

The *Stepping On Up* Guide to Cyber Bullying (and what to do about it)



Impacts of the Growing Use of Digital Devices by Preteens

There is little doubt that the Internet, new media and digital devices are transforming our lives and the lives of our children in the most profound ways. Perhaps not since the invention of the printing press has such a dramatic revolution in the way we communicate, interact, educate and consume taken place. Many of us are familiar with the tragic incidents of cyber bullying and its young victims: Megan Meier, Phoebe Prince, Rachael Neblett, Jamey Rodemeyer, Ben Lewis..... While these heartbreaking suicides exemplify the extreme consequences of cyber bullying, the more far-reaching transformation of digital culture may result from its deep and ever-expanding penetration into the lives of our children. Recent studies show that:

- 52% of 5 to 8 year-olds are using smartphones, video iPods, iPads, or similar devices
- 23% of 5 to 8 year-olds use more than one medium “most” or “some” of the time.
- 19.8% of teens reported sending more than 120 messages per school day
- 43% of teens report having been bullied online

There is also evidence of a correlation between high use of digital devices and at-risk behaviors: teens who hyper-text (more than 120 messages a day) are 40% more likely to have tried cigarettes, twice as likely to have consumed alcohol, 43% more likely to be binge drinkers, 41% more likely to have used illicit drugs, 55% more likely to have been in a physical fight, nearly three-and-a-half times more likely to have had sex and 90% more likely to report four or more sexual partners (Case Western Reserve School of Medicine).

It is clear that profound and often unwelcomed changes are a part of this digital age and a major challenge for educators, parents and students alike is to find positive ways to use these technologies and minimize their risks by promoting web safety and reducing the incidents of cyber bullying. It is also clear that this education needs to start at younger ages and is of particular importance in the upper elementary grades, when the use of these digital devices most typically begins and life-long patterns for their use are set. The Internet is one of the most transformative developments in the history of human culture and when its powers can be accessed unsupervised by children and pre-teens using personal hand-held devices, guiding principles and clear rules are obviously needed. This program provides this guidance and will help concerned adults teach young people the skills and attitudes they need to be responsible citizens of the connected digital world.

What is Cyber Bullying?

Cyber bullying takes place when a child, preteen or teen is, threatened, tormented, humiliated, embarrassed or otherwise harassed by another child, preteen or teen using the Internet, using any number of digital devices. Or as Michael defines it in Program #2, *“Someone is harassing Zazi using the Internet. And over an extended period of time.”*

Cyber bullying takes many forms:

- Sending threatening, taunting or teasing e-mails or texts, embarrassing pictures or videos
- Spreading gossip or rumors, or making someone’s private information public
- Attempting to pick on, isolate, exclude someone online
- Impersonating someone else by using their online identity to send embarrassing or hurtful messages in their name
- Pretending to be someone’s friend in order to later hurt or humiliate them
- Ganging up on someone in a chat room or on a message board
- Using chat, IM, online polls or blogs to divide the *in crowd* from the *outsiders*

Signs of Cyber Bullying

Children often find it difficult to talk about bully and cyber bullying. They may feel ashamed or embarrassed or blame themselves. As a result many bullying victims suffer in silence and some research indicates that 20% of victims say nothing about it. It is important that parents and teachers know how to spot the signs that bullying may be occurring.

Signs that your child may be the victim of cyber bullying include:

- Sudden reluctant to go online or use a cell phone
- Avoiding a discussion about what they’re doing online
- Closing the browser or turning off the cell phone when a parent enters the room
- Sudden avoidance of family or prolonged isolation in bedroom
- Or any of the signs of bullying noted below

Signs of Bullying

Possible warning signs that a child is being bullied include:

- torn, damaged, or lost pieces of clothing, books, electronics, jewelry or other belongings
- unexplained injuries: cuts, bruises, and scratches
- reluctance to go to school, loss of interest in or sudden dislike of school
- avoids school bus rides or changes walking route to school
- avoidance of after-school activities and school-based social gatherings
- unusual difficulty in concentrating or lack of focus
- being listless, unenthusiastic, remote or showing a lack of interest in favorite activities
- a sudden drop in academic interest and declining grades
- mood swings (tearfulness, withdrawal, bursts of anger, anxiety attacks, depression)
- unusual headaches, stomachaches, or other physical ailments
- difficulty sleeping, nightmares, bed wetting
- change in eating habits, a loss of appetite or overeating
- rarely talks of friends and seems socially isolated
- significant change friendships and relationships
- having more conflicts or discipline issues at school, acting out at home
- self-destructive behaviors such as cutting, talk of suicide

What Educators Can Do

Cyber bullying can be difficult to deal with by school-based educators. It often takes place off campus and is usually anonymous. However, cyber bullying can be severe and have significant impact on students' behavior in class and their ability to learn. To counter the spread of cyber bullying, educators can raise awareness of the issue by making it an essential part of their anti-bullying campaigns and use these programs and guides to share the tips and information below with students, parents and guardians. It is important to remember that educators have a key role to play in ending cyber bullying and helping their students stay safe on the web. They see their students daily and so have the ability to recognize signs of bullying. They have the trust of their students and may be the first person students turn to. And they have the authority to reach out to parents, guardians, administrators and law enforcement to help their students when cyber bullying does take place.



Things to do in the classroom and other group settings:

- Talk to you students about cyber bullying and its consequences -- and brainstorm ways everyone in the community can help stop it
- Use the lessons contained here to give your students the knowledge and skills to deal with cyber bullying. They contain many suggestions for ways to create a school and/or community-wide campaign to stop cyber bullying and raise awareness about web safety
- Raise awareness of the issue with your students, parents and guardians, in class, in parent education programs and in school-wide meeting and activities
- Raise these issues and ideas with school administrators and in staff meetings
- Hold an assembly and create fliers to hand out to your students and parents
- Talk about the importance of web safety with your students and develop guidelines for doing research on the web
- Monitor incidents of bullying in your class and site. Cyber bullying is often related to on-site bullying, causing additional hurt and isolation to those already victimized. It can also serve as a form of retaliation for those bullied at school
- Have your students write a pledge to stop bullying, rumors and gossip in all its form, in school, in the community and on the internet

What Parents Can Do to prevent Cyber Bullying

Look for signs that your child is being bullied. Sudden changes in behavior, friends, attitude toward school can be the result of online bullying. **(See below for more.)**

- Monitor your child's Internet use on computers and mobile devices.
- Set clear limits. For younger children delay use of digital devices and make sure they follow age restriction for social networking (13 years and older). For older children, limit time spent texting and social networking with realistic consequences if they don't.
- Install filtering software to safeguard you child from stumbling onto objectionable material.
- Place student/family computer in a common room, not the bedroom.
- Have a family meeting about internet use, cell phones and social networking -- and brainstorm ways to use digital devices safely.
- Discuss internet etiquette with your child so they do not retaliate, send angry messages and remember that there is always someone on the other end or their texts, messages and posts.
- Report incidents to your school so teachers, guidance counselors and staff can keep an eye out for in-school bullying.
- Report persistent problems to your Internet Service Provider or website moderator. They can block messages from cyber bullies from reaching your child.
- Learn about the anti-bullying and cyber bullying campaigns at your child's school and become involved in making them a central part of the school culture.
- Be a good role model. Put your gadgets away and turn off the computer and TV.
- Keep talking to your teens. Keep lines of communication open and don't over react.
- If there is any indication that personal contact information has been posted online, or any threats have been made to your child, immediately contact local law enforcement.

- Teach tolerance and empathy.

What Parents can do if they think their child is being bullied at school or online

If your child or student shows signs of being a victim of bullying or cyber bullying and is in serious distress or danger, don't ignore the problem. Get help right away and follow the suggestions posted at: <http://www.stopbullying.gov/get-help-now/index.html>.

The site outlines a number of responses depending on the severity of the situation. Here are a few suggestions which follow their guidelines.

Talk with your child:

- Express your concern and understanding
- Let them know you want to help and support them
- Encourage them not to be embarrassed or blame themselves for what has happened.
- Gently try to get as many details about the events as possible
- Underline that they can always talk to you about difficult things

Talk with staff at your child's school. Contact the:

- Teacher
- School counselor
- School principal
- School superintendent
- State Department of Education

If someone is feeling hopeless, helpless, thinking of suicide:

- Contact the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline online or at 1-800-273-TALK (8255). The toll-free call goes to the nearest crisis center in our national network. These centers provide 24-hour crisis counseling and mental health referrals.

If there has been a crime or someone is at immediate risk of harm:

- Call 911

If the school is not adequately addressing harassment based on race, color, national origin, sex, disability, or religion, contact:

- School superintendent
- State Department of Education
- U.S. Department of Education, Office for Civil Rights
- U.S. Department of Justice, Civil Rights Division

