

Facts About Cyberbullying and How You Can Help

Technological advances have meant many changes in everyday interaction—from cell phones to social media, the world wide web provides up-to-date access to what’s happening around us. For teens, this access to the personal lives of peers, when combined with the anonymity of the Internet, is a recipe for an unregulated slew of cyberbullying behaviors.

What is Cyberbullying?

Cyberbullying is a type of harassment involving a communication device, such as a computer, tablet, and/or smartphone. Our research examines three popular types of cyberbullying that youth, ages 13 to 18, experience. Thirty-four percent of teens have posted embarrassing pictures and/or videos about someone on a social networking site, such as Facebook. Twenty-seven percent admitted to sending nasty messages to or about someone—including spreading rumors, name-calling, and gossiping—via the Internet or text messages, and about 12 percent of teens surveyed confessed they’d created a mean website targeting a peer. For example, a teen may post photos of kids from school on a website, and have peers vote for the “fattest” or “ugliest” at school.

Why Do Teens Cyberbully?

We found four main factors that contribute to cyberbullying.

- **Proactive reasons.** Some teens turn to cyberbullying because they want something—such as lunch money, or a seat at the “popular” table. These kids also target their peers online to demonstrate power or strength over someone else. Proactive bullies don’t have any qualms about deliberately hurting someone else to elevate their social status.
- **Reactive reasons.** Sometimes, victims become perpetrators because they believe they’ve been wronged by someone—and feel the need to retaliate. For example, a teen may post a mean message on their “ex-friend’s” Facebook wall if the teen suspects the victim said something mean—to or about—the bully first. This is the most common type of cyberbullying, with 61 percent of teens owning up bullying as a reaction to a previous slight by a peer.
- **Internet junkies.** Teens who are constantly plugged into the World Wide Web are more likely to take part in cyberbullying than their less technologically inclined peers.
- **Privacy.** Having a personal computer—either in a bedroom or secluded corner of the house—also increased the likelihood that an adolescent bullied others online.

Steps to End Cyberbullying

Unsurprisingly, most teens refuse to talk to their parent(s) about their online activity, even when they're in trouble. In fact, almost 50 percent of the teens in this study indicated that they'd "*never*" talk to an adult at home about it, and 65 percent would "*never*" tell a member of school administration. Social isolation—including parents taking away cell phones, computers, or simply telling their kid to stop going on social networking sites or the Internet—was reported as the biggest obstacle teens faced when considering whether or not to tell an adult about cyberbullying. Essentially, teens were afraid their parents wouldn't know the best way to handle the situation.

Despite this lack of communication, there are steps you can take to prevent your child from participating in cyberbullying.

- **Internet safety.** Talk about how to safely browse the web, starting at a very young age—even as early as kindergarten. The more you emphasize potential dangers, the more likely your child will be to steer clear of inappropriate behavior.
- **Make it public.** Keep your computer in an open and relatively public area of your home, such as a family room or den. If your teen knows you'll be able to see everything on the screen, bullying behavior will be much less likely. Also, familiarize yourself with "web speak"—a series of acronyms that teens use during Internet conversations, especially when PAW (Parents Are Watching).
- **Impose limits.** Pick a length of time that your teen has to play online—and stick to it. If you have an older child, have a discussion about what you both consider to be a "fair" amount of Internet time. You may even consider adopting a time limit for yourself, to show your teen that Internet activity should be kept to a minimum for *everyone*—not just 16 year olds.
- **Discourage retaliation.** Once something's said online, it can never be taken back—even years later. Make sure that your teen's treating peers with respect on and offline. If your child feels slighted by a classmate, gently suggest that your teen confront the alleged "wrong-doer" face-to-face. Written words are often misinterpreted, so talking it out can prevent making an impulsive (and often, regrettable) decision to post a nasty message on Facebook.
- **Don't be rash.** Parents often have the impulse to take the computer away after a troubling online incident, but resist the urge to make a snap decision. Instead, listen to your child, without judgment, about what's going on—and brainstorm possible solutions *together*. This calm approach may encourage your teenager to be more open about online activity—and come to you if there's a problem.
- **Keep the lines of communication open.** Talk to your child often and honestly. Kids who have an open and trusting relationship with their parents, and feel safe to talk to them, are less likely to take part in cyberbullying—and are more likely to go to their parents if there's an incident online. Many parents install Internet monitoring software in the hopes of protecting their children from trouble online, but research has repeatedly shown these programs don't reduce cyberbullying or other irresponsible Internet use.

Despite concerns about Internet use, there are many positive things about new communication technologies. It's important to remember that it's not the technology that's the issue, but the behavior. An open relationship about the benefits and drawbacks about the World Wide Web—

along with open lines of communication and understanding—will help keep your teen safe, and your mind at ease.