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Cyberbullying

What Is Cyberbullying?

Cyberbullying is the use of technology to harass, threaten, embarrass, or target another person. Online threats and mean, aggressive, or rude texts, tweets, posts, or messages all count. So does posting personal information, pictures, or videos designed to hurt or embarrass someone else.

Cyberbullying also includes photos, messages, or pages that don't get taken down, even after the person has been asked to do so. In other words, it's anything that gets posted online and is meant to hurt, harass, or upset someone else.

Intimidation or mean comments that focus on things like a person's gender, religion, sexual orientation, race, or physical differences count as discrimination, which is against the law in many states. **That means the police could get involved, and bullies may face serious penalties.**

Online bullying can be particularly damaging and upsetting because it's usually anonymous or hard to trace. It's also hard to control, and the person being victimized has no idea how many people (or hundreds of people) have seen the messages or posts. People can be tormented nonstop whenever they check their device or computer.

Online bullying and harassment can be easier to commit than other acts of bullying because the bully doesn't have to confront his or her target in person.

What Are the Consequences of Cyberbullying?

Sometimes, online bullying, like other kinds of bullying, can lead to serious long-lasting problems. The stress of being in a constant state of upset or fear can lead to problems with mood, energy level, sleep, and appetite. It also can make someone feel jumpy, anxious, or sad. If someone is already depressed or anxious, cyberbullying can make things much worse.

It's not just the person being bullied who gets hurt. The punishment for cyberbullies can be serious. More and more schools and after-school programs are creating systems to respond to cyberbullying. Schools may dismiss bullies from sports teams or suspend them from school. Some types of cyberbullying may violate school codes or even break anti-discrimination or sexual harassment laws. So a bully may face serious legal trouble.

Why Do People Do It?

Why would someone be a cyberbully? There are probably as many reasons as there are bullies themselves.

Sometimes, what seems like online harassment may be accidental. The impersonal nature of text messages, posts, and other ways of communicating online means it can be hard to figure out if someone is joking or not.

Most people know when they're being bullied, though, because bullying involves repeated insults or threats. The people doing the bullying know they've crossed a line, too. It's not a one-off joke or insult — it's constant harassment and threats that go beyond typical fun teasing or a nasty comment made in anger.

What Can I Do About Cyberbullying?

Sometimes, people are afraid or not sure if they're being bullied or not. So they don't do anything about it. If you're being bullied, harassed, or teased in a hurtful way — or know someone who is — you don't have to suffer in silence. In fact, you absolutely should report any upsetting texts, messages, posts, or emails.

Tell someone. Most experts agree: The first thing to do is tell an adult you trust. This is often easier said than done. People who are cyberbullied may feel embarrassed or reluctant to report a bully. Some may hesitate because they're not 100% sure who is doing the bullying. **But bullying can get worse, so speak up until you find someone to help.** Sometimes the police can track down an anonymous online bully, so it's often worthwhile to report it.

Most parents are so concerned about protecting their kids that sometimes they focus on taking major steps to stop the bullying. If you're being bullied and worry about losing your phone or computer privileges, explain your fears to your parents. Let them know how important it is to stay connected, and work with them to figure out a solution that doesn't leave you feeling punished as well as picked on. You may have to do some negotiating on safe phone or computer use — the most important thing is to first get the bullying under control.

You also can talk to your school counselor or a trusted teacher or family member. If the bullying feels like it's really getting you down (like if it's affecting your sleep or concentration), therapy can help. If you're not ready for that, you can still benefit from the support of a trusted adult.

Walk away. What you've heard about walking away from a real-life bully works in the virtual world too. Ignoring bullies is the best way to take away their power, but it isn't always easy to do — in the real world or online.

If you see something upsetting, try to step away from the computer or turn off your phone for a while. Don't respond, and never forward the message to someone else. Find something to distract yourself from what's going on. Do something you love that doesn't give you time to think about what's happening, like playing the guitar, going for a run, or losing yourself in a book or movie. You can also just chat with a parent or sibling or play with a pet.

Taking a break like this allows you to keep things in perspective and focus on the good things in your life. It also gives you time to figure out how you want to handle things.

Resist the urge to retaliate or respond. Walking away or taking a break when you're faced with online bullying gives you some space so you won't be tempted to fire back a response or engage with the bully or bullies. Responding when we're upset can make things worse. (Standing up to a bully can be effective sometimes, but it's more likely to provoke the person and escalate the situation.) Taking a break gives the power back to you!

Although it's not a good idea to respond to a bully, **it is a good idea to save evidence of the bullying if you can. It can help you prove your case, if needed.** You don't have to keep mean emails, texts, or other communications where you see them all the time — you can ask a parent to make a copy or save them to a flash drive.

Report bullying. Social media sites take it seriously when people post cruel or mean stuff or set up fake accounts. If users report abuse, the site administrator may block the bully from using the site in the future. If someone sends you mean texts or emails, report it to phone service or email providers (such as Comcast, Google, and Verizon).

Block the bully. Most devices have settings that let you electronically block the bully or bullies from sending notes. If you don't know how to do this, ask a friend or adult who does.

Be safe online. Password protect your smartphone and your online sites, and change your passwords often. Be sure to share your passwords only with your parent or guardian. It's also wise to think twice before sharing personal information or photos/videos that you don't want the world to see. Once you've posted a photo or message, it can be difficult or impossible to delete. So remind yourself to be cautious when posting photos or responding to someone's upsetting message.

If a Friend Is a Bully

If you know of a friend who is acting as a cyberbully, take him or her aside and talk about it. Without putting your friend down, stand up for your own principles: Let the bully know it's not OK.

Explain to your friend that bullying can have serious consequences: for the bully, for those being bullied, and even for bystanders like you and your friends.

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