A Parents' Guide to

CYBERBULLYING

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Top 5 Questions Parents Have About Cyberbullying

1. What *is* cyberbullying anyway?

For the most part, cyberbullying is bullying, only it happens online or on phones or other connected devices. As for what bullying is, that depends on who you ask, but most experts agree that it involves repeated harassment and some type of power imbalance – and, when young people are involved, it usually has something to do with what's happening with peers at school. It's important to remember that not every mean comment or unpleasant interaction rises to the level of bullying. Sometimes it's just what kids call "drama." We mention this because too many kinds of behavior are called "cyberbullying," which can cause overreaction and inappropriate responses.

2. How likely is it that my child will be cyberbullied?

Some studies say only 4.5% of teens have ever been cyberbullied and others say the figure's as high as 24% (more on this below). Either way, too many students have experienced cyberbullying, but it's important to note that most have not, and most don't bully others. We point this out not to minimize a serious problem, but to emphasize that bullying is not a norm. Kindness, not cruelty, is the norm and, just as with other social problems, communicating the facts reinforces positive behaviors and actually reduces the problem.

As for any one child, it depends so much on the person, his or her peer group and their context. A positive school culture can make a difference, especially for higher-risk populations, such as special-needs students or lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) youth. For just about all kids, "online" is social – a shared experience – so no single individual has complete control over what happens in digital spaces. Research has found that a child's emotional makeup and home and school environments predict online risk better than any technology he or she uses. Treating others (and oneself!) with respect and kindness can really help keep social media use positive.

3. How do I know if my child is being cyberbullied?

Even if you have a good feel for your kids' emotional state, social skills, and peer relations – key factors in how well their online (as well as offline) experiences go – it's a good idea to ask whether cyberbullying's going on with them or any of their friends. You may not get a clear answer right away, but engage your kids in occasional conversations about how things are going online as well as offline. See what they know about cyberbullying, ask if they know others who have experienced it, if it's a problem at their school and what they would do if they were cyberbullied or knew about others who were. If they seem obsessed about checking text messages and social apps, it could be because they're worried about what's being said about them. It may not be bullying, but it may be a sign your child needs a little extra support. The federal government's StopBullying.gov website suggests that parents be on the lookout for signs such as difficulty sleeping, frequent nightmares, declining grades, not wanting to go to school, feelings of helplessness or decreased self-esteem.

4. **What's the best way to keep cyberbullying out of my child's life?**

There isn't a single answer for everybody, because each child's social experience is unique. If your child does experience cyberbullying, as a target or a bystander, supportive parenting can go a long way toward minimizing the impact. Loving support sometimes means listening or offering perspective, sometimes talking through strategies for regaining a sense of control over the situation – helping your child grow the resilience that lessens the impact of social cruelty. It may sound simplistic, but since young people make no distinction between online and offline, parents shouldn't either. The same values of respect and kindness toward self and others that you've modeled and taught your kids in everyday life apply in social media too, and they will have a positive effect on their experiences in digital spaces just as in offline life. [If you know of a child in crisis, go to our Web page, Resources for Youth in Crisis (ConnectSafely.org/crisis). If there's a serious threat of physical harm, call 911.]

5. **What do I do if my child is cyberbullied?**

Cyberbullying cases are as individual as the people involved. So the general advice that's all over the Web – not to react or retaliate, block the "bully," and print out and keep evidence in case it'll be needed – can help in some cases. But the most important thing to do is talk with your kids about what's going on, help them think through what happened, how they feel about it, and what they're going to do about it. No one knows how to resolve a situation without understanding it fully. It's important to involve your child in the process, not just take over yourself, because the main goal is to help him or her strengthen the self-confidence that might've been shaken and restore a sense of physical and/or emotional safety.

Bullying is a serious, long-standing social problem that now occurs in digital spaces as well as physical ones. But, contrary to what you might have heard or read, it isn't just a youth problem, it isn't getting worse, and it isn't more of a problem online than offline. Because of the rise of social media in the middle of the last decade, bullying and peer harassment have been getting a lot of news coverage, so – rather than increased bullying – what we're really seeing is increased *attention* to it and a lot more concern about it.

Thanks to increased research, we know more about the problem and what will help, and we're more motivated as a society to address it. We also know that the problem isn't the technology people use. Technology can help amplify it and create another "place" where it happens, but – just like bullying – cyberbullying is rooted in relationships, in how people interact in everyday life. As for young people, since they spend a lot of time in social media, their interaction – good, bad or neutral – happens in apps, texts, games and sites too.

Defining cyberbullying

Even though it has been around for ages, experts still haven't completely agreed on a definition of "bullying," much less cyberbullying, the digital version. There are elements that keep popping up in definitions, though, so that we're pretty clear on what it is not. It's not social drama, an argument, mean gossip, an impulsive expression of anger or a prank that's gone wrong but wasn't meant to. Any of these can be hurtful and sometimes they can turn into bullying, but cyberbullying is not just any form of mean behavior any more than bullying is in offline life.

Most experts agree that bullying and cyberbullying are forms of serious aggression, usually targeted and repeated. With cyberbullying, the repetition can be less personal but just as hurtful when shared widely, or even virally, by anonymous posters. By most definitions, both involve a real or perceived power imbalance that's physical, psychological and/or social. Although cyberbullying occurs in digital spaces and can be anonymous, there's usually a connection to offline life – for kids, school life.

Anonymity is more of a factor in cyberbullying than in traditional bullying. Targets may believe that more people are witness to the abuse than actually are, which can compound the pain. And since online socializing can occur 24/7, home, weekends and vacation can't be havens from the hurt.

Young people may use different terms

If you want to talk with kids about "cyberbullying," it might be best not to use that term – at least not at first. Kids often use other terms, like "drama" to describe a range of behaviors that don't necessarily fit into adult perceptions or a scholarly definition. Sometimes it involves mean gossip, pranks and arguments. Sometimes it can turn into cyberbullying, but too many kinds of behavior are called "cyberbullying," which can cause overreaction and responses from adults that only increase the problem for the young people involved. To avoid that and get a clear picture of what's going on, encourage your kids to use their own terms and be specific, so you can figure out together how to respond, if at all – and whether or not *you* need to be involved.

Putting numbers into perspective

Probably because there is no single definition of cyberbullying, the numbers are all over the map, but lower than we often hear. The National Center for Educational Statistics has said that 9% of students in grades 6-12 have experienced cyberbullying, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention that 16.2% of students had – compared to 20.1% who had been bullied offline, during the 12 months prior to the survey. After a review of multiple studies, the Cyberbullying Research Center recently estimated that, on average, about 24% of middle and high school students have been cyberbullied. But pioneering bullying researcher Dan Olweus found that, among 440,000 US students surveyed (grades 3-12), 4.5% had been. Like other experts, Olweus reported that in-person bullying is a far bigger problem than cyberbullying, which "has not increased over time," and "claims about cyberbullying made in the media" are "often greatly exaggerated." Though numbers certainly don't ease the problem for anyone who has experienced cyberbullying, they provide the sense of perspective that helps adults handle incidents calmly and appropriately. Dr. Olweus wrote that "a distorted portrayal of reality will probably generate a lot of unnecessary anxiety and tension among parents and maybe teachers and students."

Vulnerable groups

Every case is as individual as the people involved, so it's hard to generalize, but we do have some data on who tends to be more vulnerable: young people with special needs or learning disabilities and lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgender (LGBT) youth. But even young people with no noticeable vulnerabilities have been bullied and cyberbullied – whether very shy or beauty contest winners (some teen pageant contestants and celebrities have made bullying prevention their cause because of victimization in their pasts). Just being perceived as "different" can be challenging for young people, so no one's completely immune. Because we want to support, not stifle, individuality, it's important to help our children appreciate and respect what's unique in themselves and others.

Not just a 'kid thing'

A 2010 US national survey published by WorkplaceBullying.org indicates that 35% of adult workers have been bullied at work. It's at least as big a problem among adults as among youth, which in no way discounts the impact on kids, as they explore identity and learn to navigate complex social landscapes. Sadly, there are also plenty of reported cases of adults who bully kids, and anyone who watches TV – including some reality shows, talk shows and political debates – has probably seen so-called "responsible adults" get pretty nasty to each other – something you might want to point out to your kids next time you see it on TV.

Some good news about bullying

What we never see in the news is the fact that school violence, including physical bullying, is in decline in the US, and physical bullying is still a bigger problem than cyberbullying. "The surveys that reflect change over the longest time periods, going back to the early 1990s, consistently show declines in bullying and peer victimization, some of it remarkably large," reports the Crimes Against Children Research Center (CCRC) at the University of New Hampshire. There was a 74% decline in violent victimization at school among 12-to-17-year-olds between 1992 and 2011, the latest available data from

the US Department of Justice. That same report showed a 4% decline in bullying between 2007 and 2009 and a study conducted by the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention found a 22% decline in bullying in that state between 2003 and 2011. Some studies have shown an increase in cyberbullying but, according to CCRC director David Finkelhor, "the increase in online harassment is probably best seen simply as growth in the usage of electronic media for all kinds of socialization including its negative forms."

WHAT CAN HELP?

For kids and teens

Each case is individual, but there's some general, tried-and-true advice that you could consider sharing with your child:

Know that it's not your fault. What people call "bullying" is sometimes an argument between two people. But if someone is repeatedly cruel to you, that's bullying and you mustn't blame yourself. No one deserves to be treated cruelly.

Don't respond or retaliate. Sometimes a reaction is exactly what aggressors are looking for because they think it gives them power over you, and you don't want to empower a bully. As for retaliating, getting back at a bully turns you into one – and can turn one mean act into a chain reaction. If you can, remove yourself from the situation. If you can't, sometimes humor disarms or distracts a person from bullying.

Save the evidence. The only good news about bullying online or on phones is that it can usually be captured, saved, and shown to someone who can help. You can save that evidence in case things escalate. [Visit ConnectSafely.org/cyberbullying for instructions on how to capture screens on phones and computers.]

Tell the person to stop. This is completely up to you – don't do it if you don't feel totally comfortable doing it, because you need to make your position completely clear that you will not stand for this treatment any more. You may need to practice beforehand with someone you trust, like a parent or good friend.

Reach out for help – *especially* if the behavior's really getting to you. You deserve backup. See if there's someone who can listen, help you process what's going on and work through it – a friend, relative or maybe an adult you trust.

Use available tech tools. Most social media apps and services allow you to block the person. Whether the harassment's in an app, texting, comments or tagged photos, do yourself a favor and take advantage of that. You can also report the problem to the service. That probably won't end it, but you don't need the harassment in your face, and you'll be less tempted to respond. If you're getting threats of physical harm, you should call your local police (with a parent or guardian's help) and consider reporting it to school authorities.

Protect your accounts. Don't share your passwords with anyone – even your closest friends, who may not be close forever – and password-protect your phone so no one can use it to impersonate you. You'll find advice at passwords.connectsafely.org.

If someone you know is being bullied, take action. Just standing by can empower an aggressor and does nothing to help. The best thing you can do is try to stop the bullying by taking a stand against it. If you can't stop it, support the person being bullied. If the person's a friend, you can listen and see how to help. Consider together whether you should report the bullying. If you're not already friends, even a kind word can help reduce the pain. At the very least, help by not passing along a mean message and not giving positive attention to the person doing the bullying**.**

Additional advice for parents

Know that you're lucky if your child asks for help. Most young people don't tell their parents about bullying online or offline. So if your child's losing sleep or doesn't want to go to school or seems agitated when on his or her computer or phone, ask why as calmly and open-heartedly as possible. Feel free to ask if it has anything to do with mean behavior or social issues. But even if it does, don't assume it's bullying. You won't know until you get the full story, starting with your child's perspective.

Work with your child. There are two reasons why you'll want to keep your child involved. Bullying and cyberbullying usually involve a loss of dignity or control over a social situation, and involving your child in finding solutions helps him or her regain that. The second reason is about context. Because the bullying is almost always related to school life and our kids understand the situation and context better than parents ever can, their perspective is key to getting to the bottom of the situation and working out a solution. You may need to have private conversations with others, but let your child know if you do, and report back. This is about your child's life, so your child needs to be part of the solution.

Respond thoughtfully, not fast. What parents don't always know is that they can make things worse for their kids if they act rashly. A lot of cyberbullying involves somebody getting marginalized (put down and excluded), which the bully thinks increases his or her power or status. If you respond publicly or if your child's peers find out about even a discreet meeting with school authorities, the marginalization can get worse, which is why any response needs to be well thought out.

More than one perspective needed. Your child's account of what happened is likely completely sincere, but remember that one person's truth isn't necessarily everybody's. You'll need to get other perspectives and be open-minded about what they are. Sometimes kids let themselves get pulled into chain reactions, and often what we see online is only one side of or part of the story.

What victims say helps most is to be heard – really listened to – either by a friend or an adult who cares. That's why, if your kids come to you for help, it's so important to respond thoughtfully and involve them. Just by being heard respectfully, a child is often well on the way to healing.

The ultimate goal is restored self-respect and greater resilience in your child. This, not getting someone punished, is the best focus for resolving the problem and helping your child heal. What your child needs most is to regain a sense of dignity. Sometimes that means standing up to the bully, sometimes not. Together, you and your child can figure out how to get there.

One positive outcome we don't think about (or hear in the news) enough is resilience. We know the human race will never completely eradicate meanness or cruelty, and we also know that bullying is not, as heard in past generations, "normal" or a rite of passage. We need to keep working to eradicate it. But when it does happen and we overcome it – our resilience grows. Resilience isn't something that can be "downloaded" or taught. We grow it through exposure to challenges and figuring out how to deal with them. So sometimes it's important to give them space to do that and let them know we have their back.

A few closing thoughts for parents

When our children are suffering, we naturally want to stop the hurt as fast as possible. The problem is, there are no quick fixes or formulas for relational issues, and speed can sometimes lead to increased hurt. It's almost always best to slow down and listen, which may actually contribute to the victim's healing. At least, it's what children are asking for, and it demonstrates our respect for them and helps them process what happened, learn from it, gain more resilience, and regain the sense of dignity they felt they lost.

It might be tempting to think the solution is just to take away phones, ban the latest problematic social network site, or delete social media altogether. But that's not the solution for a number of reasons….

First, young people are constantly growing their social literacy as they interact with others, and both the socializing and the learning are happening in social media too now. They basically happen everywhere, because the interaction moves fluidly from online to offline, between home and school and through media and devices. Deleting one service or device doesn't really delete the interaction, especially since the context isn't a device or service. For most young people, the context is the peer group or social scene at school.

Second, social media is just another place where their friends gather. Banning a popular social media service can contribute to kids getting marginalized or just left out, whether peers intentionally stop including them or just because they're not "around." Marginalization is one form or aim of bullying and cyberbullying.

Third, when one social outlet gets banned, bad behavior can just move elsewhere – offline or to sites or apps adults have never heard of. Think of it this way: If you got into an argument on the phone and someone made you hang up, did that resolve the argument?

Finally, remember that what we see in a particular site or game chat is rarely the whole picture – it's more likely to be the tip of the iceberg. The "bully" online might've been the one who was victimized offline right beforehand in what could've been a chain reaction. Very often "bullies" are hurting too. We need to try to stop everybody's hurt to work out lasting solutions. But greater visibility because of social media does not mean cyberbullying is a bigger social problem.

And we can collectively shrink the problem further by working to get social-emotional learning into as many schools as possible, giving all children the social and emotional skills that reduce bullying and increase academic and social success.