



February Newsletter: Cyberbullying

Time to get serious: while cyberbullying certainly isn't the lightest topic we've ever covered, we think it's an important one.

What is cyberbullying? It's very much what it sounds like it would be: schoolyard-style harassment, but in an internet-enabled, digital landscape. When kids use their computers or mobile phones to mock, torment, or embarrass (publicly or privately) other kids... it's called cyberbullying. It's different than online harassment or exploitation, where adults are involved – just like a real schoolyard, cyberbullying involves minors on both sides, victim and attacker. So what can you do to protect your kids from cyberbullying? We've got a Top Five list of ideas that might help.

All the best,
Your friends at Cartwheel

Cyberbullying: Five things you can do to protect your kids

1. Know what it is

If you read the introductory paragraph, you're well on your way – and probably ahead of the crowd. Many of the parents who've called us to ask for advice on cyberbullying didn't even know it existed... until their child became the victim. There are many online resources for parents looking to find out more. Take a look at <http://www.stopcyberbullying.org/> and <http://www.cyberbullying.us/> - both sites have comprehensive information, and link to other resources for parents looking for answers.

Here are a few simple examples you can use as benchmarks of classic cyberbullying:

A mobile phone text message from another student mocking a child's appearance, dress, or performance in school.

Anonymous instant messages (in a program like AOL Instant Messenger or MSN Messenger) that use teasing, insulting, or derisive language. These can be especially frustrating because there's no phone number or email address to track down – it's a nameless source. More sophisticated bullies can use several different account names, or initially pose as friends, to gain access to and hold the attention of a child.

Posts, anonymous or named, on a social networking site like Facebook that refer hurtfully to a child, or use of the social network as a platform for public humiliation.



2. Know where your kids are on the online playground

If your child has a mobile phone, instant messaging account, or email account, you should know about it. And (at least until high school) you should have access to each of these tools. Better yet, make sure you're the one setting and controlling the passwords. Spend some time each month making sure that the people your children are talking to online are known and trusted. As an added bonus, being the one with the "keys" to your child's online world will also allow you to tweak any settings to ensure that you kids only have access to appropriate content (we're happy to help you figure out some ideal browser and messaging settings).

3. There's an online playground for teenagers, too

Social networking sites, such as Facebook and MySpace, are popular communication tools for the pre-teen and teenage set. Once your children reach the age where they're savvy enough to connect with their friends through these networks (and truthfully, probably more savvy than you are), they're probably going to want some online privacy, as well. Having password or access control in the hands of parents at this age can be a tricky conversation. And rather than using software to filter or spy on your child's activities, just cultivate an open line of communication around their online world. The major benefit of this kind of candor is that if they, or their friends, ever experience cyberbullying, they'll know that they can come to you honestly to ask for advice or help – and that if needed, you'll step in rationally and not make things worse.

4. Make sure your children aren't the bullies

If you suspect that your child might be using the internet or messaging to bully another child, step in right away. If it gets too serious, school authorities or law enforcement will step in for you. It's smart to establish that your family rules for interacting with people in the real world also apply to online and mobile interactions. So if you've got clear rules about what type of language they can use with their friends at school, apply that to their friends online as well. Be aware of warning signs that might indicate that your child's technology usage is changing drastically or becoming abnormal. If she is obsessive with the internet, or becomes withdrawn, she may be using the technology inappropriately – or be a victim herself.

5. Know when you can involve school authorities or law enforcement

School authorities should be notified right away if you suspect that online peer harassment activity is happening among its students. In fact, knowing (or helping to establish) the school's internet safety rulebook will help define how to avoid or respond to cyberbullying, coach children to interact with peers on social networking websites, and email or message each other responsibly.



Law enforcement can usually take definitive action only when a cyberbullying incident has escalated to a high level, such as a physical threat. That said, if you know or suspect that your child is the victim of a particularly vicious attack, whether or not a physical threat is involved, you should reach out to the highest authority. If the school can't help, law enforcement can either step in, or at the very least assist you in defining further measures you can take.

Understanding the motivation behind the bullying is as complicated as the social rules and hierarchies of elementary, middle, and high schools themselves... and certainly not our area of expertise. But these five suggestions for helping to educate your family and prevent cyberbullying are a great first step. If you see signs of online peer harassment among your children or their friends, feel free to give us a call – we can help design an “Internet Contract” for you and your children to agree upon, or work with your computers, phones, and internet browsers to put preventative measures in place.