

The Net Neighborhood

Children are doubling up on their media exposure-watching TV while plugged in to the Internet, text messaging while listening to music-and packing as much as 8.5 hours of media exposure into 6.5 hours a day, seven days a week. Kids are plugged in, turned on, and tuned out for the equivalent of a forty-five-hour workweek, every week.

Media technology has the power to help define reality for our kids; it also has tremendous influence on who our kids become and what kind of world they inhabit.

Connecting to the Internet is like opening the door to a new--and vast--city. Some parents look at the ugly and absolutely scary stuff out there and refuse to let the Internet be a part of their family life at all.

- Some parents are so ill-informed and have so little desire to be computer literate that they allow their children to roam any and all streets, back alleys, and freeways of the Internet.
- Some parents who know how ignorant they are, make an effort to learn at least as much as their young children know, and more-especially about Net safety and Net etiquette.
- They realize the Net is here to stay, and that teaching children to use it to their advantage, to get the most out of it, and to be safe requires the same tools that other communication and relationship skills require.

Cyberbullies

Bullies are using high tech tools to threaten, stalk, ridicule, humiliate, taunt, and spread rumors about their targets. The characteristics of bullying--imbalance of power, the intent to harm, the threat of further aggression, and the creation of terror--are magnified with the user of electronic technologies.

Faceless and nameless electronic transmissions make it easy for bullies to torment their targets anywhere and at any time.

Bullies are:

1. emboldened by apparent anonymity afforded them in cyberspace.
2. removed from the immediate reaction of the target.
3. far often not held accountable for their actions.

Faceless and nameless electronic transmissions make it easy for bullies to torment their targets anywhere and at anytime, with apparent anonymity, distributing of irretrievable messages worldwide.

Ways and Means of Cell Phone Bullying

Many models of today's cell phones are actually powerful, miniature, handheld multimedia computers that kids can use to talk to one another, chat via IM, send text messages with still and video images, chat online, surf the Internet, download songs, and watch TV.

Bullies use any and all of the following to target their peers:

- Abusive, insulting, or threatening voice messages.
- Abusive, insulting, or threatening text messages.
- Silent calls.
- Stolen identity - sending text message through a Website using the name and phone number of the target in order to get the target into trouble, spread a rumor, or tempt others to retaliate against an unsuspecting target.
- Numerous calls or text messages to a cell phone in order to run up a large phone bill for the target.
- Photo-bullying-using cell phones to take compromising or humiliating pictures or videos of the target, sending those pictures or videos to everyone in their address books and posting these pictures for perpetuity on file-sharing service (such as Kazaa) for anyone to download or view.

Internet Gaming

Games played on gaming devices such as Sony PlayStation Network or Xbox Live allow players from around the world to play together or in competition with one another.

Cyber bullies who frequent gaming communities taunt, threaten, lock targets out of the game, or hack into their target's account.

Not all Internet games are violent, but those that are, greatly impact the bully, the bullied, and the bystander. Not only do these games normalize violence and make it routine, they set up other people as adversaries, prey, or targets; they may even help create neural pathways that connect violence with pleasure and rewards, rather than fright, sadness, and sympathy.

Stopping Cyberbullying

Whether the cyberbullying is done via the cell phone or any other electronic tool--or combination of tools--the response should begin with the loss of privileges related to the use of those tools. The following steps are the same used to hold any bully accountable for any form of bullying:

- Intervene immediately with discipline utilizing the three Rs: restitution, resolution, and reconciliation.
- Create opportunities to "do good."
- Nurture empathy and sympathy.
- Teach friendship skills-assertive, respectful, and peaceful ways to relate to others.
- Closely monitor your child's TV viewing, video game playing, computer activities, and music.
- Engage in more constructive, entertaining, and energizing activities.
- Teach your child to "will good."

The discipline involved is a constructive and compassionate response to cyberbullying that takes into consideration the intent, the severity of the cyberbullying, and the restorative steps needed to help the cyberbully to take on a more prosocial role in the face-to-face encounters with peers and in the virtual neighborhood.

Helping the Cyberbullied

Being targeted in cyberspace can have devastating and sometimes deadly consequences.

- The warning signs that kids exhibit when being cyberbullied are similar to those exhibited if they are bullied in any other way, but the spiral down into depression, illness, and academic failure is usually accelerated when cyberbullying is involved.
- Cyberbullying can and does happen anytime and anywhere - no escape.
- All of the reasons for not telling about being the target of low-tech bullying are the same for cyberbullying.
- Added fear that if targets report being cyberbullied, their parents will take away their cell phones and restrict their computer access.

How to Respond

The situation is often made worse by responding to the cyberbully, whether that response is passive, aggressive, or assertive.

SCBT (Stop, Copy, Block, and Tell a trusted adult.)

- *Stop*. Don't respond.
- *Copy*. Make copies of all messages and pictures, and save cell phone text and voice messages.
- *Block* or filter communications through IM contact list or email.
- *Tell* a trusted adult.

If the cyberbullying is threatening or vicious you may need to do the following as well:

- Change email address, account, username, phone number and/or SIM (subscriber identity module) for cell phone users.
- File a detailed complaint with the school.
- File a complaint with the Website, Internet service provider, or cell phone company.

- Contact the police if the cyberbullying appears to be criminal.
- Contact an attorney. It is possible to seek financial damages from the cyberbully and his or her parents.

Bystanders

They can be willing or unwitting accomplices to cyberbullies. Bullies can use bystanders to do "cyberbullying by proxy."

From Bystander to Witness

It is never easy to stand up to a bully or defend a target. But just as there are ways to act courageously in the real world, there are ways to stand up, speak out, and defend a target in the cyberworld.

Tactics

- Don't contribute to a blog or Webpoll that denigrates or humiliates a target. Sign off or click "end."
- Don't forward or copy-and-paste derogatory, harmful, or hurtful emails, text messages, or pictures to another site.
- Save, copy, and print out such examples of cyberbullying and give them to the target so he or she can be aware of what is happening. Sharing such information in a caring and supportive way will help the target feel less isolated and alone.
- Tell a caring adult you trust who will keep your identity confidential, who will act to support the target, and who will make sure the cyberbully is held to account.
- Tell the cyberbully that you are not comfortable getting involved in the cyberbullying.

Kids have to trust that telling an adult will make a positive difference. Once they have shared information with you, talk with them about what they can do and what you are going to do.

If your child begs you not to get involved, hear them out, and then share your concerns about possible consequences of not acting and the possible actions you both can take.

Three P's: Policies, Procedures, and Programs

Even though most cyberbullying occurs outside of school, it negatively impacts students and the school environment. It has already led to violence-including murder and suicide-in schools throughout the world.

If your school already has an antibullying policy, procedures in place for the bully, the bullied, and bystanders, and programs that help break the cycle of violence and create a more caring, inclusive environment, it is important that an electronic component be added to all three P's:

- Policies must include a sanction against cyberbullying as well as other kinds of bullying. Students and parents need to be informed that cyberbullying will not be tolerated.
- Procedures for restorative justice must be tailored to the unique problems and possible solutions required to repair the damage done through cyberbullying-especially the very public and potentially permanent aspect of it.
- Programs must address what cyberbullying is; how it impacts students; what students are to do if they are targeted or if they are aware of another student being targeted; and ways to use cyberspace in a creative, constructive, and responsible manner.

What is needed is a comprehensive school-led/community- based approach. The adult community must be educated not only about the dangers of low-tech and high-tech bullying, but also about the world of high tech in general as both an environment and a tool for socializing that the younger generation has fully embraced.

Decoding the Code

Kids use shorthand to quickly send text messages to one another. It is important to know the lingo. A few common codes used:

- HHOJ: Ha, ha, only joking (or JJ: just joking). Both are used to absolve cyberbullies of any responsibility for their taunts.
- LOL: Laughing out loud,
- BRB: Be right back.
- POS: Parent over shoulder.

- 9: Parent in the room.
- YRDM: You are dead meat.
- YBS: You'll be sorry.
- ASL: Age/sex/location.
- LMIRL: Let's meet in real life.
- F2F: Face to face.
- SOHF: Sense of humor failure.
- RUITD: Are you in the Dark?

Check out Websites such as www.netlingo.com

Ask your kids to teach you a few of the shortcuts on the cell phone. It is important that you know and make the effort to keep up with the lingo your kids are using.

excerpts from *the bully, the bullied, and the bystander*, Barbara Coloroso © 2005

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