

EasyTech Cyber Bullying Guide for Parents

When students venture onto the Web, they wander well out of their neighborhoods. When they text on their cell phones, they have nonstop access to a broad network of friends, friends of friends, and others. Digital technology offers unprecedented social, collaborative, and learning opportunities, but it also carries risks. Students' best resources for staying safe are their parents and themselves. By being an informed and communicative parent, you enable your child to experience the benefits of digital communication while staying safe. A growing risk for middle school and high school students is online bullying, or cyber bullying.

Note: To learn more about online safety for students in addition to cyber bullying, see the [EasyTech Online Safety Guide for Parents](#).

What is Cyber Bullying?

As a parent, you are most likely familiar with traditional bullying tactics such as name calling and ongoing harassment in neighborhoods, school yards, and buses. Cyber bullying takes bullying to a new playing field called cyberspace – the space where people communicate digitally. Cyber bullying is bullying that happens online or on cell phones. It involves recurring threatening or offensive digital communications sent or posted online to or about a person. Cyber bullying can take the form of:

- Sending or posting embarrassing or cruel rumors or threats online or via text messages
- Instigating ongoing online harassment
- Intentionally excluding someone from online groups
- Sending or posting negative, mean, or vulgar comments, embarrassing digital photographs (real or digitally altered), or personal secrets or information
- Stealing a username and password or cell phone, and then impersonating the individual to harm his or her reputation or cause trouble
- Recording phone conversations secretly, and then posting the calls online
- Creating confrontational or mean-spirited online polls
- Stalking

While any age group is vulnerable, teen-agers and young adults are most commonly targeted; cyber bullying is a growing problem in schools.

Where Does Cyber Bullying Occur?

Cyber bullying can occur on any type of digital communication tool, including:

- Blogs
- Chat rooms
- E-mail
- Forums
- Gaming Web sites
- Instant messaging

- Mobile phone calls
- Online gaming systems
- Picture/video clips
- Social networking sites
- Text messages
- Websites
- Wikis

The variety of platforms on which cyber bullying can occur sometimes makes cyber bullying nearly impossible to escape while online. Today's students are very much online – nearly all students have cell phones and some form of Internet access.

Why is Cyber Bullying a Problem?

Today's students view technology as a part of life – they are digital natives; digital technology has existed for their entire lives. As digital natives, students often readily communicate with their network of friends through computers, cell phones, and gaming systems.

Technology intuitively expands communication channels for positive social development, successful collaboration, increased learning opportunities, and friendships, but it also increases the reach of those who are engaged in traditional bullying, and can amplify and escalate online harassment into real world conflict. Most people know the person who is targeting them.

People who cyber bully often mistakenly believe that they are anonymous online. They believe their intimidations are impossible to trace. Other perpetrators of cyber bullying may not realize that they are bullying others because they do not see the effects of their actions or how their words and actions might be harming someone online. This lack of interpersonal knowledge – feeling safely anonymous or not seeing the effects of their actions – can lower inhibitions and result in bullying that might not take place in a face-to-face setting. According to the National Crime Prevention Council (www.ncpc.org/cyberbullying), 81 percent of teens said that they think people who cyber bully do not take it seriously and think it is funny. The teens surveyed also believe people who cyber bully:

- Do not think it is a big deal
- Do not think about the consequences
- Are encouraged by friends
- Think everybody cyber bullies
- Think they will not get caught

Cyber bullying can potentially be much more devastating than offline bullying. Cyber bullying can take place 24/7 and can become very public, very quickly. Text messages, email messages, blog posts, photographs, and other digital content can be posted online or forwarded in mass emails, reaching a large audience quickly and possibly causing severe short-term and long-term damage to the targeted person.

How Prevalent is Cyber Bullying?

Various Web sites, such as the Cyberbully Alert Web site (www.cyberbullyalert.com/blog/2008/08/cyber-bullying-statistics-that-may-shock-you/), cite “warning sign” statistics about the growing threat and repercussions of cyber bullying. Documented findings include:

- 40 percent of all teen-agers with Internet access have reported being bullied online during the past year (National Crime Prevention Center, www.ncpc.org).
- Girls are more likely than boys to be cyber bullied, and the more time girls spend online, the more likely they will experience cyber bullying (Pew Research Center, www.pewinternet.org).
- Only 10 percent of kids who were bullied told their parents about it (National Crime Prevention Center).
- Only 15 percent of parents are aware of their child’s social networking habits (National Crime Prevention Center).
- The most common virtual locations for cyber bullying are chat rooms, social networking Web sites (such as Facebook), email, and instant message systems (National Crime Prevention Center).
- While more than half of individuals who have been cyber bullied know their attackers (Common Sense Media, www.common sense media.org), 43 percent do not (Pew Research Center).
- 53 percent of teens admit sending hurtful messages (Common Sense Media).
- High Internet users and frequent social networkers experienced higher than average levels of online harassment (Pew Research Center)

How Do Youth Who are Cyber Bullied Feel?

As in any confrontational situation, students react differently to cyber bullying depending on the persons involved and the events surrounding the online bullying. According to the Pew Research Center (www.pewinternet.org), some research suggests that while significant portions of teens are not bothered by online harassment or bullying, fully one-third (34 percent) are distressed by online harassment. In the study, “distressed” equated to “extremely or very upset or afraid.”

Students who face stressful levels of cyber bullying experience strong feelings that can carry over into their offline lives. Cyber bullying can make your child act uncharacteristically, and signs of distress that might indicate your child is experiencing online harassment include:

- Avoiding the computer, cell phone, and other digital communication devices
- Appearing upset or stressed when receiving email, instant messages, or text messages
- Avoiding conversations about computer use
- Withdrawing from family and friends
- Acting reluctant to attend school and social events
- Declining grades
- Displaying excessive negative feelings, such as sadness, anger, frustration, impatience, and intolerance
- Crying for no apparent reason

- Having trouble sleeping
- Displaying uncharacteristic levels of physical maladies, such as stomach pains and headaches, or lack of appetite and throwing up
- Showing signs of suicidal thoughts

In addition, bullying of all types can result in the following short- and long-term effects (summarized from What happens over time to those who bully and those who are victimized? by Patricia McDougall, Ph.D, Tracy Vaillancourt, Ph.D, and Shelley Hymel, Ph.D, retrieved from http://www.education.com/reference/article/Ref_What_Happens_Over/).

Possible Short-Term Effects

- Anxiety
- Loneliness
- Low self-esteem
- Poor social self-competence
- Depression
- Psychosomatic symptoms
- Social withdrawal
- School refusal
- School absenteeism
- Poor academic performance
- Physical health complaints
- Running away from home
- Alcohol and drug use
- Suicide

Possible Long-Term Effects

- High rates of depression
- Social anxiety
- Pathological perfectionism
- Greater neuroticism in adulthood
- Childhood bullying is a highly memorable experience; recollections of these events become traumatic memories that continue into adulthood.

How Can Parents Help Prevent and Protect Against Cyber Bullying?

While the statistics are distressing, parents, schools, and safety organizations can play a key role in helping children cope with cyber bullying. You can read one mother's account of how she helped her daughter cope with cyber bullying at: www.huffingtonpost.com/michelle-renee/bullying-school-texting-c_b_437476.html. As a parent, you can take actions to help prevent and protect your child from cyber bullying by keeping the lines of communication open.

Unique Risks Associated with Children

Naiveté, curiosity, innocence, desire for independence, fear of punishment – these natural characteristics of your growing child present challenges for you as you try to keep your child safe. Always keep your child's healthy personal development in mind when you are considering ways to protect and communicate with your child. By showing your child that you respect him or her as a maturing individual, you will be able to maintain a more open communication channel.

Get Tech Savvy

Before you can protect your child, you need to educate yourself. You must become technologically savvy and gain first-hand experience with online applications and digital communication tools. To learn about technology:

- Spend time online and learn the Internet's capabilities.
- Engage your child by asking for demonstrations on how to use the Internet or to share what they do online with you. (Be patient and let your child take the lead. Not only will you learn about the Internet but you may gain insight into how they often use online resources.)
- Sign up for classes, either in person or online.
- Talk with other parents about digital communication and technology used by their children.
- Ask teachers for suggestions on how to learn more about technology.
- Search online for help.
- Set up your own social networking page and have your child add you as a friend.
- Join the chat rooms your child visits.
- Send and receive text messages with your child – you might even find your child opens up to you more in a text message than he or she would on the drive to the store!
- Take time to have your child teach you how to play an online game, either on the computer or a gaming system. (Even if you are not interesting in gaming, you need to know what your child is doing, how communication occurs, and how your child feels when gaming. Take an interest in your child's game character's development as well as your child's gaming successes, frustrations, and goals.)

The more knowledge you have about technology's benefits and risks, the better equipped you will be to keep your child safe.

Computer Location

One of the best ways to keep tabs on cyber bullying is to keep home computers in highly visible areas. All computers in your home (yours included) should be kept in a high-traffic or centrally located room that is frequented by parents, and screens should be easily viewable. You might have to forfeit your ideal home décor or deal with reduced living area, but the tradeoff will be well worth it. By keeping home computers in a central location, you can:

- Naturally encourage a togetherness that is lost when computers are stored off in bedrooms or basements.

- Model good computer habits and practices, such as avoiding online scams, deleting suspicious emails without opening them, and avoiding malware.
- Walk by, see what's going on, ask questions, and intervene when necessary.
- Be readily available when your child wants to share a Web site or what a friend is chatting about.

Another benefit of having computers in a central, high-traffic location is that you can instigate positive online interactions with your child. For example, you might play an online game with each other, which could be as simple as a puzzle challenge, like Bejeweled, or Scrabble; research a topic you have been talking about, such as a family vacation or shared hobby; or create an online slideshow or newsletter to share with your extended family. Sharing online projects enables you and your child to learn new skills and allows you to supervise your child's online activities.

Talk Talk Talk

Parents who have the greatest impact on keeping their children safe online establish and maintain open lines of communication. As a parent, be proactive – do not wait for your child to come to you with a problem. Start a dialogue at home, making sure your child understands what constitutes cyber bullying. Ask your child discussion-prompting questions, such as:

- Why do you think people cyber bully others?
- How would cyber bullying make you feel? Have you ever felt that way?
- Have you ever sent a mean email, text, or IM?
- Have you ever said or posted mean things to others when gaming online, either on the computer or television?
- How would you react if someone set up a fake profile on a social networking site and used it to make fun of another student?
- How would you react if your friend sent you a text message that included an embarrassing picture of another student?
- How can you protect yourself from cyber bullying?
- What can you do if you experience cyber bullying?
- What can you do if you know someone who is being cyber bullied?
- What can you do if you see someone cyber bullying others?
- What do you think are the possible effects of cyber bullying?

Let your child know that he can come to you whenever he has a question or concern about behaviors online. Encourage your child to tell you immediately whenever he suspects cyber bullying is taking place, regardless of whether the cyber bullying is happening to him or others online. Cyber bullying is harmful and unacceptable in all forms.

Preventive Action

As a parent, you walk a fine line between respecting your child's privacy and keeping your child safe. Ideally, open communication will resolve many issues, but at times safety concerns may override privacy. Therefore, before cyber bullying occurs, take some preventive action and discuss your family's plan with your child. Some preventive actions you might implement include:

- Tell your child that you may review online communications, including email, social networking sites, text messages, and chat logs. Reviewing works on two levels. First, it allows you to see when others are cyber bullying or acting inappropriately toward your child, and second, it encourages your child to think twice before he or she posts or sends content.
- Consider using your browser's parental control features or installing parental control software to help control which sites your child can visit. Some sites to visit for more information are Get Net Wise (<http://kids.getnetwise.org/tools>) and Yahoooligans! Parents' Guide (<http://yahooligans.yahoo.com/parents>). This works well for younger children, but many teens know "work-arounds" so do not rely on these. Again – communication is key!
- Recruit other adults as allies, including other parents, the school media center specialist, librarians, teachers, counselors, and even pediatricians. You might also reach out to your religious institutions or clubs as resources to help encourage positive online interactions.
- Review the setup and profile of each tool your child uses to communicate online –social networking sites, blogs, online gaming systems, and so forth – and make sure you limit who can see the information and what information is provided.
- Set clear rules for computer use by designating which sites are acceptable, how long your child can use the computer, and what tasks are allowed. Encourage a dialogue so your child can suggest sites and contribute opinions regarding which sites are deemed acceptable. By working with your child to develop "house rules," your child will feel more vested in the rules and will be more likely to talk to you when he wants to revise or modify the rules. Further, having set rules can help keep your child (and computer) safe as well as help provide a balance between computer use and other activities. Remind your child that the rules are not created to punish; they are created to help set consistent expectations, and encourage peace and balance in the household.
- Restrict the people who can send communications by helping your child create safe friends lists, using the Block feature when necessary, and controlling profiles, such as setting "Friends Only" on social networking sites.
- Restrict others from adding your child to their buddy list. This feature is usually found in the privacy settings or parental controls of a communications program.
- "Google" your child to make sure others are not posting attacks online. Keeping an eye on your child's screen name, nick names, full name, address, telephone and cell numbers, and Web sites, can help you catch early signs of cyber bullying. You may also want to set up an "alert" on Google to notify you whenever something about your child is posted online.
- Discuss how to respond when cyber bullying occurs—ignore, report, and tell (see the next section for more details). By knowing what to do before an attack occurs, your child will be able to respond appropriately instead of emotionally.

- Establish a cyber bullying communication process with your child before you need one. You cannot be by your child's side all day, but you can set up a plan with your child to help document attacks and inform you of the activity if you are not available at the time the attack occurs.

If Your Child is Cyber Bullied

Even with safeguards and preventive measures in place, cyber bullying can occur. If it does, remind your child to ignore the attack, report the attack to the site administrator or moderator, and tell a trusted adult.

- **Ignore:** The first action to take seems like no action – ignore – but this is the most effective action your child can take when your child first experiences a cyber bullying attack. Responding to an attack will only encourage the person who is cyber bullying to continue. In addition, responding will make it harder to determine who instigated the attack later.
- **Report:** Reporting an attack to a site administrator or moderator helps because the attack will then be “on the record.” If no administrators or moderators are available, such as in email or text messages, save the communication and print it if possible. If the attack is on your computer, take a picture of your screen and save or print it. (Tip: To easily take a picture of a computer screen, use the “Print Screen” button on the keyboard and then paste the picture into a graphics program.)
- **Tell:** Telling a trusted adult allows your child to talk about the incident in a safe environment and have someone to turn to for help if the cyber bullying continues. If cyber bullying escalates, legal actions may need to be taken.

A concise outline of steps you and your child should follow when cyber bullying occurs appears on the Teenangels Web site (www.teenangels.org/parents/cyberbullying_guide.html). The Teenangels offer “The Escalating Levels of Response to a Cyberbullying Incident” guide, which includes some of the recommendations shown here:

- Avoid making the situation worse. Do not respond to hostility.
- Document cyber bullying. Keep a record of emails, Web pages, instant messages, text messages, or other forms of cyber bullying, including relevant dates and times.
- Block the sender. You and your child can and should block aggressive or annoying contacts. Most Internet service providers (ISPs), email programs or interfaces, cell phones, social networking sites, and instant messaging programs have a blocking feature to allow you to prevent specific users from getting through.
- Report cyber bullying to the attacker's ISP/email host (such as gmail)/cell phone company if your child is receiving threatening messages or harassment. Most cyber bullying and harassment violate ISPs' and cell phone companies' terms of service. Many companies will close an account if someone is cyber bullying (which will also close the parents' household account in most cases).
- Report cyber bullying to your ISP/email host (such as gmail)/cell phone company and the attacker's ISP/email host/cell phone company if your child's account has been hacked, a password has been compromised, or if someone is posing as your child. You can call the company or send an email to their security department.

- Report cyber bullying to your school even though school officials may not be able to do anything since most cases of cyber bullying occur off campus and after hours. While school officials may not be able to legally act on a specific cyber bullying event, they can keep an eye on the situation at school, since many cyber bullying attacks are accompanied by offline bullying as well. The school counselor or administrator may also be able to alert the parents of the parties involved in order to request their help in stopping the cyber bullying.
- Report cyber bullying to the police when it involves threats of violence, extortion, obscenities, hate crimes, or child pornography, or if the person is posting details about your child's offline contact information. If you ever feel like your child or someone you know is in danger, contact the police immediately and cut off contact with the attacker, staying offline if necessary. Also, keep your computer settings intact to aid in any investigations.
- Take legal action when cyber bullying continues after taking the preceding actions. While cyber bullying may come close to violating the law, many times it may not cross the line enough to be deemed a crime. In extreme cases, though, the threat of legal action may be necessary to stop attacks or find who is behind an attack.

When Someone Else's Child is Involved

When you or your child know of someone who is being cyber bullied you can help the person by offering support. Your child can send private messages of support or offer support in person, especially when the person being bullied is a friend. In addition, share your knowledge about cyber bullying with the person's parent or teacher, or act as the child's "trusted adult" and talk to the child about ways to avoid cyber bullying and stay safe. Use the tips in the preceding section to help support any child who is being cyber bullied.

When Your Child is Cyber Bullying Others

As hard as it may be to admit, some parents must face the possibility that their child may be cyber bullying others. Some common signs to look for if you are concerned that your child might be bullying others include:

- Your child has been involved in bullying incidents at school, or has been the target of bullying.
- Your child quickly switches windows, closes programs, or hides his or her cell phone when you enter the room.
- Your child laughs excessively when working online or on the cell phone.
- Your child uses multiple online accounts, or another person's account.
- Your child spends an unusual amount of time using the computer or cell phone.
- Your child gets excessively upset when he or she is denied access to the computer or cell phone.

While the preceding signs may be indicative of other issues, consider the activities as "warning signs" that something may be going on that needs your attention. To begin intervening in questionable activity and protecting your child from repercussions of cyber bullying others, you can:

- Increase your supervision of your child's computer, gaming, and cell phone activity.
- Spend more time with your child and learn about your child's friends, activities, and interactions at school.

- Develop clear rules and enforce them consistently. Praise family members when they adhere to rules and follow through with nonviolent, consistent consequences when the rules are broken. Make the follow-through relevant to the rule. For example, if your child sends text messages during your family's "non-electronic hour," an appropriate consequence would be that your child loses phone privileges for the rest of the day or for an extra hour the next day.
- Become more technologically savvy. Online resources are widely available online. In addition, your Internet and cell phone service providers likely offer helpful information.
- Tell your child that cyber bullying is not acceptable. Immediately intervene if you see any sign of aggression online. Provide alternative solutions and firmly explain that cyber bullying is a serious matter that you will not tolerate.
- Look at the offline behaviors and actions in the home. Sometimes, online aggression may stem from frustration or painful situations that occur offline. If offline activities are causing distress, talk to your child or have another trusted adult talk to your child.
- Model respect, kindness, patience, and empathy. Treat others well, including your child. If you treat your child with respect, kindness, patience, and empathy, your child will learn from your example. Be aware that this takes a long-term, consistent effort and dedication.
- Build on your child's interests and talents by encouraging offline activities, such as clubs, music lessons, nonviolent sports, and volunteering.
- Share your concerns with your child's teacher, counselor, principal, or other respected adult. Work together to send a clear message to your child that all bullying must stop.
- If necessary, talk with a school counselor or mental health professional.
- Explain to your child that cyber bullying and online aggression can potentially have long-lasting consequences at the school district, state, federal, and civil levels, including getting sent home from school (if your child is using school property to cyber bully others), expelled from school, charged with a crime, arrested by a policeman, or even sued by another family.

Ultimately, a parent's greatest tool is communication – whether your concern is to prevent, protect, or eliminate cyber bullying in your household. Stay aware and informed, and most of all, communicate with your child – you both have much to gain.

Resources

Aggression and Victimization in Instant Messaging, Blogging and Face-to-Face Interactions

Kelly M. Lister, M.A. & Eric F. Dubow, Ph.D.

<http://www.education.com/reference/article/bullying-instant-messaging-blogging/>

American Association for School Administrators

www.aasa.org/content.aspx?id=11652&terms=cyber+bullying

Attorney General of Pennsylvania

www.attorneygeneral.gov/kid_site/documents/elementaryschool/cyberbullying.pdf

Center for Safe and Responsible Use of the Internet

www.cyberbully.org/cyberbully/docs/cbcteducator.pdf

Children Online: Cyberbullying and Online Harrassment

www.childrenonline.org/resourceinfo/cyberbullying.html

Common Sense Media

www.common sense media.org/cyberbullying-tips

CyberBullyHelp.com

www.cyberbullyhelp.com/whatis.html

Cyberbullying Research Center

www.cyberbullying.us

Cyberbullying.org

www.cyberbullying.org

Education.com

www.education.com/topic/what-you-need-to-know-cyberbullying

Education.com

How is bullying at school related to cyberbullying?

<http://www.education.com/reference/article/bullying-instant-messaging-blogging/>

Education.com and iKeepSafe

Cyberbullying: An Old Problem with a New Face

<http://www.education.com/reference/article/bullying-evolved-with-technology/>

GetNetWise: Tools for Families

<http://kids.getnetwise.org/tools>

National Crime Prevention Council: Cyberbullying

www.ncpc.org/cyberbullying

Neil Tippett, PhD, Fran Thompson, PhD, & Peter K Smith, PhD

Research on Cyberbullying: Key Findings and Practical Suggestions

<http://www.education.com/reference/article/cyberbullying-research/>

Netbullies

www.netbullies.com

NetSmartz

What To Do When Your Child is the Victim of Cyberbullying

<http://www.education.com/reference/article/cyberbullying-when-your-child-is-victim/>

NYU Study Center

The Internet at Home: Making it Work for You and Your Kids

<http://www.education.com/reference/article/keep-kids-safe-on-internet/>

Pew Foundation

Cyberbullying and Online Teens

<http://www.education.com/reference/article/cyberbullying-facts/>

Stop Cyberbullying

www.stopcyberbullying.org

Stop Cyberbullying, Parents Page

www.stopcyberbullying.org/parents

Teenangels: Cyberbullying Guide

www.teenangels.org/parents/cyberbullying_guide.html

U.S. Department of Health and Human Services

www.stopbullyingnow.hrsa.gov/adults/cyber-bullying.aspx

Wikipedia: Cyberbullying

www.en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cyberbullying

Wired Kids, Inc.

www.wiredkids.org/wiredkids_org.html

Wired Kids, Inc, Stop Cyberbullying

www.stopcyberbullying.org/what_is_cyberbullying_exactly.html

Wired Safety

www.wiredsafety.org (this site includes an online reporting form)

Yahooligans! Parents' Guide: Cyber-Bullying

<http://kids.yahoo.com/parents/online-safety/1705--Cyber-Bullying>