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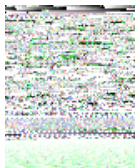
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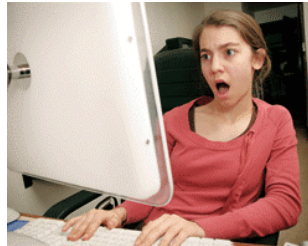
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New Ways to be Mean

What You Need to Know About Kids, Cyberbullying and How to Stop It

By Susan Flynn

In the not-so-distant past, kids who wanted to pick on someone after school might make a crank phone call. Today, the arsenal of technological tools available to harass their classmates is far more extensive, accessible and, some would say, dangerous.



They can send mean text messages from cell phones at all hours of the day. They can post unflattering photos of peers on Facebook. They can upload an embarrassing video onto YouTube to be viewed by millions.

Students have been subjected to traditional bullying - teasing, spreading rumors, shoving a kid against the locker - for generations. What's new, experts say, is the increased means to be mean.

"In a lot of ways, technology has made our lives easier," says Joan Scribner, a high school principal and president of the Massachusetts Secondary School Administrators' Association. "But it has also made kids a little braver in their bullying. The taunting and the teasing have certainly risen to a different level. We all see it as a growing problem."

By now you've likely heard the term "cyberbullying," defined as repeated, electronic-based bullying via computers and cell phones. According to one recent survey by the Massachusetts Aggression Reduction Center, 42 percent of students say they've been the victims of cyberbullying. In one highly publicized case, an autistic student on Cape Cod attended his first school dance and was videotaped by a student with a cell phone. The student later posted the clip on YouTube and classmates posted comments making fun of the 12-year-old and his dance moves.

"Adolescents can do very mean and cruel things," says Justin Patchin, co-director of the Cyberbullying Research Center, an organization and Web site providing information on the causes and consequences of cyberbullying among tweens and teens. Patchin and center co-director Sameer Hinduja are associate professors in criminal justice at the University of Wisconsin-Eau Claire and Florida Atlantic University respectively. "What we have found," Patchin says, "is that a lot of things kids will say online, they would never do in real life."

Therein lies one of the main differences with cyberbullying versus the traditional bullying counterpart - the victims often do not know the identity of their harasser. Is it a friend? An old boyfriend? Someone in gym class? The anonymity tends to make the "bully" braver, and more reckless. Or sometimes, an e-mail intended as a joke is not interpreted that way and blows up into a feud among friends, once it is forwarded again and again.

"I think it's hard when someone sends you something in an e-mail or a text," says Brigitte Berman, a Dover teen who wrote and self-published the book Dorie Witt's Guide to Surviving Bullies. "We can't hear their voice. We can't see their facial expressions."

While traditional bullying was a boy-dominated thing, Patchin has found that girls are just as likely "if not more likely" to participate in cyberbullying. Girls also are more likely to be the victims, he adds. This new form of bullying also occurs around the clock. "It's not suffering the physical effects of traditional [schoolyard] bullying, but we would argue that some of the side effects are worse," says Patchin. "It doesn't go away when you leave school. You can't escape it."

Realizing the prevalence of the problem, the Massachusetts State Legislature is debating a law that would require all public schools to develop anti-bullying programs for students, which would include cyberbullying. The law, backed by the Anti-Defamation League, would also require school staff to report cases of bullying. Right now, 38 states have anti-bullying laws. Experts say that constant bullying can lower self-esteem, hurt grades and, in worse-case scenarios, lead to suicide or cause a teen to retaliate using violence.

**A Widespread Problem**

Incidents of cyberbullying first began to rear their ugly

Are You Cyberbully Savvy?  
10 Tips for Parents

**Check with the School.** Make sure your school has an Internet safety program in place. This should not cover solely the threat of sexual predators, but also how to prevent and respond to online harassment.

**Encourage Two-Way Conversations.** Maintain an open line of communication with your children as soon as they start to use a computer and cell phone, so that they're willing to talk with you when problems arise. Bullying victims and bystanders need to know that adults who they tell will intervene rationally and not make a situation worse.

**Teach Accountability.** Discuss social networking. Make it clear to your children that anything posted online is public and they are responsible for what they write. At least 25 percent of colleges regularly check online as part of the admissions process.

**Cite the Law.** Stress to your child that cyberbullying may be a criminal offense. Electronically-communicated threats are a crime in the same way that a face-to-face or written threat can generate a criminal charge.

**Set Rules.** Review cell phone rules with your child. Also cover how to react to abusive or scary messages - save and report them, but do not respond. Consider in advance what the consequences will be if rules are broken.

**Respect Privacy.** Teach your child to never give out passwords or screen names, even to friends.

**Make a Plan.** Talk with your child about what he should do if he is the victim of cyberbullying. Ask him to tell you immediately and know what steps to take (See Tip No. 8).

**Report Incidents.** If your child is the victim of cyberbullying by school peers, report the bullying to your child's school and ask the school to address the behavior. If you believe that your child's safety is in danger, immediately



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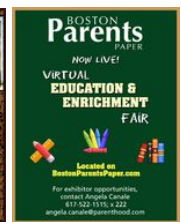
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