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| **Protecting Your Kids from Cyberbullying** |  |

**Key Points:**

Bullying is a sad fact of life, and unfortunately, bullies aren’t confined to the school playground anymore. They’ve gone online, where they hide behind the relative anonymity of the Internet to intimidate, harass and belittle others online. According to a recent study, some 75 percent of teens have been bullied online[[1]](#footnote-2) in attacks that range from mean or malicious emails to posting embarrassing information on personal sites, and even physical threats. The effects can be serious: victims of cyberbullying may become withdrawn, avoid friends and skip school. In extreme cases, they can become depressed and even consider, attempt or commit suicide. The issue of cyberbullying is important enough that fourteen states in the United States have passed or are proposing laws to make cyberbullying a crime, bringing it in line with traditional forms of in-person harassment and stalking. This phenomenon transcends boundaries and continues to grow. In Australia, one quarter of Australian children report that they have been cyberbullied while more than 57% of parents and 59% of children report that they have heard of incidents of cyberbullying among people they know.

Many parents are largely unaware of the problem. In fact, the same study found that only 10 percent of teens who had experienced bullying ever reported the problem to their parents or other adults. It’s crucial that parents create and maintain open lines of communication with their children and encourage them to speak openly about their interactions on the Internet. Parents need to be involved in children’s lives and activities. Even get children to take them on a cyber tour of their favorite sites, so they know more about where they are and what they are doing in the virtual world. Most importantly, parents need to educate themselves about cyberbullying and know the telltale signs to look for so that they can intervene if someone in their family becomes a victim.

**Examples of Cyberbullying:**

* Sending hateful, intimidating, or threatening messages online or to a cell phone
* Harassing someone in an online game
* Posting embarrassing pictures or information on a social networking site, such as MySpace.com®, Windows Live™ Spaces, or Facebook®
* Impersonating someone online, and posting cruel messages on other’s blogs or personal sites
* Disclosing private information by forwarding e-mails and text messages
* Deliberately shutting someone out of an online group such as an instant messaging (IM) buddy list
* Pretending to befriend a person in order to gain trust and then turn on him or her

**How to Avoid Cyberbullying:**

There are numerous ways parents and other adults can help protect children from becoming the object of hurtful attacks and harassment.

* Encourage children and their friends to look out for each other – this will significantly reduce the likelihood they will be targeted.
* Put the family computer and Internet-connected game console(s) in central locations in the home to keep an eye on the online activities of younger children.
* Ask children what they’re doing online, and get specific answers. Ask children for an “online tour” of the Web sites they visit most often, and other online activities they participate in.
* Have serious discussions about cyberbullying with older kids, who may use the Internet in multiple locations, including outside the home, where they are not always supervised.
* Make sure children feel comfortable reporting bullying to you, promise to report any such incidents on their behalf, if they want – and follow through. In some instances, approaching the bully’s parent, a teacher or other school official may worsen the problem. So strategize the best course for the child.
* Lay out clear consequences children will face if they engage in cyberbullying against others.

**If a Child is Being Cyberbullied:**

Take ACTION!

* **Attempt to Block:**  Begin blocking interactions with cyberbullies through filtering technologies or by refusing to respond to bullies. Children should refuse to pass along bullying messages and they should tell friends to do the same.
* **Communicate:** Discuss the implications of cyberbullying with children, including any problems they have encountered, and encourage them to report bullying to a parent or another trusted adult.
* **Try Family Safety Software:** Manage what children view, what they do, and who they communicate with online through available software. Such software can supply parents with an activity report on their child’s computer usage, which in turn provides a starting point for parents to discuss online activities with their children.
* **Investigate:** Know what children are talking about if they come to you for help. Investigate what they do online and which sites they visit before a problem arises.
* **Obtain Information:** Learn about the anti-bullying policies at children's schools and through the home Internet service provider. Determine if these policies apply.
* **Notify:** Know who to contact if a child is being cyberbullied. For instance:
  + The school,
  + The site where the bullying is taking place, and
  + Local police, if necessary.

**Useful Technology and Resources:**

Microsoft provides family safety settings in a wide range of products—such as Windows Vista®, Xbox 360® and Xbox LIVE®, and Windows Live™OneCare™ Family Safety—to help manage children’s Internet use.

You can get the details on those settings at:

[www.microsoft.com/protect/family/safetysettings/default.mspx](http://www.microsoft.com/protect/family/safetysettings/default.mspx)

A comprehensive list of popular tools is also available at:

[www.kids.getnetwise.org/tools](http://www.kids.getnetwise.org/tools)

Other helpful online resources include:

[www.onguardonline.gov](http://www.onguardonline.gov) – The Web site of the U.S. Federal Trade Commission, which offers consumers tips, articles, videos and interactive activities related to online safety and security.

[www.ilearn.isafe.org](http://www.ilearn.isafe.org) – A free online curriculum for educators, parents, teens and law enforcement.

1. “Parents Often Unaware of Cyber-Bullying,” by Tara Parker-Pope, The New York Times, October 3, 2008. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)