

# CYBERBULLYING

Parent/Teenager "Scripts" to Promote Dialogue and Discussion  
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## What is Cyberbullying?

Cyberbullying can be defined as "willful and repeated harm inflicted through the medium of electronic text." This generally occurs through the use of computers and the Internet, as bullies can send harassing e-mails or instant messages, post obscene, insulting, and slanderous messages to online bulletin boards or social networking sites (like MySpace, Friendster, Orkut, and Facebook), or develop Web sites to promote and disseminate defamatory content. Harassing text messages also can be sent to a victim via cellular phones.

In terms of proactive and reactive responses, the Internet is replete with safety tips to instruct parents whose children frequently are online. In addition, software is available for adults to install on home computers to filter web content for adolescent users. Neither of these measures, however, are completely successful in protecting youth from online victimization, nor are they as effective as parents' supervision of (or involvement in) their children's online activities.

Research has identified the importance of ongoing discussions between parents, caregivers, or teachers and children about online interactions. As such, we have created sample "scripts" between a parent and a teenager to encourage cyberbullying-related conversations. We hope they are useful in encouraging parents to discuss this important issue with their web-using teens.

## Cyberbullying on Social Networking Sites



orkut

friendster

facebook

Parent: I've noticed that you use the computer a lot to go on the Internet. Do you talk to your friends online?

Teenager: Yes, both my friends and I use the Internet a lot.

Parent: What is it about the Internet that you like?

Teenager: It's an easy way to talk to friends and stay in touch with people. You can also meet people online.

Parent: Have you ever had any problems with people on the Internet? Has anyone ever bothered or threatened you or treated you badly while online? I'm asking because I know that many people have been harassed and bullied on the Internet and I want you to be able to talk to me about things like that if they happen to you.

Teenager: Well, sometimes my friends make fun of me while we're talking online. Some people have even left comments on my MySpace page so that others could see it and join in on harassing me.

Parent: OK. I'm really glad that you told me about this. What do you mean by "harassing" you?

Teenager: There are just some people I know who created this MySpace page that isn't really mine, and they are using it to post funny things about me and pictures that are embarrassing. I don't like it, but I don't know what to do.

Parent: I'm sorry to hear that this has been happening to you. This is not your fault, and now that I know what is happening I can help you. MySpace has many restrictions to keep this sort of stuff from happening. They want youth to use their web site without fearing for their safety or having to deal with harassment of any type. We just need to check out [www.myspace.com/safetytips](http://www.myspace.com/safetytips), or I can email them at [parentcare@myspace.com](mailto:parentcare@myspace.com) and tell them about the problems you are having. Once they see the offending page and determine that it is harassment, they will remove it. How about we do that? I don't want you to suffer any further harassment, so we'll do all of this confidentially and behind the scenes. I really think we should give it a try.

## Cyberbullying via Email



Parent: I want to talk to you about email and whether you've had to deal with any kind of email harassment.

Teenager: Why?

Parent: Well, with all of the news stories about kids harassing each other using email, I want to know if this is happening to you. Have you ever been bothered or annoyed or mistreated by anyone via email?

Teenager: There were a few times where people I don't know sent me weird emails, trying to make me upset. I'm not sure how they got my email address because I don't know them, but they did.

Parent: OK. I'm proud of you for telling me about this, and I want to help you so that you don't have to deal with this anymore. It is possible that these people got your email address from a friend of yours, or from one of the social networking sites you use? Have you ever posted any personal information like your email address or anything like that online?

Teenager: No, I don't think so. I mean, I sometimes put my email address in messages I post on my friend's pages so it's easy for them to get back to me. But I guess those messages are viewable by everyone, though...so maybe that's how they got my information.

Parent: Well, even if you did post your email address in those messages, you don't deserve to be harassed or bothered like this. You just need be careful about posting *any* personal information online, because you never know who will see it. There are some messed-up people out there, and I know you don't like getting these weird emails. For now, we can use the email software on your computer to block the senders of the harassing messages. We can also look up the email header information to find out which Internet Service Provider the messages came from. We can email that Internet Service Provider to tell them what's going on, and forward them the messages as evidence. They will take care of it from there. And, if any of these emails have threatened your personal safety, we can call the police and file a report. Hopefully this

will take care of the problem, and you won't be harassed any more. What do you think?

Teenager: Well, the emails I've received are just a nuisance and there haven't been any threats. I think we should just block the senders so I don't receive any more messages from them.

Parent: Sounds good. We can take care of it right now, and you can let me know if this doesn't fix the problem. I don't want you to have to deal with this on your own.

## Cyberbullying via Cell Phone Text Message



Parent: I heard your cell phone beeping a lot the other day. Are you having any problems with it?

Teenager: No. It was just some people sending me text messages and they wouldn't stop.

Parent: What do you mean, they wouldn't stop? Are these your friends or someone else?

Teenager: It's no big deal. It's just some people from school who think it's funny to flood my phone with stupid text messages.

Parent: I'm so glad you told me about this. That must be pretty annoying.

Teenager: Yeah. It's frustrating because I want to turn off my phone so I don't have to deal with it, but then my friends can't reach me.

Parent: You shouldn't have to deal with this. If someone is bothering you using your cell phone, we can report them to the cell phone company and have their number blocked. If it gets out of hand, we can change your cell phone number and you can give the new number only to the people you want to have it.

Teenager: But I don't want to go through all of that because one or two people are harassing me and I can't get them to stop.

Parent: I understand, and I don't want you to get a new number if you don't have to. First we'll contact the cell phone company and let them know what's

happening. If the harassing text messages continue from a different number, we'll block that one too. Then if it keeps happening, we will get you a new number.

### **Other Questions to Promote Dialogue**

Though these scripts may be useful in guiding conversations with their children, parents also can start a dialogue about cyberbullying by asking a few simple questions. Following is a list of suggested questions to help parents begin to talk about these issues.

Are other kids picking on you online? If so, how?

Is it via email, or chat, or instant message, or on MySpace or similar sites?

Does it just happen once in a while, or is it a constant problem?

Do you get concerned that people will read what others have written about you online and think it's true?

Have you ever been threatened for your physical or personal safety on the Internet?

Did you know that physical and personal threats online are against the law and are a crime, just like offline threats?

Has any online argument also popped up offline, maybe at school or when you're hanging out with your friends?

How does it make you feel?

How do you typically respond?

When someone picks on you or makes fun of you online, do you usually know who the person is in real life?

Do you know in real life everyone who you've accepted as a "Friend" on your MySpace (or equivalent) page? Are some of your "Friends" people you only know online? How do you know you can trust them viewing the contents of your page?

Has anyone said anything sexually offensive to you over the Internet?

Like what? How often does this happen?

How do you deal with it?

How can I help you make it stop, without embarrassing you?

### **Concluding Thoughts**

To reiterate, one of the most important steps you can take to prevent and adequately respond to cyberbullying is to talk about online interactions with your kids. They will know where you stand on these issues, and will hopefully feel more comfortable coming to you with concerns. The earlier you initiate these conversations (yes, there will need to be more than one!), the better off you and your kids will be. As soon as they start using the computer, talk with them about the potential risks and rewards of communication in cyberspace. As they grow older and more proficient with the technologies, discuss additional issues with them as appropriate.

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