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How to prevent cyberbullying: From the home to the homeroom

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Cyberbullying And Behavior

From middle school on, students begin to accept more responsibility for their actions and gain greater autonomy from their parents, teachers and other adults. This growing independence is played out as much online as it is in the real world.

More than 90 percent of teenagers in America have daily or frequent computer access. The tools of their digital world are cell phones, computers and game consoles. They use technology to play online games, download music, e-mail and instant message. Many create personal profiles on MySpace, Facebook or other social networking sites.

Teens build a second existence online. Naturally, bullying and anti-social behavior translates from real world to the Web, invading this second existence. Where bullies take advantage of weakness to harm kids on the playground, cyberbullies take advantage of digital tools to harm them online.

Cyberbullying, or the use of Internet-connected devices to harass others, is particularly damaging because it can occur 24 hours a day, seven days a week.

The anonymity of the Internet allows cyberbullies to approach their victims with less fear of retaliation than traditional bullies. They burden their victims with the knowledge that everyone on the Web can view the harassment.

Cyberbullying tactics include:

- Sending abusive text messages to cell phones, computers, or Internet-connected game consoles.
- Posting abusive comments on someone's blog or social networking site (e.g., MySpace or Facebook).
- Creating a Web page that masquerades as the victim's personal site and using it to embarrass him or her.
- Making it appear that the victim is posting malicious comments about friends to isolate him or her from friends.
- Posting the victim's personally identifiable information on a site to put them at greater risk of contact by predators.
- Sending abusive comments while playing interactive games.
- Taking photos — often using a cell phone camera — and posting them online, sometimes manipulating them to embarrass the target.

Kids become cyberbullies because the power and anonymity of the Internet strips away responsibility and bolsters independence and autonomy beyond a level they can maturely handle.

When students are bullied in real life and online, involvement in school activities may diminish. Grades may slip. Before long, the student may dread going to school.

Because cyberbullying impedes a child's ability to succeed in school, it must be addressed at home and in the classroom.

Fortunately, school boards, parent groups and governments have begun to take action.

A Brief History Of The Battle Against Cyberbullying

To understand the dynamics of legislative and judicial discourse on cyberbullying, one must first understand the tedious balance between maintaining a safe learning environment and maintaining the free speech rights of individuals.

Case law indicates schools may be found liable for damages if a victim can prove that:

- The school environment had been altered for them
- Any staff member knew or should have known about the harassment
- There was a failure to act
- There was deliberate indifference

However, students are protected by the First Amendment and do not forfeit their constitutional right to free speech and expression while on campus, much less in the home, where cyberbullying is often carried out. School officials may discipline a student for off-campus speech if they present factual evidence which forecasts substantial disruption of, or interference with, school activities. This principle, established by United States Supreme Court decision in 1969, is known as "The Tinker Standard."

Here are a few other laws that have been instrumental in the fight against cyberbullying:

CIPA, or the Children's Internet Protection Act of 2000

- Required schools and libraries receiving E-rate funds to implement "filtering," a technology protection measure which blocks visual depictions of obscenity, child pornography or anything else harmful to minors.

- Established an Acceptable Use Policy (AUP) and an NCIPA provision to address access to inappropriate material, security when using Web 2.0 tools, network hacking, protection of personal information, as well as use and dissemination.

Oregon HB 2637 passed into law in 2007

- State officials added cyberbullying to a law that called for school districts to develop anti-bullying policies, establish procedures to report such behavior, and provide an outline of consequences. The law defines bullying as any act that "substantially interferes" with a student's education and takes place "on or immediately adjacent to school grounds" or at school-sponsored activities.

Washington SB 5288

- Provides that, by August 1, 2008, each school district shall amend its harassment, intimidation and bullying prevention policy to include a section addressing acts of bullying, harassment or intimidation that are conducted via electronic means. The policy shall include a requirement that materials be made available to educate parents and students about the seriousness of cyberbullying. Provides that the material shall include information on responsible and safe Internet use as well as what options are available if a student is being bullied via electronic means, including but not limited to, reporting threats to local police and when to involve school officials, the Internet service provider or phone service provider. If a school district has Internet use policies, the act of bullying, harassing, or intimidating another student via online means shall be included as a prohibited act and be subject to disciplinary action.

Minnesota SB 646

- Each school board shall adopt a written policy regarding intimidation and bullying in all forms, including, but not limited to, electronic forms and forms involving Internet use.

All across America, states legislatures are adopting policies similar to the ones implemented in Washington, Oregon and Minnesota. From PTA meetings to the steps of the nation's Capitol, heavy-hitting lawmakers are lining up behind proposals and bills that address cyberbullying as the serious risk it has become.

Elsewhere, online communities have been dedicated to promote Internet safety and combat cyberbullying, as well as other inappropriate behaviors on the Web. Sites like NetSmartz and WebWiseKids offer online safety tips. Telecommunications provider Qwest Communications created an entirely separate site, www.incredibleinternet.com, to educate parents about the technology-driven world their children already know how to navigate.

We are winning the battle. But there is still work to be done.

Why Prevention Must Begin In The Classroom

The National Crime Prevention Council estimates that 43 percent of teens ages 13 to 18 have been victims of cyberbullying in the last year. That statistic translates to between 6.9 and 8.7 million American teens. If you throw in pre-teens and tweens, the number almost doubles to 13 million.

That's 13 million students who should be focusing on their education, but are worried about digital whispers and Internet hearsay.

Cyberbullying is more than a nuisance when it prevents a child from learning.

Despite this alarming trend, 58 percent of teens say they've never told their parents or any other adult about the harassment.

Why not? Because victims of cyberbullying are put in a precarious position. On one hand, they long for the harassment to end. On the other hand, they fear overreaction from adults, resulting in the loss of access to their digital world. Anxiety over breaking a "code of silence" and making the harassment worse only compounds the problem.

We cannot count on cyberbullying victims to speak up. We must open the lines of communication. Teachers and counselors. Coaches and administrators. It's up to us.

Cyberbullying prevention must begin in the classroom.

Here's how to start:

- Educate your staff, students and families about cyberbullying. Use open house nights and PTA meetings. Use report cards and e-mails.
- Update and post anti-bullying policies to address cyberbullying in a prominent place.

- Use filtering and tracking software on all computers and identify staff with permission to override the filters.
- Closely monitor students' use of computers at school. Even seemingly benign sites can offer a platform for harassment.
- Investigate any and all reports of cyberbullying immediately. Learn the facts and report.
- Take action if cyberbullying occurs through the school district's Internet system. Remember, you are liable for damages if you don't.
- Notify parents of victims and parents of known or suspected cyberbullies. Your combined efforts could help heal the wounds and curb bad behavior.
- Notify the police if the known or suspected cyberbullying involves a threat. In today's culture of school violence, take nothing lightly.
- Closely monitor the behavior of cyberbullying victims. Repressed anger can become dangerous.
- Investigate to see if the victim of cyberbullying could use support from a counselor or mental health professional.

Most importantly, advocate the establishment of a standards-based curriculum on cyberbullying and online anti-social behavior. In today's technology-driven world, creating good Internet habits, teaching positive and productive uses for the Web and preempting negative behavior are as essential among today's educational priorities as any social science.

Building A Standards-Based Curriculum

Building a standards-based cyberbullying curriculum is a joint effort among teachers, parents, legislators and teens themselves.

This curriculum can be seamlessly incorporated into classes like language arts, computers or technology, social studies, even psychology.

Wherever it fits, the success of this curriculum hinges on bringing parents in at the ground level. Because cyberbullying continues from the classroom to the home, the teaching must also translate.

The goal

To **COMPEL** students to speak up about cyberbullying when it begins, so that teachers and administrators can work to solve the problem.

Help students **REPEL** the negative, hurtful actions of cyberbullies by reporting those incidents to a teacher or parent.

DISPEL the notion that cyberbullying education is a waste of time and sharing its usefulness with other educators.

Help students **EXCEL** in school by eliminating the stress and embarrassment caused by cyberbullying, which improves the overall school environment.

The lessons

A course on cyberbullying should include lessons such as:

- What is cyberbullying?
- Respect and responsibility
- Cyberbullying across devices and services
- Cyberbullying scenarios and consequences
- What to do if you're being cyberbullied
- What to do if you're a cyberbully
- Making your school safe from cyberbullying

The journal

Throughout the lessons, teachers should ask students to write about what they have learned in a personal journal. A typical entry should consist of a paragraph of four to eight sentences that addresses specific questions and key points from the lesson. Encourage students to create a separate section in a notebook for this cyberbullying course, as they will be participating in additional lessons and getting materials throughout the school year.

More resources

Visit www.incredibleinternet.com/cyberbullying for more resources for teachers and parents.

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