

What is Cyberbullying?

The Internet is a place for all sorts of electronic communication. People can type messages to one another, send pictures and even videos. Generally this communication can be constructive and helpful. But can people use the Internet to hurt or slander others? Teens and pre-teens who want to engage in online communication and Internet communities need to be aware of the potential dangers they face. One of these is “cyberbullying.” We hope this document will help you understand what cyberbullying is and how to avoid it.

What is bullying? – You are probably familiar with what a bully is: someone who is continually cruel or mean to those who are weaker. Picture your classic bully on the school playground. Because of the Internet, there are new ways that others can bully one another, and it isn’t limited to the playground anymore.

What are examples of cyberbullying? –Some will write insulting words and send them to someone else. Some write notes filled with gossip and rumors online for others to see. Some might put up embarrassing pictures of others. Some may modify pictures of others and place them online for others to see (for example, they may place pictures of a person's head onto a photo of a naked body). Some cyberbullies post others' pictures on certain websites like “Hot or Not” for strangers to rate how ugly they are. There are even cases of people creating whole websites dedicated to how much someone hates a person.

Is cyberbullying common? – Yes. In some studies, about 1/3 of the youth questioned had experienced cyberbullying on some level. About 5 percent of the youth questioned feared for their own safety as a result.

Who can be a cyberbully? – Those who bully at school can bring their bullying activities to the Internet, but many times *underdogs*, those who are *victims* of bullying, become cyberbullies. Those who feel powerless to “get back” in person feel they can easily get back over the Internet. It is easy to see how one act of cyberbullying can bring about another.

Who can be cyberbullied? – Anyone can be a victim of cyberbullying, but often there are prime targets: teens who struggle with obesity, those perceived as being gay or lesbian, those desperate for attention or acceptance, and those who are alternative thinkers or are unwilling to “go with the crowd” or play social games. Studies show that of those who are cyberbullied, females have a far greater difficulty holding back feelings of anger and frustration.

What can a parent do? – Parents need to be aware of cyberbullying and teach their teens to act and react appropriately. If a teen comes away from time on the Internet feeling particularly depressed, anxious, or angry, this may be a sign that they have been bullied online. It is important for parents to teach appropriate reactions. (1) Don’t lash back. (2) “Block” the bully from doing it again. If the bullying came through email, block all messages from that email address. If it came through IM (instant messenger) or a chat room, block future communications from that person (by blocking that person’s IM profile or username). (3) Save all the information (text, photos, etc.) exchanged and report the incident. Many social networking sites and chat rooms have a “terms of use” statement that prohibits slanderous speech, intimidation or harassment. Find the appropriate means of reporting the incident to the website. If the cyberbullying appears to be a crime, call the police.

What can teens do? – Don’t be an “innocent bystander.” Some studies show that 1/3 of teens questioned have witnessed a peer cyberbullying someone else. Speak out against any form of bullying when you see it. Most of all, don’t be a bully. Ask yourself: Am I showing respect online? How would I feel if this were done to me? What would a trusted adult think about what I am posting? How would I feel if I knew others could see what I’m doing?

Helpful websites:

- **STOP Cyberbullying:** <http://www.stopcyberbullying.org>
- **Cyberbullying411:** <http://www.cyberbully411.org>