Common Sense on Cyberbullying For High School Students

What's the issue?

Cyberbullying is the use of digital media tools, such as the Internet and cell phones, to deliberately humiliate and harass others, oftentimes repeatedly. Though most teens do not do this, those who do are often motivated by a desire for power, status, and attention – and their targets are often people they are competing with for social standing. Cyberbullies often take advantage of the Web's anonymity to antagonize someone without being recognized.

Cyberbullying can take a variety of forms, such as harassing someone, impersonating someone, spreading rumors, or forwarding embarrassing information about a person. A bully's mean-spirited comments can spread widely through instant messaging (IM), phone texting, and by posts on social networking sites. This can happen rapidly, with little time for teens to cool down between responses. And it can happen anytime — at school or at home — and oftentimes it involves large groups of teens.

Some facts

Approximately 20 percent of kids ages 10 to 18 say they have been cyberbullied sometime in their life (Cyberbullying Research Center, Hinduja and Patchin, 2010)

About one in five teens ages 11 to 18 have admitted to cyberbullying others (Cyberbullying Research Center, Hinduja and Patchin, 2009)

Teens ages 14 to 17 experience the most instances of online harassment and bullying (Pew Internet and American Life, 2007)

What is cyberbullying?

Whether it's creating a fake Facebook or MySpace page to impersonate a

fellow student, repeatedly sending hurt- ful text messages and images, or posting cruel comments on the Internet, cyberbullying can have a devastating effect. Nasty comments, lies, embarrassing photos and videos, and snide polls can be spread widely through instant messaging (IM) or phone texting, and by posts on social networking sites. It can happen anytime — at school or home — and can involve large groups of kids. The combination of the boldness created by being anonymous and the desire to be seen as "cool" can cause a kid who normally wouldn't say anything mean face-to- face to show off for other kids. Because it's happening in cyberspace, it can be completely undetectable by parents and teachers.

Why it matters

Cyberbullying is similar to face-to-face bullying, but online tools magnify the hurt, humiliation, and social drama in a very public way. Whether it's creating a fake Facebook or MySpace page to impersonate a fellow student, repeatedly sending hurtful text messages and images, or spreading rumors or posting cruel comments on the Internet, cyberbullying can result in severe emotional and even physical harm.

And though anyone can spot bullying behavior in the real world, it's much more difficult to detect it in the online world. Sometimes an entire social circle will get involved, and then it becomes harder for an individual teen to disengage from it. In fact, whole groups of teens may be actively or passively participating, and the target can feel that it is impossible to get away from the bullies. In addition, hurtful information posted on the Internet is extremely difficult to remove, and millions of people can see it.

The following tips can help you recognize the warning signs of cyberbullying and serve as a guide for talking to your teens about preventing it.

Common Sense says

» **Recognize context.** Cyberbullying is often not thought of as "cyberbullying" to the teens involved. Even though an incident has a history, a story, and nuance, rather than referring it as "cyberbullying,"

try the words "digital cruelty," "abuse," or "being mean" online.

» **Help teens understand when behavior crosses the line.** Help your teen tune into his or her own feelings. If they feel emotionally or physically scared, it's time to get help.

» **Encourage empathy.** Help teens understand the detrimental impact of cyberbullying on people who are targeted, now and later in life. Encourage them to listen to targets and to become their allies.

» **Be realistic.** Teens have their own social dynamics that often don't include parents, so helping them directly may be difficult. Encourage teens to find friends or other trusted adults to help them through the situation, even if it's not you. Websites are often slow to respond, if they respond at all, but reporting an incident to a website administrator can be an empowering step.

» **Remember that your teen might be the bully.** Teens can take different roles in cyberbullying at different times. A teen who is cyberbullied might turn around and cyberbully someone else to feel powerful again. Ask questions to understand what role or roles your teens are playing.

» **Tell them to disengage.** Encourage your teens to ignore and block the bully, and even log off the computer for a while. Point out that cyberbullies are often just looking for attention and status, so don't let them know that their efforts have worked.

Families can talk about it

» **You seem down.** What's going on at school? Is anything upsetting happening online?

» **I'm here for you and so are your friends.** Talk to me anytime.

» **Are there any teachers at school who have dealt with these kinds of situations before?** I think you should tell one of them about what's been happening.

» **Bullies want attention, power, and status, which explains why they need to cause drama.**

» **I saw a news story about a teen who was bullied online.** What would you do in that situation?

Parent Tip Sheet

Common Sense on Digital Harassment Tips

What Is Digital Harassment?

Digital harassment is when kids and teens use cell phones, social networks, and other communications devices to bully, threaten, and aggressively badger someone. While it's a form of cyberbullying, "digital harassment" is a bit different because it usually takes place between two people in a romantic relationship.

Certainly, lots of young people conduct healthy relat- ionships and use their online and mobile lives to stay connected to each other. But not all relationships are balanced — especially with teens, whose emotional lives run at peak speeds.

Some relationships can become manipulative and controlling, and teens uyse the digital devices at their disposal to act out. A few texts a day can turn into a few hundred. Relentless and unreasonable demands escalate. The abuser presses for things like the other person's passwords (so they can check up on them) and sexy photos, and forces their significant other to unfriend people whom the abuser doesn't like. They may spread lies, impersonate someone, or even resort to blackmail.

Some facts

50% of people ages 14-24 have experienced digitally abusive behavior.

Nearly half of young people (45%) report that they see people being mean to each other on social networking sites.

61% of those who have sent a naked photo or video of themselves have been pressured by someone else to do so at least once.

Roughly 7 in 10 (69%) teens say that digital abuse is a serious problem for society that should be addressed, while 76% say that it's a serious problem

for people their age.

(All of the above are from the 2009 MTV Digital Abuse study)

Why it matters

Digital harassment has real consequences for those who've been targeted. A 2009 poll conducted by MTV and the Associated Press found that targets of this kind of abuse are more likely to consider dropping out of school, engage in risky behavior, and even think about suicide.

The poll also found that kids and teens who discover digital harassment among their friends aren't inclined to come forward and report it.

Fortunately, large public-awareness campaigns — most notably MTV's A Thin Line and The Family Violence Prevention Fund's That's Not Cool — are helping teens recognize when staying connected crosses the line into digital harassment. These campaigns use kids' idols — like Justin Bieber — and entertaining videos to give teens the language they need to identify and end digital harassment.

Parents can support their teens by understanding that relationships these days are often played out both online and in public — and kids need their parents' guidance in establishing appropriate boundaries for healthy relationships. Young love is complicated enough with- out the added pressure of constant access and public scrutiny. The tips below can help you help your kids navigate these murky waters so they can avoid digital drama for themselves and their friends.

Advice for Parents

If you suspect your kid is being harassed:

Start a discussion. Your teen may not tell you if it's happening directly to him or her. But you can bring it up when you talk about online safety and responsible behavior. Tell kids about resources like That's Not Cool and the National Teen Dating Abuse Helpline (1-866-331-9474 (1-866-331-8453 TTY).

Let them know you are always there for them.

Remind teens often that you're always available to talk to. While you're at it, put in a plug for the school counselor, a teacher, or even a friend's parent

— knowing that they have a trusted adult to talk to may encourage teens to open up.

Help them set boundaries. Tell teens never to do anything that's outside their comfort zone — like sharing passwords or sending sexual photos. (It never hurts to reiterate that anything you send can travel far and wide.)

If you suspect your kid may be harassing someone:

Check their Facebook page. See what kind of comments your teen sending — and whether other kids are telling your kid to back off.

Check their cell phone. What kind of texts is your kid sending — and how many?

Check in with other parents. The parents of your kid's friends may know something you don't.

Help your kid. Find a counselor or an organization that's equipped to help. That'sNotCool is a great place to start.

Tips for all parents:

Check your teens' texts, IMs, and status updates.

Be aware of who your kids are talking to, what they're saying, and how they're saying it. If your teens won't share their messages, look at your bill to see the quantity of texts.

Have a zero-tolerance policy. No sexting, no hate speech, no stalkerish behavior.

Teach teens to respect their devices. Explain what responsible ownership — and behavior — entails.

Teach kids to be upstanders, not bystanders. If teens see their friends getting harassed, they should report it to a teacher, a counselor, or another responsible, trustworthy adult.

Talk about the pressure to broadcast. Kids in abusive relationships are often coerced into sending scantily clad or naked pictures of themselves to "prove" their love. If this happens to your kid, that's a big red flag.

Talk about what's private. Kids differ from their parents in their take on what's "private" and what's OK to share. Explain to them the consequences of posting or sending intimate stuff. It can be copied, forwarded, and sent to thousands of kids in an instant.

Parent Tip Sheet

Common Sense on Talking About "Sexting"

That picture's not as private as you think

Most teens today are comfortable with documenting their lives online. Posting photos, updating their status messages, sharing rapid-fire texts, and being a click away from friends are the new normal for teens. But this "always on" culture also creates an environment where teens can make impulsive decisions that can come back to haunt them. One example of this has been in the news a lot lately: sexting.

Some facts

22% of teen girls and 20% of teen boys have sent nude or semi-nude photos of themselves over the Internet or their phones.

22% of teens admit that technology makes them personally more forward and aggressive.

38% of teens say exchanging sexy content makes dating or hooking up with others more likely.

29% of teens believe those exchanging sexy content are "expected" to date or hook up.

(All of the above are from *CosmoGirl* and the *National Campaign to Prevent Teen Pregnancy, 2009.*)

What Is "Sexting"?

When people take and send sexually revealing picture of themselves or send sexually explicit messages via text message, it's called "sexting." While experts differ on statistics, a 2010 study conducted by Pew Internet & American Life Project confirms sexting is a teen reality that's here to stay. Kids "sext" to show off, to entice someone, to show interest in someone, or to prove commitment.

Sending these pictures or messages is problematic enough, but the real challenge comes when this content is shared broadly. As far too many teens have found out, the recipient of these messages is in possession of a highly compromising image or message that can be easily posted on a social networking site or sent to others via email or text.

Why sexting matters

In a technology world where anything can be copied, sent, posted, and seen by huge audiences, there's no such thing as being able to control information. The intention doesn't matter — even if a photo was taken and sent as a token of love, for example, the technology makes it possible for everyone to see your child's most intimate self. In the hands of teens, when revealing photos are made public, the subject almost always ends up feeling humiliated. Furthermore, sending sexual images to minors is against the law, and some states have begun prosecuting kids for child pornography or felony obscenity.

There have been some high profile cases of sexting. In July 2008, Cincinnati teen Jesse Logan committed suicide after a nude photo she'd sent to a boyfriend was circulated widely around her high school, resulting in harassment from her classmates.

Fortunately, networks with large teen audiences — MTV, for example — are using their platforms to warn teens against the dangers of sexting. And the website That's Not Cool.com uses teen-speak to help resist cyber peer pressure. Hopefully, these messages will get through.

Advice for Parents

> » **Don't wait for an incident to happen** to your child or your child's friend before you talk about the consequences of sexting. Sure, talking about sex or dating with teens can be uncomfortable, but it's better to have the talk before something happens.

> » **Remind your kids that once an image is sent, it can never be retrieved** — and they will lose control of it. Ask teens how they would feel if their teachers, parents, or the entire school saw the picture, because that happens all the time.

> » **Talk about pressures to send revealing photos.** Let teens know that you understand how they can be pushed or dared into sending something. Tell them that no matter how big the social pressure is, the potential social humiliation can be hundreds of times worse.

> » **Teach your children that the buck stops with them.** If someone sends them a photo, they should delete it immediately. It's better to be part of the solution than the problem. Besides, if they do send it on, they're distributing pornography — and that's against the law.

> » **Check out ThatsNotCool.com.** It's a fabulous site that gives kids the language and support to take texting and cell phone power back into their own hands. It's also a great resource for parents who are uncom- fortable dealing directly with this issue.

Community Discussion Guide

Cyberbullying

This discussion guide will help you facilitate a conversa- tion with parents about cyberbullying. Use the following questions and stories to get parents thinking and talking about this issue. You may also want to show the

Cyber- bullying parent tip video and hand out the Cyberbullying parent tip sheet to help spark the discussion.

What's going on with your kids?

Questions to encourage parents to share experiences, concerns, and solutions

1. Why do you think kids use the Internet or their cell phones to bully others?

2. What are all the different ways that kids can use technology to bully or humiliate others?

3. What makes cyberbullying and its potential impact different from other forms of bullying?

4. If you discovered that your child had sent a hateful or an inappropriate Instant, Text, or Picture Message to another child, what would you do?

5. If you suspect (but aren't sure) that your child is being cyberbullied, what could you do?

6. What might you include in your list of things to teach kids about being good "digital citizens"? What do you think your child would include?

Elementary school child

Seven-year-old Kelly Jones and her friends regularly go on a Web site where they design cartoon dolls, name them, and post them up for ratings by other viewers. She showed her mom that someone she didn't know kept posting dolls named Smelly Kelly Jones. "It makes me sad 'cause... are they talking about... me?" Her mom asked her to take a break from the computer and help in the backyard. Could it be that one of her friends was posting these dolls under this username as a way to make fun of her?

» What can Kelly's mom do? » What can she say to Kelly to make her feel better?

Middle school preteen or teen

Kim receives a call from the school principal about her twelve-year-old son.

The principal says that her son — who's never had any trouble in school — faces suspension because he sent some threatening text messages to another student in class. The texts said, "14 days until you die — the power of Zircon will prevail." Four

other boys in the class are involved and one of their text messages warns, "Disaster will come if you step into our circle of fire!" Her son is being held in after-school detention, and Kim has been asked to come in immediately.

» What would you do if you received this call? What questions would you have?

» Who are all the people affected in this situation? What might their views be?

» What do you think the consequences should be for the kids involved?

» How can parents monitor their kids' cell phone messages, pictures, and texts?

Middle school / high school teen

Jennifer's tenth-grade daughter Mia has just broken up with her boyfriend Ryan. It was a hard break-up and Ryan is still steaming, but he has started to date a girl on Mia's volleyball team. All the kids in Mia's class are on Facebook — they use it to plan parties, post pictures, share the latest news about their favorite bands, and just hang out. Jennifer and the other parents complain that Facebook is a waste of time, but they've pretty much accepted that it is part of their kids' lives.

While cooking breakfast one day, Jennifer hears her daughter scream and then rush down the stairs. "Mom, my friends just texted to tell me that someone posted a video of me naked in the locker room on YouTube! And all over his Facbook page there are old photos

of Ryan and me kissing and private emails that I sent to him. I tried to get on to his profile page to see them, but he's blocked me as a friend. Mia collapses at the table sobbing, "I'm sooo pissed and so embarrassed. My friends are going to hate me!"

» What would you do and say if this happened to your child?

» What role do you think the school should play in addressing this

situation, as opposed to the parents or the kids themselves?

» What are some different ways that kids can use technology to bully others?

» How can playing pranks, even relatively innocent ones, have hugely damaging consequences when video technology and the Internet are involved?

» How can we teach our kids to self-reflect before they self-reveal? Treat one another kindly online? Respect their own privacy and the privacy of others?