Cyberbullying: What Parents Need to Know

With more kids than ever using cell phones and other digital devices to text, post, and chat, cyberbullying is a growing concern. Here is information from the American Academy of Pediatrics about cyberbullying and what parents can do to keep online socializing healthy for their children.

What is cyberbullying?

Also called electronic or online bullying, cyberbullying includes a range of harmful words and actions that take place in the digital world. Here are some examples.

- Sending mean messages to someone
- Sharing embarrassing pictures of them
- Making up and spreading untrue stories about them
- Telling others to ignore someone or leave them out of activities

Cyberbullying can take place through text messaging, on social media sites, apps, e-mail, web forums or multi-player online games.

How is cyberbullying different from bullying?

Once cyberbullying became an issue, experts weren't sure if it was a whole new type of bullying, or traditional bullying moving onto new platforms. A National Academics of Sciences, Engineering and Medicine report concluded that cyberbullying and bullying are more alike than different. However, there are a few differences:

- **When & Where.** Face-to-face bullying usually takes place during the day, for example at school. But cyberbullying can happen anyplace, any day of the week, at any time of day.
- **No Signature Needed.** Although anonymous bullying is not common, either in person or online, cyberbullying can happen without knowing who is sending the messages.
- **Passing it On.** Mean or embarrassing posts on social media can spread quickly online and "go viral." This can increase the hurt or embarrassment from a bullying experience.

Just like traditional bullying, kids can experience cyberbullying in different ways, and roles sometimes change within a situation. They may be the target of bullying, bully others, or witness bullying online.

Is cyberbullying harmful?

For generations, bullying was considered a childhood "rite of passage." But research now shows how harmful bullying can be – to children who are bullied and to those who bully others. Some negative effects of bullying include:

- **Academic struggles.** Kids who are bullied may avoid going to school, have trouble concentrating in class, or even drop out of school.
- **Physical and mental health.** Bullying increases a child's risk for depression, anxiety, and sleep problems. Studies show it may also put them at higher risk for substance use later in life.

What should I do if my child is bullied online?

It is hard for parents to know the best way to react if their child is bullied, online or offline. Here are some tips.

- **The Takeaway.** Don't threaten to take away your child's device or cut their time online. They may see this as punishment and be less willing to tell you about bullying situations in the future.
- **Document.** If there is online evidence, save a screenshot. This may be helpful if it becomes necessary to report the event.
- **Support.** Talk with your child about the experience. Studies show that having just one person listen and support kids who have been bullied helps them better able to handle the situation in a healthy way.
- **Report.** Most social media platforms have a process for reporting bad behavior. If a classmate is bullying, you can report it to the school. If the bullying involves threats of physical harm, you can consider reporting to the police.
- **Find your support, too.** A child's bullying experience can also be stressful for a parent. Parents should consider finding someone to talk to for support.
- **Find resources.** Talk with your child's doctor about resources for bullying, such as Stopbullying.gov.

How parents can prevent cyberbullying

- **Discuss digital citizenship.** Talk with your children about being respectful online and how negative messages can hurt others. And remember, you are a role model. So if you use social media yourself, be sure to set a good example of positive online interactions.
- **Check in early & often.** Ask your children about what kind of messages they are seeing, sending, and getting and how they feel about them. Early experiences online are important and can set the tone and expectations your child has going forward.
- **Make a plan.** Visit HealthyChildren.org/MediaUsePlan for more information about how to create a family media use plan.

For more information

American Academy of Pediatrics
www.AAP.org and www.HealthyChildren.org