

CPYU'S DIGITAL KIDS INITIATIVE



A PARENTS' GUIDE TO CYBERBULLYING

| *By Walt Mueller*

Introduction

You remember bullying don't you? In the old days (which *really* weren't that long ago!), traditional bullies would ply their trade on the playground or in the neighborhood. If you were on the receiving end of their taunts, you could find relief and refuge in the comfort and safety of your own home. Now that our kids spend less and less time outside and more and more time "living" in the virtual online world, bullying has taken on new forms with increased intensity that allows bullies access to their victims 24/7. A nasty note passed around the classroom stayed in the classroom and was seen only by the hands it touched. Now, that same note can be posted online and go viral – through the school, the community, and even the world!

Nobody wants to be bullied, especially children and teens. Because of where they're at in the developmental process, kids are especially vulnerable to being victimized, hurt, and shaped by bullies. As parents, we must proactively respond to this emerging "bully-culture" by nurturing our children into a lifestyle of encouraging, respecting and loving others. We must do all we can to help our kids process, weather, and respond to the bullies in their own lives.

At the Center for Parent/Youth Understanding (cpyu.org), our Digital Kids Initiative serves as a resource to help you help your children navigate the Digital Frontier in virtuous ways. We believe that parental awareness and understanding of cyberbullying is a first step towards crafting healthy and proactive parental responses. What follows is an introduction to cyberbullying that we trust will serve you as you endeavor to lead your children into a healthy online experience.

DR. WALT MUELLER, *President, The Center for Parent/Youth Understanding*



Cyberbullying occurs when a child or teen intentionally intimidates or sends unflattering or hostile messages or threats via digital media to another child or teen or about another child or teen in order to harass, hurt, stalk, frighten, extort, humiliate or harm that person.

What is cyberbullying?

Cyberbullying occurs when a child or teen intentionally intimidates or sends unflattering or hostile messages or threats via digital media to another child or teen or about another child or teen in order to harass, hurt, stalk, frighten, extort, humiliate or harm that person. Cyberbullying always involves minors. If an adult is involved, the behavior is then classified as **cyberstalking** or **cyberharassment**.

How widespread is cyberbullying?

While the statistics on cyberbullying are fluid, clarity is emerging as to just how widespread cyberbullying really is. It's far more widespread than we'd like to think. According to the Cyberbullying Research Center (**cyberbullying.us**), 1 in five teenagers are harassed regularly online. Almost one-half of all teenagers have experienced some form of online harassment. More than one-third (37%) of teens admit to using social networking sites to victimize and harass their peers. With a growing number of pre-teens and children venturing onto the Digital Frontier, cyberbullying is both present and increasing at younger and younger ages, making it especially important for parents to monitor the online activity of their elementary and pre-teen-aged kids. It is estimated that over half of all cyberbullying attacks are not reported to parents, teachers or law enforcement authorities.

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Why is cyberbullying so prevalent?

- *Technology allows cyberbullies easy around-the-clock access to their victims.*
- *It can be done quickly and instantly.*
- *Once a cyberbully attack is made, it "sticks" and stays as photos, comments and lies stay online long after the initial attack.*
- *The reach is wide and the whole world serves as an audience to the cyberbully's attacks.*
- *The cyberbully can bully while they are alone and in private, leaving them with little or no accountability.*
- *Anyone can perpetrate a cyberbullying attack. Unlike traditional bullying, you don't need to be physically superior to your victim in order to cyberbully.*
- *It is "dis-embodied." You don't see your victim and you can act anonymously as the bully, thereby making bullies bolder.*
- *The anonymous nature makes it difficult to get caught, punished, or prosecuted.*

Why do kids cyberbully?

- *To put others down in an effort to build one's self up and be accepted by peers*
- *To get the attention of peers*
- *To feel and gain power over others*
- *Because they are jealous of the victim*
- *A response to being rejected*
- *To get revenge on someone, sometimes in response to cyberbully attacks from others*
- *Just for the fun of it*
- *Because they hate the victim*



Kids cyberbully to put others down in an effort to build one's self up and be accepted by peers.

Is there a profile for a cyberbully?

While any child or teen can engage in cyberbullying behavior, research and observation are helping to establish a profile for the type of person that is prone to being a cyberbully. Here are some of the broad characteristics of a cyberbully that typically exist in some combination:

- *Girls tend to cyberbully more than boys.*
- *Middle-schoolers are more prone than any other age to engage in cyberbullying.*
- *Computer/Internet obsessed, spending lots of time online.*
- *Are private about their online time, with a tendency to cover their monitors or close onscreen windows when parents come into the room.*
- *Tend to try to take control of situations.*
- *Show signs of intentional and ongoing aggressive behavior towards peers.*
- *Easily angered.*
- *Are disrespectful of others.*
- *Does not evidence social/relational maturity and oftentimes resorts to blaming, name-calling, and threats instead of using appropriate interpersonal coping skills.*
- *Have received little or no support at home from parents, and may have been abused at home.*
- *Have "enabling" parents who either ignore the cyberbullying behavior, encourage the behavior or are bullies themselves.*
- *Experience high levels of social anxiety and deep concerns over fitting-in along with the impressions they make on others.*
- *Serial attention-seekers with a desire to have power, domination and control.*

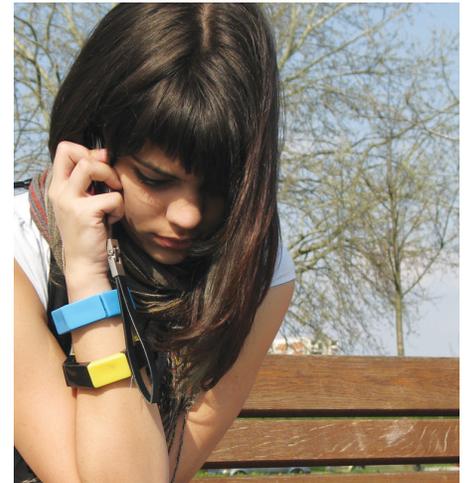
Is there a profile for a cyberbullying victim?

Any child or teen can be a victim of cyberbullying. Here are some of the most common characteristics of children and teens who are more regularly cyberbullied:

- *Social outcasts who don't fit into the mainstream or more popular peer group*
- *Physically or mentally-challenged*
- *Children and teens who struggle with sexual-identity issues*
- *Slow-developers who have not yet reached physical maturity/puberty*
- *Those who follow the rules*
- *Better students who are considered to be smarter than their peers*
- *Those who look, dress, or act differently*
- *Children and teens who lack self-confidence*
- *The "defenseless" who are hesitant to stand-up for themselves*

How do kids cyberbully?

Cyberbullying occurs in two ways. Direct cyberbullying attacks occur when the cyberbully sends a message to the victim directly. Indirect cyberbullying attacks occur when the cyberbully enlists and uses the help of others to bully the victim, with or without the knowledge of the cyberbullying accomplice.



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Direct cyberbullying

Here are some of the most common ways cyberbullies engage in direct cyberbullying:

- *Harassment and threats via text messaging or instant messaging.*
- *Ganging up on a victim by "text attack." Kids send thousands of messages to the victim's mobile device, leaving the victim with the potential for a huge bill.*
- *Stealing passwords in order to change another person's profile, post pictures, offend others, make fraudulent purchases and/or lock victims out of their own account.*
- *Blogging online and posting mean, private, or false information about the victim.*
- *Creating a website designed specifically to insult, harass or endanger another person or group of people.*
- *Spreading sexually-explicit or degrading photos or videos via text message or email that can be forwarded to countless other people, or uploaded to a social media site.*
- *Using online Internet polling tools to solicit answers to questions about victims in an effort to bully those victims ("Do you think she's hot or not?" etc.).*
- *Bullying in online live gaming platforms by verbally abusing other players, posting false rumors or locking them out of games.*
- *Using social networking sites to post compromising photos, videos, rumors, comments and other types of attacks.*

Indirect Cyberbullying

Here are some of the most common ways cyberbullies engage in indirect cyberbullying:

- *Starting "Warning Wars" or "Report Abuse Wars" by abusing the built-in security tools on social networking sites to "tell on" or report an innocent user for doing something wrong. This can lead to the user being terminated from the site for something they never did. The service provider becomes an unknowing accomplice.*
- *Making it look like the victim did something wrong, then notifying the parents of the "wrongdoing," thereby involving the parents as accomplices who punish the victim.*
- *Creating a screen name similar to the victim's current screen name or actual names, then using this screen name to say inappropriate things to other users while posing as that person.*
- *Impersonating a cyberbullying target by posing as the target in a chatroom, online or via text messaging while sending harassing, threatening, false or hateful messages to others. These victims then unknowingly respond to the one who has been impersonated, rather than the perpetrating impersonator.*
- *Signing victims up to receive spam messages, most commonly from pornographic websites.*

Signs that your child is being cyberbullied:

Here are some of the most common indicators that a child or teen might be a victim of cyberbullying attacks:

- *Emotional distress during or after using the Internet or mobile device*
- *Unexpected and unexplained anger*
- *Increase in withdrawal from family, friends, social situations, and activities*
- *Increased shame, fear, anxiety, depression, and low self-esteem*
- *Truancy and avoiding school*
- *Slipping grades and failure to complete schoolwork*
- *Change in mood, behavior, sleeping and eating habits*
- *Drug and alcohol abuse*
- *Becoming evasive and secretive when asked about their online activities*

Steps to prevent cyberbullying:

Because we live in a fast-developing digital environment that is conducive to cyberbullying, parents should take proactive steps to prevent cyberbullying. These include but are not limited to:

- *Getting to know your children and their real-world friends.*
- *Teaching your children to treat all people with respect.*
- *Teaching your children to respect others and to take a stand in defense of the victims.*
- *Educating your children about the consequences of cyberbullying others.*

Limit your child's access to online technology in AGE APPROPRIATE ways. Don't give them too much access, too soon.

- *Limit your child's access to online technology in age-appropriate ways. Don't give them too much access too soon.*
- *Know your child's online world by checking their postings, visiting their sites and being aware of how they spend their time online.*
- *Make use of parental controls and privacy settings.*
- *Be sure you know your child's passwords and never allow them to give out their passwords or other personal information.*
- *Download and use CPYU's "Family Digital Covenant" (available at digitalkidsinitiative.com).*
- *Look to the Internet for resources to help you understand and prevent cyberbullying.*

Steps for cyberbullying intervention:

Because we live in a broken world, there will be times when we need to intervene on behalf of our children when they are cyberbullied. Here are some steps you can take when intervention is necessary:

- *Begin by listening hard to your children, looking for the facts and keeping good written records. Remain calm. Don't over or under-react.*
- *Assure your child that you are going to walk with them through this difficult time, that you will support them and that you will work with them to find a resolution.*
- *Keep the lines of communication open with them while being even more diligent than usual in your relationship with them. This affords you the opportunity to watch them carefully, to support them and to build their resiliency.*
- *If they are in close and meaningful relationships with other trusted and supportive adults (teachers, relatives, youth workers, etc.), inform those people so that they can offer encouragement and support.*
- *If you are able, contact the parents of the cyberbully and share the facts by using your written records. Ask the parents to deal with the situation in a way that will lead to 1) the removal of all threatening/harassing online posts, and 2) the discontinuation of any additional follow-up or retributive bullying behavior of any type.*
- *If the cyberbullying attacks occurred while your child has been at school, notify school authorities.*
- *If your child's safety is in danger, contact law enforcement authorities and give them copies of all written notes and correspondence.*
- *Do not be afraid to seek outside help and counseling if your child is struggling either as the cyberbullied or as the cyberbully.*



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For additional information on the digital world of kids, visit the Center for Parent/Youth Understanding's Digital Kids Initiative at digitalkidsinitiative.com.

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