

## Teach your kids to be cyber-safe!



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In our ever-changing world, we have come to use – and depend on – the latest technologies and so have our children. In fact, for many families, it's not uncommon for a parent to ask their child to help them master the latest phone application. Although most exchanges are problem free – and let's face it quite handy – these technologies have opened the door to a different, but very real problem: cyber-bullying.

Our modern way of life and its amenities make it easier for some bullies to harass their victims day or night, all the while keeping their own identity under wraps. Now, a bullied child may not even have the respite of retreating home to avoid being persecuted in the schoolyard, since, thanks to technology, a child may be publicly humiliated by having his or her photo or defamatory comments posted on social networking sites or dedicated hate websites. Sadly, that same child may simply be harassed via his or her cell phone, no matter the time of day.

A 2008 study on e-bullying by the University of Toronto found that about half of all its students had admitted being bullied at some point in their lives. The Internet, cell phones, instant messaging (IM), blogging, chat rooms and You Tube videos, are all being used as tools by e-bullies.

Dr. Neil Gottheil, a Clinical Psychologist at CHEO noted that “people used to know their bullies because they were either being directly harassed by them or were discoverable as ring leaders of malicious gossip and social ostracism. Now there is a new type of bully and he or she does not have to face you at all. The cyber bully can remain anonymous and with this anonymity he or she can unleash a level of cruelty that would otherwise be hidden from others.” Dr. Gottheil notes that “more traditional forms of bullying allow bullies to know when their aggression is successful because they can observe the pain of their victims and know when to stop. Cyberbullies don't get this information at the time of the

bullying and hence, don't necessarily fully appreciate the extent of the damage they have caused.”

Cyberbullying usually involves more than a one-time communication; it includes writing hateful emails, sending death threats, stealing someone's password to pose as them and harass a third party or to erase someone's memory drive. It can also include setting up bashing websites, where peers may be asked to vote for the ugliest person in class or for the biggest loser, and it can – and has – led some children and youth to contemplate or commit suicide. And the sad truth is that many kids aren't comfortable going to their parents for help. Sometimes this is out of shame and embarrassment, a feeling of isolation or lack of support. Sometimes it's as simple as fearing they will lose their phone or computer privileges. Given that our kids are more knowledgeable about the technologies they use, as parents we may simply not know how to help.

It is therefore essential to talk to your child about cyber-bullying and, when possible, to do so before they are ever targeted. Knowledge can be the key to prevention for both parents and children. If your children own a cell phone, have an email account, use instant messaging or simply surf the net, learning how to stay safe online is critical. As a parent, there are ways you can teach your children cyber-safety and help reduce their chances of being targeted by bullies:

1. Educate yourself about the technologies and don't be afraid to enlist your children's help in doing so. Learn and be aware of the latest social media software and trends. If your kids are using it, then learn it.
2. Teach them to select a computer password that isn't too easy to guess (no pet names or dates of birth) and the importance of not sharing it with others – even their best friend! Also, encourage them to change their passwords regularly.
3. Discuss openly and candidly what should and should not be shared on-line about themselves and their friends. Some children may not necessarily know what is and isn't appropriate.
4. Talk openly about cyber-bullying, its repercussions and how hurtful it is. Tell your children you are there for them if they need to talk.
5. Teach your children that should they be cyber-bullied, they not try to return the favour. Cyber-bullies want their targets to respond, but this only serves to keep it going and possibly makes it worse.

6. Set some time limits and computer rules (such as which sites they are or aren't allowed to use and how long they can chat and surf).
7. Put the computer in a high traffic location such as the family room or the kitchen – this will help you keep an eye on their computer usage without having to constantly hover around them.
8. Be wary of monitoring software because this teaches kids that you don't trust them. Additionally, children have access to many computers and can create many accounts if they don't want you to know what they are up to.

According to Dr. Gottheil, "it is important for parents to remember that their children likely know the technology considerably better than they do. Parents should enlist their children's help in learning about their online use, and continue to develop their relationship, emphasizing strong communication, trust and respect. Rather than trying to walk in uninvited, these basic building blocks will make it more likely for children to invite their parents in."

And if your child tells you he or she is being cyber-bullied, take action. Read and keep a record of all the emails your child received. Do not delete emails or text messages, as these may serve as evidence and help track down the bullies. Contact your internet service provider, as some may be able to trace the source of the offending emails or websites. If you suspect that the bully is from your child's school contact the principal or the school resource officer (SRO) assigned to the school. Finally, remember that this behaviour is not a prank and that any threats of violence should be reported to the police right away.

Hopefully, your children will never be the victims of a cyber-bully, but if they are – or if one of their friends is – give them the tools that will better equip them to deal with it and encourage them to come to you for help.

To help you start a conversation with your child on this topic, here are some of the best available resources on cyber-bullying:

**Books:**

*Cyberbullying and Cyberthreats: Responding to the Challenge of Online Social Aggression, Threats, and Distress* (Perfect Paperback) by Nancy E. Willard

*Bullying Beyond the Schoolyard: Preventing and Responding to Cyberbullying* (Paperback), written by Sameer Hinduja

**DVD:**

*7 Ways to Block a Cyberbully (with sections for parents and educators)* Learning Zone Express 2008 – FAM BF 637.B85 S48 2008. This DVD may be borrowed for free at the CHEO Kaitlin Atkinson Family Library, located on the first floor of the hospital, in front of the elevators.

**Websites:**

- [www.Stopcyberbullying.org](http://www.Stopcyberbullying.org)
- [www.cyberbullying.ca](http://www.cyberbullying.ca)
- [www.bewebaware.ca](http://www.bewebaware.ca)
- [www.wiredsafety.org](http://www.wiredsafety.org)

The Study done by the University of Toronto can be found at:

<http://www.news.utoronto.ca/social-sciences-business-law/u-of-tcyber-bullying-survey-d.html>

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