FAMILY TIP SHEET

ELEMENTARY SCHOOL

Common Sense on Cyberbullying

What's the Issue?

Spreading rumors and bullying is nothing new. Kids have always found ways to be cruel to one another. But computers, cell phones, and digital technologies make bullying easier and more widespread. Kids now use their cell phones and computers to hurt, humiliate, and harass each other, and it's starting at younger ages. Cyberbullying is defined as repeatedly sending or posting harmful or mean messages, images, or videos about someone else using the Internet, cell phones, or other digital technologies. Kids may call each other names, say nasty things about one another, threaten each other, or make others feel uncomfortable or scared.

Children's increased access to digital technology has created more pathways to communicate — for both good and for bad. Although cyberbullying is typically associated with tweens and teens, more cases are now being reported with younger children. Cyberbullying is especially disturbing because it is constant, inescapable, and very public. It can happen anytime — at school or at 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 to other kids by cyberbullying someone. Younger kids may bully to get attention, because they think it will make them popular, or because they want to look tough and make others afraid of them. And because it happens online, it can easily go undetected by parents and teachers.

Why Does It Matter?

Cyberbullying is a growing problem among younger kids. Younger kids are starting to use online communication and at the same time they are exploring ways to test other people's reactions. For instance, kids who send a mean message might not fully understand how another person might react to that message. What's more, hurtful information posted on the Internet is extremely difficult to prevent or remove, and anyone can see it. Imagine being publically humiliated in front of everyone you know. Such behavior usually happens when adults aren't around. So parents and teachers often see only the anxiety or depression that results from their kids being hurt or bullied. Parents can help by becoming aware of the issue, learning to identify the warning signs of bullying, and helping kids to understand how to be respectful to others online.

What Families Can Do

Make a list together of how talking online is different than talking face to face. Get kids to think about how it might be easier to say things online you wouldn't say in person, and how this may be good sometimes and a problem at other times.

Practice writing a text or chat message to a friend. Model for your child how to compliment people and how to avoid mean words or behaviors.

Point out that it's important to stick up for others, online as well as in the real world. Discuss ways they can support friends who are bullied and report bad behavior they see online.

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Limit online socializing. Because there is more risk for bullying on sites where kids can openly communicate, avoid open and free chat sites and look for those that offer prescripted or prescreened chat options, like Webkinz or Club Penguin.

Explain the basics of good behavior online. Remind your kids that being mean, lying, or telling secrets hurts — both online and offline. And remember to praise your child when you see good behavior.

Remind your kids not to share passwords with their friends. A common form of cyberbullying is when kids share passwords, log on to another child's account, and pretend to be that person. Kids can protect themselves by learning that passwords are strictly private, and they should be shared only with their parents.

Make sure they talk to someone (even if it's not you). A child should tell a parent, teacher, or trusted adult if he or she is being bullied online. Tell your child that this isn't tattling, it's standing up for him- or herself.

Advise them on how to handle cyberbullying. Even though they might be tempted to, your child should never retaliate against a cyberbully. They can stop the cycle by not responding to the bully. Also remind them to save the evidence rather than delete it.

Establish consequences for bullying behavior. If your child is mean to or humiliates another child, consider taking phone and computer privileges away and discuss what it means to be respectful to others.

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