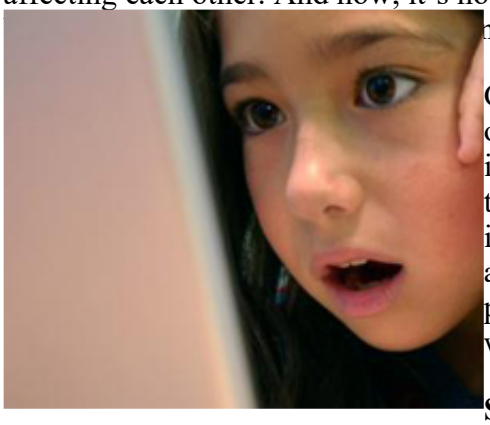
Cyberbullying: protecting your child online

With cell phones, text messaging, blogs and social networking, today's youth are as tech-savvy as ever. Bullying has been a big problem for every generation but technology has given children a whole new way of affecting each other. And now, it's not just the physically "tough kids" that are acting aggressively—today's nd torment children in the vast world of cyberspace.



Cyberbullying is such a big problem because it's difficult to stop, is often anonymous, creates unlimited witnesses and even follows kids into their homes. The effects of electronic bullying can last much longer than the traditional ways. Mean, vulgar or threatening messages and images can all leave kids and parents feeling pretty helpless, but there are steps you can take to prevent cyberbullying and identify the problem when it arises. Keep your kids safe online and out of harm's way in the virtual world by:

Setting boundaries. Although technology may be second nature to your kids, you still need to establish limits. You might, for example, let your child sign up for a social networking account, but insist that you have each other as contacts. Ensure the computer is in a shared family space. If you feel your children are responsible, you might ease up the rules by letting them bring the laptop into their own room every once in a while. If your kids have cell phones, steer clear of unlimited text-messaging plans. Instead, pay for a reasonable amount of monthly texts so you can keep an eye on their usage. Even if your children lash out and claim you're invading their privacy, stay firm and remind them that their access to technology is a privilege and not a right.

Being open. Talk to your children specifically about cyberbullying and what is and isn't acceptable online behaviour. Teach kids that if they're being bullied they should ignore the attacker and contact an adult immediately. Most importantly, let them know you won't blame them or take away their computer privileges if they tell you what's happening. This worry often prevents kids from seeking help.

Knowing the danger signs. Insomnia, headaches, nervousness, depression, stomachaches, social withdrawal, declining grades and avoiding school may all signal your child is being bullied. Lots of time online or refusing to use the computer altogether may also suggest a problem. If you notice any of these signs, take it seriously; sit down and talk to your child.

Defining private versus public information. Teach your kids that whatever they put online can stay in cyberspace forever. Posting messages to their friends, text messages, photos and even private online conversations can all be sent around at the click of a button. Help them recognize that if they don't want the world to see something, it shouldn't be posted online. Remind kids to never share their passwords and to change them regularly. Cyberbullying often takes the form of stealing someone's identity and damaging their reputation.

Providing a moral refresher. We try to educate our children on the difference between right and wrong but we don't always remind them that the same rules apply to computers and cell phones. Often cyber bullies don't realize how hurtful they're being when they don't see the recipient's pain or facial expressions. It's easy to write an insult via text message—you just have to hit send. Teach your children that no one has the right to hurt anyone else, regardless of how it's done. This will make them less likely to participate in cyberbullying, passively watch someone be damaged by it, or let it continue to happen to them.

Taking action. If you suspect your child is being bullied, listen carefully and avoid trivializing the experience. Skip the "sticks and stones" lecture—the humiliation and long-lasting emotional pain from bullying is very real and shouldn't be brushed off. Your child should block the bully from all forms of communication and save any hurtful messages or images. Contact your child's school to make it aware of the problem, and if the offences are serious enough, consider contacting local authorities.

On top of the usual trials and tribulations of growing up, youths now have to deal with an entirely new set of social challenges created by technology. By setting clear boundaries, keeping your eyes open for worrisome

behaviour and highlighting that morals apply to every part of life, you can help ensure your kids stay safe in both the “real” and “virtual” world.