

Student Guide to Cyberbullying and Cyberthreats

CYBERBULLYING

Cyberbullying is being mean to others by sending or posting harmful material or engaging in other forms of social aggression using the Internet or other digital technologies. Here are some examples of kinds of cyberbullying:

- Flaming—Online fights using electronic messages with angry and vulgar language.

Joe and Alec’s online fight got angrier and angrier. Insults were flying. Joe warned Alec to watch his back in school the next day.

- Harassment—Repeatedly sending nasty, mean, and insulting messages.

Sara reported to the principal that Kayla was bullying another student. When Sara got home, she had 35 angry messages in her e-mail box. The anonymous cruel messages kept coming—some from strangers.

- Denigration—“Dissing” someone online. Sending or posting gossip or rumors about a person to damage his or her reputation or friendships.

Some boys created a “We Hate Joe” Web site where they posted jokes, cartoons, gossip, and rumors, all dissing Joe.

- Impersonation—Pretending to be someone else and sending or posting material to get that person in trouble or danger or to damage that person’s reputation or friendships.

Laura watched closely as Emma logged on to her account and discovered her password. Later, Laura logged on to Emma's account and sent a hurtful message to Emma's boyfriend, Adam.

- **Outing**—Sharing someone's secrets or embarrassing information or images online.

Greg, an obese high school student, was changing in the locker room after gym class. Matt took a picture of him with his cell phone camera. Within seconds, the picture was flying around the phones at school.

- **Trickery**—Tricking someone into revealing secrets or embarrassing information, then sharing it online.

Katie sent a message to Jessica pretending to be her friend and asking lots of questions. Jessica responded, sharing really personal information. Katie forwarded the message to lots of other people with her own comment, "Jessica is a loser."

- **Exclusion**—Intentionally and cruelly excluding someone from an online group.

Millie tries hard to fit in with a group of girls at school. She recently got on the "outs" with a leader in this group. Now Millie has been blocked from the friendship links of all the girls.

- **Cyberstalking**—Repeated, intense harassment and denigration that includes threats or creates significant fear.

When Annie broke up with Sam, he sent her many angry, threatening, pleading messages. He spread nasty rumors about her to her friends and posted a sexually suggestive picture she had given him in a sex-oriented discussion group, along with her e-mail address and cell phone number.

Preventing Cyberbullying

There are several important things that you can do to avoid being a target of cyberbullying:

- *Protect yourself.* Never provide any information or images in electronic form that could be used against you.
- *Examine how you are communicating.* If you find that people are frequently attacking you, look closely at how you are commu-

nicating with them. You might be communicating in a way that is irritating others or hurting their feelings.

- *Find some new friends.* If you are trying to fit into a group of people who are treating you badly, it might be easier to simply find some nicer friends. Life's too short to waste time trying to be friends with mean people.

Don't Give Power to Bullies

Bullies want to achieve power and be seen by others as stronger and better. If you lose your cool or respond in another way that shows lack of strength, a bully can boast about it to others—and will probably keep bullying you. So the key to handling bullies is to stay calm and not make it fun to harass you. The Internet can actually help you if you are the target of bullying. If you are bullied online, you have several advantages:

- No one can see your initial reaction. If you do lose your cool, which is natural and normal, no one will ever know—as long as you keep your hands off the keyboard until you calm down.
- Internet communications are delayed. If you choose to respond, you can take the time to write a calm, strong, assertive response. You can even show your response to others to get feedback before you send it.
- You might not feel as strong and powerful as the person bullying you. But you can act like you are stronger and more powerful when you are online. Just pretend you are creating a character in an online game—a character who is stronger than you currently think you are.

A Very Important Rule

Never retaliate! A bully wants you to get upset. If you get mad and strike back in an attempt to hurt the bully as badly as you were hurt, it just won't work. No matter what you think of, all it does is give the bully a "win." It makes you look bad. You could also set yourself up for trouble. People who see your post may think you are the one who is causing the problem, not the bully. If someone shows your message to an adult, you could be the one who gets into trouble.

Don't Be a Cyberbully

People lose their temper from time to time. Many people have sent a message on the Internet that was angry—and wrong. This does

not make you a bully. If you have sent an angry or hurtful message, apologize. If you have posted angry or hurtful material, remove it and apologize. Try to make things right.

Bullies don't just lose their temper and make a mistake. Bullies intentionally put other people down so that they can make themselves feel more important. Bullies try to defend their actions in a number of ways. They say or think things like these:

"I didn't do anything wrong." "It wasn't my fault." "The stupid kid deserved it." "I was just playing around." "It was just a joke."

If you are acting like a bully, the most important question you need to ask yourself is "Why?" What are you trying to gain by putting others down?

What you should understand about cyberbullying is that whenever you use electronic communications you are leaving traces—"cyberfootprints" that lead right back to you. Eventually, people will be able to figure out who you are and hold you accountable for the harm you have caused.

What You Should Do If You Are Cyberbullied

There are different ways to respond to cyberbullying. Decide what to do based on who is cyberbullying you and how bad the cyberbullying is. Try to figure out what you think might work best to get the cyberbullying to stop.

- Always save the evidence. Download the harmful material. Save any chats or instant messages. But don't keep looking at it—this will only make you feel worse.
- Decide if you need to involve an adult. Sometimes you can resolve these situations on your own. Tell an adult if:

You are really upset and are not sure what to do.

The cyberbully is also bullying you in real life.

You have been threatened with harm.

The cyberbullying is doing things that can really damage your reputation and friendships.

The cyberbully is also bullying other students.

You tried some of the other steps to get the cyberbully to stop, but it didn't work.

- Tell the cyberbully to stop. Send the cyberbully a private message stating something like this: “Stop sending me messages” or “Remove the material you posted.” Depending on your relationship with this person, you might be able to work out a friendly truce. Make sure your message is nonemotional and strong. You could also tell the cyberbully that if the harm does not stop, you will take other steps to stop it.
- Ignore the cyberbully. Stop going to any group where you are being cyberbullied. Remove the cyberbully from your buddies list.
- Have your parents contact the cyberbully’s parents. They might talk with the parents or send them a letter. If they send a letter, it will be helpful if they include the harmful material you have downloaded.
- File a complaint with the Web site or service. Most sites and services prohibit bullying behavior. You can generally find an e-mail contact on the home page. Explain what has happened and provide the links to the harmful material or attach any harmful messages. Request that the material be removed and perhaps also that the account of the cyberbully be terminated.
- Talk to your school. If the cyberbully goes to your school, and especially if the cyberbully is also bullying you at school, tell your principal or school counselor. Provide the material you have downloaded.
- Contact an attorney or the police. You will need your parents to help you with this. Sometimes cyberbullying is so bad your parents could sue the parents of the cyberbully for money. Or the cyberbullying could be a crime. Of course, it’s better if things do not get to this point—but it’s useful to know these options are there if things get really bad.

Be a Friend

Bullies love an audience. Many teens do not like to see others being bullied, but are not sure what to do. Here are some things you can do:

- Speak out against cyberbullying in your online communities.
- Help the target in private.
- Encourage the target to report the cyberbullying.

- File a complaint with the site yourself.
- Report the cyberbullying to the school the target attends. You can download this material and report anonymously.
- Tell your parents and ask their guidance.

CYBERTHREATS

Cyberthreats are either threats or “distressing material”—statements that make it sound like the writer is emotionally upset and may be considering harming someone else, harming himself or herself, or committing suicide.

Jeff wrote in his blog: “I’m a retarded [expletive] for ever believing that things would change. I’m starting to regret sticking around. It takes courage to turn the gun on your self, takes courage to face death.”

Celia met Andrew in a chat room. Andrew wrote: “bring a gun to school, ur on the front of every. . . . i cant imagine going through life without killing a few people. . . . people can be kissing my shotgun straight out of doom. . . . if i dont like the way u look at me, u die. . . . i choose who lives and who dies.”

Greg set up an anonymous IM account and sent a threatening message to his older sister suggesting that she would be killed the next day at school.

Sometimes when teens post what appears to be a threat, they are just joking. Other times, the threat could be very real. Here are two very important things that you must understand about online threats:

- *Don’t make threats online.* If you post a threat online, adults may not be able to tell whether the threat is real. There are criminal laws against making threats. If you make a cyberthreat, even if you are just joking, you could be suspended, expelled, or even arrested.
- *Report threats or distressing material.* If you see a threat or distressing material posted online, it could be very real. It is extremely important to report this to an adult. If the threat is real, someone could be seriously injured.

Just in case you are wondering—these are all true stories. Jeff killed nine people and then killed himself. Celia reported her online conversation to her father, who contacted the police. The police found that Andrew had many weapons, including an AK-47. He is now in prison. Greg’s sister told her parents, her parents told the school, and the school went into “lock-down.” Greg was identified easily—and arrested for making a threat.

REPORTING ONLINE CONCERNS

Many teens think that it is really not okay to talk with adults about what is happening online. They may think that adults will over-react—which, admittedly, in some cases they do. Or they may be afraid that other teens will retaliate.

The problem is that teens are being harmed by others or are posting material that raises real concerns about their safety or the safety of others. And responsible adults are not present in the online communities where this is occurring. So if teens who witness online concerns don’t report, someone might be really hurt.

A group of girls at his school had been taunting Alan through IM, teasing him about his small size, daring him to do things he couldn’t do. They dared him to commit suicide. He discussed this with them. The girls thought it was a big joke. One afternoon, Alan got his grandfather’s shotgun, loaded it, and killed himself. He left this message, “The only way to get the respect you deserve is to die.”

Just in case you are wondering—this is a true story. How might this story have ended differently if one of the girls had told her parents or someone at school that Alan was being cyberbullied and was talking about killing himself?

If you see something happening online that worries you, here is what you can do:

- Download all the materials. Provide written instructions for how to find these materials online or where the communications occurred.
- If there is a possibility of immediate harm, report your concern to the local police or to a school violence or suicide prevention hotline.

- To report other concerns, show the materials to the principal or school counselor or put the documents and instructions into an envelope, write “IMPORTANT” on the envelope, and put the envelope in your principal’s or school counselor’s office or mailbox.
- If the student does not go to your school, see if you can find out where the student does go to school by searching for the school Web site. Look for an e-mail address for the school principal or counselor. Send a “high priority” message explaining your concerns and telling this person where to find the material online.

THINKING IT THROUGH

1. What are your personal standards for how you intend to treat other people online?
2. What steps will you take to make it less likely that you will be cyberbullied?
3. What are four things you could do if you were being cyberbullied?
4. What should you not do if you are cyberbullied?
5. What can you do if you see someone else being cyberbullied?
6. Why is it not a good idea to post material that an adult might think is a threat?
7. Why is it a good idea to report any online material that appears to be a threat, even if it may just be a joke?
8. Review the terms of use agreement for a popular teen Web site. What kinds of communications and activities does this agreement prohibit?
9. What are your thoughts on the following statement: “On the Internet, I should have the free-speech right to post whatever I want, even if I might hurt someone else.”

FOR THE TEACHER: INSTRUCTIONAL RECOMMENDATIONS

The following are additional instructional strategies:

- Present students with the results of a recent student needs assessment and use this data as the basis for engaging in a

discussion about how to address local concerns. Ask the students to prepare a joint document presenting their advice on these issues to the school or district safe schools committee.

- Ask students to research news articles online that discuss cyberbullying, cyberthreats, or dangerous online communities, then have them discuss or write about the incidents reported. Ask students to put themselves into the story and outline the steps they would take if they witnessed or experienced any incidents similar to those that were reported. The goal of this exercise is to reinforce the recommendations for how students can productively address these concerns.
- Have students debate about one of the key social norms that supports online social aggression: “On the Internet, I have a free-speech right to post whatever I want, without regard for the possible harm it might cause to someone else.”
- Ask the students to interview their parents, asking for their guidance on family values around online activities. Download some of the terms of use agreements from popular social networking sites. Provide copies of the district’s Internet use policy. Have the students create a major chart outlining the standards expressed by their parents, the terms of use agreements, and the district’s Internet use agreement. Identify the commonalities and any differences. Following this analysis, ask the students to create their own personal statement of standards.