THE CYBERBULLYING TALK

A how-to guide for conversations between adults & youth

Why?

Cyberbullying is bullying – unwanted, repeated, aggressive, negative behavior – that takes place over digital devices such as cell phones, tablets, and computers. Cyberbullying can happen over email, through texting, on social media, while gaming or sharing content, and via messaging.

Online behavior can be hard to decipher, and cyberbullying is often so complicated that many students might not identify negative behavior that happens while using technology. Preparing youth to engage with online behaviors of all kinds can help foster a healthier relationship with what they may encounter.

Many youth worry that they will lose access to technology if they tell an adult about cyberbullying. Let them know the goal is not to take away their technology but to keep them safe online.

As you open the subject for discussion, let youth know that you recognize that phones, computers, and being connected online with friends is a significant part of their lives. However, you also want them to know how to be safe and handle negative behaviors like cyberbullying. Explain that if something hurtful is communicated online, it is important that they tell you so that you can work through the situation together.

When?

Adults should discuss online conduct and behavior, as well as cyberbullying, as soon as children and teens begin using technology. Cyberbullying can begin as soon as youth have access to cell phones, computers, gaming sites, social media, messaging, or any technology that allows them to connect with others and others to connect with them.

Revisit the cyberbullying and online behavior discussion often as youth mature, not just when problems arise. Take an interest in the technology they use and ask them about it.

By talking about how healthy online interactions look and feel, you can focus the conversation on what behaviors you expect to see online, at school, and in the world at large.

The underlying purpose of any conversation about technology or cyberbullying is to show support for what youth are experiencing and to ensure that the conversation will continue.

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WHAT SHOULD THE CONVERSATION INCLUDE?

When starting a conversation with youth about cyberbullying, keep in mind that bullying can be hard for them to talk about for many reasons. They might be embarrassed by what is happening, afraid that the bullying will worsen if they tell, or anxious that their technology will be taken away. They may also think that it is a problem they have to solve on their own.

1. Help your child define cyberbullying

It is often difficult for youth to understand negative behaviors that are directed toward them online. Encourage them to talk about what they experience while online: the good, the bad, and the things they don't understand. Keeping the lines of communication open will encourage youth to find you when problems occur.

2. Open the conversation about what information to share online

Start by discussing what is and isn't appropriate information to share online to ensure their safety and security. This is often talked about in the same way you would talk with youth about being safe at school, at the neighborhood park, or while playing sports or participating in any other group activity. Explain that if something hurtful is shared online (via words, images, videos, etc.), it may be cyberbullying, and it's important that you know about it. Reassure them that you won't respond by removing access to their accounts, and that together you will handle the situation.

3. Establish cyber rules

It's also important to set up rules about cyber safety. Together, create a code of conduct or cyber-safety agreement that you both support. This can include guidelines for times youth are allowed to be online, which sites they will be allowed to use, and if you will monitor their accounts. The code of conduct can also describe points such as "We will treat others online with the same kindness that we do in person."

4. Strategize a plan to respond to cyberbullying

If youth do experience cyberbullying, there are several steps that can be taken to make it stop. Share tips for responding with youth so that they are empowered with options if they encounter inappropriate behavior online.

Emphasize the importance of saving all cyberbullying content, including emails, messages, posts, and screenshots. If the cyberbullying occurs on social media, youth can untag themselves from the post or photo, unfriend or block the person, and report the content after taking a screenshot or saving the message or messages. Check with your youth's school to see if cyberbullying is included in the school policy. If needed, report the online bullying behavior to the principal, superintendent, or other school representative and include copies of the hurtful content.

After these guidelines are set up, keep talking about online safety and cyberbullying. This will help youth learn to recognize behaviors that are inappropriate and will help them feel comfortable talking with you.

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5. Encourage youth to be good bystanders if they see cyberbullying

Just as it's important for youth to demonstrate positive behavior online, it's also important for them to be good bystanders if they see inappropriate behavior happening to others. There are a variety of steps they can take, and they should be encouraged to do what feels safe to them.

Youth can choose not to "like" or share posts that are bullying someone. Even if the content is not targeting them, they can still report the bullying to the site or any adult they trust. They can also respond with positive support, whether it's posting a comment showing solidarity or privately messaging the person being bullied. A kind comment or message among a bunch of mean ones can make a huge difference!

6. Support self-advocacy

Include youth in creating solutions for the cyberbullying they are experiencing. This helps them learn to speak up for themselves and engages them to express what is important to them with regard to technology use.

Inspire youth to become active in talking about the information they see online not only with you, but with content providers and those who create the technology they are using. Their input in what they'd like to experience when being connected to others through technology is essential to ensure a safer future for all.

What makes cyberbullying unique from traditional bullying?

While all bullying is characterized by aggressive, often repetitive, hurtful behavior toward another person or group, there are distinguishing elements when it happens using digital devices, which include:

- **Persistence.** Cyberbullying can happen anytime,anyplace where someone has access to technology.
- **Anonymity.** Those being bullied might not even know who is targeting them, which makes it easier to hurt someone and not be held accountable.
- **Difficulty in detecting.** Some bullying is easy to see, such as pushing someone or damaging belongings. Cyberbullying happens on a digital device, on apps or sites where adult access may be restricted, so adults may not be aware what is happening.
- **Sharing to a potentially larger audience.** Information online can be easily and quickly shared, making it difficult to contain or stop negative messages once they are posted.
- **Easier to be hurtful.** The person bullying doesn't see the immediate response from the person being targeted, as technology distances them from the real-life pain they could be causing.
- **Permanence.** Once something is shared on the internet, it is often available to everyone, everywhere, making it challenging to remove or delete.

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HAVING THE CYBERBULLYING TALK

Conversation starters for adults

• "You seem really anxious and you're checking your phone a lot. Is something going on?"
• "Do you ever feel nervous?"
• "I just heard something about a cyberbullying incident, and I want to talk to you about it."
• "Have you seen or heard about any cyberbullying happening to your friends?
• "I'm concerned about what you told me happened to your friends online. Let's figure out together how to help them and keep this from happening to you."
• "Have you ever gotten a message from a stranger while playing this game? Do you know anyone who has?"
• "A friend told me that her daughter got some intimate pictures from a boy and couldn't get him to stop sending them. Has that happened to anyone you know?"

Youth should understand that the conversation comes from a place of caring and not judgment and that the discussion will help make their interactions with technology better.

For support:

• "You deserve to be safe from bullying online, just like at school, on the playground, and in the neighborhood. If an interaction online is bothering you or making you nervous, trust your feelings and tell me what's happening so that I can help you."
• "I trust that you know how to use technology responsibly, and I want to make sure you know I am here for you if you need any help."
• "I understand how important it is to communicate with other kids by phone and online, and I don't want to take anything away. I just want us to talk about what will keep you safe and problem-solve together."
• "If something happening online is upsetting to you, it's important to tell me about it, even if you're not if it's bullying."

When revisiting the code of conduct or cyber-safety agreement:

• "What are some ideas you have to update our agreement?"
• "You're using different apps now, and it's time that we talked about our agreement again."
• "I'm disappointed in how you're using your phone and social media. We are going to revisit our cyber-safety agreement."
• "What happened to your friend was really scary, and I think we should look at our agreement again so that this doesn't happen to you."
• "I've learned something new about the messaging in that app you like..."
• "I read an article about the app you use, and it said you're at risk of being hacked or your personal information being stolen. I think we should delete it from our phones. What do you think?"

Be clear, be open

Make sure youth understand what will and will not happen if they talk to you about what's happening with their technology. Always aim to keep the lines of communication open, so that they will feel comfortable coming to you with difficult conversations. Be clear that there will be consequences if youth demonstrate cyberbullying behavior.

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