

Is Your Child a Cyber Bully?

BY MARIA T. ARANDA, PH.D.

AS SUMMER APPROACHES, children will likely spend more time on their phones and home computers. While there are many safe and educational ways to use them, cyber-bullying remains an issue for children even during the summer.

Cyber-bullying is a type of peer aggression that inflicts harm through computers, cell phones and other electronic devices. It can have serious consequences – for both victims and perpetrators. In Massachusetts, after Phoebe Prince, 15, hanged herself in January, nine teens were charged with cyberbullying her through text messages and Facebook posts.

Cyber-bullying can occur when kids post insulting or slanderous messages to online bulletin boards or social networking sites. It can also occur via e-mail or text and instant messages. Given the popularity of social networking sites and the way they quickly send information to many people, a few seconds of harassment can turn into a child's nightmare.

Although filters and protective software are available for parents, there is no match for parental supervision of a child's online activi-

ties. This starts with establishing rules for children's online behavior. Rules that apply for "real-life" people and situations should also apply online. Parents need to teach that online comments can inflict harm, cause pain and damage the victim's and harrasser's reputations.

Parents also need to monitor the sites their children are visiting and their communication on them. Filtering software allows parents to prevent young children from sharing private information online; other types of tracking and monitoring software tell parents what Internet sites are being visited and how long their kids are on the computer. Parents should also retain the right to review the text messages on a child's phone and insist that all portions of their teen's social networking pages be accessible to them.

Parents should also enforce clear consequences if their children are not exhibiting agreed upon behavior. If a teenager exhibits reckless behavior in an automobile, he or she often loses driving privileges. The loss of phones and computers is a logical consequence for inappropriate online behavior.

The rapid explosion of electronic media and forums is a new phenomenon. Given the uncertainty surrounding their social, developmental and emotional impacts on children, parents need to discuss responsible computer and phone use and set appropriate boundaries. They also need to be vigilant of changes in their children as they use electronic media more frequently. A decrease in a child's interest in social or family activities due to increased screen time should cause concern. The same holds true for obsessive use of phones, computers and video games.

Smart phones and computers are positive things busy parents can use to maintain contact with their kids. With proper parental supervision and gentle guidance, these items can prove immensely useful tools rather than become harmful instruments.



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