

What is Cyberbullying?

Cyberbullying refers to bullying through information and communication technologies, mediums such as mobile phone text messages, emails, phone calls, internet chat rooms, instant messaging - and the latest trend social networking websites such as MySpace, Facebook and Bebo.

Cyberbullying is a fast growing trend that experts believe is more harmful than typical schoolyard bullying. Nearly all of us can be contacted 24/7 via the internet or our mobile phones. Victims can be reached anytime and anyplace. For many children, home is no longer a refuge from the bullies. "Children can escape threats and abuse in the classroom, only to find text messages and emails from the same tormentors when they arrive home."

Recent surveys have shown that one-third of teenagers have had mean, threatening or embarrassing things said about them online. 10% of teenagers were threatened online with physical harm. 16% of teenagers who were victims told no one about it. No type of bullying is harmless. In some cases, it can constitute criminal behavior. In extreme incidents, cyberbullying has led teenagers to suicide. Most victims, however, suffer shame, embarrassment, anger, depression and withdrawal. Cyberbullying is often seen as anonymous, and the nature of the internet allows it to spread quickly to hundreds and thousands of people.

Parents often tell their children to turn off the mobile phones or stay off the computer. Many parents don't understand that the internet and mobile phone act as a social lifeline for teenagers to their peer group. Victims often don't tell their parents because they think their parents will only make the problem worse, or - that they might even confiscate their mobile phone or take away internet access—removing that social lifeline. While bullying is something that is often 'under the radar' of adults, cyberbullying is even more so. Teenagers are increasingly communicating in ways that are often unknown by adults and away from their supervision. They organize their social lives through these mediums. Their friendships are made and broken over these mediums.

'So what can we do about it?' many people wonder. Education and awareness is the key. Parents and teachers need to understand the problem, and understand the technology. In an age of influences such as reality TV programs, where participants are harassed and ridiculed, children need to understand that this is not the Way they should relate to each other. If awareness of these issues is raised to such a level among their parents, teachers and friends, children will begin to feel that they can talk about cyberbullying, and the problem will come out of the mobile phone inboxes, out of the computers and into the open.

For information on how to handle cyberbullying, please see our *Cyberbullying Tips Sheet*.