

Cyber

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Ways to protect your kids from cyberbullies

These days, 90% of teens are online, 73% are on a social network, and over 80% use a cell phone regularly. With so much time spent online and on cell phones, it's no wonder bullies have taken to cyberspace. In fact, you may be surprised how often it happens and how seldom it gets reported:

- Over half of all adolescents and teens have been bullied online, and over 25% have been bullied repeatedly.
- Over half of adolescents and teens have engaged in cyberbullying themselves.
- 70% report seeing frequent bullying online.
- More than half do not tell their parents when cyberbullying occurs.
- 80% of young people think bullying online is easier to get away with than bullying in person.

What can you do as a parent?

While your first instinct may be to take away your child's phone or internet privileges, many experts suggest that talking to your kids and actively monitoring their online and cell phone activities may be a better way to go. Here are a few suggestions to help protect your kids, so they do not become a cyberbully or a cyberbullying victim:

1. Learn your child's perspective.

If you understand their technology and are supportive of the issues they face, they may be more inclined to talk to you about what is happening to them or around them. Instead of criticizing them directly, use current events to initiate conversations about privacy, never sending a text or photo they'll regret sending later, and never posting gossip or hurtful messages or photos online.

2. Be the one your kids turn to.

Encourage your children to confide in you about what they see online and who they are communicating with. If they don't feel comfortable telling you, encourage them to confide in another adult that they (and you) trust. Tell them that if they are a victim, they will not be punished and reassure them that being bullied is not their fault.

3. Help them understand your perspective.

Explain to your child that it's your job to keep them safe. Part of that is monitoring their cell phone and internet use. In a recent survey, when asked how they would feel if their parents were monitoring them, 62% of teens said they'd be accepting and 75% said they'd be unaffected.

4. Set limits and boundaries.

With cell phone and tablet usage starting as early as the toddler years, it is more important than ever to establish clear rules about when your kids can start using mobile devices without you viewing exactly what they see. TeenSafe suggests starting to use an iPad or tablet at age 6-9, and a cell phone with monitoring at age 10-12.

5. Create a smartphone agreement.

Before you give your kids a cell phone of their own, have a collaborative conversation with them to hash out an agreement you'll both follow. This might include boundaries such as no phones in the bedroom, no phones overnight in their rooms, phones stay in common areas, and no downloading apps without approval. You will also want to include clear consequences if they break the rules and establish passwords for their phone and apps that you know as well.

6. Think twice about taking away their phones as punishment.

Kids with cell phones can be more independent, connect better with their peers, and can reach their parents (and their parents can reach them) any time.

7. Lead by example.

To teens and adolescents, the internet is a way to socialize with their friends. They may also turn to technology when their social-emotional needs aren't met. One way to help combat this is by disconnecting yourself. Give your kids your full attention and establish phone-free family time, so you can all reconnect more effectively.

8. Make sure you have the coverage you need.

If, despite everything you do, your child is a victim of a cyberbully, your child may become distressed, anxious, depressed, or worse. Make sure you have insurance coverage that can help you put security measures in place, provide your child with counseling, and even protect you if your child happens to be the bully.

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Sources: "11 Facts About Cyber Bullying," www.dosomething.org, "The TeenSafe Parenting Guide to Tech Safety," www.teensafe.com, and "Bullying Statistics," www.bullyingstatistics.org

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