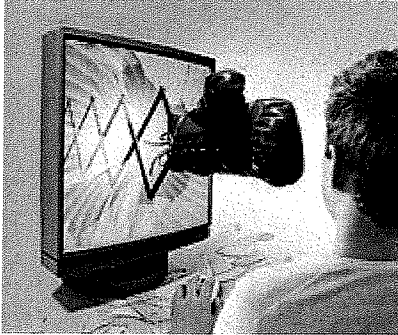


5 Ways to Prevent and Stop Cyberbullying

Technology, for its many upsides, also makes it easier for cruel kids to go way beyond mean. The best way to keep everybody safe amidst social networking sites and cell phones is for parents to learn some tough new tactics.

By Rosalind Wiseman



I work with a lot of amazing tweens and teens, and most of the time the good I witness more than compensates for the cruelty I also see happening among kids. But after the Phoebe Prince suicide in January 2010, I have to say, I hit a huge low. And then I found out that some of Phoebe's tormentors continued to ridicule her on Facebook after her death. That just sent me over the edge. All I could think was, "Have young people completely abandoned any sense of decency? Have they lost their minds?" What came up for me, also, as the mother of two boys only a few years younger than Phoebe, was anger at the bullies' parents. Honestly, how is it possible not to know your child is doing something that terrible? But as time passed I forced myself to remember how every day I meet moms and dads who try their best, only to learn, to their horror, that their child has knowingly and

willingly participated in some form of abuse of a peer. Finger-pointing is easy—and solves nothing.

It's not that kids being mean to one another is anything new. But cell phones and social networking sites have made it impossible to escape, so harassing others is that much easier, more tempting and more extreme. And unlike adults, kids don't regard technology as separate from the rest of their lives. To them, everyday life and what happens digitally are one and the same, with a constant flow of information between the two. In my view, this total immersion means that the chance of your child being involved in bullying, as either a target, a bystander or, yes, a perpetrator, is 100%.

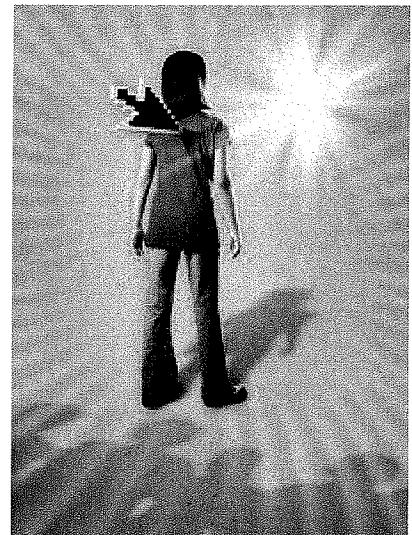
I know that's not what parents want to hear. But we need to stop pretending otherwise, because accepting the new reality is what will give us the strength and strategies to deal with kid cruelty.

1. Skip the easy answers.

Don't tell a kid who's being targeted, "Walk away," "Be nice," "Ignore it." These phrases do not work because most of the time the tween or teen has to interact with the perpetrator again and again, at school, in the neighborhood, online or over the phone. What's more, telling a child to blow off a bully doesn't help her build the skills needed to competently face disrespectful people.

Remember, to those who do not live by the golden rule, "kind" behavior looks weak and may even incite more bad behavior.

Besides being ineffective, these suggestions make kids believe that adults don't understand what they're up against and therefore can't assist them. What to do instead? When your daughter comes to you, say, "I'm so sorry, but I'm so glad you told me. Let's come up with a plan together." Then, if this is someone she has to see regularly, help her think of a practical way to face the bully (which should happen only if she doesn't feel physically threatened; see "Higher Authority," on page 7, for what to do if the direct approach is not the right one). Have her write down what she doesn't like and what she wants to happen. Finally, help her create a script and decide when and where to approach the bully.

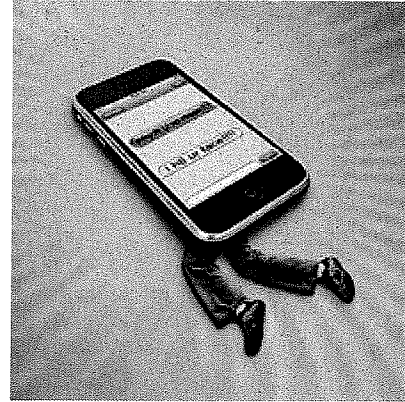


You should also explain that success in this situation isn't to make the bully see her point of view or to get revenge. Nor is the idea to become friends with the mean kid. She also shouldn't expect an apology, although she can certainly request one and accept it if it's sincere. The goal is for your child to learn how to be very clear about where she stands in the face of abuse and then communicate that directly to the person causing the problem. What matters most is that she at least try to deal with the situation. Making any attempt, no matter what the outcome, means she's done a good job.

2. Acknowledge that your child could be at least partly in the wrong.

I know, I know. This is way hard. But believing your child couldn't be mean isn't unconditional love. It's denial. Really loving your son or daughter is accepting that good kids can do crappy things sometimes. Think about the last time you got an edgy e-mail. Weren't you tempted to fire off something equally cutting? Now imagine you're 14, with an adolescent's poor impulse control.

Add to the mix that today's technology makes it extremely easy for the line between target and perpetrator to blur. For example, Boy A breaks up with a girl and Boy B asks her out. So A goes on Facebook and spreads horrible rumors about B, and B retaliates in kind, believing his actions are justifiable self-defense. Now everybody's gone over the top. Or kids may decide, out of righteous indignation, that they have to punish someone, as was the case with some boys and girls at a school where I was working. They thought a boy had snitched to the coach that they had skipped practice, so they persecuted him relentlessly, at school and online. This may seem strange, but none of these kids thought that what they were doing was wrong. And be warned: Once a kid is certain he was protecting himself, he's often frighteningly good at convincing his parents that he's completely innocent. Before you decide you know who did what to whom, ask your child, "If the other person were right here telling me this story, what would he say?"



3. Don't let the bystander off the hook.

If you learn your child saw a cruel verbal or photo message and didn't report it to you or another trusted adult, explain—again!—the difference between snitching (telling because you want to get the person in trouble) and reporting (telling because you want to solve a problem). Underscore that your family believes in speaking out when someone is not being treated with dignity. Your tween or teen also needs to know that forwarding an abusive message or image may not be quite the same as creating it, but it's still so hurtful that it's a form of bullying. Hold her accountable by taking away her phone until she genuinely apologizes—to the target, the target's parents and, if applicable, the school administration—for contributing to a negative educational environment.

4. Do not jump in.

I really believe that most parents are sane. At the least, no mom wakes up and says to herself, "Today I'm going to be a crazy, enabling parent who is going to respond to my child's problem as if I'm also 13." But too often a parent decides she should be the one to put the mean kid in his place, sometimes even by impersonating her child online. It's also very common for angry parents to fire off an e-mail to everyone they know with pages and pages—all in caps, single-spaced—saying how horrible this other kid is, by way of "warning" others. Another dirty trick is the petition—imploing others to avoid the alleged bad influence. Resist! Instead, guide your child to develop an appropriate strategy.

5. Hold the line.

When the subject of monitoring and setting boundaries comes up, parents often say to me, "But I want to respect my teen's privacy, or else he'll stop talking to me." Drop this thinking. The reality is that anyone who uses social networking doesn't have privacy. He forfeits it the moment personal information goes online. Your intervention is not going to drive kids underground— they're already there. So in addition to spot-checking what they send and receive, clearly and repeatedly articulate your policy for tech, including a crystal-clear rule that it can't be used to attack others in any way for any reason. Spell out consequences for violations and enforce them without fail. And don't believe for a moment that because tweens and teens are more tech-savvy than most adults, you can't supervise. You can and should go into their digital worlds, and be as hands-on there as you are in the rest of their lives.

Higher Authority

When your child has done all he can and the cyberbullying hasn't stopped or has escalated, your response has to move up to the next level.

Go to the School For bullying that has happened on school grounds, set up a meeting with the teacher that also includes your child. Prep your kid to say exactly what's happening, why it's impossible for her to concentrate in the classroom and that she needs the teacher's help. Your role is to literally sit behind your child offering emotional support. Tell her ahead of time that if she gets too uncomfortable (in part because she may have to repeat words she's not used to saying to adults) she should give a little signal, like "Mom?" or a code word, that conveys she wants you to join in. Focus on behavior you want to go

away, not the other child's punishment (legally, the school can't discuss other students with you). At the end set a deadline for action by saying, "If two or three days from now this behavior isn't changing, what are we going to do? If the situation doesn't improve, I'll have to go to the administration and I'd really like your support with that." If you have to, speak with the principal next. Explain everything you, your child and the teacher have done so far, and conclude with, "I need your help so my daughter can be a participating member of this community."

Bring in the Police If there's an inescapable pattern of harassment or stalking (in or out of school) or your child feels physically threatened, it's time to alert police. At this stage it's really important that you have written documentation of all the efforts your child and you have made, so take careful notes from the time you first learn of a problem.

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Angry, concerned moms are sounding off about mean kids. Join them at momster.com/fc/cyberbullying >>

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