Eight Escalating Steps You Can Take if Cyberbullying and Cyberthreats Persists

Introduction

Like so many other facets of your kids' lives, bullying has now gone online too. If you think your kids haven't experienced bullying in the digital schoolyard-think again. Half of all kids have been bullied in cyberspace, and just as many admit to bullying others, according to a 2004 survey by WiredSafety.org, a nonprofit safety and education group.

Cyberbullies tend to use the same tactics as they do in the offline world. They torment and tease other kids from a distance using email, web sites, online games, instant messaging, blogs and community sites like MySpace or American Online chat rooms. Online taunts sting just like they do offline, but on the Internet cyberbullies can often stay anonymous, hiding behind fake email addresses and screen names.

There's no doubt cyberbullying can be devastating. For instance, some bullies harass their targets with a barrage of instant messages, like "Everyone hates you," or "You are a loser." Other cyberbullies create web sites that mock or humiliate other kids, such as setting up online polls with themes like: "Vote for the ten ugliest girls in school." Cyberbullies can also impersonate their target, for example, posting fake online ads soliciting dates on their behalf. Or hacking into the victim's email account and sending hateful messages to their friends.

If your child is a victim of online bullying, there are a number of escalating steps you can take, says Nancy E. Willard, author of the book *Cyberbullying and Cyberthreats: Responding to the challenge of online social cruelty, threats, and distress*.

Identify and block

First, ask your child not to respond or retaliate, no matter how tempting it may be to "fight back." If you can identify who's cyberbullying your child, block any further communications. In your instant message program go to People or Friends in the main menu and choose Block User or Remove Friend, for instance. In your email program, add the offending email address to your blacklist. For assistance in online sleuthing, contact WiredSafety.org, whose trained volunteers can also help you try to track down who's behind the online harassment.

Set boundaries

You, not your kids, should also contact the bully (or bullies) and demand the offending behavior stop. If you don't know their real identity, send an email or IM. Warn them that you will contact their parents or school, too, if the behavior continues.

File a complaint

Most cyberbullying behavior-harassment, threats, invasion of privacy, stalking-are violations of a web site or Internet service provider's "terms of service." You can file a complaint with the service and that could lead to the suspension or termination of the cyberbully's (or his or her parents') Internet access.

Contact the school

If you know the bully attends the same school as your child, teachers and administrators might be able to help. Keep in mind, however, that due to free speech rights, schools often have little leverage over what goes on outside the classroom. Some schools are incorporating anti-cyberbullying terms into students' online access agreements, so if the bully contacted your child from a school computer, he or she could be in big trouble. Make sure to report the incident either way.