What is cyberbullying? How to spot if your child is being bullied online

Written by Jane Kemp

Cyberbullying leaves thousands of kids around the world too frightened to go online, depressed and in some cases even suicidal. It involves sending unpleasant messages via text, email or social networking sites, such as Facebook, Instagram or Snapchat. Cyberbullying is just as serious as other face-to-face types of bullying, and because it's done online, it can happen 24 hours a day, 7 days a week.

Children often find it hard to talk to their parents about cyberbullying, as they may be concerned that their parents will get involved and make the problem worse, or that they will stop them spending time online. It might seem like cyberbullying is difficult to beat – because cyberbullies are less likely to get caught in the act. But there are steps you can take to help protect your child…

It's a problem that's undoubtedly on the rise, and research shows that a staggering 68% of parents are worried about online bullying. The National Association of Head Teachers (NAHT) in the UK report that 1 in 4 children aged 11 to 16 have been cyberbullied.

If you worry about your kids being bullied online, read on to learn more about how to spot the signs, what to do if you find out your child is being bullied and how we can beat cyberbullying.

How to spot the signs of cyberbullying

Your children could be reluctant to tell you if they're being cyberbullied. But you can keep a look out for one or more of the following symptoms:

• Showing signs of stress such as being moody, silent or crying, or bullying a younger sibling or friend in a way that is different to 'normal'.

• Making excuses to miss school, such as stomach complaints or headaches – or skipping school altogether.

• Seeming upset after using the internet or mobile, or changing their behaviour – for example no longer wanting to look at a new text immediately or being secretive and unwilling to talk about their online activities and phone use.

• Being withdrawn or unwilling to join in with normal social activities – more so than normal.

• Changing their eating habits.

• Sleeping badly.

• Wetting the bed.

What you can do if your child is being cyberbullied

• If your child is upset by something online but seems to be handling the situation, advise them not to retaliate. Though it's tempting to reply to hurtful comments, it can make rows last longer.

• If you feel you can discuss bullying behaviour with the other child's parent, proceed with caution. It's natural for a parent to defend their child, so make sure you're calm and ask for their help to resolve the situation – your goal should always be to stop the bullying.

• In some situations, it might be best to encourage your child to block or 'unfriend' the person who has upset them. Your child might be reluctant to do this if they consider the person to be a friend, so spend some time talking to them about what it really means to be a good friend.

• Most social media platforms give options for reporting or flagging content that breaches their user guidelines. Be aware that the thresholds for offensive content, the process for reviewing reports and the time it takes to remove content can vary.

• Save the evidence so you have a record in case you need to seek professional help. For example, you might want to screengrab offensive content and keep it in a safe place.

• If the people doing the bullying are from your child's class, you may want to contact the school, as the staff may not be aware of it. Many counselling services also offer help, often on a sliding scale of cost depending on family income. A few even offer services for free.

How to protect your child from cyberbullying

Just like any other kind of bullying, cyberbullying can happen in any school to just about any child. Of course, it can also happen outside of school parameters too. But there are steps you can take to help protect your child:

• Teach your son or daughter to always tell someone they trust if bullying is happening – whether that's you, a teacher or someone else in authority. Let them know they're not being a snitch – sending abusive or threatening messages is actually against the law.

• Advise them to only add trusted friends and family to social network sites like Facebook, to their email address list and to their phone book. They should be careful who they add and not be afraid to turn down friend requests on Facebook and other social media.

• Tell them not to lend their phone to other people and to never give out their phone number on internet chat rooms.

• Remind them that camera phone messages can be traced and forwarded – they should be careful what picture messages they send and who they send them to. The same goes for emails, texts and messages on social networking sites, as these can also be traced and forwarded.

• Teach them not to take inappropriate pictures in swimming pools, school changing rooms and so on. Bring these subjects out into the open and talk about them. Make sure your child knows what to do if they see someone else taking inappropriate photos.

• If your child receives a video or a photo of someone else being hurt they need to know that it's okay to tell you. They shouldn't feel like they're telling tales.

• Make sure your child is cautious if they have Bluetooth on their phone and encourage them to reject calls and messages from people they don't know.

• Talk to your children openly about how they use the internet and their favourite sites. It helps if you understand how the technology works, not least because you can help them adjust the privacy settings on their online profiles.

• If something feels wrong or suspect, it is OK to check it out with someone else (not a peer).

The modern, interconnected, always 'on' world has the potential to be fraught with danger. But if used with thought and respect, it is undoubtedly a wonderful opportunity for knowledge and friendship.