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Cyberbullying

by Summer Stanley

Bullying is something that has occurred since the beginning of time, but in recent years, rapid advances in technology have made it even easier, more pervasive, and harder to prevent.

The "classic" image of the schoolyard bully may bring to mind a child (usually a boy) who taunts other children, steals their lunch money, and pushes them down on the playground. But these days, both boys and girls do their fair share of bullying, and it can and does go far beyond simple teasing.

Because children of almost all ages own or have access to a computer, tablet, or smartphone, they are automatically at risk of cyberbullying and other harmful content. Add to that the ever-changing world of social media, and you have a potentially devastating situation.

In addition to well-known social media outlets like Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter, developers around the globe are constantly coming up with new ways for people to connect with others anonymously. The result is a multitude of apps and websites that make children more vulnerable to cyberbullying.

Some messaging apps, like Telegram and Line, allow the sender of a message to delete texts or chats from the recipient's phone, making it easy for a bully to remove any record of their activity. Other apps you may have heard of include:

- **Snapchat:** A photo messaging app that allows for sharing pictures and short videos that are intended to be erased shortly after delivery
- **Kik:** A messaging app that allows users of all ages to contact others anonymously
- **Sarahah:** An anonymous messaging app that allows users to send anonymous messages to people they may know

Even playing games online may open up a child to cyberbullying. Many gamers play on teams with friends and strangers while communicating through apps like Discord, a voice-over IP (VOIP) app that lets players chat while playing. Using avatars and anonymous usernames gives players the freedom to harass and sometimes gang up on others.

Other cyberbullying tactics may include hacking into someone's social media account or creating a fake account; and "doxing" (an abbreviated form of "documents"), in which a bully makes personal information like addresses and phone numbers public.

Often, cyberbullying occurs in conjunction with school bullying. This combination is particularly harmful, because the targeted child is vulnerable to the abuse 24/7. And sometimes, this harassment even crosses over into criminal behavior and physical violence.

It can be overwhelming to think about all the outlets kids can use to bully others. So what can you, as a parent or teacher, do to prevent or stop cyberbullying?

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According to StopBullying.gov, adults should keep an eye out for the following warning signs that a child is being cyberbullied:

- Noticeable increases or decreases in device use, including texting

- Emotional responses to what is happening on their device

- Hiding their screen or device when others are near, and avoiding discussion about what they are doing on their device

- Shutting down social media accounts

- Avoiding social situations, even those that were enjoyed in the past

- Becoming withdrawn or depressed, or losing interest in people and activities

If you notice a change in your child's mood or behavior, try to determine if these changes are connected to his or her usage of a computer, tablet, or cell phone. If you see signs of cyberbullying, ask your child what is happening, how it started, and who is involved. Document the harassment, and take screenshots if possible. Having records of the abuse will be helpful if you decide to report the behavior.

Most social media platforms and schools have clear policies and reporting processes. If a classmate is cyberbullying, report it to the school. You can also contact the app developers or social media platforms to report offensive content and have it removed. If a child has received physical threats, or if a crime or illegal behavior is occurring, report it to the police.

Bullying of any kind can have severe negative effects on children and teens, including:

- Depression and anxiety

- Sadness and loneliness

- Changes in sleep and eating patterns

- Loss of interest in activities they used to enjoy

- Health complaints

- Decreased academic achievement and school participation

Even worse, according to a report published in the Journal of School Violence, middle and high school students who experienced either school-based or online bullying were significantly more likely to report suicidal ideation. Preventing and stopping cyberbullying is most successful when parents are diligent about monitoring their children's online habits, when schools have anti-bullying programs in place, and when children learn at a young age that bullying others is unacceptable. Learn more at StopBullying.gov or Cyberbullying.org.

Resources:

"Cyberbullying Tactics," accessed Sept. 18, 2018, https://www.stopbullying.gov/cyberbullying/cyberbullying-tactics/index.html

"Bullying, Cyberbullying, and Suicide Among US Youth: Our Updated Research Findings," accessed Sept. 19, 2018, https://cyberbullying.org/bullying-cyberbullying-suicide-among-us-youth

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