

#Bits and Bytes

Cyberbullying - the signs, the consequences and how to deal with it.

Bullying. We all know how unpleasant this is. This however, doesn't stop people doing it. What though, is cyberbullying exactly?

How is it any different? Well, the impact of cyberbullying is the same. It makes people feel extremely anxious, isolated, threatened, exposed, worthless, humiliated, paranoid and depressed. All of these can contribute to deeper and darker issues such as self harm, eating disorders, drug and alcohol abuse and even in extreme cases, suicide.

So what is it? Quite simply put, cyberbullying is

bullying which takes place online using any number of technological devices such as consoles, smartphones, tablets etc. It is commonly carried out via social media, instant messaging and increasingly via gaming and live streaming. The scary thing is that many adults and parents are totally unaware of these technologies and how they are used to bully others.



Why is it so hard to police?

The Internet never sleeps. This means that cyberbullying may occur 24-7. Whilst your child is sleeping, someone may be posting on social media about them at any time. By the time they wake up in the morning the damage has been done. There is just no escaping it. A scary thought.

Many cyberbullying incidents remain **anonymous**. It is easy to hide your identity online - we've all heard of the keyboard warrior and trolls? Well this anonymity is very scary for those on the receiving end of it.

Cyberbullying can be very **subtle and very easy to do**. It may be the case that they deliberately leave someone out of a group chat, crop someone out of a photo, comment on a live stream, mention them in social media status or photo, deliberately not tag them in a post or destroy someone's progress in a game for example. You wouldn't really think these are forms of cyberbullying but they are and have a serious impact on the wellbeing of that child left out.

Cyberbullying **isn't exclusive to school children** either. Trolling on Twitter is very common practice - hiding behind their user names or setting up fake accounts. I myself have experienced this and I'm 42. It's still unnerving (even at my age) to have someone

comment negatively on something you may post. People can be extremely nasty behind the keyboard. Would they do it face to face? Doubtful. This is why cyberbullying is such a deeply cowardly act.

The **"audience"** of the bullying so to speak, has the possibility to be much wider than that of non cyberbullying. The reason being that once something is posted online (for example a video, screenshot, photo) it is actually very difficult to remove and more often than not, is online forever. Also bullies can share things within seconds and it has the potential to spread very quickly - all people have to do is click on 'share' and before you know it, hundreds of people have seen it. They cannot "unsee" it.

Reputations can be damaged far too easily and undeservedly so. Once it is tarnished, it can't be undone.

Due to the fact that cyberbullying is carried out online and not in person, the bully does not see first hand the **impact their behaviour** is having on the person being bullied. They may think it's a bit of fun but have no idea that the person they are bullying is self harming because of it, for example.

Why do people do it?

- **Power and control.** This doesn't really need explaining. For whatever reason it makes the bully feel good and empowered to have an element of control over their victim.
- **They are jealous.** Young people experience a huge amount of insecurity and emotion. Sometimes, they are so envious of others that they feel the need to bring them down purely to make themselves feel a little better.
- **Peer pressure and the need to fit in** – this is common. Some people feel the need to be part of a friendship group so much or to make friends that they are encouraged to gang up and take part in cyberbullying even if they know that it is wrong. Being a child is complex and difficult! Fitting in is a huge part of their lives.
- **A difficult home life.** Sometimes frustration with situations at home can be overwhelming and with no one to talk to about it, their anger can be taken out on others. Sometimes this is a cry for help because they have no one to talk to so their emotions spill out and this is unfortunately the channel they use.
- **They have experienced cyberbullying themselves.** Because of this experience they feel that it is normal to cyberbully others. They may feel like it's okay to treat people in the same way as they have been treated in the past.

The forms cyberbullying can take



- **Harassment.** Targeting a person or group with a constant stream of offensive messages.
- **Cyberstalking.** Sending repeated and frequent messages that include real threats of physical harm.
- Sending or posting information that's intended to damage someone's **reputation**.
- Deliberately **excluding** someone from online conversations, group chats, cropping out of photos, not allowing them to join in with gaming sessions and other online activities.
- **Masquerading.** They create a fake identity or impersonate someone else online to harass an individual anonymously.
- **Fraping.** Logging into someone else's account, impersonating them or posting inappropriate content in their name.
- **Flaming.** Sending angry, abusive online messages to intentionally provoke someone into starting an argument.
- **Baiting.** Intentionally make a person angry by saying or doing things to annoy them.
- **Trolling.** Posting provocative and insulting messages about sensitive subjects on someone's Social Media feed. This is common on Twitter.
- **Roasting.** Ganging up on an individual online and sending offensive abuse until the victim is seen to 'crack'
- **Publicly sharing** personal, private or embarrassing information, photos or videos about someone online.
- **Griefing.** Online gamers can talk to other users using microphones and they can also use an in-game chat/messaging facility too. These can be used to encourage teamwork, build friendships which is of course, great! However some people use these to abuse players through verbal abuse or text/messaging abuse. Also they may deliberately try and ruin someone's game by destroying parts of their worlds, stealing things from them or killing them
- **Catfishing.** Stealing someone's profile or setting up fake profiles to lure people into starting online relationships. Ever seen that MTV programme called Catfish? It certainly is an eye opener.

How can you tell if your child is being bullied online?

Your child might not feel comfortable talking to you about being on the receiving end of cyberbullying. This may be because they feel embarrassed or that they have been threatened with abuse. It is therefore important to look out for any signs in your child's behaviour. Look out for these:

1. Your child is using their electronic device a lot less than normal or has suddenly stopped using it without reason.
2. Alternatively they become obsessive about being constantly online.
3. Your child seems nervous when using their device.
4. You notice changes in behaviour of your child - they are becoming sad, withdrawn, angry, or lashing out more than is normal.
5. They are reluctant to go to school and don't

seem to want to take part in their usual social activities.

6. They have unexplained physical symptoms such as headaches, stomach upsets. Usually a cry for help.
7. They avoid discussions about what they're doing online or who they're talking to.
8. All of the above may indicate that something is up and needs careful, non-judgemental parental intervention. Anything out of the norm is a red flag.



How you can help

- **Encourage your child to talk to someone.** It is important that your child has someone they can talk to openly and honestly. This may be a friend, family member, a teacher, or anyone who is trusted. These people are a great sounding board and can offer advice, rational thought and allow them to feel so much better - a problem shared is a problem halved after all!
- **Never judge!** This is the most important piece of advice I give. You need to encourage honest conversation between you and your child and if they think you will judge them, you have no hope of getting them to open up.
- **Don't take their devices off them.** Not only will this make your child resent you, the threat of having their technology confiscated will not encourage them open up to you. Also, this doesn't stop cyberbullying - as I stated earlier the bullying can continue even if your child isn't online.
- **If the cyberbullying is occurring in school** or it is involving people who go to the same school, a teacher should be able to help you resolve the issue effectively. Remember, teachers are trained in safeguarding.
- **Tell your child never to retaliate.** Bullies are trying to provoke the victim and expect a reaction. If they are ignored, they are more likely to become bored and move on.
- **Look at the severity of the bullying and assess the threat.** If the cyberbully is sending messages of a threatening nature or you have reason to be worried about safety, you should contact the police. They will be able to help with more specific advice on what to do going forward.

What if your child is the cyberbully?

- **Talk about it.** Find out why they are doing it. Don't be judgemental, don't be defensive and don't let your emotion take over. Stay calm throughout.
- Explain the **consequences** of the bullying. Explain how it may hurt others and what that victim may be feeling.
- Encourage your child to take responsibility for their actions and to apologise face to face to their victim.
- Discuss the implications if they were to be reported to the **police**.
- Explain that they may be likely to lose friends and have others think badly of them.
- **Never condone it.** Explain calmly that it is wrong in any circumstance.
- Always **lead by example** by being positive digital role model at all times
- **Don't confiscate devices** - yes there needs to be an element of "punishment" so to speak so I would recommend that you restrict access and take some (not all) of their privileges away with the agreement that they can work towards regaining full access.
- **Learn from it TOGETHER.** Look at how you as a family can work together to promote different behaviour online.

Want to know more?

In summary, I offer this general advice - get involved in your child's online life! They WILL talk to you about their online life if you show an interest!

1. Have conversations about that they are doing. Show an interest in what they are doing by playing games with them, asking them their help and advice with technology (even if you don't really need it). Get to grips with the social media they use. Use it yourself.
2. Keep the use of devices to downstairs. I would not recommend that they use any technology in their own bedrooms at all. Why would they need privacy when online? If they do, personally I would be worried about what they are getting up to.
3. Discuss the various issues openly, honestly and OFTEN with your children from an EARLY AGE. This will forge trust and they will be more likely to chat about any problems they are having without being embarrassed. This is vital and the final point I'd like to make for now.

Part of what I do is go into schools and other organisations and talk about issues such as this plus many more. There are so many aspects to staying safe online it's vital to keep up to date. If you are a teacher, a student or a parent and feel a session would be beneficial, drop me an email (sally@jumpstartit.org.uk)

Plenty to think about! If you want to know more, get in touch!

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