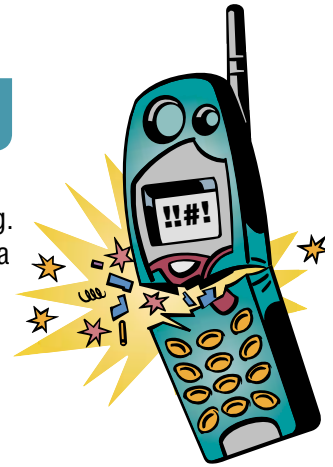


Confronting Electronic Bullying

“Sticks and stones” aside, words can hurt. The newest wrinkle is electronic, or cyber, bullying. No longer just a schoolyard tough, the cyber bully can be anyone with access to a computer or a cell phone. In a U.K. report, one in four children, some as young as 11 years old, are bullied in Britain. A Canadian study reported that 13% of students are bullied monthly. A U.S. study says one in 17 youngsters between the ages of 10 and 17 has been threatened or harassed online.



How Electronic Bullying Works

Mobile phones may be the most abused medium. Bullies send threatening or harassing text messages, often involving sex, sexual orientation, or race. Unwelcome sexual comments and threats of sexual abuse are often directed at girls. Boys are more often victims of homophobic harassment, regardless of their true sexual orientation. Racial slurs and threats of violence also are concerns. In one U.S. study 13% of students reported being called a hate-related name.

E-mail, websites, and screen names in chat rooms are masks for electronic bullies, who can attack without warning and with alarming persistence. A teenager, for example, videotaped himself playing “Star Wars,” using a golf club as a light saber. A private geeky moment like most kids have — until the video fell into a bully’s hands and ended up on the Internet to humiliate the student. In another case, a girl broke up with her boyfriend. The boy then superimposed a photo of the girl’s face onto a pornographic photo and sent it by e-mail to their friends and classmates. Another example: A student took cell-phone pictures of an overweight boy as he was changing clothes in a locker room and then sent the pictures to many of their peers.

The consequences of bullying can be serious. Victims’ schoolwork often suffers. Some students have dropped out of school, been compelled to seek psychiatric help, and even committed suicide as a result of the distress caused by cyber bullies.

What Teachers, Administrators, Parents, and Students Can Do

- 1. Communicate.** Keep everyone affected by electronic bullying informed. Filters for Internet content do not work for most cyber bullying, but helping students combat bullying on their own does. Peer-support and parent-involvement groups also can help.
- 2. Encourage openness.** Bullies thrive on secrecy, intimidation, and humiliation. They count on their victims’ silence. Openness is a key to reducing or eliminating bullying. Urge students to talk to their parents and teachers.
- 3. Don’t engage the bully.** Most bullies are looking for a reaction from their victims. Lack of a response can help to extinguish the bullying behaviors.
- 4. Monitor e-mail, Internet, and cell-phone use.** Responsible adults should determine when students are mature enough to handle electronic communication — especially when such communication may include cyber-bullying content.
- 5. Hold bullies responsible.** Electronic bullying is a punishable offense. When cyber bullies are identified, hold them accountable. Most schools have antiharassment policies that should extend to electronic bullying.

— Donovan R. Walling

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