Cyberbullying & Sexting: What Parents Need to Know

Cyberbullying

Bullying is an old problem that remains difficult to bring under control, in part because technology offers new ways for kids to pick on one another. Indeed, cyberbullying can extend the reach and power of some of the worst bullies, subjecting kids to taunts from beyond their own schools and neighborhoods.

As the pressure builds, victims can experience anxiety, depression, and other stress-related disorders. As recent well-publicized cases have shown, some kids and teens ended their lives to escape bullying. Experts say that kids who are bullied — and the bullies themselves — are at an elevated risk for suicidal thoughts, attempts, and completed suicides.

Parents are often desperate to help when their kids are bullied. It’s hard enough to combat the typical schoolyard thug — so what can be done about the sometimes anonymous tormentors who strike from behind a computer screen?

Encourage your child not to respond, because doing so just fuels the fire and makes the situation worse. But do keep the threatening messages, pictures, and texts, as these can be used as evidence with the bully’s parents, school, employer, or even the police. Also consider involving officials at your child’s school, especially if the bully also goes there.

Warning signs of cyberbullying to watch for can include:
- emotional distress during or after using the Internet
- withdrawal from friends and family members
- avoidance of school or group gatherings
- slipping grades and “acting out” in anger at home
- changes in mood, behavior, sleep, or appetite
- wanting to stop using the computer or cell phone
- appearing nervous or jumpy when getting an instant message or email
- avoiding discussions about computer or cell phone activities

And if your son or daughter is doing the bullying, take steps to end the negative behavior. Explain that joking and teasing might seem harmless but can hurt feelings and lead to serious consequences at home, school, and in the community. If it continues, put tracking or filtering software on the computer, impose restrictions on computer and cell phone use, and consider having your child talk with a counselor.

Sexting

Pose with your friends for your iPhone-loving date, who instantly uploads it via Facebook mobile, and you have a memory to enjoy forever — or a permanently ruined reputation.

Even adults can live to regret something that lands online or is forwarded inappropriately. But “sexting” (sending or receiving of sexually explicit or sexually suggestive images or video via a cell phone) is largely a youth phenomenon.

Why do they do it? Many young women cite “pressure from guys” as the reason they send or pose for sexually suggestive pictures or texts, and guys sometimes blame “pressure from friends.” But for some, it’s almost become normal behavior, a way of flirting, or “not a big deal.” And they get some reinforcement for that when lewd celebrity pictures and videos
go mainstream and the consequences are greater fame and reality TV shows, not ruined careers or humiliation.

So besides educating themselves about what their kids are transmitting, parents need to get kids — whose decision-making skills, judgment, and ideas about privacy are still being formed — to understand that even if their intentions are playful or harmless, if messages or pictures become public, the results can be anything but.

It can be hard for teens to grasp the permanent consequences of their ever-changing tech interactions. Just as they might not consider how smoking now can cause long-term health problems down the road, they can be reluctant to curb their “share everything” tendencies now for the sake of their reputations later.

Questionable behavior gone viral can have potential legal ramifications, not to mention it can also haunt a college applicant or prospective employee years later. More and more colleges and employers check online profiles looking for indications of a candidate’s suitability — or giant red flags about bad judgment and immaturity.

So how can you get through to your kids? The answer is to have open conversations about personal responsibility, personal boundaries, and how to resist peer pressure. Conversations like this should occur throughout kids’ lives — not just when problems emerge.

Explain to your kids, early and often, that once an image or message is sent, it is no longer in their control and cannot be taken back. It can, and likely will, spread beyond their control. Make it clear that there will be consequences if your kids are caught sexting, such as confiscation of cell phones and netbooks or close monitoring of their use.