



## Cyber Bullying

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*"I'd block them, but then they'd have another screen name and they'd be like 'you're a whore, you can't get away from this'... It would just bring me to tears and I would cry because I couldn't get away from it as much as I tried."*

– Erica Bryant, 18 years old

Everyday at school, Erica Bryant was harassed. "They'd call me a slut, call me a whore."

The bullying became too much, so her parents decided to have her home schooled.

"So, sure, a huge part of the problem was resolved in that she didn't have to face that trauma everyday, she didn't have to sit in the lunchroom by herself," explains her mom, Linda Perloff, "but what we didn't expect was the power of the Internet ...we didn't expect the instant messaging."

Erica explains her frustration: "I'd block them, but then they'd have another screen name and they'd be like 'you're a whore, you can't get away from this. It would just bring me to tears and I would cry because I couldn't get away from it, as much as I tried."

Experts say cyber bullying can be even more painful and pervasive than face-to-face harassment.

"You can never really get away from it," explains pediatrician Dr. Ken Haller, "because even if you're not on the Internet checking out what people are saying about you, other people are."

But, experts say, there are ways to minimize attacks online.

First, make sure your child doesn't post anything revealing.

"If they're thinking, I'm just putting this out there for my friends to read, they don't realize that anyone can pick this up and someone who might be a potential bully would say, 'Ah! I'm going to use this. This is great'," says Haller.

Experts say if the cyber bullying doesn't stop- print the messages out and show them to the bully's parents. If the messages are threatening, go to the police.

"I always encourage parents to talk to your local law enforcement agency and run it by them," says Judy Freeman, a school social worker. "Many times they say, 'well, we really can't do anything,' but if it's - if it borders onto harassment or if there's some threat involved, they will become involved."

Erica is now in a new school. The harassment has stopped- at least for her.

"If I see it happen to other girls I'm not going to sit by and watch," she says. "I'm going to get involved and put an end to it."

## Tips for Parents

Bullying in America has become an epidemic. In fact, with the advent of the Internet, bullies don't even have to have physical contact with your child to torment him/her. Thus, parents are faced with the monumental task of monitoring the activities of children in a world of virtually unlimited sources of information. Although many parents attempt to regulate the access of their children to the Internet, that access is, in fact, nearly ubiquitous. Consider these facts

regarding children, technology and the Internet:

- Children are increasingly using new technologies in school, at the library, at home and in after-school activities.
- A recent study estimated that nearly 10 million children are online.
- Over one quarter of U.S. classrooms have Internet access, and 78 percent of schools have some kind of access to the Internet.
- Two out of three public libraries provide computers and Internet access for public use.

Because bullying – including online bullying – can be such an emotional issue, experts say it is extremely important to open the lines of communication with your kids. This can include ...

- Starting to talk with them early.
- Initiating conversations.
- Creating an open environment.
- Communicating your values.
- Listening to your child.
- Trying to be honest.
- Being patient.
- Sharing your experiences.

Also, watch for behavioral changes. Children who are suffering from teasing and bullying may try to hide the hurt. They become withdrawn from family and friends, lose interest in hobbies, and may turn to destructive habits like alcohol, drugs, and acts of violence.

While bullying, harassment and teasing are unfortunate aspects of childhood, you can help minimize these occurrences by raising non-violent children. The American Academy of Pediatrics cites the following tips for curbing hurtful behavior in your child:

- Give your child consistent love and attention. Every child needs a strong, loving relationship with a parent or other adult to feel safe and secure and to develop a sense of trust. Without a steady bond to a caring adult, a child is at risk for becoming hostile, difficult and hard to manage.
- Make sure your child is supervised. A child depends on his or her parents and family members for encouragement, protection and support as he or she learns to think for him or herself. Without proper supervision, your child will not receive the guidance he or she needs. Studies report that unsupervised children often have behavior problems.
- Monitor your child's Internet use. If your child knows you are watching, he/she is less likely to take part in cyber-bullying. Also, encourage him/her to avoid using chat rooms with violent or derogatory conversations.
- Show your child appropriate behaviors by the way you act. Children often learn by example. The behavior, values and attitudes of parents and siblings have a strong influence on them. Be firm with your child about the possible dangers of violent behavior and language. Also, remember to praise your child when he or she solves problems constructively without violence.
- Be consistent about rules and discipline. When you make a rule, stick to it. Your child needs structure with clear expectations for his or her behavior. Setting rules and then not enforcing them is confusing and sets up your child to "see what he or she can get away with."
- Try to keep your child from seeing violence in the home or community. Violence in the home can be frightening and harmful to children. A child who has seen violence at home does not always become violent, but he or she may be more likely to try to resolve conflicts with violence.
- Try to keep your child from seeing too much violence in the media. Watching a lot of violence on television, in the movies and in video games can lead children to behave aggressively. As a parent, you can control the amount of violence your child sees in the media by limiting television viewing and previewing games, movies, etc., before allowing access to them by your child.
- Help your child stand up against violence. Support your child in standing up against violence. Teach him or her to respond with calm but firm words when others insult or threaten another person. Help your child understand that it takes more courage and leadership to resist violence than to go along with it.

## References

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