What Can Parents Do to Prevent and Address Cyber-Bullying?

Adults seldom are present in the online environments frequented by children and youth. Therefore, it is extremely important that adults pay close attention to cyber-bullying and the activities of children and youth when using these new technologies.

Cyber-bullying occurs when children and youth use cyber-technologies such as text messaging, Internet sites, and cell phones to bully others. Indirect forms of bullying like this can include spreading of false rumors, gossip, and verbal taunts or attacks. Like bullying that happens in person, cyber-bullying can have serious, and sometimes legal consequences for the ones doing the bullying.

Here are some ideas of ways to protect your child from cyber-bullying or address the issue if you find your child is cyber-bullying others.

Suggestions for Parents

TIPS TO HELP PREVENT CYBER-BULLYING:

- Keep your home computer(s) in easily viewable places, such as a family room or kitchen.

- Talk regularly with your child about online activities he or she is involved in.

  a. Talk specifically about cyber-bullying and encourage your child to tell you immediately if he or she is the victim of cyber-bullying, cyber-stalking, or other illegal or troublesome online behaviors.

  b. Encourage your child to tell you if he or she is aware of others who may be the victims of such behavior.

  c. Explain that cyber-bullying is harmful and unacceptable behavior. Outline your expectations for responsible online behavior and make it clear that there will be consequences for inappropriate behavior.

- Although adults must respect the privacy of children and youth, concerns for your child's safety may sometimes override these privacy concerns. Tell your child that you may review his or her online communications if you think there is reason for concern.

- Consider installing parental control filtering software and/or tracking programs, but don't rely solely on these tools.

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TIPS FOR DEALING WITH CYBER-BULLYING THAT YOUR CHILD HAS EXPERIENCED:

Because cyber-bullying can range from rude comments to lies, impersonations, and threats, your responses may depend on the nature and severity of the cyber-bullying. Here are some actions that you may want to take after the fact.

- Strongly encourage your child not to respond to the cyber-bullying.

- Do not erase the messages or pictures. Save these as evidence.

- Try to identify the individual doing the cyber-bullying. Even if the cyber-bully is anonymous (for example, is using a fake name or someone else's identity), there may be a way to track him or her through your Internet service provider. If the cyber-bullying is criminal (or if you suspect that it may be), contact the police and ask them to do the tracking.

- Sending inappropriate language may violate the "terms and conditions" of email services, Internet service providers, Web sites, and cell phone companies. Consider contacting these providers and filing a complaint.

- If the cyber-bullying is coming through email or a cell phone, it may be possible to block future contact from the individual who cyber-bullied. Of course, he or she may assume a different identity and continue the bullying.

- Contact your school. If the cyber-bullying is occurring through your school district's Internet system, school administrators have an obligation to intervene. Even if the cyber-bullying is occurring off campus, make your school administrators aware of the problem. They may be able to help you resolve the cyber-bullying or be watchful for face-to-face bullying.

- Consider contacting the cyber-bully's parents. These parents may be very concerned to learn that their child has been cyber-bullying others, and they may effectively put a stop to the bullying. On the other hand, these parents may react very badly to your contacting them. So, proceed cautiously. If you decide to contact a cyber-bully's parents, communicate with them in writing—not face-to-face. Present proof of the cyber-bullying (for example, copies of an email message) and ask them to make sure the cyber-bullying stops.

- Consider contacting an attorney in cases of serious cyber-bullying. In some circumstances, civil law permits those who are being bullied to sue a bully or his or her parents in order to recover damages.

- Contact the police if cyber-bullying involves acts such as threats of violence; extortion; obscene or harassing phone calls or text messages; harassment, stalking, or hate crimes; or child pornography. If you are uncertain if cyber-bullying violates criminal laws, contact your local police, who will advise you.