Preventing and Halting Cyberbullying - Advice for Parents and Kids

Understanding Cyberbullying:

Cyberbullying, which involves the use of Internet or cellphone technology to send bullying messages, is the new version of an old problem. However, unlike school bullying, cyberbullying is not limited to selected locations and times. Cyberbullying can happen any time you pick up your cell phone or log in to your favorite social media account. Once it begins, cyberbullying can go on any time of day or night and bring in many more people than just the bully who started it. For that reason, cyberbullying can be even more devastating than "ordinary" bullying.

It's estimated that up to a third of today's teenagers will be the victims of cyberbullying at some point. The ways cyberbullying can take place are many and varied. It may start with taunting or demeaning messages sent by text, IM or email messages, or posted on social media sites like Facebook. It can escalate into having your account hijacked or your online identity stolen and mocked. Cyberbullies often create fake accounts or websites and hide behind them as they send out their bullying messages. With today's electronic devices and social media, cyberbullying has become quite simple to perpetrate. Therefore we often see victims switching roles and become perpetrators, and vice versa.

Both girls and boys both commit cyberbullying, but in different forms. Girls' cyberbullying actions are subtle, while boys' are more overt and involve implying physical threats or sexual messages (known as "sexting.") Girls' will use cyberbullying to spread gossip and rumors that attack the victim's reputation or expose her secrets, while excluding the victim from buddy lists and other online social groups.

Bullying is a serious problem. Victims of any form of bullying will naturally feel angry, hurt, isolated and helpless. Prolonged bullying can lead to the victim becoming anxious, depressed and often suicidal. Cyberbullying is frequently experienced as being even more traumatic and painful because it becomes such a pervasive part of the victim's life, and the perpetrators are often anonymous and hard to identify. Taking place in the public sphere of the Internet, cyberbullying can potentially be viewed by thousands of people and therefore add immeasurably to the sense of humiliation and violation the victim inevitably feels.

Dealing with Cyberbullying -- for Teens and Kids

The first thing to remember is to NEVER respond to any bullying post or message about you. Cyberbullies WANT to provoke a reaction from you, so your response can cause the situation to become worse. Also keep in mind that if you try to "bully the bully" you

could find yourself getting in trouble with the law. Many parts of cyberbullying behavior are ILLEGAL. Follow these pointers for more effective ways to deal with cyberbullying:

- Save the bullying text message or a screenshot of an offensive webpage, and then delete the message from any pages in your account where your friends might see it. Report the bullying messages to a parent, teacher or school counselor.

- If the bullying message threatens you or another person with physical harm, report it to the police right away. The same is true for messages of an inappropriate sexual nature. These actions are against the law in most cases.

- Be persistent in reporting the bullying messages. Cyberbullies tend to pursue their victims over time. You need to report every incident as soon as you can after it happens. You do not have to live with being bullied in any form.

- Block the cyberbully and report them to the social media site or their Internet Service Provider (ISP). You should always stick to only those social media sites that have a clear policy and procedure for blocking and reporting cyberbullies.

Dealing with Cyberbullying -- for Teens and Kids

- Make sure your kids know that they should report any bullying or threatening messages to you immediately. Assure them that your intention is to protect them so they have a good Internet experience. Kids are sometimes afraid to tell their parents about cyberbullying because they think they might lose their cell phone or Internet privileges.

- Be sure your kids know how to block and report bullies. Also teach your kids to never post personal information online or to share their passwords with anyone except their parents.

- Monitor your child's Internet and cell phone use. As parents, you have the right and responsibility to protect your child, online as well as offline. Use appropriate filters on the computer to regulate the sites your child can access. Know the

passwords to access your child's social media sites, and review the friend list with your child.

– Take action when cyberbullying occurs. Keep a saved copy of all bullying or threatening messages and report to the police, as well to the service providers for your Internet and cell phone use, and the social media site on which the bullying occurred. Block the bully's access to your child's account, and change cell phone numbers and email addresses if necessary.

– If you can identify the cyberbully and if he or she attends your child's school, consider making a report to the school and following their procedures for resolving the situation.

– Take legal action if necessary. Cyberbullying can become a crime if it involves laws against sexual harassment or discrimination. Identify theft or password hacking may fall under criminal state or federal prosecution. "Sexting" or sending sex-related messages to a child may be prosecuted under child pornography laws. If an adult is involved, the criminal charges are even more serious.