A Parents' Guide to
Cyberbullying and Cyberthreats

Young people have fully embraced the Internet and other technologies, like cell phones, as both an environment and a tool for socializing. They send emails, create their own web sites, post intimate personal news in blogs (online interactive diaries), send text messages and images via cell phone, message each other through IMs (instant messages), chat in chatrooms, post to discussion boards, and seek out new friends in teen sites.

Unfortunately, there are increasing reports of teens (and sometimes younger children) using these technologies to post cruel text or images to bully their peers or engage in other cruel behavior. There are also increasing reports of teens posting material that raises concerns they are considering an act of violence towards others or themselves. This Guide will provide you with insight into these concerns and guidelines to prevent you child from being victimized by or engaging in online harmful behavior. It will also provide guidance on intervention actions. If you are confused about any Internet terms, check the glossary at the end.

THE STORIES

These stories are based on actual events. Most names have been changed.

A group of girls at his school had been taunting Alan through IM, teasing him about his small size, daring him to do things he couldn't do. They dared him to commit suicide. He discussed this with them. The girls thought it was a big joke. One afternoon, Alan got his grandfather's shotgun, loaded it, and killed himself. He had deleted every thing from his computer, except for one message, "The only way to get the respect you deserve is to die."

Unknown middle school students created a web site all about Raymond. On this site, they posted Raymond stories, Raymond jokes, and Raymond cartoons. They posed questions about Raymond's sex life. They invited anyone visiting the site to submit their own comments and had an email link for people to send comments directly to Raymond.

Sitting around the computer with her friends at a Friday night sleepover, Judy asked, "Who don't we like? Who can we mess with?" They chose Sara, who was always trying to fit into the group. Sure enough, Sara was online. So Judy started IM-ing with her – with all of the other girls providing suggestions. "Ask her who she likes best, Jack or Nathan," they urged. The next Monday, the girls were passing Sara's IM at school.

Greg, an obese high school student, was changing in the locker room after gym class. Matt took a covert picture of him with his cell phone camera. Within seconds, he sent it to classmates. Soon the picture was flying around to cell phones at school. By the time Greg left the locker room, all the students were laughing at him.

Joanne saw some girls bullying Jessica at school and reported the bullying to the office. By the time Joanne got home from school she had 35 angry messages in her email box and even more angry text-messages on her cell phone. Most of the messages are anonymous. Now, on a daily basis, Joanne gets many email and text messages using vulgar and insulting language.

An anonymous group of students from school have created a web site. The web site contains partially nude images of the girls, apparently taken in the girl's locker room. The web site offers visitors the opportunity to post comments about each girl. Many derogatory comments have been posted, including some that are sexually explicit.

After he beat another boy in an online game, several of the boy's friends threatened Michael in the game site chat room. "We'll make you pay for this." Now when Michael tries to play on the site, a group of other players gang up on him and restrict his activities so that he cannot participate.

When Annie broke up with her boyfriend, Sam, he sent her many angry, threatening, pleading messages. When Annie blocked his email account, Sam continued to send messages either by email or text message. When Annie still refused to get back with him, Sam posed as Annie in a sex-oriented discussion group and posted a sexually suggestive picture Annie had given him, along with her email address and cell phone number.

Jeff wrote the following comments in a series of chats: "I'm a retarded [expletive] for ever believing that things would change. I'm starting to regret sticking around, I should've taken the razor blade express last time around." "It takes courage to turn the gun on your ownself, takes courage to face death. Knowing you're going to die and actually following through takes heart, I don't care who you are.""... kind of rocky right now so I might disappear unexpectedly."

Sue was really angry at Kelsey, who she thought stole her boyfriend. Sue convinced Marilyn to post anonymous comments on a school-related discussion board slamming Kelsey. Marilyn was eager to win Sue's approval and fit into her group of friends, so she did as Sue requested.

Joe and Alec have gotten into an online argument about an incident that occurred at school. Each message has gotten angrier and more vulgar. Joe warns Alec to watch his back in school the next day.

Celia met Andrew, a.k.a., nazi_bot_sadistic, in a chat room. As they continued to communicate, Celia became concerned. Andrew was obviously a very angry young man. He had no friends at school and expressed the desire to show the other students who he really was. Andrew wrote: "bring a gun to school, ur on the front of every newspaper … didnt choose this life, but i damn well chose to exit it … i cant imagine going through life without killing a few people … people can be kissing my shotgun straight out of doom … i tell it how it is .. if u dont like it u die … if i dont like the way u look at me, u die … i choose who lives and who dies.

Cyberbullying

Cyberbullying is being cruel to others by sending or posting harmful material using the Internet or a cell phone. Here is how it happens:

- Flaming. Online "fights" using electronic messages with angry and vulgar language.
- Harassment. Repeatedly sending offensive, rude, and insulting messages.
- Cyberstalking. Repeatedly sending messages that include threats of harm or are highly intimidating. Engaging in other online activities that make a person afraid for her or her safety.
- Denigration. "Dissing" someone online. Sending or posting cruel gossip or rumors about a person to damage his or her reputation or friendships.
- Impersonation. Breaking into someone's account, posing as that person and sending messages to make the person look bad, get that person in trouble or danger, or damage that person's repu-

tation or friendships.
- Outing and Trickery. Sharing someone's secrets or embarrassing information online. Tricking someone into revealing secrets or embarrassing information, which is then shared online.
- Exclusion. Intentionally excluding someone from an online group, like a "buddy list."

Cyberthreats

A cyberthreat is online material that threatens or raises concerns about violence against others, suicide or other self-harm.

- Direct threats. Actual threats to hurt someone or commit suicide.
- Distressing Material. Online material that provides clues that the person is emotionally upset and may be considering hurting someone, hurting him or herself or committing suicide.

(The stories of Alan, Jeff, and Andrew all demonstrate distressing material. Alan committed suicide. Jeff was the student from Red Lake who killed nine people and himself.

Celia saved and reported the chat. Andrew was found to be a member of a hate group and possess many weapons. He is now in prison.)

How, Who, and Why

- Cyberbullying or cyberthreat material – text or images – may be posted on personal web sites or blogs or transmitted via email, discussion groups, message boards, chat, IM, or text/image cell phones. (See, Internet terms.)
- A cyberbully may be a person whom the target knows or an online stranger. A cyberbully may be anonymous and may solicit involvement of other people online who do not even know the target.
- Many times, cyberbullying and cyberthreats are related to in-school bullying. Sometimes, the student who is victimized at school is also being bullied online. But other times, the person who is being victimized at school becomes a cyberbully and retaliates against the in-school bully online. Other times, the target will simply share his or her anger or depression online as distressing material.
- Sometimes, cyberbullying involves relationships. Relationships can break up. When this happens, one person may start to cyberbully the other person. Other times, teens may get into online fights about relationships.
- Sometimes cyberbullying is based on hate or bias – bullying others because of race, religion, obesity, or sexual orientation.
- Some teens think cyberbullying entertaining – a fun game to hurt other people.
- Some teens have no one to talk with about how bad they are feeling and how horrible their life is. So they post material online that shares how hurt they are. They might think that if they post this kind of material online, they will meet someone who cares about them. Unfortunately, they may meet a dangerous stranger or hook up with other teens who reinforce their bad feelings.
- Generally, teens are the most actively involved, sometimes children are. [We use the terms "teen" or "teenager" in this document.]

Related Online Risky Behavior

There are other concerns about youth online behavior related to the concerns of cyberbullying and cyberthreats. Teens who do not have strong "real world" connections appear to be the ones most attracted to these risky behaviors. These are the youth who are "looking for love in all the wrong places."

Disclosing Personal Information

Young people are disclosing personal contact information and massive amounts of sensitive personal information in profiles, web pages, blogs, and through all forms of Internet communications. They seem to be totally unaware of the public and permanent nature of these disclosures and the ability of anyone to send whatever material they place in electronic form and send or post can be resent to anyone, anywhere in the world.

Internet Addiction

Internet addiction is defined as an excessive amount of time spent using the Internet, resulting in lack of healthy engagement in areas of life. Internet addiction is itself a concern, as well as an indicator of other concerns. The Internet offers a time-warped place where children and teens can get away from their real world concerns—they can be free, independent, uninhibited, and can find acceptance. The Internet is available 24/7. The game is always going on. Friends are always available. Life online constantly beckons.

One large part of the problem is that commercial web sites have designed "stickiness" into their operations—activities that are designed for the specific purpose of enticing young people to spend as much time

as possible on their site and return frequently

Risky Sexual Behavior

Young people are using Internet communities and matching services to make connections with others for sexual activities, ranging from online discussions about sex to "hook-ups." In the context of these relationships, they may post or provide sexually suggestive or explicit pictures or videos.

Suicide and Self-harm Communities

Depressed young people are interacting with sites and groups that provide information on suicide and self-harm methods and encouragement for such activities. Self-harm includes cutting, anorexia, fainting, and the like.

Hate Group Recruitment and Gangs

Sites and groups that foster hatred against "others" are actively recruiting angry, disconnected youth. Some youth informally use Internet to coordinate troublesome and dangerous activities.

Violent Gaming

Violent gaming frequently involves sexual or biased-base victims. Young people often engage in online simulation games, which reinforce the perception that all interactions online, including violent ones, are "just a game."

WHY ARE PARENTS OUT OF THE LOOP?

Because in too many cases parents aren't paying attention and teens aren't talking.

- Many parents think that if their children are home using a computer they are safe and not getting into trouble. Nothing could be further from the truth. Your child could be the target of emotionally damaging harassment or be causing pain to others – from the comfort of your family room.
- Some parents think they have protected their children because they have installed filtering software. Filtering software provides false security. Not only can children still get to the kinds of material parents don't want them to access, it cannot prevent cyberbullying.
- There is a strong social norm among teens that works against sharing information with adults about what is going on online. For teens "what happens online, should stay online." Many teens fear that if adults find out what is happening online, their access will be restricted.

ONLINE BEHAVIOR

Why is it that when people use the Internet or other technologies, they sometimes do things that they would never do in the "real world?" The answer to this question can be summed up in one statement: "You can't see me, I can't see you."

You Can't See Me

When people use the Internet, they feel like they are invisible. It is just them, the keyboard, and the computer. In fact, people are not really invisible, because they are leaving little "cyberfootprints" wherever they go. The perception of invisibility is enhanced because of the ability to create anonymous accounts. When people are invisible, this removes the concerns of detection, social disapproval, and punishment.

I Can't See You

When people use the Internet they do not receive tangible feedback about the consequences of their actions, including actions that have hurt someone else. The lack of tangible feedback interferes with empathy. This also leads to the perception that online actions are "just a game."

Rationalizations

Sometimes when people do something they know is wrong, they provide excuses or rationalizations for their behavior. Common rationalizations include: "He started it." "Everybody does it." "Nobody ever gets caught." "I was just playing around." It is a lot easier to rationalize wrong behavior on-

line because of the perception of invisibility and the lack of tangible feedback.

Role Playing

Teens engage in role-playing online, by creating different "personas" or "avatars" in different online environments. This allows them to use a new Internet rationalization "It wasn't me. It was my 'avatar'." This reinforces the perception that all actions online are a game.

Online Social Norms

The perception of invisibility, lack of tangible feedback, and the ease by which wrong behavior can be rationalized, and role playing has provided the basis for online social norms that support for cyberbullying and cyberthreats. These norms include:

- "Tell all. On the Internet it is okay to reveal my personal secrets for the world to see."
- "I have a free speech right to say whatever I want about others online, without regard for the harm I might cause."
- "What happens online is just a game. It is not real. So no one can get really hurt."
- "What happens online, should stay online."

THE IMPACT OF CYBERBULLYING

It is widely known that face-to-face bullying can result in long-term psychological harm to targets. This harm includes low self-esteem, depression, anger, school failure, school avoidance, and, in some cases, school violence or suicide. It is possible that the harm caused by cyberbullying may be even greater than harm caused by traditional bullying because...

- Online communications can be extremely vicious.
- There is no escape for those who are being cyberbullied – victimization is ongoing, 24/7.

- Cyberbullying material can be distributed worldwide and is often irretrievable.
- Cyberbullies can be anonymous and can solicit the involvement of unknown "friends."
- Many teens are reluctant to tell adults what is happening online or through their cell phone because they are emotionally traumatized, think it is their fault, fear greater retribution, or fear their online activities or use of a cell phone will be restricted.

BULLY, TARGET, AND BYSTANDER

If your child has been actively socializing online, it is probable that he or she has been involved in cyberbullying in one or more of the following roles:

- Bullies – "Put-downers" who harass and demean others, especially those they think are different or inferior, or "getbackers" who have been bullied by others and are using the Internet to retaliate or vent their anger.
- Targets – the targets of the cyberbully.
- Bystanders who are part of the problem – those who encourage and support the bully or watch the bullying from the sidelines, but do nothing to intervene or help the target.
- Bystanders who are part of the solution – those who seek to stop the bullying, protest it, provide support to the target, or tell an adult. We need more of these kinds of bystanders!

STAY INVOLVED WITH YOUR CHILD'S ONLINE EXPERIENCES

Make it your business to know what your child is doing online and your child's online friends. Teenagers are likely to take the position that their online activities are their business. But parents have a moral, as well as legal, obligation to ensure that their children are engaged in safe and responsible

behavior – including online behavior. To stay involved …

- Keep the computer in a public place in the house. Periodically check on what your child is doing. Discuss the kinds of Internet activities your child enjoys.
- Be up front with your child that you will periodically investigate the files on the computer, the browser history files, and your child's public online activities.
- Search for your child's name online, look at his or her profiles and postings on teen community sites, review web pages or blogs.
- Tell your child that you may review his or her private communication activities if you have reason to believe you will find unsafe or irresponsible behavior.
- Watch out for secretive behavior as you approach the computer, such as rapidly switching screens, and for attempts to hide online behavior, such as an empty history file.
- You can install key-stroke monitoring software that will record all of your child's online activities. The use of such software can raise trust concerns. If you install the software, do not always think that you should use it. Tell your child it has been installed and what actions on his or her part could lead to your investigation. These actions could include not being willing to talk about his or her online activities, late night use, extensive use, decline in grades, evidence your child is seeking to cover his or her tracks, report of inappropriate activity, appearing really upset after Internet use, and the like.

[Not on topic, but important: If ever you find any evidence your child is interacting with a possible sexual predator, do not confront your child. Your child could warn the predator or run off with him. Call your local police and ask for a youth or computer crimes expert.]

PREVENT YOUR CHILD FROM BEING A CYBERBULLY

Values and Ethical Behavior Discussion
Talk with your child about the value of treating others with kindness and respect and your expectation that your child will act in accord with these values online.

Consequences Discussion
Make it clear that if your child engages in irresponsible online behavior, you will impose an undesirable consequence. Talk about the implications of severe cyberbullying that could lead to criminal arrest or civil litigation (see below).

Questions Teenagers Can Ask Themselves
Help your child develop self-awareness, empathy, and effective decision-making by asking themselves these questions:

- Am I being kind and showing respect for others and myself?
- How would I feel if someone did the same thing to me or to my best friend?
- How do I feel inside?
- What would a trusted adult, who is important in my life, think?
- Is this action in violation of any agreements, rules, or laws?
- How would I feel if everyone could see me?
- Would it be okay if I did this in my home or at school?
- How does this action reflect on me?

Prevent Online Retaliation
Some teens who engage in cyberbullying are retaliating against teens who are bullying them face-to-face. Help your child understand that retaliating is not smart. It allows bullies to justify their behavior because the target "lost his or her cool." Further, your child could be mistaken as the source of the problem. Ask the school counselor for resources to help you bully-proof your child and assistance to stop any bullying that is occurring at school.

PREVENT YOUR CHILD FROM BECOMING A TARGET

Bully-proof Your Child

Find parent resources to help bully-proof your child by building his or her self-confidence and resilience. Pay special attention if your child has traits that can lead to victimization, including if your child is obese, perceived to be gay or lesbian, an alternative thinker, not willing to play social games, a "wanna-bee" not fitting into the "in crowd," and the like.

Combat the "Tell All" Phenomenon

Your child should understand how risky it is to reveal sensitive personal information online in public forum or a message that could be forwarded to others. Help your child distinguish between personal interest information that can safety be shared and sensitive personal information that should generally not be shared. Discourage involvement in the kinds of environments that promote excessive self-disclosure and rude behavior.

Discuss Cyberbullying

Ask your child whether he or she has been a target of cyberbullying or has witnessed it and what happened. Assure your child that you trust him or her to handle many of these kinds of situations, but that if a situation ever emerges that causes concerns, you are there to help and will not respond by unilaterally restricting all Internet activities.

SIGNS OF VICTIMIZATION

The following are signs your child may be the target of cyberbullying:

- Emotional upset – depression, sadness, anxiety, anger, or fear, especially if there is nothing readily apparent that could be causing this upset, or if your child seems especially upset after using the Internet or a cell phone. [You're unlikely to be able to tell if your child is emotionally upset after using the Internet if the computer is hidden in a bedroom!]
- Avoidance of friends, school, activities.
- Decline in grades.
- Subtle comments that reflect emotional distress or disturbed online or in-person relationships.

If you are concerned, try to engage your child in a conversation about bullying and cyberbullying and pay closer attention to what he or she is doing online.

Important If your child is highly depressed, appears to be suicidal, or has made a suicide attempt, it is critically important to find out what is happening to your child online (as well as offline). You may need the assistance of someone with greater technical Internet expertise to help investigate. This may be the time to install monitoring software without telling your child.

ENCOURAGE YOUR CHILD TO HELP

Your child may ask you, "If I am just watching and am not part of the activity, then how could I be doing something wrong?" Good question. Easy answer: "Bullies crave an audience. By paying attention to their bullying, you are encouraging their behavior. You are part of the problem. I want my child to be part of the solution."

Cyberbullying is occurring in online environments where responsible adults are generally not present. Youth are also posting material that provides clues they are considering committing an act of violence against others or suicide in these online environments. Usually the only people who know someone is being victimized or someone is depressed and considering violence or suicide are other teenagers. Increased teen intervention and reporting is essential.

Help your child gain a sense of responsibility for the well-being of others and the willingness to go out of their way to help another. Stress the importance of speaking out against bullies, or, if this is not safe, providing private help to the target or reporting such actions to you or another responsible adult.

Make sure your child knows how important it is to report any direct threats or distressing material he or she may witness online to you, the school, a school violence or suicide hotline, or the police.

Responding to Cyberbullying

The following page will provide you with a step-by-step process of response options for specific situations. General guidance is to assist your child to …

- Develop his or her personal guidelines for online involvement.
- Make a realistic evaluation of the quality of the online community and the benefits of remaining in or leaving.
- Recognize the need to leave an online situation that has gotten out of control.
- Conduct a self-assessment of his or her behavior or communications that may be contributing to the victimization.
- Learn how to respond in an assertive, but not aggressive, way to any harmful communications.
- Know when and how to gain assistance from an adult.

Internet Terms

Just in case you are wondering what some of these words mean:

- Profiles – Established on community sites generally during registration. Allow users to provide personal information and interests. Can be searched by other users.
- Username – a fake name that a user establishes during registration that identifies the user on that site. The username(s) that a teen selects can provide insight into the image or persona the teen seeks to establish in the particular community.
- Personal web sites – sites to post material, including writings, drawings, and pictures.
- Blogs (weblogs) – interactive personal online diaries or journals. Teens share a significant amount of personal information in blogs. Others can submit comments.
- Email – asynchronous (not real time) communication sent to individual(s) or a discussion list.
- Discussion groups or boards – asynchronous group communications around a topic. Students often establish discuss groups that are school-related.
- Chat – synchronous (real time) group communication, with ability to establish private chats.
- Instant messaging (IM) – synchronous private communications with anyone on a contact or "buddy list." Teens can have up to 450 "friends" on their "buddy list."
- Text/digital image messaging – messages or images sent via cell-phones.
- Gaming – online interactive games that are played user against the machine or that involve two or more users. Some gaming sites include extensive ongoing simulation activities where the gamer assumes a permanent character (persona or avatar) whenever he or she is involved in the gaming site.
- Social networking communities – web sites that combine the features of profiles, personal web sites, blogs, discussion groups/boards, chat, gaming, and messaging. All the rage with teens! Look at http://www.myspace.com, http://www.bolt.com, http://studentcenter.org, http://www.livejournal.com.
- Important insights: Web site or provider Terms of Use generally prohibit harmful speech, but do not review postings. Concerns must be reported to the site. Many sites have age limits older than 13 or 16, but youth know they can easily lie about their age during registration.

Center for Safe and Responsible Internet Use

The Center conducts research and provides resources and professional development to school districts and others. Please visit the Center's web sites at http://cyberbully.org or http://csriu.org for additional resources.

Cyberbullying and Cyberthreats Part I: A Guide for Counselors, Teachers and Parent Educators Available December 2005.

Stop the Cyberbullying!

Step 1. Save the Evidence (don't let your child keep looking at it)

- Don't trash the email or text message.
- Save the chat or IM session.
- Download all web pages.

Step 2. Identify the Cyberbully (if you can)
This could take some detective work. Remember that a cyberbully may impersonate someone else. You may not need to know who the cyberbully is to take some actions to get the cyberbullying to stop.

- Ask your ISP or contact a company that traces the identity of people online
- If you can demonstrate that another student may involved, the district technology director may be able to find evidence.
- An attorney can help to identify the cyberbully.
- If a crime has occurred, the police can identify the cyberbully.

Possible Actions to Stop Cyberbullying

Tell the cyberbully to stop
- Your child can send the cyberbully a non-emotional, assertive message telling the cyberbully to stop.

Ignore the cyberbully – Help your child …
- Block or filter all further communications through his or her email and IM contact list.
- Avoid going to the site or group where he or she has been attacked.
- Change your child's email address, account, username, or phone number.

File a Complaint
Cyberbullying is a violation of the "Terms of Use" of most web sites, ISPs, and cell phone companies. File a complaint by providing the harmful messages or a link to the harmful material and ask that the account be terminated and any harmful material removed. Here are the steps:

- If the cyberbully is using email, contact the ISP of the cyberbully (you can determine the ISP from the email address), contact the company at <support@<ISP> or look on the ISP's site for a "Contact Us" email address.
- If the material appears on a third-party web site (e.g. <http://www.webhostname.com/~kid'sname.html>) go to site's home page, file a complaint through the "Contact Us" email address.
- If the material is on a web site with its own domain name (e.g. http://www.xyzkid.com), go to Whois (http://www.whois.net) to find the owner of the site and the host company. Go to the host company's web site and file a complaint through the "Contact Us" email address.
- If the cyberbully is using a cell phone, trace the number and contact the phone company.

Contact Your School Counselor, Principal, or Resource Officer
Your school can't discipline a student for totally off-campus actions because of free speech protections. But off-campus cyberbullying can provide reasonable suspicion of wrong behavior, which could give the school the right to search the student's Internet use records. If the school finds use of the district Internet system to cyberbully, it can discipline the student. If the cyberbully is also bullying your child at school, the school can intervene. Your school counselor or resource officer can contact the parents of the cyberbully to ask the cyberbullying to stop.

Contact the Cyberbully's Parents
The cyberbully's parents may be totally unaware, concerned to find that their child has engaged in this kind of activity, and get the cyberbullying to stop. Or they could be very defensive. Avoid direct contact. Send the cyberbully's parents a letter that includes the downloaded material and requests that the cyberbullying stop and all harmful material be removed.

Contact an Attorney or File a Small Claims Action
An attorney can send a letter to the cyberbully's parents demanding that the cyberbullying stop. An attorney can also help file a lawsuit or help you file a small claims action against the cyberbully's parents for financial damages (money because your child has been harmed) and a requirement that the cyberbullying stop.

Contact the Police
If the cyberbullying appears to be a crime, contact the police. Cyberbullying that involves threats of violence, coercion, obscene or harassing text messages, harassment or stalking, hate or bias crimes, creating or sending sexually explicit picture, sexual exploitation, or taking a picture of someone in private place.