

# Marriage and Family Corner: Beware the cyber-bully

Mary McKinney | Posted: Monday, August 3, 2015 9:06 am

For good and bad, each generation has greater access to people and information.

As a young person, it was a treat to call friends on landline phones and pass them notes in person. I mailed letters and pictures, and I still delight in receiving these in the mailbox.

I filled countless hours with visits to the library to search the card catalog and encyclopedias. These resources seemed immense and they opened great possibilities to me, with a low level of risk.

In contrast, the Internet offers instant communication and seemingly infinite information.

Smart phones make the Internet accessible almost anywhere and anytime.

Phones and other devices make immediate contact possible with multitudes of people, regardless of the locations of the sender and receiver.

This convenience and expansiveness brings benefits and risks, therefore, cyber safety is an important concern, including for the prevention of and for dealing with cyber-bullying.

Accurate and adequate information provided within a context of warm and supportive parenting serves a protective function for children and adolescents.

Cyber-bullying is harassing, threatening, embarrassing, or taunting done through computers, cell phones, or other electronic devices.

It can be done through emails, texts, or posts on blogs, chat rooms, or social networking sites.

The availability of so many platforms means a targeted child or adolescent is never beyond the potential reach of the bully, even when alone or with family.



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Even when a targeted child is completely “unplugged” to not see posts, messages, or pictures, the bully can still make those things visible to other people.

These actions might serve the purposes of embarrassing the target, instigating conflict between the target and the audience of the bully’s post, or otherwise causing problems. These actions can be made anonymously, or by a bully posing as the target.

The impact of cyber-bullying can be devastating and it can even be deadly.

News stories have included children attempting or committing suicide following cyber-bullying.

And, children who don’t reach that tragic outcome can experience depression, substance abuse or other negative consequences of the bully’s actions.

Even well-informed, involved and caring parents don’t know the full extent of the time their children spend online, what their online activity is, or when they are negatively impacted by it.

To be clear, this under-awareness and under-reporting is the norm even with “good kids” and “good parents.”

Of course, the degree of the parent’s awareness drops as daily involvement with these activities drop.

Although a parent is unlikely to know the full picture of a child’s cyber experiences, she or he can still serve a protective function to decrease the chances of these problems and increase the child’s ability to handle them if they happen.

There is no substitute for warm and direct parental involvement and example, such as looking with children at information sources and communication forums, asking about their thoughts and experiences.

It is important to provide specific information to children and adolescents about cyber safety. This information should include tips for staying safe, as well as when to ask for help.

A parent should always let a child know he or she won’t be in trouble at home if he talks to his parent, teacher, or other adult about being targeted by a cyber-bully. That includes that the child will not lose cyber privileges as a result of a bully’s actions.

Likewise, a parent should let the child know other trusted adults with whom it would be wise and acceptable to discuss such problems.

Parents should actively support development of the child’s social skills and peer relationships.

Children are less likely to be bullied when they have a warm and positive relationship with parent(s) and good social skills. And, if they are targeted by a child, they are more likely to be able to handle it effectively and to ask for help.

One of the relevant social skills is to resist retaliating for hurtful actions.

Retaliation feeds the bully, escalating the problem.

This safety is just one more good reason to focus on the quality of your relationship with your child.

If the problem is severe, involves the potential for imminent risk to anyone, or doesn't resolve well and quickly with parental involvement, seek additional help from the school and mental health providers.

Resources for parents and children:

[www.stopbullying.gov](http://www.stopbullying.gov), [www.netsmartz.org](http://www.netsmartz.org), [www.safelyeverafter.com](http://www.safelyeverafter.com).

*For more information on available services or to discuss information in this column, contact:*

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