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Security Tip (ST06-005)

Dealing with Cyberbullies

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> Bullies are taking advantage of technology to intimidate and harass their victims. Dealing with cyberbullying can be difficult, but there are steps you can take.

What is cyberbullying?

Cyberbullying is using technology to harass, or bully, someone else. Bullies used to be restricted to methods such as physical intimidation, postal mail, or the telephone, but computers, cell phones, tablets, and other mobile devices offers bullies forums such as email, instant messaging, web pages, and digital photos.

Forms of cyberbullying can range in severity from cruel or embarrassing rumors to threats, harassment, or stalking. It can affect any age group; however, teenagers and young adults are common victims, and cyberbullying is a growing problem in schools.

Why has cyberbullying become such a problem?

The relative anonymity of the internet is appealing for bullies because it enhances the intimidation and makes tracing the activity more difficult. Some bullies also find it easier to be more vicious because there is no personal contact. The internet and email can also increase the visibility of the activity. Information or pictures posted online or forwarded in mass emails can reach a larger audience faster than more traditional methods, causing more damage to the victims. A large amount of personal information is available online, so bullies may be able to arbitrarily choose their victims.

Cyberbullying may also indicate a tendency toward more serious behavior. While bullying has always been an unfortunate reality, most bullies grow out of it. Cyberbullying has not existed long enough to have solid research, but there is evidence that it may be an early warning for violent behavior.

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How can you protect yourself or your children?

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- **Teach your children good online habits.** Explain the risks of technology, and teach children how to be responsible online. (See Keeping Children Safe Online for more information.) Reduce their risk of becoming cyberbullies by setting guidelines for and monitoring their use of the internet and other electronic media (cell phones, tablets, etc.).
- **Keep lines of communication open.** Regularly talk to your children about their online activities so that they feel comfortable telling you if they are being victimized.
- **Watch for warning signs.** If you notice changes in your child's behavior, try to identify the cause as soon as possible. If cyberbullying is involved, acting early can limit the damage.
- **Limit availability of personal information.** Limiting the number of people who have access to contact information or details about interests, habits, or employment reduces exposure to bullies that you or your child do not know. This may limit the risk of becoming a victim and may make it easier to identify the bully if you or your child are victimized.
- **Avoid escalating the situation.** Responding with hostility is likely to provoke a bully and escalate the situation. Depending on the circumstances, consider ignoring the issue. Often, bullies thrive on the reaction of their victims. Other options include subtle actions. For example, you may be able to block the messages on social networking sites or stop unwanted emails by changing the email address. If you continue to get messages at the new email address, you may have a stronger case for legal action.
- **Document the activity.** Keep a record of any online activity (emails, web pages, instant messages, etc.), including relevant dates and times. In addition to archiving an electronic version, consider printing a copy.
- **Report cyberbullying to the appropriate authorities.** If you or your child are being harassed or threatened, report the activity. Many schools have instituted anti-bullying programs, so school officials may have established policies for dealing with activity that involves students. If necessary, contact your local law enforcement. Law enforcement agencies have different policies, but your local police department or Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) branch are good starting points.

Additional information

The following organizations offer additional information about this topic:

- Federal Trade Commission – https://www.consumer.ftc.gov/articles/0028-cyberbullying
- StopBullying.gov – https://www.stopbullying.gov/
- Teacher.org – http://www.teacher.org/resource/bullying/
- Talking with Kids About Being Online – https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2018/05/Talking-with-kids-about-being-online-_2018.pdf

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