

Protect Your Kids from Cyberbullies

With the new school year just a few weeks away, it is important to talk with your kids about the dangers of cyberbullying. Both adults and children spend a great deal of free time online via smart phones, tablets and home computers. Cyberbullying presents a threat to their emotional and social well being. Social networking has magnified the effects of online bullying, particularly for teens. It is important to recognize that cyberbullying is not simply ‘kids being kids’ but rather a real danger with extreme consequences for both the bullies, the bullied and parents.



- **Identify Problems** – Identifying cyberbullying is particularly difficult with teens who may be more tech savvy than their parents and more reluctant to share the details of their social life. Talk to your kids about their online activities and what to do if they are bullied online. Also, look out for warning signs, such as unwillingness to discuss online activities, nervousness, difficulty sleeping, weight change and withdrawing from school or social activities.
- **Understand the Methods** – Cyberbullies may use some or all of these methods, which include:
 - **Harassment** – Repeatedly sending threats or other offensive material to one or more victims is harassment. Harassment may involve cyberstalking, where the bully locates email accounts, home addresses and phone numbers they can use to threaten or harass victims.
 - **Flaming** – Flaming is the act of taunting the victim to respond. This is often done publicly to shame the victim for cowardice if they fail to respond or further mock them if they do.
 - **Exclusion** – Exclusion is the act of blocking or freezing someone out of a social group. For many teens this act can be very traumatic. Other types of harassment may spring out of exclusion.
 - **Impersonation (a.k.a. Masquerading)** – Bullies often use false or misleading online identities to post hurtful information on message boards or social networks. They may use fake email addresses or user accounts to send messages after a previous account is blocked.
 - **Outing** – Outing involves the bully publishing personal or private details about the victim publicly or within a social circle. This can be anything from a personal secret to explicit photographs. Bullies may even pose as a love interest in order to provoke the victim into sharing embarrassing personal information. Once shared online, information may spread quickly throughout the teen’s school and social circle.
- **Ignore the Bully** – Avoid engaging directly with the bully to stop the behavior. Someone engaged in online bullying is unlikely to be swayed by reason. Cyberbullies crave a response to taunts and insults. Teach your kids that responding in any way will open the floodgates for additional bullying. In some cases, ignoring the behavior may cut things off before they get worse.

- **Save Evidence** – Saving evidence of abuse and bullying will help you report the issue to the necessary parties. Save emails, images and chat records. Take screenshots of things posted online so the bully cannot delete them in an effort to cover his or her tracks.
 - **Report Bullying** – If the perpetrator is a minor you may try reaching out to a parent or guardian to intervene in the matter. Many parents are surprised to learn that their children are bullying and will help intervene. If the bully attends your child's school, discuss the matter with an administrator or counselor. Some schools have guidelines for dealing with cyberbullies and preventing escalation. File formal complaints with websites and the phone and Internet providers to block the bully. In many cases the terms of service prohibit harassment and the bully may be banned from the site or blocked by his or her Internet service provider.
 - **Report Illegal Behavior to the Police** – While cyberbullying is relatively new and the law has not always been quick to respond, some localities have established laws to penalize cyberbully. Threats of violence and the posting of pornographic images, particularly those involving minors, are against the law and should be immediately reported to the authorities. If you need to find out more about the law where you live call your LegalShield provider law firm and speak with an attorney.
-