

## **Is your child the target—or the perpetrator—of cyber bullying?**

As a parent, there's nothing worse than witnessing your child being treated badly by others—unless, perhaps, it's what you *don't* see. With more than 70% of online teens regularly logging onto social networking sites—a majority of which have no effective measures in place to verify the identity of users—there's been a surge of documented cases of “cyber bullying.”

### **What is cyber bullying?**

Bullying is nothing new—for centuries, it's been a source of anxiety, shame, and fear for the unlucky kids who are targeted. Today, with millions of teens relying on the Internet as their primary source of communication and entertainment, the tormenting has transitioned from the school bus to the web.

Online harassment can be more than just a nuisance—it can result in serious, long-term ramifications for the victim. While traditional “playground bullying” is witnessed only by the students in the class, cyber bullying takes place in front of thousands of other Internet surfers, magnifying the devastating impact felt by the victim.

Cyber bullying is often easy to recognize, but in other cases it may be subtler and harder to detect. It can include a variety of different incarnations:

- Sending abusive or profane messages
- Repeatedly initiating contact even after the victimized member has requested for it to stop
- Transmitting pornographic images or sexually related content
- Posting content that contains defamatory or slanderous content about the subject
- Illicitly accessing the victim's account and sending phony messages on their behalf
- Spreading hurtful rumors about the victim, or participating in name-calling
- Using intimidation, threats, or blackmail to terrorize or extort something from the victim

### **How can you help?**

As a parent of a tween or teen who spends time on social networking sites, there are some cautionary measures you can take to reduce the risk of your child getting bullied (or participating in bullying behavior):

- **Explain the concept.** Many victims don't realize they've been bullied because they don't know what that behavior looks like or feels like. Educate your kids about what constitutes the various degrees of online harassment, pointing out the differences between good-natured joking, inappropriate teasing, and harmful bullying.
- **Teach them the importance of privacy.** Warn your kids about the dangers of sharing pictures and personal information. The more they share with the public, the more "ammunition" they'll be providing to potential cyber bullies. Also teach them to respect the privacy of their peers, and to refrain from requesting or using personal information or images from other members.
- **Develop a plan.** If your child ever feels uncomfortable or intimidated by messages, images, or other materials sent by another member, let him know he doesn't have to handle it alone. Create a strategy where you'll work together to address the situation without embarrassing him.
- **Take a crash course in web lingo.** Kids use dozens of acronyms, symbols, and other shorthand when communicating online. Most of them are innocent abbreviations, but others may contain references to sex, drugs, and other illicit content. By doing a quick Google search, you can find websites and software that decipher this confusing lingo so you can understand what your child is discussing.
- **Monitor your child's online activity.** Perhaps the most important protective measure, this one is also the most challenging. When you're juggling parenting, work, errands, and other activities, it can seem like there's simply not enough time to police the sites your child is visiting. If you're too busy to serve as the watchdog yourself, you should install parental control software onto your child's machine to track URLs, instant messages, live chat, and illicit content.