

Cyberbullying Scripts

Talking to Teens about Online Harassment



Sameer Hinduja, Ph.D. and Justin W. Patchin, Ph.D.

January 2013

What is Cyberbullying?

We define cyberbullying as “willful and repeated harm inflicted through computers, cell phones, and other electronic devices.” Bullies can send harassing e-mails or texts, post obscene, insulting, and slanderous messages and photos to online bulletin boards or social networking sites (like Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, Tumblr), or develop Web sites to promote and distribute hateful or humiliating content.

In terms of proactive and reactive responses, the Internet is full with safety tips to instruct parents whose children frequently are online. In addition, software is available for adults to install on home computers to filter inappropriate web content for adolescent users. Neither of these measures, however, are completely successful in protecting youth from online victimization, nor are they as effective as parents’ supervision of (or involvement in) their children’s online activities.

Research has identified the importance of ongoing discussions between parents, caregivers, or teachers and children about online interactions. As such, we have created some sample “scripts” between a parent and a teenager to encourage cyberbullying-related conversations. We hope they are useful in encouraging parents to discuss this important issue with their tech-savvy teens.

Video Games

Parent: Why haven’t you been playing that online game you’ve been so addicted to lately?

Teen: I don’t want to talk about it.

Parent: It’s okay, you can talk to me. I promise everything will be okay.

Teen: Well, some guys have been calling me names and making fun of me during the in-game chat.

Parent: Who? What types of things are they saying?

Teen: It’s the same group of guys. They have their own “clan” in the game and always play together. Every time I’m playing they enter the same online room as me and say that I’m “gay” and a “loser” and have no friends. They torment me!

Parent: Okay. Just know that you didn’t do anything wrong and we are going to solve this problem so you can keep playing without having to worry about being cyberbullied.

Teen: How are we going to do that? I don’t even know their real names.

Parent: I think there is a setting to block certain usernames. We’ll also call up the gaming host and report the usernames of the guys who are bullying you and request that they be banned as well.

Teen: I didn’t know we could do that. Thanks!

Parent: No problem. I really want you to remember that you don’t have to allow others to be jerks to you online. You can control your gaming experience by taking advantage of the blocks and protections and controls that your gaming console and the online gaming network have. We may not know how to work them, but we can figure it out thanks to Google and trial and error. So let’s work on this together! That way, you can focus on enjoying the game and not being distracted by drama or nonsense from others.

Facebook

Parent: What have you been doing on the computer for the past hour?

Teen: Oh, nothing...just dealing with some stuff on my Facebook.

Parent: What do you mean? Is everything okay?

Teen: It's fine, I don't want to talk about it.

Parent: You know you can tell me anything. I know something is bothering you, so what's up?

Teen: This stupid kid from my English class posted a stupid photo of me on my Facebook wall. He edited my profile picture to make it look like I'm really overweight and wearing a bikini. I think he photoshopped it; he took my face and put it on somebody else's body.

Parent: Wow, that is awful. I'm so sorry.

Teen: Some people were posting mean comments about the photo. One person said that I am a "fat whale" and no guy would want to date me. So I am feeling really crappy.

Parent: Listen, I know it may seem like the end of the world right now but we are going to fix this. First, make sure you delete the photo from your wall. We'll also review your security settings on Facebook to ensure only your real friends have access to your profile, and we can set some controls – if you want – to say who can and cannot post to your wall. We'll also report and block the person who posted the photo using Facebook's "report abuse" link. I'm sorry this happened to you – some people are just going to be mean and we're not going to be able to understand it. But we can definitely do something about it.

Teen: Thanks, Dad! Thanks for not freaking out and for being calm. Let's do it!

E-mail

Parent: I want to talk to you about email and whether you've had to deal with any kind of email harassment.

Teen: Why?

Parent: Well, with all of the news stories about kids harassing each other using email, I want to know if this is happening to you. Have you ever been bothered or annoyed or mistreated by anyone via email?

Teen: There were a few times where people I don't know sent me weird emails, trying to make me upset. I'm not sure how they got my email address because I don't know them, but they did.

Parent: OK. I'm proud of you for telling me about this, and I want to help you so that you don't have to deal with this anymore. It is possible that these people got your email address from a friend of yours, or from one of the social networking sites you use? Have you ever posted any personal information like your email address or anything like that online?

Teen: No, I don't think so. I mean, I sometimes put my email address in messages I post on my friend's pages so it's easy for them to get back to me. But I guess those messages are viewable by everyone, though...so maybe that's how they got my information.

Parent: Well, even if you did post your email address in those messages, you don't deserve to be harassed or bothered like this. You just need be careful about posting any personal information online, because you never know who will see it. There are some messed-up people out there, and I know you don't like getting these weird emails. For now, we can use the email software on your computer to block the senders of the harassing messages. We can also look up the email header information to find out which Internet Service Provider the messages came from [directions for this are on the Cyberbullying Research Center Web site]. We can email that Internet Service Provider to tell them what's going on, and forward them the messages as evidence. They will take care of it from there. And, if any of these emails have threatened your personal safety, we can call the police and file a report. Hopefully this will take care of the problem, and you won't be harassed any more. What do you think?

Teen: Well, the emails I've received are just annoying and there haven't been any threats. I think we should just block the senders so I don't receive any more messages from them.

Parent: That sounds good. We can take care of it right now, and you can let me know if this doesn't fix the problem. I don't want you to have to deal with this on your own.

Cell Phones

Parent: I heard your cell phone beeping a lot the other day. Are you having any problems with it?

Teen: No. It was just some people sending me text messages and they wouldn't stop.

Parent: What do you mean, they wouldn't stop? Are these your friends or someone else?

Teen: It's no big deal. It's just some people from school who think it's funny to flood my phone with stupid text messages.

Parent: I'm so glad you told me about this. That must be pretty annoying.

Teen: Yeah. It's frustrating because I want to turn off my phone so I don't have to deal with it, but then my friends can't reach me.

Parent: You shouldn't have to deal with this. If someone is bothering you using your cell phone, we can report them to the cell phone company and have their number blocked. If it gets out of hand, we can change your cell phone number and you can give the new number only to the people you want to have it.

Teen: But I don't want to go through all of that because one or two people are harassing me and I can't get them to stop.

Parent: I understand, and I don't want you to get a new number if you don't have to. First we'll contact the cell phone company and let them know what's happening. If the harassing text messages continue from a different number, we'll block that one too. Then if it keeps happening, we will get you a new number.

Sexting

Parent: I was watching the news tonight and saw a story about a student who committed suicide after some pretty embarrassing photos were sent around school by her ex-boyfriend. Did you hear about that?

Teen: Yeah, I did. Everyone at school is talking about it. She was in my Algebra class.

Parent: What do you know about it?

Teen: Well, I heard she and her ex-boyfriend were sending naked photos of themselves to each other when they were dating using their cell phones. When they broke up, he started sending some of the pictures to his friends and they quickly spread around school. She was being made fun of all the time and she eventually just stopped coming to class. The next thing I heard, she killed herself.

Parent: Do you know what the media calls it when you send nude photos of yourself to someone through your cell phone?

Teen: What?

Parent: "Sexting." And did you know that it's actually illegal when teens your age do it?

Teen: Really?

Parent: Yes. Transmitting and receiving nude photos of someone under 18 years old is against the law. It doesn't matter if it's your girlfriend, boyfriend or best friend and it doesn't matter if you want to send them or if they want to see them, it's illegal!

Teen: Are you serious? I mean, I don't get it, how could it be illegal?

Parent: Well, because according to the formal letter of the law, it is the same as child pornography, because the teen involved is considered a minor. This means that technically, if the teen took the picture, she or he has engaged in the "creation of child pornography." If they send it to someone else (or post it somewhere), it is considered the "transmission of child pornography." If someone receives it on their phone or computer and doesn't immediately delete it, it is considered "possession of child pornography." In most states, each of those acts is a felony, and tied to multiple years in prison as a possible penalty. Seriously.

Teen: Wow. I had no idea.

Parent: And apart from all of that, these pictures that teens send to someone they trust usually end up circulating outside of that one recipient. Can you imagine a picture of yourself, that you sent to your boyfriend, eventually circulating out there across the Internet for all the world to see for the REST OF YOUR LIFE? And, having it used to threaten you, and cyberbully you, and blackmail you?

Teen: Yeah, I definitely don't want that. That would be so awful.

Parent: And you can't risk it. You just can't. I wish I could say you can trust everyone you send a nude picture to, but you can't.

Teen: Um, thanks, Mom. Really.

Concluding Thoughts

To reiterate, one of the most important steps you can take to prevent and effectively respond to cyberbullying, or any other problem related to their technology use, is to regularly talk about online interactions with your kids. They will know where you stand on these issues, and will hopefully feel more comfortable coming to you with concerns. The earlier you initiate these conversations (yes, there will need to be more than one!), the better off you and your kids will be. As soon as they start using the computer, talk with them about the potential risks and rewards of communication in cyberspace. As they grow older and more proficient with the technologies, discuss additional issues with them as appropriate.

For more information, visit our website at www.cyberbullying.us or pick up one of our recent books:

School Climate 2.0: Preventing Cyberbullying and Sexting One Classroom at a Time

By: Sameer Hinduja and Justin W. Patchin
www.schoolclimate20.com

Bullying Beyond the Schoolyard: Preventing and Responding to Cyberbullying

By: Sameer Hinduja and Justin W. Patchin
www.cyberbullyingbook.com

Cyberbullying Prevention and Response: Expert Perspectives

By: Justin W. Patchin and Sameer Hinduja
www.cyberbullying.us/blog/cyberbullying-prevention-and-response-expert-perspectives.html

Sameer Hinduja, Ph.D. is an Associate Professor at Florida Atlantic University and Justin W. Patchin, Ph.D. is an Associate Professor at the University of Wisconsin-Eau Claire. Together, they lecture across the United States and abroad on the causes and consequences of cyberbullying and offer comprehensive workshops for parents, teachers, counselors, mental health professionals, law enforcement, youth and others concerned with addressing and preventing online aggression. The Cyberbullying Research Center is dedicated to providing up-to-date information about the nature, extent, causes, and consequences of cyberbullying among adolescents.

For more information, visit <http://www.cyberbullying.us>.
© 2013 Cyberbullying Research Center - Sameer Hinduja and Justin W. Patchin