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Bullying Takes on a Whole New Face: Cyber Bullying

(COLUMBUS, Ohio)— It is no secret that in this time of advancing technology, opportunity for cyber bullying is increasing at an alarming rate and all too often is leading to devastating consequences. The term cyber bullying has been thrown around lately, especially in light of events such as teen suicide and violence. It is stories like these that cause concern for parents, educators and physicians alike.

Cyber bullying includes harassing e-mails, instant messages and text messages, as well as intimidating or threatening Web sites, blogs or posts. With the open availability to these tools, kids have unlimited access to harass and torment others.

It is important for parents to be aware and informed on what to do if they suspect their child is a victim of cyber bullying.

“Parents should look for a distressing change in behavior. Kids might become withdrawn, fearful, agitated, irritable or volatile. It might be difficult to motivate kids to do things they are normally interested in doing. Kids may even complain about non-specific physical symptoms like headaches, tummy aches or loss of appetite,” said Victoria Rentel, M.D., a family physician in Columbus, Ohio. If you suspect that your child is a victim of bullying there are steps you can take to make your child feel safe.

“Talk to kids openly about different kinds of threatening behaviors, cyber and otherwise. Empower them to recognize when it is happening and help them identify uncomfortable feelings,” said Rentel.

“In addition, have a safety plan and safe people for your children to talk to. If children do report concerning behaviors, take it seriously. Do not assign blame, although you should talk openly about bad online choices later,” added Rentel.

Parents may find themselves asking what is so different about cyber bullying over other schoolyard bullying.

“The ‘virtual bully’ creates an enhanced sense of powerlessness, in that you cannot necessarily call on the bully's parents, teachers or school administrators to intervene,” said Rentel.

In the short term, cyber bullying can lead to a combination of depressed or anxious behaviors that can become more persistent and pervasive problems. Parents should request help from guidance counselors, therapists or primary care doctors to overcome those risks. In the long term, the consequences of bullying may be even more severe. Children who are bullied have higher rates of

depression, anxiety, low self-esteem and other mental health conditions. Children who are bullied are more likely to think about suicide and some of these wounds may linger into adulthood.

“Sadly, the reality is that we all deal with bullies in life. If you approach this problem in a calm, matter-of-fact, open and honest way you will demonstrate to your children that these seemingly insurmountable, emotionally charged problems are often eminently manageable,” said Rentel.

A bully is a bully. The arenas for bullying are endless but parents can be sure to recognize the effects of bullying and gain perspective on the situation and ask for help.

The Ohio Academy of Family Physicians is a statewide professional association with more than 4,200 members, including practicing physicians, family medicine residents and medical students. The scope of family medicine encompasses all ages, both sexes and every disease entity. Family physicians provide comprehensive, continuing care to all members of the family.



FACT SHEET

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Signs Your Child May be Being Bullied

- Reluctance to go to school or ride the school bus
- Poor school performance
- Headaches, stomachaches or other physical complaints
- Trouble sleeping or eating

Steps to Take if Bullying is Suspected

- Contact school officials - Talk to your child's teacher, the school counselor and the school principal. You might also want to encourage school officials to address bullying — including cyber bullying — as part of the curriculum.
- Follow up - Keep in contact with school officials. If the bullying seems to continue, be persistent.
- Boost your child's self-confidence - Help your child get involved in activities that can raise self-esteem, such as sports, music or art. Encourage your child to build friendships and develop their social skills.
- Know when to seek professional help - Consider professional or school counseling for your child if their fear or anxiety becomes overwhelming.
- Encourage your child to share their concerns - Remain calm, listen in a loving manner and support your child's feelings. Remind your child that they are not to blame for being bullied.
- Learn as much as you can about the situation - Ask your child to describe how and when the bullying occurs and who is involved.
- Teach your child how to respond to the bullying – Do not promote retaliation or fighting back against a bully. Instead, encourage your child to maintain their composure.

Tips for Internet Safety in Your Home

- Limit access - This might mean taking away the phone, changing passwords, putting computers in a public space in the house or monitoring "friends" on social networking sites.
- Know your kids' online friends - Visit your kids online. Google your children's names.
- Know your technology - It might be possible to block certain numbers on cell phones or limit texting.

Sources: www.mayoclinic.com