



BULLY 2.0

Facebook, text messages and other technology have transformed playground bullying into something more insidious—and sometimes even deadly.

What parents can do to fight back.

BY ALLECIA VERMILLION

In 2009, 13-year-old Hope Witsell used her cell phone to send a topless photo of herself to a boy. The picture spread throughout her Florida middle school, prompting taunts and bullying. The next year, 18-year-old Rutgers University freshman Tyler Clementi's roommate and another student filmed Clementi in what news reports called a "sexual encounter" with a man, and they disseminated it on the Internet.

These teens both made headlines when they committed suicide, tragedies attributed to bullying. While playground bullying has existed since the day we set up the first swing set, technology such as social media, cell phones and the Internet has created more avenues for this abusive behavior, and more ways bullying can damage a child's or teen's life. Many studies and researchers suggest bullying and cyberbullying are becoming more serious—and more harmful—than in past generations.

Obvious bullying takes the form of physical aggression, like punching and shoving, but more frequently it takes non-physical forms. According to federal research, verbal bullying is the most common form of bullying, among both boys and girls. Name-calling and rumor-spreading are forms of verbal bullying. Social isolation, such as purposely excluding someone, is another common form of bullying. This behavior—right alongside other youth activities—easily has moved online, and cyberbullying has quickly become recognized as sometimes even more destructive as the traditional type of bullying for one big reason: Cyberbullying never sleeps. It extends beyond school grounds and can cause destruction 24 hours a day.

WHAT PARENTS NEED TO KNOW

Anti-bullying activist Marie Newman recalls when her son struggled three years ago after classmates spread untrue and exaggerated gossip about him.

"I didn't have a name for it," she recalls. "I thought it was just extra teasing."

Newman's son started at a new school in sixth grade to escape his bullies. But six weeks later, he confided that the mean behavior had followed him to his new school. Newman visited school to speak with the assistant principal, the first of many lessons in how to deal with bullies.

"You want to get back to normalcy so badly," Newman recalls. "It's a little bit like finding a cure to a disease."

An April 2011 report issued by the Massachusetts Department of Public Health and the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention found 44% of middle school students and 30% of high school students in Massachusetts public schools reported being involved in or affected by bullying at some point. The percentage of gay and lesbian teens who say they have experienced bullying is considerably larger. One 10-year study conducted by the Gay Lesbian Straight Education network found nine out of 10 lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgender middle and high school students had been harassed at school. Two-thirds of the 7,300 respondents said they felt unsafe at school because of their sexual orientation.

Newman, who went on to co-author of *When Your Child Is Being Bullied: Real Solutions*, cites another statistic commonly shared within the anti-bullying community: 60% of kids who bully on a regular basis by the seventh grade ultimately travel through the legal system by the time they're 24. This statistic holds true no matter what the socioeconomic status, she says.

Her son ended up transferring to a private school, but Newman is quick to point out that her family's solution is not for everyone. But at the first sign of bullying, she says, parents should "make a lot of noise with the administration in a very respectful way."

This also applies to cyberbullying, she says. Kids and teens spend a staggering amount of time on other social media sites and interacting via text messages. One recent report by the Kaiser Family Foundation found high school students spend 90 minutes a day sending or receiving text messages. Threats or insults in these forums should also be reported to school officials.

"Gossip is disseminated so efficiently," Newman says. What starts out as a joke can quickly become mean-spirited. Kids have been known to create official Facebook pages with names like "I Hate Joey" or "The Jenny Smith Sucks Club."

FAST FACT

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Bullying through a keyboard gives kids a false sense of distance or anonymity, she says. “They think because it’s not being said to their face, that it isn’t as bad,” Newman adds.

WHY DO PEOPLE BULLY?

Lawrence J. Levy, a psychologist in Boca Raton, Fla., says he has observed children who bully to establish a social hierarchy, and others whose bad behavior is a function of their own issues at home.

“But, then, some kids are just mean,” he says.

Levy, who was bullied as a child, spent hours during his medical training observing children in the psychiatric unit of the Miami Children’s Hospital. While there’s no one description for

kids who get picked on, “when kids are anxious and socially awkward, they’re a target,” he says.

In his experience, parents can “bully-proof” their kids by raising children who have a strong sense of self and don’t react to taunting. This is a tall order for many adults, not to mention kids who are still developing and growing, and feel a heightened need to relate to and get approval from others.

“Children need one area of their life where they feel they belong,” he says. This can be a sports league, arts group, club or other activity.

In the past, most adults viewed bullying as an unpleasant but formative childhood rite of passage, like wearing braces or being embarrassed by your parents. However, educators and public health officials at all levels have started taking bullying—and especially cyberbullying—seriously.

“Traditionally people would just ignore (bullying),” Levy says. “Don’t be afraid to talk to teachers or other parents.”

IF YOUR CHILD IS BULLIED

REMAIN VIGILANT. Watch for behavioral changes and warning signs. These can include trouble sleeping, losing interest in social activities, complaining of ailments to stay home from school, items being mysteriously lost (because they were stolen) and generally being anxious, moody or depressed.

STAY CONNECTED WITH YOUR CHILD. Talk with him or her about the situation; make it clear they are not at fault and that you want to help.

WORK TOGETHER ON A SOLUTION.

Parents may be tempted to go straight to the principal’s office or the bully’s parents, but kids can find this devastatingly embarrassing. Discuss possible solutions and actions with your child, and offer assurances of discretion.

DOCUMENT THE BULLYING. Work with your child to log the details of bullying incidents. For cyberbullying this means a record of text messages, emails and social media postings. For other incidents, write down the date, the details and the person involved.



IF YOUR CHILD IS THE BULLY

REMAIN VIGILANT. Warning signs include violence toward others, quick negative physical responses to situations, frequent detentions, not accepting responsibility for actions, and having extra money or belongings that can’t be explained. Characteristics of kids who bully include being easily frustrated, lacking empathy and impulsiveness.

MAKE IT CLEAR BULLYING IS NOT OK. Discuss this topic with your child and explain calmly that you won’t tolerate this behavior. Talk about the consequences of both bullying and being bullied. Ask your child’s school to keep you informed and work together to address bullying.

SPEND MORE TIME TOGETHER. Carefully monitor his or her activities, including online activities and text messaging. It’s also helpful to know your child’s friends and be aware of how they spend their free time.

ENCOURAGE TALENTS AND POSITIVE ATTRIBUTES.

Help your child get involved in sports or other social activities.

WHEN PUSH COMES TO SHOVE

In March, President Obama and first lady Michelle Obama hosted a White House conference on bullying, and the federal government has rolled out StopBullying.gov. In announcing the new site, Health and Human Services Secretary Kathleen Sebelius said, “Brushing aside bullying, either as a problem that can’t be solved or one that isn’t serious, misses the terrible impact it can have on a young person’s life.”


Many states have passed laws that pertain specifically to bullying—and particularly cyberbullying. According to the National Conference of State Legislatures, all but 16 states have cyberbullying laws in place. Many of them make school districts the enforcers of anti-bullying policies. A variety of federal legislation aimed at bullying continues to move slowly through Washington. In recent years, the American Foundation for Suicide Prevention has worked to support anti-bullying legislation in Congress.

The recent spate of gay teen suicides prompted prominent columnist Dan Savage to launch the “It Gets Better” project, a series of video messages assuring gay teens their lives will improve dramatically once they make it through adolescence. The project has collected more than 10,000 videos, including submissions from celebrities and politicians, including President Obama.

Gay or straight, kids who survive bullying and thrive in adulthood are eager to pass the message on. Lisa Nakamura, today the chef-owner of popular Allium restaurant in Washington’s San Juan Islands, has written on her restaurant blog about being bullied as a child by a group of girls who founded an “I Hate Lisa” club. She writes that the experience left her “paranoid and insecure” well into adulthood.

“I have a distrust of newcomers and have difficulty accepting praise from any source,” she writes. “I can be hyper-critical about myself and others, and boy, that does hurt sometimes.”

As an adult, Nakamura says that in some ways she wants to thank those playground perpetrators.

“Because of your meanness and cowardly behavior, I have developed a resiliency and tenaciousness that I treasure,” she writes. “I am not afraid to stand alone for what I believe in. I am not afraid to go my own way.” 

SOURCE: STOPBULLYING.GOV



PARENTS CAN "BULLY-PROOF" THEIR KIDS

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