

Too Close to Home

Some practical tips on recognising and responding to cyber-bullying

By Michael McQueen

Bullying has always been a very real problem in schools. In the past it has often been dismissed as largely harmless or even a rite of passage for young people.



However, in recent years the spotlight has been placed on bullying and its long-term negative impact on the mental health and self esteem of young people. In our modern age, we are recording, monitoring and talking about abuse of young people more than ever before. However it is also our modern age that has resulted in bullies having more potent tools and tactics than in previous generations. Gone are the days where fist fights and name calling could be left in the school yard, today's young people are vulnerable to attack, slander and malice at every hour of the day and night. Furthermore, the viral nature of communication technologies like Facebook and Twitter mean that harsh words and malicious gossip can be propagated almost immediately with no hope of ever taking them back or controlling them.

This is indeed a difficult era in which to be a young person. However, it is also a difficult time to be a parent. The challenge of knowing what to say and when to say it, what to do and not do, when to protect and when to let be; these are all significant questions faced by parents who fear their child is being bullied.

Despite the recent spate of government task forces dedicated to combating cyber-bullying in our schools, the issues (and technology) involved in the issue are complex and unprecedented. Online communications have run so far ahead of the evolution of online social etiquette that a strategic, reasonable and effective response to cyber-bullying is still a long way off.

Regardless, there are some things that parents can do when faced with the prospect of having a child who is being bullied electronically:

1. Don't wait to be told

Often the pain of being bullied is matched only by the shame and embarrassment of actually being the victim. Many young people feel they have to prove their strength by not going to authorities to get 'help'. In this sense, going for help can seem to only validate the power that the bully has over the victim. In addition, our culture of not 'dobbing' can drive a reluctance for young people to report victimization in the fear that the resultant action by a parent will only make the bullying worse.

It is important that an environment is created where parents indicate a willingness just to listen as opposed to swinging into problem solving or activist mode. Sometimes the best 'solution' to helping a child respond to bullying is to do little more than just be there to offer support. That said, there is certainly a place for a more proactive response which we will discuss below.

If you are unsure whether your son or daughter is being bullied, some of the classic signs to look for may include a distinct and irrational change in mood and behavior, despondency and listlessness, introspective and 'distant' persona.

2. Don't remove access

It is often a natural response for parents to simply combat any electronic bullying by removing access to the very technology the perpetrator is using. Sometimes this takes the form of barring Facebook, confiscating mobile phones or limiting internet access. Regardless of what active avoidance measures are taken, this approach can often be highly counterproductive. The main reason for this is being connected electronically to peers often forms the

foundation of young people's identity. Removing access to this sense of community is seen as something similar to social suicide. This is another reason young people will not report cyber-bullying in the first place – the fear of being cut off is worse than the pain of being bullied.

3. Share your experiences

If you as a parent can share your experiences of being bullied as a child or teen, you may give your own son or daughter the permission to share their experiences or at least feel that they are 'normal'. Narrative is an extremely powerful way of getting a message through to an experience-driven group like Gen Y or Gen Z. Beware how you share your experiences. They mustn't come across as condescending, contrived or self-serving. The best stories always convey a principle, model a response but above all create a sense of shared experience.

4. Affirm in meaningful and strategic ways

Perth-based educationalist Dr. Ian Lillico suggests that the most effective way to affirm and encourage a child who is being cyber-bullied is to send positive messages using the same technology the bully is using. In other words, if your son or daughter is receiving threatening or malicious text messages from a bully, try and counteract these by sending positive and affirming text messages throughout the day. It can be useful here to employ other significant people in the young person's life; aunts, uncles, coaches, grandparents and even their own friends to send similar messages.

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5. Involve other authorities

As mentioned above, sometimes the best way to help a son or daughter who is being bullied is to simply listen to them, affirm them and give them perspective through sharing your own experiences. However, there are times when more firm action needs to be taken. Some ideas for action parents can take include:

- **Going to the school.** If the bullying is coming from a fellow student at school, approach the school principal, head teacher of welfare, pastoral care co-ordinator or the year adviser. In many cases there are things that can be done at a school level that will stem the barrage of bullying and even perhaps diffuse the situation.
- **Approaching the bully's parents.** Sometimes an appropriate response would be for the victim's parents to make contact directly with the parents of the perpetrator. Although this may not always work, it is certainly worth trying – most parents would want to know if their son or daughter was bullying their peers.
- **Report the bullying/abuse to technology providers.** Most online social media sites now have processes in place where feedback on offending members can be given directly to the service provider (i.e. Facebook, MySpace etc). Once they receive feedback on bullying or abusive behaviour, the service provider will in some cases place a block on the offending users account. If the bullying is occurring via mobile phone, a report can also be made to the phone service provider.

Unfortunately there are no easy solutions to cyber bullying. However, perhaps the above offer a good place to start. Above all else, it is critical that young people feel they have the support of significant adults around them who are willing to listen, understand and take action if necessary. Keeping lines of communication open and knowing there is a safe person they can turn to when life gets hard is sometimes all young people need to get them through.



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