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Is your child a cyberbully?

By Vera Kochan

With online learning and boredom from lack of physical contact with peers creating additional time spent on electronic devices, experts have seen a 70% increase in cyberbullying among youths since the start of the pandemic, according to Verywell Family, a website that provides information gathered from health professionals.

While there is a lot of information available about what a parent can do if their child is being bullied, what should parents do if their child is the cyberbully?

According to Marriage and Family Therapist and Lamorinda Weekly contributing writer Margie Ryerson, there are signs that a parent should be aware of when identifying whether their child is cyberbullying someone. "Parents need to observe and listen to what their children are doing and saying," she stated. "If parents overhear their child talking to friends and saying mean, disparaging remarks about another child, they need to check further to see if their child is engaged in cyberbullying. Some other signs are if a child has a history of bullying or being bullied, or if he or she is extremely secretive while online and quickly switches screens when a parent is around."

Ryerson suggests steps parents can take to curb bullying before it escalates. "The more empathy parents can help their child develop, the better. Starting at a young age, have your child imagine and talk about what it would be like to be in another child's place," she said, adding, "Find books to read and discuss examples of children who have certain challenges. For example, discuss how another child might feel who is being bullied or who has a disability or a serious illness. Volunteer with your child for various organizations that help disadvantaged people. Model being a compassionate person."

If your child has been identified and verified as a cyberbully by another parent or school officials Ryerson states that it is important, as a parent of a bully, to cooperate in addressing the issue. "Unfortunately, sometimes parents will automatically become defensive and will refuse to accept that their child is a bully. Unless parents cooperate, the child who is a cyberbully will be enabled to continue this destructive pattern of behavior."

When asked whether some form of punishment for the cyberbully is in order, Ryerson responded, "It is possible that punishing a child who is cyberbullying will lead to more of the same behavior, and it will just become more hidden and insidious. Instead of being angry and punitive, parents can be more effective if they show disappointment in their child for his or her behavior. When parents get angry, often a child will respond with anger as well." Ryerson adds, "Instead, parents can help instill responsibility and compassion in their child by showing surprise and sadness over the cyberbullying and avoiding an angry confrontation." Early intervention can equip cyberbullies with the skills they need to interact with others positively. The term "once a bully, always a bully" need not apply to an individual for the rest of his or her life. Verywell Family states that "bullying is a choice. It is not caused by something the victim said or did, and people who bully others need to learn to take ownership of these choices." Unfortunately, many children feel that they are entitled to behave the way they do. In this case, teaching them empathy may help to curtail the behavior.

Verywell Family suggests that many bullies lack impulse control and post hurtful things online without thinking of the consequences to the victim. It is important to find ways to curb those impulses and make better decisions. This method of lashing out may also signify a lack of self-esteem, which turns into anger and frustration toward others. Examining the bully's strengths and weaknesses could help in determining what areas are positive points and what areas need attention.

Many times a cyberbully feels left out of a popular clique at school, and the jealousy may turn into anger which can lead to lashing out. On the flip side, a bully can also be the most popular person in a clique who feels that being a bully will keep them popular. Verywell Family points out the importance of teaching children to develop bully-proof friendships that are healthy. Recognizing that everyone deserves respect teaches kids that their power can be used in positive ways.

"Of course in the case of extreme cyberbullying, such as a child encouraging another child to hurt himself or herself or someone else, parents need to take immediate and serious action," warned Ryerson. "Some measures would include removing access to all social media, limiting and monitoring screen use, and insisting on individual and family psychotherapy."

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This article is a follow-up to Lamorinda Weekly's Oct. 14 article, "Rise in cyberbullying among adolescents during COVID-19."

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