

DEALING WITH CYBER-BULLYING

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The term 'bully' refers to someone who habitually intimidates another person. Physical bullying implies physically harming another person or their property. Emotional bullying is attacking someone's self-worth by putting them down, calling them names, standing over them in a threatening manner, or even glaring at them. Social bullying refers to publicly humiliating or ostracizing a person, or harming their reputation with negative speech.

Cyber-bullying is now a major threat to kids and refers to intimidation through any electronic communication device. Children today have exposed themselves to bullies unintentionally. We now live in a world where kids share anything and everything through such avenues as Facebook and Twitter. Unfortunately, this seemingly harmless form of communication has been known to become deadly in the hands of bullies. A New York Daily Times editorial made the following points. "While they (bullies) think they can hide behind the anonymity of the Internet they are humiliating young people who often have nowhere to run, and no time to recover, as they know the next attack may come at any moment, day or night and will reach them wherever they are, via laptop or smart phone." In some cases these victims have killed themselves as a result of the bullying.

Neil Steinberg in the Chicago-Sun Times observes that being "reared in the blogger-Twitter-Facebook culture kids likely have a very different concept of privacy than the rest of us. In sharing every thought and every intimate detail of their lives with anonymous strangers, many of them are now incapable of drawing lines between private and public."

How do we protect our children from cyber-bullies? The first thing is to educate them about what must be kept private for the sake of safety and integrity. Fashion trends now have little respect for what, in our recent past, would have covered for the sake of decency. Many kids these days are posting photographs of themselves in scanty clothing, having little thought of the message they are portraying. Because of this lack of discernment we, as parents, need to use actual examples of what should be kept private and what can safely be shared.

To decrease exposure to cyber-bullying, kids need to be discouraged from continuous texting, blogging, Twittering and Facebooking. The more bullies know about a prospective victim, the more ammunition they have to fire at them. Your kids need to know that if they receive bullying messages on their media device they should refrain from replying and report it immediately to a responsible adult. If you suspect your child is being bullied, through the Internet, by phone or through actual contact, it is imperative that it is dealt with as soon as possible. Read the offending message. If action is required then have your child send a

message back saying that he/she must stop sending such messages or the text will be forwarded to the police, the principal or that child's parents (whatever is most appropriate). If that warning is not heeded then you as a parent need to report the infringement along with any saved copies of previous communications to the authorities. Secondly, ensure your child is not suffering any anxiety or fear about retribution. It may be that your child needs professional counseling to recover from intimidation.

After reporting the bullying, wait and see if the person desists. If it stops, let it go. If it continues, report it to the police and take whatever action is required to prevent further bullying. If the bullying is via a cell phone or landline telephone report the indiscretion to the phone company who can cut services to that home.

If you have any comments or questions on this subject, please do not hesitate to contact us at sally@forefrontfamilies.org. We invite you to also check out our website at www.forefrontfamilies.org and our blog site at www.forefrontfamilies.blogspot.com for further assistance.