What to Do When Your Child Is a Cyberbully

Ideas for addressing your child's cyberbullying

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It is heart wrenching to hear about kids being cyberbullied. But imagine the shock when you learn your child is the cyberbully. Of course the first and most natural response is disbelief. How could your child ever be capable of hurting another person? But recognizing how easy it is for children to engage in cyberbullying will keep you from overreacting.

Unfortunately, parents are often caught off guard when they learn about their child's online antics because they usually hear about the cyberbullying from the school or the victim's parents.

But this is not a reason to freak out. Nor is it a reason to beat yourself up as a parent. Instead follow these suggestions and address the issue in a calm, rational and productive manner.

Listen. It sounds easy enough, but when you are contacted by another person regarding something your child has done wrong, active listening can be extremely difficult. You will experience a wide range of emotions and your first reaction may be to defend your child. Instead, do your best to keep calm and quiet. Listen to all the details and ask for copies of the correspondence being referenced. It will be much easier to address the problem with your child if you have examples of the cyberbullying.

Acknowledge the problem. While it's not a good idea to automatically assume your child is guilty before you have a chance to talk, it is important to acknowledge the gravity of the situation. Assure the parent or school that you that you will speak with your child and get back to them right away.

Express your concern and make a commitment to pursue the situation further.

Talk to your child. Tell him what you have been told and show him copies of the cyberbullying. Then ask him what is going on. The goal is to get your child to acknowledge what he has done and take responsibility.

Accept that your child made a mistake. It's important that you accept your child's mistake and take action.

Remember it is your job to respond appropriately and prevent future bullying incidents. Ignoring or denying the behavior only exacerbates the problem. And, it increases the likelihood that your child will cyberbully again.

Implement consequences. After cyberbullying occurs, it's important that your child learn how to handle online communications appropriately. Taking away his access to electronic communications is often the best course of action. Begin by explaining your expectations regarding electronic communication including the concept of digital etiquette. Be sure he knows that if he wants to use social networking and other electronic communications again, he'll have to earn this privilege back by demonstrating that he understands the rules. It also might be a good idea to give these privileges back in stages. For instance, you can allow him to use Facebook again but only for set time periods each day and with parental control software that allows you to see everything he types.

Support the school. If your child's school implements a disciplinary plan for the cyberbullying, it is extremely important that you support it.

As difficult as that may be, you are communicating to your child that cyberbullying is unacceptable and won't be tolerated. Supporting the school is one of the best ways to ensure that your child doesn't cyberbully others again.

Educate yourself about relevant legal issues. Many states have laws regarding cyberbullying. Research your state's policies and laws to determine how this cyberbullying incident may be handled. Additionally, if sexting was an aspect of the cyberbullying, it's important that you familiarize yourself with the legal consequences of sexting as well.

Get to the root. Discover why your child chose to cyberbully. Was the bullying a product of peer pressure? Has your child been bullied and cyberbullying was an act of revenge? Did your child cyberbully hoping to fit in with a clique? Did your child cyberbully because he thought it was fun or entertaining? The purpose of these questions is to find out why your child chose to cyberbully so you can address the issue. Don't allow the answers to these questions become an excuse for the cyberbullying. It is still very important that your child realize that the choice to cyberbully was his regardless of the circumstances.

Help your child understand cyberbullying. Kids often believe that statements made online don't count. As a result, they underestimate their impact. It's your job to help him understand the seriousness of cyberbullying. If your child doesn't seem to acknowledge that cyberbullying is a problem, give him copies of some tragic cases to read including stories about Jessica Logan, Amanda Todd and Phoebe Prince. Then, ask him to discuss those cases with you. The goal is that he can see how serious cyberbullying can be and how it hurts other people.

Make amends. Once your child fully understands the impact of his actions, it's important that he make amends in some way. While apologizing seems like a natural answer, it's not always the best one. Sometimes the victim will feel threatened or anxious if a face-to-face apology is made. In this case, a letter apologizing for his actions might be a better option. In some cases, parents have required their children to make regular contributions from their allowances or paychecks to anti-bullying organizations. Whatever route you take, remember that if there is a lawsuit involved, an apology may have to wait until the suit is settled. So consult with your attorney. The key is to ensure that your child understands the consequences of cyberbullying.

Continue to monitor electronic devices. One of the best ways to prevent cyberbullying, is to keep tabs on what your child is doing online. This may include having passwords to all their accounts, having e-mails forwarded to your account and monitoring texts through your cell phone company. Until your child earns back your trust, having their communications monitored is a consequence for breaking your rules – and in some cases the law.

Increase your knowledge of technology. Don't let technology intimidate you or keep you from learning. While you may never keep pace with your child, it's important that you at least stay informed. Find a trusted online resource for information about the Internet, social networking and other ways kids communicate and visit it regularly.

Remember you are not a bad parent. Any child can become a cyberbully by sending an angry response to an e-mail. They also can resort to cyberbullying when a situation on social media escalates. The important thing is that you address the issue and prevent cyberbullying in the future.