How to Handle Cyberbullying
A Quick Guide to Help Parents Understand and Deal with Cyberbullying

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Perhaps your child's school has warned you to look out for cases of cyberbullying, or you have heard stories in the media about kids being cyberbullied. As a parent, you may have heard your children tell their friends that they have received rude, hurtful, or threatening messages on their cell phone or computer. Or, maybe you fear your own child might be sending these types of messages to another adolescent. This behavior is sometimes left unaddressed because it is thought of as simple childhood conflict that everyone experiences in their youth. However, as you will find out in this report, cyberbullying has the potential to be a much bigger deal for your family. The tragic story of Megan Meier could not illustrate this point better.

Megan Meier's Story

We can all learn from the story of Megan Meier. Megan was only 13 years. She had just changed schools, where she had joined the Volleyball team and was making new friends. One of Megan's new friends was Josh. Josh didn't go to Megan's new school – they only knew each other as friends on MySpace. He was 16 and Megan thought he was attractive. She often rushed home just to see how he was or read his latest message.

One day, Josh changed. He began to message Megan with terrible gossip he had heard about her. He started posting blogs and comments on hundreds of pages saying terrible things about Megan that aimed to ruin her reputation. Josh made Megan feel like everyone in their online network was against her. Megan retaliated, but this only made her more upset and the situation got more out of hand.

Megan's mother was aware that Megan was having problems dealing with a cyberbully. In fact, when the situation seemed to have gotten out of hand, Megan's mom told her to just log-off. Megan's mother wanted the situation to not get any worse and was upset that Megan used

bad language in response to many blogs, e-mails, and IM's. Megan's mom was also in a rush to take Megan's sibling to an orthodontist appointment, and underestimated the pain that Josh had caused Megan by his ongoing cyberbullying. Megan was devastated because her mom did not take her side. She ran to her room crying. The last message Megan received from Josh that afternoon crudely stated that "…the world would be a better place without you."

Sadly, Megan took her own life that day. After the funeral, Megan's mom found out that Josh was not even a real person. His profile was a fake, made by Megan's former best friend with the help of her own mother. Megan took her own life, but as her father put it, "it was like Josh handed her a loaded gun." Megan's parents have made it their goal to bring awareness to the prevalence of cyberbullying and to make all parents aware of how dangerous cyberbullying can be for children.[1] The contents of this report hope to help accomplish this goal.

A Brief Overview of this Report

This paper includes helpful information for parents who want to learn more about cyberbullying. The research backing up these claims comes primarily from Dr. Tony Roberto and Jennifer Eden (2008) and Dr. Art Ramirez, Dr. Kellie Palazzolo, Matthew Savage, and Douglas Deiss (2009), all of whom study cyberbullying within The Hugh Downs School of Human Communication at Arizona State University. Highlights of their work are presented here to help you answer some key questions about cyberbullying, including:

1. What is cyberbullying?

2. How prevalent is cyberbullying?

3. What is the difference between traditional bullying and cyberbullying?

4. What if I suspect my child is a victim of cyberbullying?

5. What if I suspect my child is a cyberbully?

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[1] For more information, see: http://www.meganmeierfoundation.org/

What is Cyberbullying?

You may be asking yourself, "what is cyberbullying?" Cyberbullying has been defined as the deliberate and repeated misuse of communication technology by an individual or group to threaten or harm others[2].

What, exactly, does this mean? First, cyberbullying involves the use of <u>communication technology</u>, such as pagers, cell phones, personal digital assistants (PDAs), or computers. With these devices, adolescents have the ability to harass, demean and damage one another by speaking directly, leaving voicemails, or sending text, picture, or video messages. Also, the Internet can be used by cyberbullies who send email, use instant messaging services, or utilize a range of online tools available on Web sites, bulletin boards, and in chat rooms. Web sites are pages on the Internet that people can visit and browse, bulletin boards are spaces online where people can post their own comments for others too, and chat rooms allow people to interact in real-time with one another individually or in groups. For example, in the story told earlier about the case of Megan Meier, she committed suicide after being harassed by a schoolmate and her mother on the social networking site, MySpace.

Second, cyberbullying messages are meant to <u>threaten or harm</u> others. Cyberbullying messages can include physical threats, such as a warning that victims should look out for others who might hurt them at school. Messages also can be designed to cause psychological harm. These messages usually attack, insult, spread rumors about, embarrass, or harm the relationships of the cyberbullying victim. Messages such as these are referred to as verbal aggression because they aim to damage the confidence of another person. Common types of verbally aggressive messages insult victims' character, competence, physical appearance, or personality, and these messages can include threats, profanity, and yelling. For example, in Megan Meier's case, her

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[2] This is a recent comprehensive definition of cyberbullying provided by Roberto and Eden (2008).

schoolmate and her mother pretended to be a boy named "Josh". While "Josh" was initially interested in Megan, "Josh" eventually told Megan he did not want to be friends anymore because he heard that Megan was mean to her friends and that the world would be a better place without her.

Third, cyberbullying is <u>deliberate</u>. Because cyberbullying is deliberate, it is different from friendly or playful teasing and arguing. Cyberbullying is not when people have arguments, it is not when someone stands up for their own positions on controversial issues, and it is not when an individual argues against the positions which another person takes on an issue. But, if someone intentionally uses communication technology to tease a person in a mean or hurtful way, that teasing is considered cyberbullying. On the same note, if a discussion or argument using communication technology gets out of line and leads to personal attacks, those personal attacks that are made with the intention of hurting someone would be considered cyberbullying. In other words, a cyberbully attacks the person rather than a person's position on an issue. At its heart, cyberbullying represents an intentional attempt to use communication technology to threaten or harm others. In the example of the Megan Meier case, her schoolmate and her schoolmate's mom set up a false MySpace account on purpose, in order to hurt and harass Megan Meier.

Fourth, cyberbullying generally consists of a <u>repeated</u> behavior. However, it is possible that a single message sent from one person to another using communication technology can qualify as cyberbullying. An extreme example might be a death threat sent in an email or text message. But, traditional cyberbullying comes in the form of multiple messages, such as numerous emails or text messages to a victim. Sometimes, a group of cyberbullies work together; this happens most often on social networking sites where groups of people can exclude and ignore a victim. The term "repeated" often takes on much scarier and sad meaning too. To

illustrate, a cyberbully might create a single derogatory web site that can then be viewed over and over by hundreds or thousands of visitors. Or, a cyberbully might send or post a single text, picture, or video message that is received or viewed by thousands or even millions of recipients or visitors. In the Megan Meier, repeated harassment was demonstrated because her cyberbullies sent hundreds of messages over a period of several months that inevitably hurt and harassed her.

Fifth and final, cyberbullies can work <u>individually or as a group</u>. Cyberbullying can include a single individual working alone, or multiple individuals working together to threaten or harm their victim. In the Megan Meier incident, perpetration of cyberbullying occurred from just one person, whereas there are also cases of groups working together to harass a victim. A tactic that adolescents tend to frequently use involves a group of people deciding that they will collectively delete a victim as their friend on a social networking site. The cyberbullies working together might even try to persuade others in the social network to ignore the victim. One extreme case of group bullying happened in Korea, where a woman who failed to pick up after her dog was subsequently labeled "dog poop girl" and harassed by thousands of people online.

> ### Recap: What is Cyberbullying?
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> *Cyberbullying is the deliberate and repeated misuse of communication technology by an individual or group to threaten or harm others.*

How Prevalent is Cyberbullying?

Although it is hard to know the exact prevalence of cyberbullying with complete certainty, the findings of many recent studies suggest that cyberbullying may be happening more often. The largest study of cyberbullying involved a survey of 150,000 Norwegian and Swedish high school students and found that 15% of students reported being involved in bullying

situations often[3]. Nationally in U.S. middle schools, frequent cyberbullying estimates include nearly 6 million U.S. students in grades 6-10. Of the students in the study, 11% reported being victims of cyberbullying, 13% reported being cyberbullies, and 6% said that they were a victim who later became a bully themselves[4]. It is important to protect children from being victims, because those children who are cyberbullied have a higher likelihood of becoming cyberbullies themselves.

What is the Difference between Traditional Bullying and Cyberbullying?

As a parent, you might wonder why cyberbullying is a big deal because it is similar to the traditional schoolyard bullying you dealt with in your childhood. There are some key differences between traditional bullying and cyberbullying that might make you more concerned about cyberbullying.

Traditional bullying, as you probably remember, is when a child is physically harassed or repeatedly teased in a mean and hurtful way. The two ways we see traditional bullying play out between children are through direct verbal and physical aggression and indirect relational aggression. A statement of direct verbal aggression would be "I hate you" whereas indirect relational aggression might be "everyone in school thinks you are ugly and stupid; no one likes you!" Distinguishing between these types of bullying is important because children might use more indirect aggression when engaging in cyberbullying. In fact, there seem to be some interesting differences between boys and girls bullying behavior. Most evidence shows that boys are more likely than girls to be

> *Protecting children from being victims is important because those children who are cyberbullied have a higher likelihood of becoming cyberbullies themselves.*

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[3] Olweus (1993)
[4] Nansel et al. (2001)

both perpetrators and victims of bullying. But, boys are more likely to report bullying and being bullied via direct aggression, while girls are more likely to report being bullied via indirect or relational aggression. Because of this difference, girls might be more likely to engage in cyberbullying behavior or to be a victim of cyberbullying. Although this may be the case, boys and girls should both learn about how to avoid the dangers of cyberbullying.

Parents should be aware of a few other differences between bullying a cyberbullying. First, traditional bullying typically occurs at a one time and place such as at school, but cyberbullying can happen anytime and anywhere such as outside of school. Second, victims of traditional bullying know who bullied them, whereas a cyberbully can remain anonymous. Third, traditional bullying is usually witnessed by a small number of people. On the other hand, cyberbullying can spread much more quickly and broadly. Consider how easy it can be for a cyberbully to send many messages to many individuals with just a few keystrokes and clicks. Fourth, traditional bullies are typically more powerful – meaning that they are physically bigger, stronger, or more popular. However, cyberbullies do not have to be more powerful; a cyberbully may have power simply because they are able to instantly effect their victim. The Internet is a place where a cyberbully can dominate others in ways that are not possible in face to face interaction. Last, although evidence of traditional bullying can be difficult to collect and document, evidence of cyberbullying is easy to gather and preserve. For example, most cyberbullying evidence can easily be saved (such as chat histories, web pages, and screenshots, and photos) and printed. This is important to do if you are cyberbullied, as we will discuss next.

> ### *Cyberbullying...*
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> *...can happen anytime and anywhere.*
>
> *...is often anonymous.*
>
> *... can spread quickly and broadly.*
>
> *...can be powerful.*
>
> *...is easy to document!*

What if I Suspect My Child is a Victim of Cyberbullying?

There are two important questions to keep in mind concerning the possibility that your child may be dealing with a cyberbully. A first question to consider is whether your child has experienced traditional bullying. Although not always the case, those children who are bullied at school or in person are generally more likely to be a victim of cyberbullying too. In fact, this is the same for bullies too: those who bully in person also tend to cyberbully too. The second question to ask yourself is how involved you are in your child's use of communication technology. Being a part of your child's online experience is important for protecting them against cyberbullies. Ask your son or daughter to tell you about the websites they visit and use. Create rules together for what is and what is not appropriate concerning the use of the Internet. If your child has a profile on a social networking site, be a part of creating the site with them. That way, you can discuss the positive and negative consequences may be when choosing to display certain pictures or descriptions in text. In addition, if you allow your child to use a cell phone, monitor their text messaging and ask them about the conversations they are having. Knowing how your child uses technology and for what reasons is an important first step in dealing with cyberbullying.

A warning sign that your child may be a victim of cyberbullying involves paying attention to their emotions. If they seem irritated, distressed, sad, or angry after or during their use of technology, such as when texting on a cell phone or surfing the Internet on a computer. Foremost, ask your child what is bothering them in a supportive way, and teach them that it is okay to share their feelings with you. Take this opportunity to teach your child about four simple behaviors they can do if they are cyberbullied.

First, tell your child to stop the interaction with a cyberbully as soon as possible. Retaliating only has the ability to make things worse! This is a simple, but very important behavior, because it reduces the impact that the cyberbully can have and immediately stops the situation from spiraling out of control. Next, teach your child how to save evidence of the cyberbullying attack. There are many options, such as saving a chat history, taking a screenshot,

> *Four things to teach children to do if they are cyberbullied:*
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> *1. Stop, don't retaliate.*
> *2. Save evidence.*
> *3. Seek support.*
> *4. Report the incident.*

and saving web pages. You can improve your ability to make a successful report later by documenting the situation – especially if the cyberbully does not stop their attacks. In addition, teach children that it is okay and helpful to tell an adult what happened and how they feel. Let them know that if you are not around that teachers and other family members can also help. Their friends can be supportive too, but acknowledge that they should not listen to advice that involves retaliation. The last lesson is for you and your child. Tell your child to not be afraid to report that they have been cyberbullied to a teacher or school official. Other resources are available to you too. For example, if your child is harassed or threatened, consider reporting the activity to a local law enforcement agency. Your local police department or FBI branch are good starting points because they usually have a contact person for cybercrimes. Also, report cyberbullying to school officials if other students are involved, as schools have policies for dealing with cyberbullying too. By taking part in these easy behaviors, cyberbullies will quickly realize they are not invisible or invincible just because they hide behind technology.

What if I Suspect My Child is a Cyberbully?

Cyberbullying is no joke – laws are currently changing so that cyberbullies can be severely punished. Cyberbullying can result in the loss of internet privileges, suspension from school, expulsion, or being arrested and sentenced to community service or detention centers. These consequences underscore the important of monitoring children's behavior; teach them there is nothing funny about being a cyberbully. Sometimes children forget that there is another person at the other end of their messages. Or, it may be the case that a less powerful child may be less disadvantaged when online or using communication technology. For example, cyberbullying can serve as a way to retaliate for traditional bullying or aggression that happened in person, especially because it can be done anonymously. Teach children to be polite when communicating with technology, just as they are expected to be in person.

Cyberbullying behaviors that should raise your alarm include when children:

- *Spread rumors or false information about others.*
- *Send email, instant or text messages to others pretending to be another person.*
- *Send rude, harassing or threatening messages.*
- *Creating websites that pick on, humiliate or scare others.*
- *Send out or post embarrassing or inappropriate pictures or images*

Common types of cyberbullying that you should look are teach children to avoid engaging in include flaming, harassment, denigration, impersonation, trickery, exclusion, and cyber stalking. *Flaming* is a brief, heated exchange in a public setting that involves angry, rude, vulgar, or threatening messages, whereas *harassment* is when a cyberbully repeatedly sends offensive messages over a long period of time. *Denigration* involves publicly sending or posting cruel statements about a person and

impersonation is when a cyberbully poses as someone else to make them look bad or place them in danger. *Trickery* is a term used to describe when a cyberbully shares embarrassing or private information with others. *Exclusion* is when a cyberbully or cyberbullies intentionally exclude a person from an online group. Last, *cyberstalking* involves repeatedly sending threatening or intimidating messages a victim.

One way that has been suggested to teach children to avoid cyberbullying is to make them aware of a popular cyber pledge. They can learn the pledge, read it aloud or even sign it, and it should be posted in a visible location near their work area, desk, or computer. Going over the pledge with your child can be helpful for you to teach them that it is everyone's responsibility to take a stand against cyberbullying. Also, children will learn to take personal responsibility for their role in cyberbullying, in addition to underscoring the importance of the topic.

Cyber Pledge:

- *I agree to take a stand against cyberbullying, including sharing this pledge with others and asking them to take it too.*
- *I agree not to use technology as a weapon to hurt others.*
- *I agree to think before I click.*
- *I agree to think about the person on the other side.*
- *I agree to support others being cyberbullied and report cyberbullying whenever I find it.*
- *I agree not to join in on cyberbullying or be used by a cyberbully to hurt others.*
- *I agree to take 5 minutes to help me calm down and walk away from the computer when I am being targeted by a cyberbully and to tell someone.*
- *I agree to be part of the solution, not part of the problem.*

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Additional Resources

Check out these websites about Internet safety if you need more help dealing with cyberbullying.

What is it, how it works, and how to deal with cyberbullies:

http://www.stopcyberbullying.org

Being aware of cyberbullying tactics:

http://www.cyberbullying.org

Tips, information, and games for prevention:

http://stopbullyingnow.hrsa.gov

National Crime Prevention Council:

http://www.ncpc.org/cyberbullying

Outlining the severe punishment for cyberbullying:

http://www.cyberbullying.info

Helpful info for parents, teachers, and librarians:

http://www.cyberbully.org