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Cyber Bullying: Stop, Block and Tell

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"I hate you! Everyone else hates you!
You should just die!"

Those hateful words have been shouted on playgrounds as long as we all can remember. But what if those words were in an email sent to your child or grandchild? What if they were sent to all her friends? What if they were posted on a Web site or the child's online guestbook?

These things — and worse — are happening all over the world. It's called cyber bullying.

Over the last several years, the Internet has changed the way young people communicate. Recent studies have suggested that for many members of "Generation Y" (those born in or after the 1980s), social networking sites like Facebook or MySpace, as well as blogs and online journals, have become a primary means of communicating with others.

Unfortunately, the explosion of online social networking and text messaging also comes with certain dangers — including cyber bullying.

Some people scoff at the idea of cyber bullying, falling back on the old "sticks and stones may break my bones, but words will never hurt me" point of view. The problem is that cyber bullying, unlike traditional bullying, is not a simple prank between friends or a one-time name-calling incident. It is repetitious and often escalating behavior with potentially serious consequences.

Cyber bullying takes a number of forms: threatening or offensive emails, text messages or comments, the creation and spreading of hurtful rumors online, online sexual harassment, or even taking on someone else's identity online in order to harass or humiliate. These behaviors, especially when repeated over time, can cause bullying victims to become socially isolated, depressed and even afraid or embarrassed to attend school or see their peers. Extreme cases of such bullying have led young people to take their own lives.

Cyber bullying is limited only to the imaginations and bandwidth of the kids.

Parents' first reaction when hearing about cyber bullying may be to yank their child off the Internet entirely. However, if students think they may lose access to the Internet if they report a problem, then they will be much less likely to talk to parents or other adults if problems do arise.

Instead of avoiding the Internet, parents and guardians need to learn more about it. Become familiar with social networking sites like Facebook. Tell your teen that if she (or he) wants to have a Facebook profile, then she needs to add you as a "friend" so that you are able to see her page.

If your child does become the victim of cyber bullying, report it. One good piece of advice is, "Stop, block and tell." A growing number of schools now have policies in place to address cyber bullying, and many law enforcement agencies now have divisions that are devoted to Internet safety.

For more resources on cyber bullying, visit www.miroundtable.org or www.stopcyberbullying.org.