Protecting Kids from Cyberbullying

What Is Cyberbullying?
Cyberbullying is like playground bullying, but it's done either online or with cell phones. It can take the form of individual harassment, public humiliation, or both. The viral nature of online life and cell phones makes sending humiliating or degrading messages, pictures, or videos simple and immediate and anonymous. Screen names easily disguise bullies' identities. Sometimes they can even pretend to be the victims, posting comments that look like the victims wrote them. Other times, the cyberbullying can take the form of direct threats -- either physical ones or social ones.

Why You Should Care?
Because it could happen to your kids, and it could damage them emotionally. Their self esteem and their self confidence -- not to mention their sense of physical safety -- all take huge hits when bullying is involved. You should know that your kids may not want to tell you they're being bullied ... they might be embarrassed or might not want to own up to the fact they're on sites they aren't supposed to be on.

Some Facts You Should Know:

• 1 in 3 kids say they've been cyberbullied.
• Cyberbully 411 reports that 40% of kids say their cyberbullying took place on instant messenger services. 30% said it happened on social networking sites, and 29% said they were bullied while playing an online game.
• USA Today reports that girls generally mock others for their physical appearance, while boys tend to make more sexually explicit comments.
• Cyberbullying is especially prevalent in middle school-aged kids (9-14).

Common Sense Says:
If your child is being cyberbullied, there are things they (and you) can do to stop it:

• Don't respond. Engaging with a bully only fuels the fire. Plus, any response could be circulated immediately.
• Sign off and block the bully. Get offline, and use your instant messenger's blocking features. On cell phones, only answer known numbers.
• Change contact information. If someone is pretending to be your kids, have them change their passwords. If someone creates false profiles, contact the company that hosts the site and report the cyberbullying.
• Save all bullying emails. Send them to your Internet service provider.
• Don't assume your kids will talk to you about being bullied. Often they feel guilty, ashamed, or that it's too painful to bring up. (Or, they may not want to cop to the fact that they've been somewhere forbidden online.) Make sure your kids know you won't judge them, you just want them to be safe.
• For more information, see your child's guidance counselor.

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