

Talking Tech

Cyber-bullying targets kids. How to keep your kids safe when surfing the Internet.

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I vividly remember two incidents from my school days that involved bullies. The first was a bully my age picking on my brother who is three years my junior. I'm not 'allowed' to call him my little brother since he is more than a foot taller than I! The bully was just a pain-in-the-neck jerk. After I had words with him, he moved on to, I assume, pick on someone without an older sibling for protection.

The second incident was a bully picking on me; she must have been about 12' tall and weighed about a ton ' OK, perhaps it just seemed that way to me, but I was terrified of her and deliberately took alternate routes rather than pass her in the hallway. One day she got on my bus after school. My heart began to race and perspiration broke out on my brow and upper lip. I thought that it was the end for me; she had already told me what she intended to do to me when she got the chance and I knew she was serious.

I felt sick to my stomach, and I was embarrassed to tell anyone on the bus about my terror. I just prayed that she would get off the bus before it came to my stop. Unfortunately, she did not. As the bus approached my stop, she stood to exit the bus. She turned to me and told me exactly how she planned to rearrange my face.

My knees were weak and my temples pounding. This was it. Oh, but wait, a thought occurred to me, maybe I could just stay on the bus and get off at the next stop ' I could run like the wind and she could never catch me! As a skinny little runt, I could run pretty fast; maybe I could outrun her! And that is exactly what I did ' I was sure that I would run into her at every corner and face my last breath.

I ran as fast as I could around nearby apartment buildings, climbing fences and generally experiencing a full-blown panic attack. I made it to my front door and locked it behind me. Weeping, scuffed up from climbing fences, breathless and heart racing, I made it safely home. I was a complete wreck and she had never even laid a hand on me.

I never shared the story with my parents or friends ' it just seemed all too humiliating. But now, as a mother, I recall those events and wonder why I foolishly kept it a secret' I should have told my mom or one of my teachers so they could have helped me. If I had told

someone, maybe I wouldn't have spent a year of my life afraid to turn a corner in the school corridors.

Fortunately, the big bully wasn't at school when I returned the following year. I don't know if she graduated, or if perhaps she got sent to reform school; I was just happy to enjoy my sophomore year without her threats. Tenth grade was a super year for me ' no more stress headaches, no more fearful lunches, and a casual stroll to all of my classes.

When I think about those episodes I realize that once inside my home I was safe from the bully. However, today our children are not safe at home; they are at even greater risk than we ever were, because they can be exposed to danger when we think they are safe ' inside our own homes.

The risks I'm referring to are those found on our own PCs each time our kids visit the Internet. There is a long list of risks, however today I'm going to focus on one area that seldom makes the press and is often overlooked in discussions regarding Internet safety.

Children use the Internet differently from adults; they go online to socialize. Children and teens lack emotional maturity, which can make them vulnerable to manipulation and intimidation. Whenever there is a group of kids, there will be a bully. Cyber bullying is the use of information and technology such as e-mail, instant messaging, chat rooms and blogs to post defamatory comments, rumors or threats. Kids can be 'stalked' online with nasty instant messages or a website of embarrassing pictures (taken, for example, in the locker room with a camera cell phone).

Cyber bullies are a very distressing problem. A study four years ago, funded by the National Center For Missing & Exploited Children' indicated that one in every seventeen kids had been threatened or harassed on the Internet. Since Internet use and access rates have dramatically increased in the past four years, I can only surmise that the harassment rate has risen as well. As a parent, those stats scare me.

One recent example that I read about was involving preteen girls. Let's call the victim 'Julie.' For Julie's 13th birthday, her parents permitted her to have a sleepover for up to four of her friends. Although she tried not to flaunt the party into the faces of those girls who were not invited, some girls did hear about the party and were angry to be excluded.

The excluded girls got together after school and created a 'We Hate Julie' website. This type of site is also referred to as a 'slam book.' They told all of their friends at school about the site and every day girls added mean comments about Julie to the site. When Julie heard about it, she visited the site; in fact it became a daily ritual for her.

She felt mortified each time she looked at the site, but couldn't stop herself from going back. She felt isolated and became despondent; she no longer wanted to participate in school activities. Eventually, her mother was able to encourage Julie to speak up about what was

troubling her and the ugly truth came out. What those girls did is called relational aggression; they used their relationships as weapons to hurt Julie. This is just one type of cyber bullying that can occur. Middle-school-aged kids tend to be at the mercy of cyber bullies because of their desperate need to fit in.

Cyber bullying has even led to the victim committing suicide, as in the case of one young lady in England who was anonymously harassed because she was overweight. Another teen was suicidal when bullies posted untrue allegations of her sexual exploits, complete with her full name, address and telephone number.

Not everyone in cyberspace minds their manners; in fact most studies have shown that even when someone sends an e-mail message to someone they know or work with, they don't pay careful attention to etiquette. When your kids are online, particularly in chat rooms, there is a good chance that they'll get messages that are unbecoming, distressing or just plain mean. Some messages may be far worse: predators preying on our youth (stay tuned for the next article in this series for more information).

Make sure your kids know not to take flaming (mean) messages personally. In most cases, but not all, the sender doesn't even know the recipient. The experts say teach your kids that the best thing to do if they encounter messages or people like that is to ignore them. However, some messages may amount to harassment, which is a federal crime.

If the messages or images are dirty, indecent, vulgar or obscene with the intent to abuse, annoy, harass or threaten them, they should tell you immediately so that you can report the problem to your Internet service provider (ISP) and the CyberTipline' at the National Center for Missing & Exploited Children at www.cybertipline.com.

Have your kids tell the bully to leave them alone and not to contact them ever again. They should leave the chat room or turn off the instant messaging program and leave it offline for a day.

Make sure that they should never reply again to mail or messages from the bully ' ever, but save them in case you need to show them to authorities as evidence. According to CyberAngels, an Internet safety organization, 'If you take that power away from the harasser and refuse to 'play their game,' then you have become empowered instead. You are now in charge.' Find new chat rooms with moderators; look for those sponsored by kid-safe sites.

As parents we make sure our kids are eating the right foods and watching television and movies and reading books that are age appropriate. We look for parental labels on the music CDs they buy but we probably are not paying close enough attention to their web activities to protect them from real threats.

Experts say that Internet filters, site blockers and activity loggers are needed in addition to teaching our kids what net behavior we expect from them, and these are essential steps to protecting our youth. Most of us admit that our kids are far more tech savvy than we are,

but we can't let that be an excuse for ignoring the dangers.

Take some time to visit www.NetSmartz.org, www.CyberAngels.org, www.SafeKids.com, www.WiredKids.org or the National Center for Missing & Exploited Children' at www.missingkids.com for more information and great tips to help you help your kids enjoy their time on the Internet and avoid risky situations.

I thought that NetSmartz.org had one of the best 'teen-appropriate' information pages. There were real-life stories that can be played, in media format regarding the dangers on the Internet. I sat down with my teen to look at a few of them. She didn't want to, you know ' because they 'know everything' at that age. But I insisted and she obliged.

Make sure your children (including teens) know that if something makes them uncomfortable on the Internet they should come to you and that you will not be angry, no matter what. Even if it means they have to admit they did something they knew they were not supposed to. The absolute worst thing that we can do is take the privilege of Internet access away from our youth. It is a wonderful tool and can also provide hours of harmless fun, so take the time to learn how to avoid problems and what to do when those problems are unavoidable.

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