Youth & Family Counseling

Healthy individuals, strong families, thriving communities

1113 S. Milwaukee Avenue, #104
Libertyville, IL 60048
(847) 367-5991
www.CounselingForAll.org

Is Your Child Safe from Cyberbullying?

By Cassandra D'Addeo, MS, LMFT

It's Friday afternoon and the 3:35 pm bell rings through the halls of your child's school. School is officially out for the weekend. Children's heads are filled with thoughts of "no homework, no teachers, and no school bullies!" But even when our children are not at school, we must ask ourselves: Are they safe from being bullied?

Within the last few years, technology use has become widespread, as computers, cell phones, and other devices are readily accessible to nearly everyone. Ten years ago, most middle school students did not have cell phones and many Americans did not know much about Facebook. Over these past 10 years, however, bullying has expanded beyond verbal and physical forms and entered into the cyber world.

Today's students are experts in technology and trends. As a result, bullying does not stop when the bell rings at the end of the school day. Bullying continues through small devices via children's cell phones, e-mail accounts, and social networks. Libertyville Elementary School District 70 annually updates and publishes a handbook for Highland Middle School parents and students. The District 70 2014-2015 Parent-Student Handbook states, "Bullying, intimidation, teen dating violence and harassment diminish a student's ability to learn and a school's ability to educate. Preventing students from engaging in these disruptive behaviors is an important school goal." (Contact District 70 [www.d70schools.org] for its complete policy on preventing bullying.) All parents should review their school district's anti-bullying policy and have an ongoing conversation with their child regarding the effects of bullying.

According to the National Crime Prevention Center (www.ncpc.org), more than 40 percent of teenagers with Internet access have reported being bullied online within the past year. NCPC also reports that only 10 percent of children who have been cyberbullied tell their parents about it. So what can we do as a community and as parents to help prevent and resolve cyberbullying in our communities and our homes?

Communicate safe Internet practices. Experts advise parents to keep open lines of communication with their children. But have you recently talked with your child about how to safely use the Internet? Here are some talking points to get your conversation going.

- Social media account holders can post pictures and information including e-mail addresses, cell phone numbers, and other personal facts. Talk with your child about what

types of information should be posted on social network accounts. This includes being specific about what types of pictures should be placed on your child's account. Facebook provides privacy restrictions that are frequently changed and updated. It is important to make sure you check in with your child to ensure he or she is keeping appropriate privacy settings in place.

- Advise children to decline friendships from strangers and to only allow social media followers with whom they have close relationships. Children value how many people they are able to "friend" on social networks. In fact, it can be an ego boost for kids to have more Facebook friends (or Twitter or Instagram followers) than their schoolmates. It is vital to have a conversation with children about social media safety and the importance of accepting social media friends among only the people they know well. Taking these precautions should help reduce potential bullies from posting negative comments on a Facebook wall or other social media. If bullying does occur on a child's social network, parents should print a copy of the post for their records, then delete the post from the child's page or account, report the cyberbullying incident to child's school personnel, and notify the specific social media site. If the threat is serious, report the occurrence to local authorities immediately.

- Simply setting up privacy restrictions on Facebook and other social networks is not enough to prevent all forms of cyberbullying. If your child receives threatening or hurtful text or e-mail messages, call your cell phone provider to block the sender's phone number or contact your e-mail provider to block specific senders. Finally, always keep a log of what is occurring so that you can bring the entire history to the attention of school authorities or your local police.

- Creating an environment in which your child can express himself or herself is the most important way to keep your child safe from being a victim of cyberbullying. When you ask your child about his or her day at school, also ask about what is showing up on Facebook and other social media sites. Also, to help children become more socially responsible and help protect their friends and siblings from cyberbullying, parents can explain how it is everyone's social responsibility to report malice and malicious postings that are targeting other children. No child should have to fear cyberbullying, and it is our responsibility as members of a community to help resolve this issue.

Monday, October 6, 2014, is Blue Shirt Day: World Day of Bullying Prevention, sponsored by Stomp Out Bullying™. To heighten awareness about this issue, Youth and Family Counseling along with other local agencies will be "going blue" on October 6 to educate the community on the effects of bullying. Join YFC and our community in starting an antibullying conversation during the month of October. For more information on how you can bring YFC's bullying prevention program to your child's school, contact Cassie D'Addeo at 847-367-5991, ext. 26.

Visit these websites to learn more about cyberbullying:

  Stomp Out Bullying   www.stompoutbullying.org

  National Crime Prevention Center   www.ncpc.org

  Libertyville Elementary School District 70   www.d70schools.org