

“eSmart Schools has found the content in the Kidproof Safety program to be a valuable and credible resource on cybersafety for schools”

TERM 2, 2015

“Watch your back – I am going to turn all your friends away from you”

On Thursday night Ella, aged 13, receives a text messages from her friend Andi. Ella opens it assuming it is an update from the conversation they were having at school earlier that day. Immediately, Ella knows that it is not. She feels hot, overwhelmed and tears well up in her eyes when she reads “Don’t think you can get away with what you did to me at school today. Watch your back because I am going to turn all your friends away from you!”

Relational aggression refers to acts of emotional bullying hidden among tightly knit networks of friends. Kids who use others emotions negatively, use relationships, words and gestures as their weapons of attack. It comes as no surprise to many parents that this is common at this age, particularly with girls. Using relationships to bully and hurt others is by nature covert, secretive and difficult to detect.



Unfortunately, an event like the one above happens among school aged children every day. Cyberbullying is classified as relational aggression because it is a direct attempt to inflict harm on a peer through manipulation and with the intent of damaging peer relationships.

Posting a harmful remark, blogging nasty comments about someone or sharing inappropriate pictures of a ‘friend’ through a social media platform; where others are intended to read the remarks and see the images, intentionally create wider relational harm.

Flaming messages

Flaming messages are hostile or insulting messages that are sent between internet users, and they often involve put downs and profanity. They fly through cyberspace at lightning speeds and may have long lasting consequences on both the bully and the victim. The messages are frequently the result of the heated real-world issues that come with schoolyard politics. Although cyberbullying occurs mostly at home and often on school grounds, the consequences are definitely prevalent during school hours.

Cyberbullying can emerge from a flame war. One person sends a hurtful message to another, they react by sending a flaming message back, the original flamer sends one even hotter...and the war has started.

What can your child do if they receive a flaming text? I.C.E

At Kidproof we have a saying that you can stop a bully in their tracks by using ICE – Ignore, Communicate and Exit. This is a simple and straightforward strategy anyone can use to stop a situation from moving forward.

The best response is no response (Ignore) do not respond to the flaming message, it can aggravate the situation. Communicate to a trusted adult (preferably one at school and one at home) about the message. Exit that conversation, the gaming site, the group chat, etc.

Cyberbullying is not normal behaviour, and it is not “just kidding around”

Interestingly enough there is correlation between number of devices at home and the level of tech use and abuse amongst the residents. That means, the more devices you have in your home, the more likely your child is to be involved in some degree of technological misuse.

So, why do kids do it anyway? Young people can use a number of rationales, such as:

- They have observed other kids doing it, it becomes ‘normal’
- The other person upset the
- Their friends bullied online so they thought it was acceptable
- Because it was fun
- They didn’t like the victim
- They were bullied first
- Forced to do so (peer pressured)

What’s the harm?

Often people that participate in cyber bullying misunderstand freedom of expression guidelines. Many youth are still developing their critical thinking skills, and these are essential to understanding the long term consequences and repercussions of their online actions.

Digital drama’s and drive by postings are common. Youth looking to draw attention to themselves can easily create drama around them. What is happening in the schoolyard can now be dragged into an online space and community and vice versa. Making a hurtful comment and then running away into the darkness of night, while the victim never knew who attacked them is downright cowardly.

Parents can be an agent of change

If you are worried about the impact of cyberbullying and relational aggression on your child there are things you can do to help. Parents can be an agent of change by proactively opening conversations about this issue. You can start a conversation by asking your child questions such as these:

- Have you ever received an angry or rude message from someone via email, text or in a game chat room?

- Have you continued to receive hurtful messages after you asked them to stop?
- Were you ever afraid to open an email, text message or go onto a game site for fear of seeing a hurtful message?
- Have you received unwanted sexually explicit photos or suggestions?

The thing is, most kids know the ‘rules’ of how to deflect a bully; block, report and delete. So if they know the rules, why aren’t they following the rules?! This is when underdeveloped critical thinking skills get them into trouble.



Think about your own digital modelling.

As parents it is our responsibility to set rules, boundaries and expectations when it comes to our children’s online behaviour. Consequences must also be enforced when rules and guidelines are broken, just as you would in the real world. What are your values in regards to treating others? If you expect respect, consideration and tolerance, then expect no less of your children. Set the expectations of social behaviour and model this by being a good digital citizen yourself.

Encourage kids to do the right thing. Encourage your child to treat others with respect and to stand up for those who are being targeted. Empathy and tolerance go a long way in reducing the instances of bullying and cyber bullying. Encourage conflict to be solved face to face. When a child can see another’s emotions or signs of stress or sadness, they tend to back down.

Technology is a privilege

Too many youth believe technology is their right. Privileges are earned based on good behaviour and meeting family standards. Enforce integrity and have the strength to restrict or take away online access if digital boundaries are violated. This can be a very tricky thing to do, but it will certainly make an impact.

