

Professor Mark Griffiths: How to beat the cyberbullies

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CYBERBULLYING typically refers to a child being tormented, threatened, harassed, humiliated, embarrassed or otherwise targeted by another child using digital technology such as the internet or mobile phones.

The methods used are limited only by the child's imagination and access to technology.

More worryingly, cyber-bullying has been on the increase over the last few years.

In national surveys of ten to 17-year-olds, twice as many children and young people indicated that they had been victims and perpetrators of online harassment in 2008 compared with 1999.

Research here in the UK and US has shown that about ten per cent of children and teenagers have been cyber-bullied in the previous month with about one in six children being cyber-bullied at least once in their lifetime.

As children get older the incidence of cyberbullying increases as a greater proportion of older children have access to mobile phones and the internet.

Most of the time the cyberbullying does not go that far, although parents sometimes try and pursue criminal charges.

"I know your school. I'm going to beat you. Hurt you. Disfigure you."

This was a genuine text message on a 15-year-old boy's mobile phone.

He knew why he was being threatened, but did not know the bully's identity. Weeks before he had formed a friendship through an internet chat-room. He gave his mobile number, but did not get one back in return. When the relationship soured, the 'friend' started sending abusive emails.

Cyberbullying is not usually a one-off communication, unless it involves a death threat or a threat of serious bodily harm.

Children often know it when they see it, while parents may be more worried about the crude language used by children rather than the hurtful effect of rude and embarrassing posts or texts.

In preventing cyberbullying, schools can work with the parents to stop and remedy cyberbullying situations.

They can also educate the students on cyber-ethics and the law.

All schools need to amend policies against bullying to include internet and text messaging abuse, with training for teachers and pupils on handling it.

Unfortunately there is no 'one size fits all' solution as there are many different forms of cyberbullying.

However, there are a number of basic things that parents can do.

As with other types of bullying it is important for parents to listen to their child and react with sympathy. You can try the following tips to help keep your child safe as you can from cyberbullying:

Get your child to show you any offensive or abusive texts or emails they've received and keep a record of them as evidence

Tell your child never to respond to any abusive texts or emails as this is often what the bully wants the child to do

Tell your child to avoid giving their name, email address or mobile phone number to people outside their trusted circle of family and friends

Try to identify the individual doing the cyberbullying

Consider contacting the cyberbully's parents. Their parents may be very concerned to learn that their child has been cyberbullying others, and may be able put a stop to it

Change email address or mobile number if the cyberbullying continues

Where possible, use blocking software to prevent the cyberbully getting abusive material through in the first place

Even if the cyberbully is anonymous – using a fake name or someone else's identity for example – there may be a way to track them through your service provider

Report any cyberbullying to your child's school, the service provider and/or the site moderator.

If all else fails, contact the police – especially if it involves threats of violence, extortion, obscene or harassing messages or pornography.

Professor Mark Griffiths is a psychologist at Nottingham Trent University and an expert on the issues of internet safety