MY STUDENT IS BEING BULLIED ONLINE

ANONYMOUSLY

WHAT CAN I DO?

Negative behavior isn't exclusive to social media. It's in our daily lives, the playground and corridors of schools. However, with today's teens always being connected online, the negative interactions that they could previously step away from, can follow them wherever they are. There are ways for teens to manage these interactions though. Young people, as digitally savvy as they are, still need the support and advice of their educators and parents. They will appreciate you talking with them about these difficulties, even before they arise. This open dialogue will help teens develop coping strategies in order to relieve stress and create a thoughtful and calm response to negative comments.

What is anonymous cyberbullying?

The phenomenal growth of social media over the last 10 years has provided fantastic opportunities for people across the globe to connect with one another. However, it has also presented challenges and many of the issues that existed offline, have transferred online. One such problem is bullying online, known as cyberbullying. It can take a form of continuous aggressive or humiliating posts, comments or questions online.

Anonymous cyberbullying is when the author of those offensive remarks remains unknown, hiding behind fake profiles, pseudonyms or using anonymous features provided by social media services.

Online anonymity has been a part of the internet since its conception and examples of online anonymity can be found in many different areas:

• Anonymous guest comments on, for example, blog posts or news channels.

• Using pseudonyms on social networking sites or gaming sites.

• In some cases anonymity is a function provided by the social network in order to encourage conversation and discussion, and protect users' personal information e.g. Whisper, Yik Yak, ASKfm.

Anonymous Online Communication

Why do young people like anonymous communication online?

Young people find online anonymity compelling for a number of reasons. It allows them to share things they don't feel comfortable saying as themselves, for example, their views about current news topics or to seek support for issues in their lives on topics such as relationships and sexuality. Most importantly, it gives them the freedom to experiment and explore with a different voice and identity. This is a critical goal for teens in their psychological phase of development. It also makes things more equal – if everyone is anonymous then it doesn't matter whether you're the most or least popular kid in school, all voices are equal[1].

Anonymous online communication offers practical benefits. For teens it allows them to better manage their digital footprint (the things we leave behind on the internet e.g. comments, content, social media profiles), allowing them to speak their mind without the same need to worry about future consequences.

The privacy afforded by anonymous online communication also allows young people to protect their real identity when sharing their views and seeking support. Whether through asking anonymous questions online or participating in forums or help groups, young people can have discussions that they may otherwise not want to participate in[2]. For example, sites like "The Student Room" let young people discuss their important issues, particularly around education, without having to make it clear who they are.

Anonymous cyberbullying

Anonymity as a function can also be misused. It allows people to sever the link between their right to freedom of expression and their responsibility to not hurt others. Resultantly, some people use anonymity to be hurtful and cruel, share humiliating pictures, spread rumours, create fake profiles, threaten or blackmail others. All of these may have detrimental effects on the development of the young people who experience them, especially if they are already vulnerable, less resilient than others or going through difficulties in their lives.

[1] www.huffingtonpost.com/larry-magid/the-good-side-of-anonymou_b_6224256.html
[2] www.msu.edu/~jwalther/docs/support.html

What should I do if my student has told me they're being cyberbullied anonymously?

Cyberbullying may have negative impacts on young people and their everyday lives, particularly on those who are already vulnerable.

As a professional working with young people you probably have an anti-bullying policy that is inclusive of bullying which occurs outside of school. However, it can be difficult to know how to best take action when the bullying happens online. Here are some helpful tips to keep in mind:

1 Reassure

Reassure the student that they did the right thing in coming to you, acknowledge their courage in coming forward, and let them know that you will help them as much as possible. Young people who have suffered bullying, especially if anonymous, often feel helpless to do anything about it. Knowing they have your support can be instrumental in helping them get back on their feet.

2 Follow procedure

Your school should have a clear policy for dealing with bullying, these can vary from school to school, but as much as possible this should be followed. In particular, ensure that you are keeping the person who has been bullied informed of all interventions to reassure them that you are taking action. If necessary loop in the Safeguarding Officer at your school who will be able to provide further advice.

3 Save the evidence

This is important in case the bullying escalates further. Even when bullying is anonymous, saved evidence can be used by police and service providers to track down the person who's bullying. Urge the person who has been bullied to save the evidence through screenshotting. This can be done easily on mobile phones and on computers.

4 Report

Encourage the young person to report any negative behaviour they come across to the social media sites involved. Most social media sites will be able to take swift action and take down the material concerned if it violates their terms of service. They may also be able to identify the anonymous bully and remove them from the service. If the student is reluctant to report a post or individual themselves for any reason, you can also report it, even if you are not a member of the site or app.

What to do if your student has told you they're being cyberbullied contd.

5 Block

Blocking users on social media can be an effective way for young people who are suffering from bullying to stop it. Most social networks will have clear guidelines on how to block within their safety centres. Encourage your students to take the time to familiarise themselves with these for each social network they're on.

6 Privacy Settings

If the anonymous bullying is happening on social networks then make sure that the young person has checked their privacy settings and re-set them if necessary to protect themselves from unwanted contact. In particular, make sure to check settings on who can see their posts. Young people may be reluctant to remove friends due to fear of missing out on social relationships, but remind them that they can always reconnect later when they feel more comfortable. It can be difficult for young people to understand, but when bullying is occurring their safety must be the highest priority.

7 School Class Bullying

Sometimes it becomes clear that a whole class is involved in bullying a particular pupil or group of pupils. This "herd mentality" can be particularly difficult to deal with as resolving it is likely to need a combination of individual and group intervention. The core of resolving class bullying in the long term is creating a strong, positive school community and this requires a large-scale ongoing conversation between staff, parents and students of the school. Encouraging pupils to come up with an open "school behaviour contract" can be an effective starting point.

8 Support

Bullying of any form can have detrimental effects on young people's confidence and they may be wary talking about it. If you feel this is the case then you could direct them to www.antibullyingpro.com or www.youngminds.org.uk where they can get more advice on what to do if they are affected by cyberbullying. If they do want to talk to someone, but don't know who, they can get confidential advice from trained counsellors experienced in talking about bullying through ChildLine (0800 11 11 (UK) or 1800 66 66 66 (ROI)).

Get ahead of the problem

Proactive steps can also be taken to reduce anonymous cyberbullying within the school:

Encourage conversation

Provide opportunities for young people to speak openly about their experiences online and share advice. Scenarios can be an effective way of developing digital resilience in young people and these can be specialised towards dealing with cyberbullying, including if it is anonymous.

Hosting an assembly

This can be a very quick way to reach the whole school and ensure that all students are informed about what steps they can take to combat cyberbullying.

Peer-to-peer learning

This can be a fantastic way to give students responsibility and engage them with the topic on which they feel authoritative. Group the class and give them each a social network to research the safety features and get them to present it to their classmates using an interactive whiteboard.

Anti-Bullying team

If you have an anti-bullying team then encourage them to talk about how they could take action on cyberbullying, perhaps by hosting a competition that encourages students to take part creatively. Trained Anti-Bullying Ambassadors are a great way to set this up in your school.

School anti-bullying policies and culture

A clear, accessible anti-bullying policy that provides a structured framework so pupils, staff and parents know the steps that will be taken in cases of bullying is really important. Encouraging pupils to look at the policy and suggest improvements can be a very effective way of promoting a strong anti-bullying culture and helping them to feel involved and responsible.

More information

More information on how best to support young people with issue concerning can be found at the websites below.

Cyberbullying

www.antibullyingpro.com/support-centre
provides advice on a range of digital issues for young people

www.youngminds.org.uk/
provides advice on young people's mental health and how to deal with bullying

www.themix.org.uk/
a support service for young people under the age of 25, it offers advice and counselling on a range of issues including cyberbullying

www.mind.org.uk/information-support/tips-for-everyday-living/online-safety-and-support/
offers support and information on a range of online issues including cyberbullying

Cyberbullying in schools

www.childnet.com/ufiles/cyberbullying_teachers.pdf
provides useful advice about general cyberbullying for school staff

www.saferinternet.org.uk/advice-and-resources/teachers-and-professionals
lots of advice and resources for how to support young people online

www.saferinternet.org.uk/about/helpline
or 0844 381 4772 – a UK helpline based around resolving online issues faced by professionals who work with young people

www.webwise.ie/category/teachers/advice-teachers/
great advice for teachers and parents on a range of digital topics including cyberbullying