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insights

Strategies to deal with cyberbullying

by Martine Oglethorpe

Cyberbullying is certainly one of the downsides of the digital world and something that evokes great fear amongst parents and educators. While the extent of the harm and the effects of cyberbullying can vary greatly, it is important that young people know there are things that can be done to minimise that harm, and to help put an end to bullying behaviour.

Cyberbullying can be described as any bullying that occurs via a technological medium, either via texting, email, social media interactions, gaming comments or the unwanted sharing of images and videos. It tends to have three characteristics: it usually involves a power imbalance, it is behaviour intended to cause harm or embarrassment, and it doesn't cease when the target asks for it to stop.

We should make a distinction between behaviour that is bullying – and thus reportable – versus that which is simply 'mean and nasty'. Some behaviours are hurtful and unkind, but not necessarily bullying. An action may be thoughtless, bold, mean, rude or ill mannered, but it doesn't necessarily have the characteristics of bullying. Such one-off behaviours would rarely be reportable or require follow up in line with anti-bullying laws. Nevertheless, for such behaviours we can still use the strategies below, as well as a healthy dose of resilience. We just wouldn't be reporting the behaviour to police or looking to the law for help.

When bullying behaviours do occur, we now have some good data to support a number of potential strategies that can work for young people. Some of these are more appropriate for certain people and certain situations, but the most important thing for young people is to know that they do have options.

Block
Every social network, app or gaming device has the ability to block or mute someone who is abusing you in any way. It is important to familiarise yourself with the 'settings' button on any network or game as this is where you will find the ways to block those people who are no longer serving you well.

Report
If the behaviour is particularly malicious or threatening and appears to be breaking any codes of behaviour set out by the service or network, the perpetrator can be reported to that service or network. Their account can be looked at and taken down if they are deemed to be breaking those codes of conduct. Again, look to the settings in the particular app or game to find reporting instructions.

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Ignore

For those who are able, simply ignoring the behaviour has also been found to be most effective. When there is no one there to respond, the offender often gets tired of the lack of interaction. The refusal 'to take the bait' often sees the behaviour subside. Of course if ignoring it doesn't stop the behaviour, then other steps need to be taken.

Be an upstander

The power of numbers can be both a good and a bad thing online. If one person takes a stand and sticks up for someone there is usually a ripple effect and others will join in to admonish the behaviour. Encouraging young people to have the courage to stand up for others who are unable to stand up for themselves goes a long way to stopping these behaviours.

Seek help from the Office of the eSafety Commissioner

If you have not had any success in getting comments, photos or videos taken down by a social network, the next step is to take your issue to the eSafety Commissioner. The Commissioner's office has the power to deal with cyberbullying and take down any content thought to be threatening or abusive. Take screenshots if needed as evidence of offending behaviour. Find more information at www.esafety.gov.au.

Get others involved

'A problem shared is a problem halved' they say, and this can certainly be true for those experiencing bullying. This can be difficult for some kids who fear retribution to themselves, embarrassment or having their tech taken away. However it is important for them to know that these do not have to be concerns for them. Ask your young person who they feel they could turn to should something go wrong online. This will preferably be a parent or teacher, but even if it is another friend both kids can discuss how they could help someone else in the same situation. What are the steps they could take to help someone being bullied online?

Every young person has the right to safe access to the internet and to be able to engage in positive interactions with others. When this right is denied, it is imperative that young people know they have options at their disposal to put an end to the bullying behaviour and get back to their fundamental right of safe access to the online world.

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