Cyberbullying: Three Conversations to Have With Kids

Today, kids have many ways to connect with others online through social media, games and messaging apps. While it can be great to interact with family and friends, there are also downsides, especially with the risks of cyberbullying.

According to the United Nations, cyberbullying involves the posting or sending of electronic messages, including pictures or videos, aimed at harassing, threatening or targeting another person.

If you're worried about protecting your child from potential online dangers, you're not alone. Our biggest ever survey of parents and carers found that 82% feel the same way.

Isn't the solution to cyber bullying just getting off the internet?
The reality is that technology is here to stay. Kids will eventually go online in some way or another, and we can't be there to watch over them forever.

But we can help them develop the skills and awareness they need to stay safer, make good choices, and talk to a trusted adult if something strange or worrying happens.

With time and practise, you can help them learn to navigate the online world safely –and conversations can make a big difference.

When you're talking about online bullying
You don't always have to have serious talks about cyberbullying. Casual, frequent chats can work well, too.

It's good to be ready, but you don't always need to plan these talks, either.

They can happen anytime, like when you're doing something else together, such as driving or cooking. And it's best to choose moments when everyone is feeling calm and relaxed.

Here are three conversations you can have with kids about cyberbullying.

A conversation about bullying behaviours
When you're talking to younger kids about cyberbullying, keep it simple. For example, you could explain it as "when someone is being mean or hurtful to another person online."

Let them know it's important to be kind online, and to be treated with kindness, just like in real life.

When chatting with your tween or teen, be mindful of their growing need for privacy and independence.

Try showing genuine interest – ask about their favourite apps or online games. This can lead to chats about if they've ever seen someone being mean to

others online (for example, on social media sites) or if they've ever felt uncomfortable with something.

Encourage your child to think about how their messages might be received before hitting send and to always respect others' privacy.

Sometimes it's easier to talk about cyberbullying when we see it in the news, TV or movies. This is especially true for tweens and teens who might feel lectured if you bring it up directly.

If something comes up, ask what they think about it. They may not share much immediately, and might feel more comfortable talking later.

Building life skills like these is a gradual process. It's always good to start early when the risks are lower, but it's never too late to start.

A conversation about cyber safety and the "what ifs"

We can help kids feel prepared to handle tricky situations by talking about "what if" scenarios.

For younger children, you could ask how they'd feel if a stranger tried to message them while they were playing a game online. Then, you could talk together about different things they could do, like telling a grown-up about the message.

Chat with them about the dangers of talking to strangers and let them know that not everyone online is who they say they are.

For teens, you could chat about how they'd feel if they saw hurtful or embarrassing comments about a classmate on social media. Discuss different ways they could respond and be open to their ideas.

This can help them to know their views matter and they can express their thoughts without feeling judged.

A conversation about always being there (no matter what)

Whether it's online or offline, it's important to help kids understand when it's okay to keep things to themselves and when they should talk to someone.

With technology constantly changing and so much connectivity, there are more ways for bullies to act and sneakier ways that bullying can happen. It's also easier for kids to hide things from their parents.

Plus, kids often feel embarrassed or scared to talk to their parents about things happening online, especially if they think they'll get in trouble.

Bullying in-person and online can also happen together, which can make it feel even scarier for kids to talk about.

Assure them you're always available to listen and help, no matter what.

Let them know it's okay to feel scared or worried, and they won't get in trouble for coming to you, even if they've broken some family rules.

Tell them it's always better to ask for help than to worry alone.

Online safety and other things to consider:

As a parent or carer, there are things you can do to set the stage for a positive relationship with technology.

If you're often on your phone when your kids are trying to talk to you, or if screens are taking over family time, it might be time to rethink things and come up with new rules together.

Maybe it's time to think about some new agreements, together as a family, like 'no devices in bedrooms'.

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Kids look up to adults and learn a lot about positive relationships with screens and how to be respectful from watching us. Model that behaviour yourself.

Give praise and attention when appropriate. Enjoying time with your child can also help build trust and good communication, making it easier for kids to come to you for help or to talk things through.

What if you've spotted the signs that a child is being cyberbullied?

Perhaps you've noticed that your child is feeling anxious or upset, they're not socialising with their friends as much, or they are acting secretively online.

They may avoid certain situations, become unusually shy, or do risky things. Additionally, a lack of appetite or trouble sleeping can also be indicators that something is not right.

If you suspect your child is being bullied online, the signs can be subtle. Trust your instincts, and try not to panic if you think there's an issue.

If you're really worried, talk to a professional.