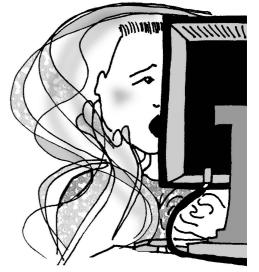# PARENTING *TIPS*

What is Cyberbullying?

Cyberbullying refers to bullying through information and communication technologies, mediums such as mobile phone text messages, emails, phone calls, internet chat rooms, instant messaging – and the latest trend – social networking websites such as MySpace, Facebook and Bebo. Cyberbullying is a fast growing trend that experts believe is more harmful than typical schoolyard bullying. Nearly all of us can be contacted 24/7 via the internet or our mobile phones. Victims can be reached anytime and anyplace. For many children, home is no longer a refuge from the bullies. "Children can escape threats and abuse in the classroom, only to find text messages and emails from the same tormentors when they arrive home."

"There's no safe place anymore. You can be bullied 24/7...even in the privacy of your own bedroom."

Recent surveys have shown that one-third of teenagers have had mean, threatening or embarrassing things said about them online. 10 percent of teenagers were threatened online with physical harm. 16 percent of teenagers who were victims told no one about it. No type of bullying is harmless. In some cases, it can constitute criminal behaviour. In extreme incidents, cyberbullying has led teenagers to suicide. Most victims, however, suffer shame, embarrassment, anger, depression and withdrawal. Cyberbullying is often seen as anonymous, and the nature of the internet allows it to spread quickly to hundreds and thousands of people.

Vernon was appalled to see his emotional vulnerability exposed on the internet

Parents often tell their children to turn off the mobile phones or stay off the computer. Many parents don't understand that the internet and mobile phone act as a social lifeline for teenagers to their peer group. Victims often don't tell their parents because they think their parents will only make the problem worse, or – that they might even confiscate their mobile phone or take away their internet access – removing that social lifeline. While bullying is something that is often 'under the radar' of adults, cyberbullying is even more so. Teenagers are increasingly communicating in ways that are often unknown by adults and away from their supervision. They organise their social lives through these mediums. Their friendships are made and broken over these mediums.

"The challenge is in raising awareness to such a level that people – victims and witnesses – will feel comfortable enough to speak up."

'So what can we do about it?' many people wonder. Education and awareness is the key. Parents and teachers need to understand the problem, and understand the technology. In an age of influences such as reality TV programmes, where participants are harassed and ridiculed, children need to understand that this is not the way they should relate to each other. If awareness of these issues is raised to such a level among their parents, teachers and friends, children will begin to feel that they can talk about cyberbullying, and the problem will come out of the mobile phone inboxes, out of the computers and into the open.

What Parents Can Do

- "Bullying in all forms – including cyberbullying – is unacceptable, and it is vital to develop effective strategies both for addressing and preventing it."

- Teachers and parents are only just beginning to understand that phone/ internet is a social lifeline within peer groups.
  - o Friendships are made and broken over these mediums.
  - o The current generation is desensitized by reality TV.
  - o Keep the computer in a well-travelled part of the home.
  - o "With the widespread use among children of online diaries and social networking sites such as MySpace.com, the attacks are becoming more common."
  - o If the child engages in unacceptable behaviour online, make certain that there are immediate consequences.

- Parents should ensure that they and their child understand how to use technology safely, including the use of moderated chat rooms and parental control software, as well as the risks and consequences of misuse
  - o Importance of not erasing messages/emails.
  - o Despite anonymity, Internet Service Providers can track computers through a unique digital signature. Every computer connected to the internet has a unique string of identifying numbers.

- Unacceptable behaviour includes:
  - o Sending email, instant or text messages to others disguising yourself as another person.
  - o Spreading rumours or false information about others.
  - o Sending rude, harassing or threatening messages.
  - o Creating websites that ridicule, humiliate or intimidate others.
  - o Posting on websites or disseminating embarrassing or inappropriate pictures or images of others.
  - o Restriction/confiscation of technology is not the answer. Kids are smart – they will find other options.
  - o Advise the child that cyberbullying may be a criminal offence - electronically communicated threats are crimes.
  - o Tell the child to never reveal his or her password to anyone, including friends.

- Warning Signs:
  - o Your child has withdrawn from normal interaction with family and friends to spend an inordinate amount of time engaged in Internet activity.
  - o Your child turns the computer off or quickly changes the screen when you enter the room.
  - o Your child suddenly avoids using the computer or drastically changes internet use habits.
  - o Your child demonstrates a marked change in behaviour, beliefs, self-esteem or attitudes.
  - o Your child's academic performance or school attendance decreases significantly.

- "A third of those who experience cyberbullying do not report it. If we are to succeed in preventing bullying, we need to break the climate of silence in which it thrives by empowering children and young people to speak out and seek help."