

Cyberbullying

411

MYTHS and TRUTHS about bullying and technology

By Tamekia Reece

Suppose you were asked: What is cyberbullying? Could someone get in trouble for it? Is it as bad as face-to-face bullying? What should or shouldn't you do if you're being cyberbullied?

Could you answer each of those questions? If not, you're definitely not alone. Although cyberbullying is talked about often in real life, magazines, movies, and on the Internet, a lot of misinformation still exists. To help keep you safe (and out of trouble), here's the real deal on cyberbullying.

CATHERINE YEULET/ISTOCK

MYTH: Everyone experiences online bullying—cyberbullying.

TRUTH: Anyone who spends time in the digital world will come across negativity. It might mean being called a hater because you disagree with someone on an online message board, receiving a mean text message from a friend you're having a disagreement with, or getting a "that's dumb" comment about your YouTube video. Those things aren't cyberbullying. "Cyberbullying is when someone repeatedly targets you in a negative manner using electronic media: texting, instant messaging, calls, e-mails, online forums, or social networks," says Dr. Gwenn O'Keeffe, author of *CyberSafe*.

MYTH: Cyberbullying isn't as bad as face-to-face bullying.

TRUTH: It's possibly worse. When someone bullies you in person, the bullying stops when you're no longer around that person. With cyberbullying, even if you turn off your computer or cell phone, the hurtful messages will be waiting when you turn the device back on. That constant harassment can have damaging effects. "Cyberbullying victims may experience anxiety, fear, self-esteem issues, or physical symptoms like headaches, stomachaches, or trouble sleeping," O'Keeffe says. Some teens, she

31 percent of teens admit they have said something online that they would not have said face-to-face.

Source: GFI Software 2011 Parent-Teen Internet Safety Report

adds, feel so hopeless they think they have to take drastic steps to end their pain.

That almost happened with Pennsylvania teen Heather.* After a classmate noticed she and Heather had identical pencil cases, the girl told her friends Heather had copied. "They contacted me on Facebook chat asking what my problem was and saying I was stupid," Heather says. Because it was about something so simple, Heather thought it would be a one-time thing. But they repeatedly sent messages for more than a month, calling Heather names, saying she had problems, and telling her everyone disliked her.

"I was depressed, felt really bad about myself, and [believed] no one liked me," Heather says. "I even thought about hurting myself physically." Fortunately, Heather didn't act on her thoughts and instead got counseling. However, the many news



Jamie Isaacs wants bullying to end.

FIGHTING BACK (POSITIVELY)

Jamie Isaacs, 15, received no assistance from school officials when a group of bullies targeted her online and off-line for years. "My mom and I approached the principal and superintendent of the school district many times, but they didn't help," the New York teen says. Jamie eventually left the school district, but she didn't go quietly. "I didn't want to just let my situation die like most people would do; I wanted justice," she says. Jamie and her family went to their county's

legislator and helped write and pass an antibullying law. They also started the Jamie Isaacs Foundation for Anti-Bullying, Inc., which aims to help raise awareness and save lives of victims of bullying. "We started the foundation hoping to prevent a situation like mine from ever happening again," Jamie says. "I want to be the voice for all the victims who had their voices put on mute."

For more info, visit www.jamieisaacsfoundation.org.

PHOTO COURTESY OF JAMIE ISAACS

*Name has been changed.

reports of teens committing suicide or harming others because of cyberbullying show some teens aren't as lucky.

MYTH: Only known troublemakers are likely to cyberbully.

TRUTH: The anonymous nature of the Internet makes it easy to say and do things you wouldn't in person, O'Keeffe says. Anyone could be behind the screen: the swim team captain, the most popular guy at school, the quiet girl from science class.

Plus, people sometimes get caught up in cyberbullying without intentionally meaning harm, says Thomas Jacobs, a retired judge and the author of *Teen Cyberbullying Investigated*. Think about it: When a celeb is a trending topic on Twitter, people tweet insults and jokes because they're bored, they think it's fun, or they don't want to be left out. The same can happen with teens. "If the bully is popular, other teens may feel pressured to join in because 'everyone else is doing it,'" Jacobs explains.

MYTH: Cyberbullies are never caught.

TRUTH: With a little investigative work, law enforcement officials can trace just about anything you do online or through a cell phone back to you, says Jacobs. And cyberbullying, depending on the circumstances, can have severe consequences. "Not only may there be punishments at home, bullies may face suspension, expulsion, or other disciplinary action at school, and there can also be legal consequences—like your parents being sued or criminal charges being filed against you," Jacobs says.

MYTH: Fighting back online will stop the cyberbullying.

TRUTH: Doctoring your bully's online photos or creating a slam book probably won't make him or her leave you alone. It will most likely start a cyber war. "Instead of trying to retaliate against the bully, it's best to save copies of harassing messages or online posts [in case you need them as proof later], and then ignore the person," Jacobs says. Many bullies like the attention they get from bothering others, so if you ignore a bully by not responding

Need Cyberbullying Help?

www.stopcyberbullying.org. This Web site by the group WiredSafety includes information on identifying cyberbullying, preventing it, and how to handle it if it happens to you.

www.stopbullying.gov. This government Web site has a ton of information on both bullying and cyberbullying.

www.athinline.org. Get facts on digital abuse and cyberbullying and learn how to deal with those things and help others at this Web site from MTV.

Bully Block app. Block unwanted text messages, pictures, and calls with this app for Android phones. You can also record to a secret file and send the information to your parents.

and blocking the person from contacting you by phone, IM, e-mail, or your social networking profiles, he or she may get bored and leave you alone.

If you have a bully who just won't quit (or you're being threatened), it's time to call in some adult help. Don't worry about losing your phone or Internet privileges if you tell your parents. You most likely won't: Being cyberbullied isn't your fault, and parents usually understand that, Jacobs says. Notifying your parents or other trusted adults, such as your school principal or counselor, is a good idea because they may be able to do things you can't—such as talking with the bully's parents, reporting the bully's behavior to an Internet service provider, or if it's really bad, contacting law enforcement officials. Whatever you do, don't think you have to deal with it on your own. The important thing to remember, Jacobs says, is no one has to suffer from cyberbullying, because help is available. **CH**

Think About It

Why, do you think, is it so easy for cyberbullying to take hold and continue? What are some ways teens who are bystanders can help stop cyberbullying?