Cyberbullying

What makes cyberbullying so toxic, invasive, and harmful? How do teens think about cyberbullying — and how can they help be part of the solution instead of part of the problem? Cyberbullying has been a major buzzword over the past several years, with a distressing number of headlines calling attention to every parent's worst nightmares: school expulsions, arrests, youth suicides. Thankfully, many schools and young people are now taking a stand against cyberbullying, and children are stepping forward to demonstrate empathy and kindness.

NOTE: In order to authentically capture the issue, we have drawn on real cases, which have elements that some parents may find distressing.

Key Vocabulary

cyberbullying

Cyberbullying involves online harassment or cruelty, and is often characterized by repeated or ongoing incidents.

The Case, Part 1

In our work with teens, the Amanda Todd story comes up often as an example of a deeply upsetting cyberbullying case. It is a story of bullying and cyberbullying with the most tragic and extreme ending imaginable: Amanda Todd took her own life at the age of 15. Shortly before she committed suicide, Amanda posted a heart-wrenching video on YouTube telling her story. In the video, she shares her experience by flipping through a series of flashcards.

▶ **https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IyHX7wMJBY0**

Amanda explains in the video that she would "go with friends on webcam" when she was in seventh grade and got a lot of positive feedback, including being called beautiful and stunning. Eventually, she was asked to flash the camera. She did, and the person with whom she was chatting took a picture and sent it out widely. She changed schools, but the photo followed her: He created a Facebook page using her exposed picture and friended people from her new school. She again lost her friends, and she again moved schools. Yet, both the stories of her mistakes and the bullying — on and offline — continued to follow Amanda.

When Amanda posted her story, she also shared the following description accompanying her video, "I'm struggling to stay in this world, because everything just touches me so deeply. I'm not doing this for attention. I'm doing this to be an inspiration and to show that I can be strong. I did things to myself to make pain go away, because I'd rather hurt myself then someone else. Haters are haters but please don't hate, although im sure I'll get them. I hope I can show you guys that everyone has a story, and everyones future will be bright one day, you just gotta pull through. I'm still here aren't I?"

Distressingly, people left cruel comments on the video, even after Amanda's death. The case is horrific and extreme. However, it serves as a powerful entry point for teens to share their reactions to bullying and cyberbullying. In the following clip, a group of teens share their reactions to the Amanda Todd story and their thoughts on what could have been done to help.

Watch Teens React to Bullying (Amanda Todd) from 3:50 – 7:00 minutes (~ 3 minutes).

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VF6cmddWOgU

Teens React to Bullying (Amanda Todd)
TheFineBros
Subscribe 9,790,158
18,725,962
149,942   5,785

Consider

• What strikes you about the teens' reactions?

• Is there a particular comment from the Teens React video that stands out for you? Why?

• One of the teens suggests that it's "the parents' fault." Do you agree that parents are responsible for how their kids treat others online?

• How do you think parents can help in situations of bullying and cyberbullying?

• What seems similar or different about cyberbullying compared to offline bullying? Do the two require similar or different interventions to support kids?

• As a parent, when (if ever) would you get involved with a cyberbullying incident? What would you consider in deciding how to respond?

• The teens share a range of reactions regarding what should happen when people post cruel comments online, including a firm but vague sense that "something should happen" and more concrete suggestions like revoking accounts, removing the comment box, or shutting down the websites. What do you think is an effective response to online cruelty?

common sense education

The Case, Part 2

In the Teens React video, they suggest that Amanda "just really needed a friend." Social media platforms can be part of the problem, but they can also be a powerful component of the solution. Pause to watch the "We are all Daniel Cui" video and consider how the students and Daniel Cui's school stood up against cyberbullying.

Watch We Are All Daniel Cui: (~ 3 minutes)

▶ **https://www.facebook.com/ video.php?v=3824560741502**

Video: We Are All Daniel Cui

Consider

• What is your immediate reaction to the video?

• What do you think made the biggest difference for Daniel? Why was his peers' reaction to the incident so impactful?

• What do you hope for your kids when they see cyberbullying happening in their online lives? What is your minimum expectation and what is your hope?

Cunningham, Calvin. "FULL VIDEO: Amanda Todd: Struggling, Bullying, Suicide, Self Harm, Fighting." *YouTube* Video, 8:15. September 2, 2014.
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IyHX7wMJBY0

TheFineBros. "Teens React to Bullying (Amanda Todd)." *YouTube* Video, 14:42. September 2, 2014.
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VF6cmddWOgU

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- **Build a support network for your children.**

  It can be easy to think that you'll be the one to support your child in times of need. But kids often hesitate to reach out to parents in the toughest of times. Encourage your kids to turn to any trusted adult — teacher, coach, older sibling — if they are on the receiving end of hurtful online behavior. Remind your kids that you understand these situations are complicated, and that you do not want them to handle it alone. Share personal stories of when you needed someone else's support. Sometimes kids worry that parents will overract, so it is helpful toexplain that you'll think through the solution together. Try communicating your commitment to helping them find solutions that feel comfortable, safe, and supportive if and when these situations arise.

- **Encourage your kids to stand up to the bully — or at the very least to stand *with* the victim.**

  In an ideal world, we hope our kids will stand up to bullies — and this is certainly a great message for your kids. If it feels safe, encourage your child to address the bully online or, better yet, offline. Still, it doesn't always feel safe, socially or otherwise, to stand up to cyberbullies. Urge your kids to at least stand *with* the victim by communicating (1) that they do not share the bully's perspective and (2) that they are there for support. For example, a kid might say, "Hey, I just wanted to let you know that I saw what is going on online and I just wanted to tell you that I'm really sorry this is happening to you. I don't feel that way about it and I think it is really mean that people are saying that. If you need to talk to someone or if there is anything I can do, let me know."

- **Be strategic in your support.**

  If you feel that your child or someone you know is being cyberbullied "aka the target," know that there are concrete steps that you can take. First, listen to the victim and be a sympathetic ear. Show the victim how to block bullies online; many platforms have "blocking" features or have a way to report inappropriate use. Encourage the victim to take screenshots and/or print the evidence of the mean messaging. And last, find ways to encourage kindness at your kids' schools or within the community. How can you highlight the positive ways kids are using media and technology these days?

Cyberbullying

Digital Dilemmas are brief hypothetical situations and corresponding questions designed to foster cross-generational conversations about different aspects of adolescents' digital lives. Use this fictitious scenario, based on real-life stories, to spark a conversation at home with your children and open up the discussion about these very important topics.

Fake Pages

Mackayla looked away from her computer screen in disbelief. One of her friends had just sent Mackayla the link to a vicious fake page… of Mackayla's younger sister, Remy. Someone – she had no idea who was behind it – had used Remy's picture and name to make a fake account. They filled out all of the "About me" sections making fun of Remy's interests, hobbies, and even her style and appearance. All of the tagged pictures were photoshopped pictures of Remy's head on embarrassing bodies. One pictured showed Remy's face on the body of a very overweight older man, and another had Remy's head on the body of a nearly-naked bikini model. Even worse, it looked like the fake page had "friended" more than half of Remy's grade. Mackayla remembered that Remy had mentioned having some issues at school and had even come home crying a couple of times but she had not realized that it had gotten this bad. Mackayla didn't know if Remy had seen the page yet, but she was devastated and knew that Remy would be too.

? What seems realistic (or unrealistic) about this story? Do you ever hear about this kind of thing happening?

? What can Mackayla do now that she has seen the page? What would you do if you were Remy's older sister and saw the page?

? Do you think this is a case of "cyberbullying"? Why or why not?

? What can different people – her parents, her school, her friends – each do to help Remy get through this experience?