TOP 10 WAYS PARENTS CAN PROTECT KIDS FROM CYBERBULLYING

Jeremy A. Kaplan, October 9, 2010

Concerns about cyberbullying have moved back to the front burner amid the agony over a Rutgers University student's suicide after two fellow students were accused of secretly streaming video of him in a sexual encounter with a man over the Internet.

Cyberbullying is particularly scary for parents; it goes beyond simply keeping your kids off certain websites, and it requires a deeper understanding of what's appropriate -- and what to do when the line has been crossed.

Experts say there are some guidelines parents can follow to protect their children -- at least until they're old enough to make decisions for themselves. Here are the top 10 tips from cybersafety experts about how parents can help their kids avoid online bullies.

1. Monitor the use of your child's photo online. Many cyberbullies will take your child's photo and manipulate it in ways that are damaging or embarrassing. Be very careful about the images your child presents online, especially those coming from cell phones.

"Turn off picture receiving/sending capabilities for children -- talk to your service provider about how to do so," advises Anna Maria Scheimreif, a guidance counselor with Medford Memorial School in Medford, N.J. "Experience has shown me that most children are usually not being taught to use this capability wisely."

2. In fact, watch out for cell phones, period. "Cyberbullying can occur through any means of electronic communication device," Scheimreif added, noting that parents and guardians are often unaware of all of the capabilities of these devices. "Buy your child a phone you can understand and control. If you can't figure it out -- regardless of whether your child is dying to have it -- don't buy it."

Gavin McKiernan, national grassroots director for the Parents Television Council, points out that smartphones present a unique problem. "As a parent, you have very little chance of finding out what's going on -- until it's a problem." He suggests proactive steps, limiting access to the Internet or other options at an early age.

3. Suggest a support network. Fourteen-year-old McKay Hatch didn't like the foul language his friends were using, and started The No Cussing Club as a way of dealing with it. "They were victims of intensive bullying and harassment for taking a positive stand," McKiernan said, but "Having those four or five friends to start out with, knowing you're not alone, was extremely helpful."

4. Have an open conversation. One of the most important things parents can do about cyberbullying is to simply talk about it. "Parents need to regularly check in with kids and gauge the emotional tenor of the social network," advised Robin Raskin, editor of the site "Raising Digital Kids" and founder of the Kids@Play conference. "They should ask 'what happened online today' right after they ask 'how was school today,'" Raskin said.

Often, simply raising questions and having an open discussion are the best ways to find out whether children are encountering inappropriate pressure online, experts suggest.

"Talk to your kids about cyberbullying and help them understand what it is -- and what they should do about it if it occurs," said Dr. Gwenn O'Keeffe, the author of the new book CyberSafe: Protecting and Empowering Kids in the Digital World from the American Academy of Pediatrics.

5. Involve students. Raskin advises schools to put students who are leaders in "good digital citizenship" on the policy boards at school. "When students themselves have a say in what constitutes bullying and what the punishments are, we all win. Students trust other students more than parents and teachers," she said.

6. Advocate online-reputation awareness. If awareness of right and wrong aren't a part of both home and school, children won't take it to heart, Raskin warns. "Stopping cyberbullying is going to need to adopt the 'takes a village' approach," she told FoxNews.com. If a student feels threatened, then parents, other students and educators all need to be involved."

7. Set -- and then obey -- the age limits. "If you're under 13 you *DO NOT* belong on Facebook," Raskin said, noting that sites like Togetherville are "social networks on training wheels" that make it easy for young kids to develop good social-networking skills. But she stresses the age limits. "Parents need to enforce that rule and not play ostrich."

All conversations need to be age appropriate, Scheimfreif adds. "Be specific in your communication, but age appropriate. Say 'sexting' to a 13-year-old, but not to a 10-year-old."

8. Know who your kids are talking to. "Don't assume -- there is no profile for a cyberbully or a victim," warns Scheimfreif. Parents should be vigilant and knowledgeable, they should keep the lines of communication open and use their local resources. "Ask your child's friends, their parents, your friends, the school community and your local community," she said.

And it's not all about spying. O'Keeffe stresses that parents can encourage kids to let them know who they're talking to online. "Teach your kids to seek out an adult, such as yourself, if they are online and one of the ' four Ds' occurs -- something Dangerous, Destructive, Derogatory, or Damaging. Just like we wouldn't allow these to occur in the offline world for behaviors or actions or speech, we can't allow them in the online world for talk, posts, texts, behavior."

9. Teach kids appropriate actions. It's best not to engage people when they're being negative and hurtful, notes McKiernan. He advises parents to tell their children: "Follow the lessons of Martin Luther King and Mahatma Gandhi. If you know you're right, don't engage in people who are spiteful and angry."

That's a tough lesson for kids to learn, of course, and that's where parents can help out. Advise your kids not to make comments or join in spiteful threads on message boards.

"Help kids stand up to bullies online by not engaging in further interaction," agrees O'Keeffe. Tell your kids, "Don't forward the communication or respond back, but show it to a trusted adult."

10. The Internet is forever. Raskin notes that parents should remember the Internet's long memory -- and should remind kids constantly of the permanence of the web. "It's not a great place to play a prank on someone -- since it never goes away and spreads like wildfire."