Helping our kids deal with cyberbullying.

A TELUS Wise® parent's guide.

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What is cyberbullying?

Kids may brush off online meanness as a joke, but cyberbullying can be even more devastating than face-to-face bullying. Technology allows for cyberbullying to take place on a much larger and more public scale than "traditional" bullying, with the potential for numerous witnesses, greater humiliation, and possibly even more instigators. With this extended reach, kids can be victimized anywhere and at any time, and feel like there is no escape.

There are several ways that young people bully others online. By far, the most common behaviour is verbal or emotional abuse, like name calling or sending offensive or threatening messages. Often, ones' appearance, race, religion, ethnicity or sexual orientation is the basis for bullying.

Other examples of cyberbullying include:

- Spreading rumours
- Sharing personal or embarrassing information about others, including photos or videos
- Imitating someone online (by gaining access to their accounts or creating fake accounts)
- Social exclusion where someone is intentionally left out of online social conversations or experiences (e.g. chat groups)
- Harassing players in an online game
- Posting offensive or inflammatory comments in online communities with the goal of instigating conflict (often referred to as 'trolling')

Did you know? Parents are the number one group of people that kids turn to for help with cyberbullying, and most kids say that talking to their parents makes the situation better.

How can I help prevent or reduce the impact of cyberbullying?

Engage in ongoing dialogue:

Don't wait for things to go wrong before engaging your child in a conversation about appropriate online behaviour; instead, have ongoing conversations about what your child does online starting at an early age. Your kids should be in the habit of talking to you about their everyday online lives, just like they tell you about their day at school. Remind your children to come to you right away if they feel uncomfortable or threatened online.

Set rules, standards and boundaries:

Establish clear rules about the values you expect your children to live by online, similar to the values you expect in their physical world. Technology can give people the sense of anonymity, sometimes making it easier for youth to cyberbully (intentionally or unintentionally) because they can't see the hurt through the screen. It may seem hard to believe, but even teens are less likely to engage in cyberbullying if there is a household rule against it![1]

Here are two resources to help establish healthy habits online:

- Family Online Rules tip sheet

- TELUS Wise Smartphone contract: an agreement designed to keep the lines of communication open between parents/guardians and children, and establish safe and healthy smartphone usage and boundaries.

Educate and inform:

To rise above cyberbullying we need to change the culture in which it happens. Youth need to understand that what may seem like "just a joke" can have a powerful and negative impact on someone else.

It's also important to teach youth that most kids aren't cyberbullying. When young people believe that bullying is common, they are more likely to engage in and tolerate it – and when they know how uncommon it actually is, bullying rates drop.

While 42 percent of youth report experiencing cyberbullying in the past 4 weeks, less than a quarter (15%) admit to cyberbullying others.[2]

[1] Young Canadians in a Wired World, 2014.
[2] Young Canadians' Experiences with Electronic Bullying report, 2015

Be aware of gender specific considerations:

The kinds of mean behaviours that young people engage in online are gendered. For girls, cyberbullying is often relational with girls most likely to be mean online to get back at someone who was mean to them or to a friend. We should encourage youth to talk things out with the person alone and offline (assuming they feel safe to do so), instead of calling on their friends for backup, which can lead to more drama that escalates into bullying.

Boys are significantly more likely than girls to harass others 'just for fun' by mocking their race, religion, ethnicity or sexual orientation, and/or sexually harassing others online. In-game harassment is particularly important for parents to be aware of, as this behaviour increases as boys get older. To counter this, we need to set clear guidelines with youth on our expectations around how they engage with others online and reinforce the need to be respectful in all online environments.

Understand where there is greater risk:

Kids and teens who may be marginalized for poverty, disability, being a member of a visible minority group, and/or identifying as LGBTQ+ are much more likely to be targets of cyberbullying.

If you think your kids are at increased risk of being cyberbullied, make an extra effort to support them. Reinforce that they are not alone and that you are there for them. Make it clear that homophobia, racism, and derogatory slang is as unacceptable online as it is offline. Using terms like "fag", or "retard" or sexualized name-calling, like calling someone a "slut", is also unacceptable and constitutes cyberbullying.

The Internet can be a lifeline for marginalized kids, allowing them to connect with others who are similar, share experiences and offer/receive support from one another. If your child tells you they have been cyberbullied, do not take away their device, connectivity or social media, but rather have a conversation about it and offer your support.

Sexting and consent:

Make sure your kids understand the idea of consent and how it applies online. Have conversations about gender roles and how these can make youth feel they have to act in certain ways. No one should feel pressured into doing anything online – including sending or sharing intimate images. Like with cyberbullying, when kids understand that sexting and/or sharing of sexts is less common than they think it is, they are less likely to engage in the behaviour.

Forty six percent of youth who have received sexts have shared them, and this is more common among boys (53%) than girls (40%). Reinforce the importance of treating everyone with respect and that sharing sexts is both wrong and hurtful. If you have boys, challenge gender stereotypes that might make them think it is okay to share intimate images a girl sends them.

> Some additional resources on sexting and non-consensual sharing of sexts:
> - Non-Consensual Sharing of Sexts: Behaviours and Attitudes of Canadian Youth study report
> - Infographic

What should I do if my child is targeted?

It can be difficult for kids and teens to come forward when they are being bullied (and possibly more so for LGBTQ+ youth who may not be ready to openly talk about their sexuality). If your child is a target of cyberbullying, consider the following tips:

- **Stay calm and don't overreact.** One of the biggest reasons kids don't ask their parents for help when it comes to online conflict comes from the fear they will have their devices or social media access restricted. Forbidding your child from going online or taking away their smartphone may do more harm than good. For your child, this is equal to social death and will leave them feeling even more victimized, isolated and alone.

- **Take it seriously.** Resist the urge to minimize or ignore the situation. Listen and provide advice if your child asks for it, and remind them they are not alone. Check in regularly to ensure the situation is getting better, not worse, and that your child feels supported. Letting them know you care and are there for them can go a long way in alleviating their fears.

- **Develop a plan together and agree on what the best next steps are.** If you feel it necessary, engage their school in the conversation, and in more serious cases you can engage the police. Always ensure that your child is aligned with the plan.

- **Teach your child what to do if they are being cyberbullied by sharing the four-step STOP process:**
  - **Stop** – leave the online space and don't engage or argue back. Taking a break and doing something offline to get your mind off the situation can be an effective coping mechanism.
  - **Block** – block messages and/or the person being mean if you can
  - **Record** – save the evidence, taking screenshots if you have to
  - **Talk** – talk to someone about it so you don't have to deal with it alone (parents, teachers, coaches, Kid's Help Phone, or even the local police)

What are some signs that my child is being cyberbullied?

- a reluctance to use technology and/or social media, or conversely, being hyper-vigilant about checking their device and/or social media

- being upset or aggravated after using their phone, tablet or computer

- general anxiety, distress, sleeplessness

- withdrawal from school, friends and usual activities

Refer to the <u>What to Do if Someone is Mean to You Online tip sheet</u> for additional guidance on what to do, and consult the MediaSmarts article <u>Cyberbullying and the Law</u> for more information on legal options.

What should I do if my child is cyberbullying someone?

The anonymity of technology can make even the "best kids" make mistakes online. If you discover that your child is the one being mean online the same rules apply as if they were the target – stay calm, don't overreact and don't take away their devices, excluding them from the online world.

First and foremost, make sure your child immediately stops engaging with the target(s) online. Cyberbullying can have serious consequences, including disciplinary action at school and in extreme cases, criminal charges.

Have your child explain the situation to you from their perspective so their voice is heard. In response, be clear that it is never okay to be mean or cruel online, even if they are responding to being bullied themselves (or in defense of a friend who has been bullied).

Next, talk to your child about how they can make up for the harm they've done. Perhaps they can offer the target a face-to-face apology (if possible), or post an apology online. People do make mistakes, but we also need to recognize and understand the importance of addressing the situation, and how it can help both parties learn from the experience.

Talk to your child about what led to the cyberbullying in the first place, and discuss ways to avoid it in the future, such as:

- Recognizing when we're angry or upset

- Assuming the best about other people

- Thinking twice about how what we say or do will make people feel

- Talking to people in person when we're upset instead of escalating conflicts online

- Not connecting online with people who often make us mad or upset

- Taking time away from technology to calm down and decide on the best course of action as opposed to acting in the moment.

Finally, you may decide that you need to have more specific household rules about how you expect your children to behave. Make sure to explain those clearly and help your child understand the importance of treating other people with respect, online and off.

# How can I help my child stand up to cyberbullying?

Understanding the power of intervention is critical. When kids intervene when they witness cyberbullying, it can make a tremendous and positive difference. Fortunately, most kids who witness cyberbullying do want to help, however they often have concerns about making the situation worse or becoming targets themselves.

Make sure your kids know there is always something they can do to help when they witness someone being cyberbullied. Some helpful responses could be:

- **Comforting the person being targeted privately:** One of the worst things about being bullied is feeling that nobody cares about what's happening. Letting someone know you care can be a big help and won't make things worse.

- **Helping the person being targeted report what's happening or talk about it with their parents or friends.** Kids say that helping them talk to parents or friends or report what's happening is one of the best things witnesses can do.

- **Posting something nice about the person being targeted.** If your kids want to do something public they can let people know that they are supporting the person being targeted by posting something good about them.

- **Privately talking to the person doing the bullying.** If your kids want to talk directly to the person doing the bullying, to avoid embarrassing them, they should send a private message or text.

- **If something is happening right now that they have to stop,** they can try distracting the person who is doing the bullying or giving the person who is being targeted a chance to get out of the situation without being embarrassed (for instance, by changing the conversation, or sharing something unrelated, like a funny video).

Help your kids feel empowered to intervene when they witness cyberbullying. Together, go through the Impact tool and print out the tip sheets on different ways to help out when they witness cruel behaviour online.

Find more resources on the MediaSmarts or TELUS Wise websites.
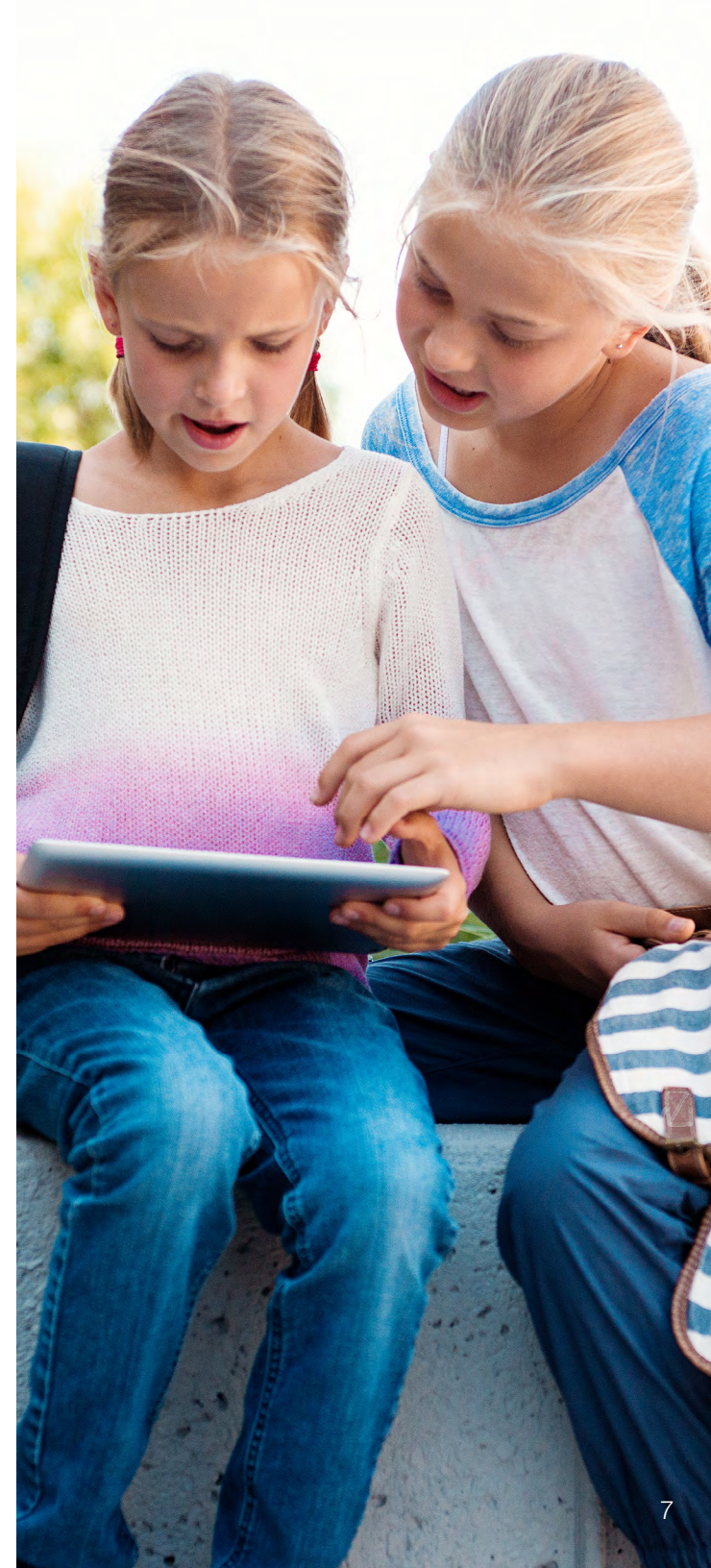
How you can participate in TELUS Wise.

- Visit us at <u>telus.com/**wise**</u> if you have any questions or if you want to book a free in-person TELUS Wise workshop for you child's school and/or parent group.

- Contact us at wise@telus.com

- Join the conversation online with @TELUS on Twitter and using #TELUSWise

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