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When kids are getting hurt online, it's tempting to just "pull the plug." Although doing that may limit your child's exposure, be careful before you do this. Many kids experience banning electronics as essentially a punishment for having reported cyberbullying to their parents, and they may think twice before talking to you about it next time.

Still, it's a good idea to encourage kids to develop alternate activities that they really enjoy. That helps them keep their mind off the digital abuse and feel better about things. And above all – keep the conversation going! Talking is the ultimate cure for cyberbullying.

Dr. Elizabeth K. Englander

Dr. Elizabeth K. Englander is a Professor of Psychology, and the founder and Director of the Massachusetts Aggression Reduction Center at Bridgewater State University in Bridgewater, Massachusetts.
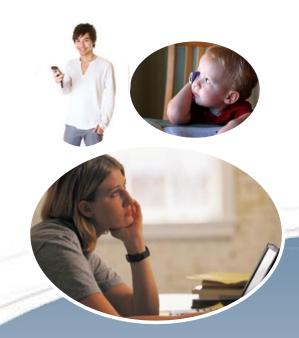
She is a nationally recognized researcher and trainer in the field of childhood aggression, bullying and cyberbullying.

Dr. Englander has trained tens of thousands of teachers, students, and parent and community groups. She presents at many national conferences and is the author of dozens of journal articles and book chapters, including the book *Understanding violence*.

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Understanding Cyberbullying and Social Networking

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Cyberbullying and Social Networking.

Social Networking websites are sites whose purpose is to keep people interacting with one another. The most popular site right now is Facebook, but many other sites are also popular (e.g., Formspring, Google+, Bebo). Social networking sites aren't the *only* place where cyberbullying happens, but they're one of the most common places where kids may post comments, send cruel messages, post hurtful polls or pictures, or start rumors about others.

Text messaging is the other main venue for cyberbullying. Texting messaging – often called "texting" – is more popular among girls, who report in my research that it accounts for about half of cyberbullying cases.

What do YOU need to know?

Digital communications – online, or via texting – are a central part of socializing for children today. This can be both bad and good for kids, but it does make parenting more complex. On the one hand, electronics are here to stay, and children must have experience with devices to learn how to use them. On the other hand, devices and games can be so compelling that many kids need to be coaxed to find other interests and activities.

Parents don't need to be technology experts to help their kids learn how to use technology. While it's always a good idea to understand the technologies your kids use, ultimately, kids really need to have old-fashioned conversations with their parents, discussing what they do and see online, and what they think and feel about it – and what they think is right or wrong.

Why do kids get into trouble online?

Although much attention has focused on online predators, it's much more likely that a child will be the cyberbully, not an adult.

Kids often don't understand how electronic communications change how we talk. For example, when you are typing something, you don't see the person's face and body language; you miss all of those cues and can easily misunderstand what's being said. Online, it's easier to be casually cruel because you can't see how you're hurting the person, and you don't get the nonverbal cues that tell you to stop.

Many online also believe that they are "lost in the crowd" and that no one will ever see what they're doing. What they don't realize is that their "real-life" community (e.g., their school) doesn't have a million people and because it's these people who watch them online, they are not really lost in a crowd of millions.

Of course, because kids are so young, their ability to understand the permanency of what they do online is very limited!

Some Myth-Busters

Recent research found that more than 90% of kids were already online playing interactive games by age 8. Start discussing online issues and etiquette when your kids are young!

As children grow, most bullying episodes either happen online or are both online and in school. By high school, very few incidents happen *only* in school.

Most kids are comfortable with technology but not very knowledgeable. They need to talk about how to interact with others online.

When you give your child a "cell phone," you're giving them a mobile computer – not just a phone. Be aware of how they can use these devices and talk with them about rules.

Kids are so accustomed to being connected that putting away that cell phone can actually make them anxious. Talk about that anxiety and help kids put it away!

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