

Social Media Safety Recommendations for School Districts

INTRODUCTION

The prevalence of social media in society presents a wide gamut of outcomes that have an effect on children. That variance can stretch from extremely positive experiences (social connectedness, communication with others of similar interest, and learning of all kinds) to extremely negative experiences including physical injury and social and emotional harm. The role of educators is to value students as human beings and, therefore, embrace the responsibility to care for and protect them.

Intensifying the issue and impact of cyberbullying is that rumors, negative information, and threats can spread nearly limitlessly and can be done so with incredible speed. Further complicating this phenomenon is that technology capacity makes this information nearly irretrievable once it has been posted. Therefore, damaging cyberbullying spreads wide and fast and often cannot be rescinded. Making it even more difficult to rectify, cyberbullies can post on social media without revealing and/or masking their identities.

“Cyberbullying is being cruel to others by sending or posting harmful material or engaging in other forms of social aggression using the Internet or other digital technologies. Cyberbullying can take different forms:

- **Flaming.** Online fights using electronic messages with angry and vulgar language.
- **Harassment.** Repeatedly sending nasty, mean, and insulting messages.
- **Denigration.** Sending or posting gossip or rumors about a person to damage his or her reputation or friendships.
- **Impersonation.** Pretending to be someone else and sending or posting material to get that person in trouble or danger or to damage that person’s reputation or friendships.
- **Outing.** Sharing someone’s secrets or embarrassing information or images online.
- **Trickery.** Talking someone into revealing secrets or embarrassing information, then sharing it online.
- **Exclusion.** Intentionally and cruelly excluding someone from an online group.
- **Cyberstalking.** Repeated, intense harassment and denigration that includes threats or creates significant fear.”

“Cyberbullying is being cruel to others by sending or posting harmful material or engaging in other forms of social aggression using the Internet or other digital technologies.”

-Willard

(Willard)

Effects of cyberbullying:

1. Physical or emotional harm to the other student;
2. Damage to the other student’s personal property;
3. The other student to experience a hostile school environment;
4. An infringement on the other student’s right to attend school;
5. Substantial disruption of the educational process or the orderly operation of the school.”

(McKeon)

It has become necessary to take action steps in order to guide students on a positive pathway when using social media. Those actions encompass the entire school community because many people in schools hold collective responsibility for their students' wellbeing.

This document serves as a guide for Connecticut school districts to develop a comprehensive approach to the issue of social media safety for students. It is intended to stand as a reflective and comparative instrument for schools when considering the scope of their system to enhance student safety in social media.

POLICY

Suggestions for developing and/or refining policies and practices regarding the use of social media:

1. Include cyberbullying and social media use in district bullying and school climate policies and clearly articulate those policies to all stakeholder groups, including parents and students.
2. Require all school employees to follow the same procedures for cyberbullying as they do for other forms of abusive behaviors. The guidelines for staff responsibilities should specifically include their responsibility for reporting credible rumors or knowledge of cyberbullying.
3. Include a clear and comprehensive definition of bullying and cyberbullying in the district's policies.
4. Include policies regarding cyberbullying in the student and parent handbooks and any other communication systems (where and how information is disseminated to parents and students).
5. Clearly state what is and is not acceptable use of school-owned technology.
6. Clearly define the school's policy on the use of personal SMART phones and other devices in school. (The school policy may be that personal devices and school Wi-Fi are not for personal use.)
7. Make clear that all rules and consequences apply to anyone in the school community (administrators, faculty, support staff, coaches, other students etc.)
8. Make clear that personal devices are subject to search by school officials.
9. Include notice of the consequences that may occur for cyberbullying infractions and make clear that those consequences apply to infractions that occur outside of school as well as inside.
10. Include notice of the means of reporting infractions. A school managed reporting system should be available for both students who wish to remain anonymous and those willing to identify themselves.
11. Include restorative measures and not just punitive actions. When cyberbullying infractions occur, school administrators should take advantage of the opportunity to help those who bully grow in maturity and tolerance.
12. Annually plan, develop and put into place effective actions designed to create and maintain a school climate that discourages any and all forms of bullying, including cyberbullying.

BACKGROUND:

“Establish firm policies. Rules regarding technology need to be explicitly taught, rather than assumed. A student should be aware of policies before a problem occurs. Create clear boundaries. Policies serve as a good way to curtail verbal aggression and establish it as an unacceptable behavior. Policies should also be specific, including any legal implications.” (Clifford)

Any school/district policy regarding cyberbullying must align with the more general district bullying policy, an example of which follows:

Policy from Regional School District 15:

“Bullying” means the repeated use by one or more students of a written, verbal or electronic communication, such as cyberbullying, or a physical act or gesture directed at another student attending school in the same district that:

- 1. causes physical or emotional harm to such student or damage to such student’s property;*
- 2. places such student in reasonable fear of harm to himself or herself, or of damage to his or her property;*
- 3. creates a hostile environment at school for such student;*
- 4. infringes on the rights of such student at school; or*
- 5. substantially disrupts the educational process or the orderly operation of a school.*

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-Clifford

Bullying shall include, but not be limited to, a written, verbal or electronic communication or physical act or gesture based on any actual or perceived differentiating characteristics, such as race, color, religion, ancestry, national origin, gender, sexual orientation, gender identity and expression, socioeconomic status, academic status, physical appearance, or mental, physical, developmental or sensory disability, or by association with an individual or group who has or is perceived to have one or more of such characteristics.”

(Pomperaug Regional School District 15)

CULTURE

Suggestions for building and sustaining a positive school culture:

- 1. A student’s overarching need is to feel cared about and respected. Work toward demonstrating unquestioning care as the key component to unlocking the potential of students. What are the things that always happen in your school which show caring and understanding toward students?*
- 2. “Relationships are influenced by emotions. By creating positive relationships between students and between staff and students, the culture of the school is improved.” (Brackett)*
- 3. “Culture is relationships. What do you do each day to create the emotional climate you want? Is the mindset of your system infused with the belief that emotions matter? Do you have an emotionally accepting climate? Are you building social and emotional skills?” (Brackett)*

4. Establish intervention plans for repeat offenders. Interventions should focus on restorative behaviors and not just punishment. Hold aggressors responsible for their actions and address issues in a healthy way in order to try to prevent further incidents.
5. Provide counseling support for students who are victims/targets of bullying.
6. Ensure that staff acknowledge and accept students' personal interests, different backgrounds and varying personalities.
7. Educate students about their online presence. Make clear that they are not anonymous when they are online, that words matter and that what they say about people can have harmful effects.
8. Create team-building opportunities for students. Create opportunities for students to join in activities with which they feel a personal connection and interest. By doing so, students feel that school is a place *for them personally*. Students who feel that they "belong" are less likely to be offenders or victims of bullying.
9. Provide opportunities for students to meet and interact with peers with whom they may not ordinarily associate.
10. Provide opportunities for students to express themselves and voice their concerns (e.g., assemblies, class meetings, focus groups, student government, etc.)
11. Give positive feedback when students exhibit supportive actions toward one another.
12. Have a systematic process in place for educating students about relationships. Develop a well-articulated curriculum for tolerance, acceptance and respect in which all students participate.

CAS has developed a Model School Climate Policy which is available as a free resource at http://www.casciac.org/pdfs/Model_CT_SC_Policy.pdf.

BACKGROUND:

- *"It's not something you can legislate or arrest your way out of," cautions Stephen Balkam, chief executive officer of the Family Online Safety Institute in Washington, D.C. "It's always going to be a combination of tools, rules, and schools. The emphasis needs to be on creating a culture of responsibility online."* (Adams)
- *Experts say banning technology is not the answer, but rather teaching kids to be good digital citizens. When schools adopt codes of conduct, they should apply to activity in or out of school and set the consequences up front.* (Adams)
- *Encourage a telling atmosphere so that pupils will report cyberbullying where they see it.* (Adams)
- *Addressing the situation in a healthy way avoids further incidences. These might include teaching students about healthy relationships, responsibility and empathy. It is vital to create opportunities for forgiveness and reintegration to occur. Punishment is different than restoration in that it focuses on the rule broken, rather than the overall behavior. Restoration aims to*
 1. *Acknowledge the behavior.*
 2. *Understand the harm that was caused to the person.*
 3. *Repair or amend the harm in some way.*
 4. *Commit to change so it does not happen again.* (Clifford)

"Zero tolerance policy. Make students understand early on that bullying of any kind, including cyberbullying is unacceptable. The [Massachusetts Aggression Reduction Center](#), found that students

reported “looks, not fitting in, and sexual orientation” as reasons for being targets. Students with disabilities were more likely to be targets of cyberbullying, than in person bullying. Teach students about being responsible world citizens who are accepting of individual differences. Make sure that groupings in the classroom allow students to work with different people. Try to create activities that build on strengths, to show students how each person has something unique to contribute. Incorporate responsible technology use. Teach tolerance and respect for diversity. An open environment is best where individual differences are appreciated.”
(Clifford)

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-Clifford

EDUCATION

Suggestions for incorporating Internet safety awareness into the curriculum:

1. “Teach about emotions and how they can have an effect on behaviors. When do students in your district learn about how their emotions affect their actions? When do they learn about how their emotions influence decision-making?” (Brackett)
2. “Know exactly where and when you teach children to recognize their own feelings and emotions. Kids need to learn about feelings just as they do all other aspects of life.” (Brackett)
3. Recognize that often students can experience stress. How do they learn about stressors and constructive stress management? Students should learn about stress management, dealing with adversity and perseverance. Help them to understand how grit helps them through difficult experiences.
4. Teach about five skills related to emotions: Recognizing, Understanding, Labeling, Expressing, Regulating; R.U.L.E.R (Brackett)
5. Identify and teach the exact vocabulary that deals with emotions.
6. Ensure that clubs, teams and other school organizations take actions that support positive school climates. Issues with cyberbullying should be taught to members of clubs, school organizations and teams.
7. Review the district's policies for bullying and cyberbullying with students.
8. Make sure students understand that they have the right to anonymity when they are the victim or are reporting cyberbullying as outlined in the district's school climate policy.
9. Establish clear guidelines for students on how to report abuses of social media. Some experts suggest having an anonymous way to report, such as a drop box, hotline, or e-mail. Tell students that reporting a cyberbullying incident isn't squealing.
10. Teach students that sometimes kids feel they are anonymous when they are online but that all social media can spread rapidly.
11. Provide students with a clear definition of cyberbullying:
“Cyberbullying is bullying that takes place over digital devices like cell phones, computers, and tablets. Cyberbullying can occur through SMS, Text, and apps, or online in social media, forums, or gaming where people can view, participate in, or share content. Cyberbullying includes sending, posting, or sharing negative, harmful, false, or mean content about someone else. It can include sharing personal or private information about someone else causing embarrassment or humiliation. Some cyberbullying crosses the line into unlawful or criminal behavior.”
(stopbullying.gov)

12. Help students to recognize cyberbullying when it occurs. Examples include:
 - a. Posting comments or rumors about someone online that are mean, hurtful, or embarrassing.
 - b. Threatening to hurt someone or telling them to harm themselves.
 - c. Posting a mean or hurtful picture or video.
 - d. Pretending to be someone else online in order to solicit or post personal or false information about someone else.
 - e. Posting mean or hateful names, comments, or content about any race, religion, ethnicity, or other personal characteristics online.
 - f. Creating a mean or hurtful webpage about someone.
 - g. When someone repeatedly harasses, mistreats, or makes fun of another person.
13. Expose students to examples of cyberbullying.
14. Make students are aware that the bully can remain anonymous and may be unaware of the pain inflicted on the target.

"Remind them to never put anything sensitive into an electronic format and send it to someone," says Willard. "The more embarrassing or damaging the material you send electronically, the more likely it will become public."

"Encourage the target of cyberbullying not to erase the evidence by immediately deleting the hurtful message from his/her wall or phone. Tell the students to take a screenshot to save it, and then share the information with an adult." (Adams)

WHAT CAN KIDS DO?

1. Don't respond to any online or text messages sent by cyberbullies.
2. Don't be an accomplice by forwarding any of the messages to others kids.
3. Save and print out all the messages as proof and evidence of cyberbullying.
4. If you are being bullied, tell an adult immediately to get help solving the problem.

(Fitzgerald)

SOME FACTS:

- *Cyberbullying is often anonymous and unlimited by time and place so the victim has little respite from the abuse.*
- *There is an element of disinhibition due to anonymity where students who would not normally participate do so. It can reach hundreds or even thousands of people quickly. The victim can feel even more isolated.*
- *It often involves repeated episodes of aggression and an imbalance of power. The victim may feel escape is impossible.*
- *More females than males are the victims and perpetrators of this type of bullying.*

"Cyberbullying is often anonymous and unlimited by time and place so the victim has little respite from the abuse."

-Clifford

Create digital citizens. *Cyberbullying is impersonal in nature. It is important to teach kids that the same rules apply in and out of the digital world. Clearly teach students how to be cyber safe and savvy. Microsoft even provides a free instructional program to teach digital citizenship and ethical use of technology. Much like rules are taught, digital citizenship can be imparted through explicit teaching.*

Raise awareness. *Awareness is powerful. It changes social perceptions. Rather than create panic over technology use or spread misunderstandings, awareness allows a positive atmosphere to emerge. Put*

cyberbullying in the spotlight in your classroom. Teach students about the psychological and legal ramifications. Explore issues like technology risks, cyber safety and positive online communities. Talk about age-appropriate cases of cyberbullying and their resolution. Showcase how technology is being used to help people in your community. Show students how they can use technology for the greater good. For instance, a new trend is creating a managed space for classmates to compliment each other on school achievements or work together on a class project.

Teach students it's okay to report abuse. Students need to know that they should report abuse. The [Columbine Commission report](#) reported that in 81% of violent incidents, someone other than the attacker knew what was going to happen but did not report it. It is important to break the silence surrounding cyber abuse. Victims often do not report abuse for several reasons:

- *They fear retribution from peers.*
- *They have anxiety that adults will remove computer or cell phone access.*
- *They don't think adults will know how to resolve the situation. Often, adults may respond by removing technology from the victim, which is often seen as a punishment. Let kids know it's not technology that is the problem, but irresponsible use. Give examples of how situations were resolved that involved cyberbullying, so they trust turning to you.*

Establish open communication with students. Students need to know where and/or who they can go to before a problem occurs. By the time a situation escalates, it may be too late. Students may be so stressed with their situation that they may not be thinking logically. It's best to make resources clear and available before situations become muddled with stress. You can have an anonymous box to report cases so that students know they can feel safe to report information. Organizations such as [Safe2Tell](#) allow students to report incidents anonymously. You might have your school establish a hotline, or contact a local organization. Knowing there is a way to report cases may also stop students from engaging in the behavior. Research suggests that a parenting style that is emotionally warm with clear limits best creates resiliency in regards to digital aggression. Teachers can follow the same example: Be clear, empathetic, and communicate openly with students.

(CLIFFORD)

STAFF RESPONSIBILITIES AND DEVELOPMENT

Suggestions for staff training and development:

1. Ensure that staff recognize that students experience a wide range of emotions and that young people feel emotions strongly.
2. Ensure that staff understand that emotions matter for attention, memory and learning. If the brain is preoccupied with being bullied or stressed, kids can't learn. (Brackett)
3. Help staff come to the understanding that emotions matter for both education and for school culture.
4. Develop a staff development plan for improving their understanding of bullying, social media issues and improving their emotional intelligence. How are you developing staff to be good listeners and empathetic educators?
5. Help staff to see children as having feelings and emotions and to value them as emotional people.
6. Require staff to follow the same procedures for cyberbullying as they do for other forms of abusive behaviors.

7. Teach staff to recognize (reward) students for supportive actions toward each other.
8. Ensure that staff can identify the warning signs of cyberbullying between students.
9. Ensure that staff is trained in:
 - mandated reporting laws and procedures
 - conflict resolution, including issues involving social media
 - restorative disciplinary practices
10. Identify to staff steps that they can take to prevent cyberbullying. Emphasize that this is not limited to computer class but should be followed through on throughout the school.
11. Encourage staff to keep up-to-date with the latest apps and other technology trends to watch out for.
12. Ensure that staff recognize their duty to keep kids safe emotionally and to protect their rights.
13. When getting feedback from your staff, find out: Does your staff feel equipped to handle bullying? Does your staff see part of their responsibility as helping students who are being threatened and bullied? What would your staff like to learn most about in the area of creating a safe and positive school climate?

PARENTS

Suggestions for involving parents as partners:

1. Make available to parents information on cyberbullying, which should include: awareness of, warning signs and what to do when cyberbullying occurs.
2. Make parents aware of social media venues, apps and gaming venues that are popular and where cyberbullying can occur.
3. Remind parents of the school's policies and procedures.
4. Address the issue of cyberbullying at PTO, school assemblies or other events. Include students in the discussions.
5. Communicate to parents what steps the school is taking to prevent cyberbullying (policies, consequences, steps to build positive culture, how technology is being monitored).
6. Encourage parents to have their children block anyone who becomes abusive online.
7. Communicate to parents that what happens online is very serious to kids, and they should not take it lightly. "Their online persona is essentially the same to them as their real person. If a child approaches you about a problem, don't try to minimize it. Find resources immediately and make it apparent that you understand it is a serious issue." (Clifford)
8. "Suggest parents buy filtering software or special phones for younger children and teenagers." (Clifford)
9. Communicate to parents the safe and anonymous way for them to report threats, harmful behaviors or dangerous situations.
10. Make parents aware of apps that screen for parental oversight of social media apps and sites.
11. Establish a link to school resources for parents.

WHAT CAN PARENTS DO?

1. *Keep the computer in a common area of the home. Do not allow it in your children's bedrooms. Monitor their online usage.*
 2. *Learn how various social networking websites work. Become familiar with Facebook, MySpace, and Twitter.* Ask your children if they will show you their profile pages.*
 3. *Talk regularly and specifically with your children about online issues. Let them know they can come to you for help if anything is inappropriate, upsetting, or dangerous.*
 4. *Build trust with your children. Set time limits, explain your reasons for them, and discuss rules for online safety and Internet use. Ask your children to contribute to establishing the rules; then they'll be more inclined to follow them.*
 5. *Tell your children not to respond to any cyberbullying threats or comments online. However, do not delete any of the messages. Instead, print out all the messages, including the e-mail addresses or online screen names of the cyberbully. You will need the messages to verify and prove there is cyberbullying.*
 6. *Don't overreact by blaming your children. If they are being bullied, be supportive and understanding. Find out how long the bullying has been going on and ensure that you'll work together to find a solution. Let your children know they are not to blame for being bullied.*
 7. *Don't underreact by telling your children to "shrug it off" or just deal with the bullying. The emotional pain of being bullied is very real and can have long-lasting effects. Don't tease them about it or respond with a "kids will be kids" attitude.*
 8. *Don't threaten to take away your children's computers if they come to you with a problem. This only forces kids to be more secretive.*
 9. *Talk to your school's guidance counselors so they can keep an eye out for bullying during the school day.*
 10. *If there are threats of physical violence or the bullying continues to escalate, get law enforcement involved.*
- (Fitzgerald)

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-Fitzgerald

* Parents should stay up-to-date with emerging apps, sites and other social media outlets.

WHAT CAN PARENTS DO?

By: Meline Kevorkian, EdD

Technology is a wonderful tool for communicating and information sharing, but like all tools children learn to use, parents must provide supervision and set limits to ensure their children have a safe and rewarding experience. Cyberbullying is a relatively new danger, and one that can have lasting consequences. Here are some tips for Internet safety and preventing cyberbullying.

Know your technology. If you allow your children to carry cell phones, have a MySpace or Facebook page, or work with other technology, learn how to use them yourself. Your children can be your teachers in showing you what they are doing online. Take an interest in your children's online world just as you would any other aspect of their lives.

Set reasonable limits. Help your children learn to make responsible decisions about using technology by establishing guidelines and exerting control when necessary. Investigate all the features of the technology they use. Cell phones with Internet access should have the same guidelines and safety measures as those for household computers. Obtain information on parental controls for all the technology your children use.

Get to know your children's online friends. Making "friends" online is fast and easy, but you must help your children learn the difference between a real friend and a friendly stranger. Monitor their virtual friendships with questions you would ask about their friends in the physical world. Urge your children never to disclose any information that would reveal who they are, where they live, or where they go to school. Instruct them never to arrange to meet online-only friends in person.

Talk with your kids if you suspect they are being bullied. Changes in your child's behavior and attitudes can signal that they are being bullied at school or online. Victimized children are more likely to have difficulty sleeping, headaches, nervousness, stomachaches, and make excuses to avoid going to school. Kids are usually reluctant to tell anyone about problems with their peers, and fear losing Internet privileges if they report being cyberbullied. You must ensure they feel confident that they can tell you anything and that you will help them. We must teach our children that no one has the right to hurt another person.

Help kids understand the difference between tattling and reporting. We must help children speak up when they are being victimized or witness someone else being victimized. There is a difference between tattling and reporting. Tattling is when you tell something to get someone in trouble. Reporting is getting someone help to keep them safe.

Show your children you love them and will protect them. Children who are bullied are at risk for a variety of mental health problems, such as depression, anxiety, diminished self-esteem, and social withdrawal. Remind your children that they are lovable and valuable, and that it is bullies who are the ones with the personality problem.

Get involved with bullying prevention efforts in your school or district. Review your school's policies and rules against bullying, including cyberbullying. Promote parent education to provide information and training for parents on how to recognize and prevent cyberbullying.

(Kevorkian)

WHAT CAN PARENTS DO?

1. Tell teens not to respond to the cyber bullies.
2. Block or delete the cyber bully's messages without reading them.
3. Report bullying incidents to Internet Service Providers (ISP's) and website moderators.
4. Keep records of bullying incidents, including printouts.
5. If cyber bullying involves threats or harassment, call your local police.
6. Over 70% of teens said that being able to block cyber bullies was the most effective method of prevention.
7. Encourage your school to be proactive in enacting cyber bullying policies.
8. Educate students, parents and staff about Safe2Tell (www.safe2tell.org or 1-877-542-7233).

(Clifford)

"Over 70% of teens said that being able to block cyber bullies was the most effective method of prevention."

-Clifford

WHAT CAN PARENTS DO?

Check out "CAS Practical Steps for Parents to Prevent Bullying" at http://www.casciac.org/pdfs/Practical_Steps_for_Parents_Bullying.pdf

SUPERVISION

Important tips for monitoring and supervision of student use of technology:

1. Have a system of filters and blocks for sites, apps and online social media tools that are not appropriate for school.
2. Students using computers or other devices in school often have access to the Internet and social networking sites despite efforts to restrict them through filters and firewalls. It is imperative that teachers continually monitor students' use of technology, on both personal and school owned devices, during school.
3. Teachers should actively monitor the online activities of students by moving around the classroom and set the tone that students who use technology in a distracting or harassing manner will be disciplined.
4. Provide adequate budgeting for technology to track inappropriate use.
5. Seek out-of-district expertise on current trends in cyberbullying, apps, and other technology abuses that could spread to your school.

EVALUATING EFFECTIVENESS

Suggestions for evaluating the effectiveness of policies and practices governing use of the Internet:

1. Establish a baseline of feedback about your schools' online culture as part of your school climate survey. Include students, staff and parents.
2. Periodically reevaluate your schools' online culture.
3. Have informal conversations with kids about what is popular online.
4. Gather groups of students and conduct focus group discussions about school climate and any online issues that may be rising.

Resource: [National School Climate Standards](#)

Resource: [Actualizing School Climate Standards](#)

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