Q: A parent recently told me their teen was being bullied on social media. What advice could I give that would be most helpful?

A: Social media (like Facebook or Twitter) have become an essential way for youth to communicate with each other. Nearly 90% of all teenagers now report they use social media, often for multiple hours every day. Social media are used to express all of the same drives and impulses behind in-person social interactions, which include negative impulses like bullying. The new term “cyber bullying” specifically refers to one minor tormenting, harassing, or humiliating another minor through digital technology. Cyber bullying is generally not anonymous, in that around three-fourths of those electronically bullied know exactly who is behind the attack.

Cyber bullies may pretend to be someone else in order to trick their victim into revealing personal information, may lie about their victims online, may pretend to be their victim while communicating to another person online (especially if they obtain the victim’s password), or may post unflattering pictures of their victim online without permission. The pernicious nature of such bullying is that the offending content may continue to exist online long after it is posted and essentially be viewable by the whole world. The reported frequency of teenagers experiencing cyber bullying varies significantly, though it is safe to assume it is in the 16% to 24% range.1,2 Most children report that they think the bully believes what they are doing is a “joke” despite the resulting negative consequences. Kids who cyber bully have often been victims themselves.

Parents should be suspicious of cyber bullying when their child suddenly changes their social media habits, appears withdrawn or upset after being online, avoids formerly enjoyable social situations, or states that they are blocking numbers from their phone.

Pediatricians and other care providers should encourage parents to talk to their kids about social media use, to tell them that cyber bullying is unacceptable, and to tell them that they would want to help if this were to ever happen. Parents need to specifically tell their children that they will not revoke their phone or online privileges if they are cyber bullied, as this is a common fear preventing disclosures to parents. Parents should actively monitor their children’s online media use through practices such as checking out their child’s home page or viewing password-protected areas, particularly with young children.

Tips for children who experience cyber bullying:

• Avoid responding or retaliating directly with the bully, since direct responses often reinforce the behavior.
• Block the bully’s messages or delete them without reading them.
• Work with parent(s) to notify the media site of the cyber bullying, since social media service providers often can internally address bullying on their site, as well.
• Consider working with school officials regarding ways they can help address the issue.
• Keep passwords completely secret from everyone, except parents.
• Consider keeping a log of the bullying events. This can help law enforcement intervene in the case of later escalation of bullying into overt threats.

For more helpful information, families can turn to the following online resources: www.stopbullying.gov, www.stope cyberbullying.org, and www.ncpc.org.

REFERENCES