

There's a Soul Behind That Screen

***A film by AT&T and resources from
Common Sense Media encouraging
parents to raise safe, responsible,
and thoughtful digital citizens***

Parent resources

You've just watched AT&T's *There's a Soul Behind That Screen*, and you may be worried about whether cyberbullying will affect your kids. Or maybe your child has already experienced cyberbullying and you want to know how to prevent it from happening again. We're here to help.

Dealing with Cyberbullying

Kids can be mean to each other — sometimes on purpose and sometimes by accident. It's a natural phase of child development. And technology only makes being mean easier. But that doesn't mean it's right. While it's kids' jobs to test limits and explore their identities, it's our job as parents and caregivers to teach kids **empathy** and **resilience** and to be compassionate and understanding so they seek us out when they need help.

Prevent it

Build a solid relationship. Even kids with great relationships with their parents can be cyberbullied — or even become cyberbullies. But those who feel comfortable telling their parents when they're having a problem can gain needed support.

★ **TIP** Build family activities into your regular routine. Family dinners, movie nights, and outdoor activities all can bring parents and kids closer together if they happen regularly.

★ **TIP** Show an interest in your child's online and offline activities. Approach conversations about your child's digital life with curiosity, not judgment.

Boost self-confidence. In the film, one girl was teased online to the point where she said, "I didn't want to go outside or spend time with friends because I thought I was fat." This kind of low self-image can be a result of cyberbullying, but kids with poor self-image also can be affected by bullying more than those with lots of confidence.

★ **TIP** Encourage a strong self-image by praising effort more than results. Avoid critical comments about appearance or diet, such as when Zoe's mom grabbed food away from her, saying, "You shouldn't be eating this."

💡 **CONVERSATION STARTER** "I noticed you put a lot of work into that science assignment. I like seeing you work so hard on something. What did you enjoy about the process?"

Encourage positive activities. In the film, one of the girls talks about her process for posting on social media and jokes, "Gotta get those likes, you know?" Her goal of getting likes or praise for her posts is reflective of many young social media users who feel an emotional or psychological boost when they get positive recognition online.

★ **TIP** Acknowledge the very real feelings associated with social media praise. But also support kids' other activities and interests so they get positive reinforcement from a variety of sources. Sports and the arts can be great ways to balance the ego boost of likes with other types of positive acknowledgement.

Prevent it

Set limits. Cyberbullying can happen at any time of day, and it can have a greater impact on kids when there's no relief. Sometimes in-person bullying at school can continue as cyberbullying after hours. In David's case, his parents noticed that his phone use "went late into the night," which meant he was likely being cyberbullied relentlessly.

★ **TIP** Set a time when all devices get turned off. Charge devices in a central location, such as the kitchen. Consider creating a family media contract so everyone understands the rules and the consequences if they're broken.

Foster healthy friendships. It's normal for kids to experiment with different friend groups as they go through the tween and teen years. Parents can facilitate positive relationships and discourage negative ones.

★ **TIP** Put extra effort into supporting your child's friendships by creating time for get-togethers, sleepovers, and other fun activities with kids who contribute to your child's positive attitude. Notice if some friends are more draining or seem to encourage negative behavior in your kid and stay alert for changes in those relationships. But be careful not to directly criticize friends, because that could backfire.

💬 **CONVERSATION STARTER**

"You seem a little sad. Did anything happen when you were hanging out with Vanessa that you want to tell me about?"

Build support systems. The film shares reports that kids are often targeted for being socially awkward, gay, foreign-born, or lower-income or because of their clothing. Anything that sets kids apart and makes them different from the mainstream is a potential target for bullies. But parents can mitigate the effects of bullying by building robust support systems for kids.

★ **TIP** Make sure kids have people outside the immediate family — aunts and uncles, online friends, teachers, coaches, therapists, and the like — whom they can turn to if they're being bullied. Sometimes it's hard for kids to tell their parents — either because they're embarrassed or they think their parents will overreact — but a network of trusted adults can give kids options for someone to turn to in a crisis.

Prevent it

Teach digital citizenship. As one teen says early in the film, “Social media can be a powerful tool.” And that’s why it’s important to equip kids with the information they need — as well as provide a safe training ground — so they can think critically, behave safely, and participate responsibly in an online world.

★ **TIP** Wait until kids are mature enough to use a smartphone responsibly before giving them one. Just because “everyone has one” doesn’t mean your kid is ready for one, too. And when you do give your kid a phone, go through all the settings available on the device and any apps your kid will be using to make sure their privacy settings are strict, and set up any parental controls you want to use. That way, when they make a mistake (and they will), the consequences will be more limited.

★ **TIP** Discuss your expectations around digital communication and behavior, including treating people kindly. Remind kids that jokes can easily go too far, such as in the film when teens “roast” their friend online and end up hurting his feelings.

★ **TIP** Set up a device contract or family media agreement that gets explicit with expectations. Include items such as:
I promise not to use my phone/computer to be mean to others. Or, I promise to tell a parent or other trusted adult if any online conversation or drama gets out of control and I need help dealing with it.

💬 **CONVERSATION STARTER** “We’ve given you a phone because we know you’re responsible enough to use it safely. We want to go over the expectations we have for your phone use, as well as discuss the consequences for breaking any of the rules.”

Detect it

Foster regular conversations. When Tyra gets ready to check her profile in the movie, her mother says from the other room, “Just be careful.” It seems like the mother is aware that by going online, her daughter is facing some risk. That’s true, but it’s important to delve a little deeper when talking about online concerns.

★ **TIP** Think about your kid’s online life in the same way you think about their offline life. Ask about their friends and activities. Make talking about texts as commonplace as talking about homework. And if you say, “Be careful,” make sure there’s agreement on what that means.

💬 **CONVERSATION STARTER**

“What’s your favorite emoji?” or
“Whom do you chat with the most?”

Notice changes in behavior. In the tragic story of David, his parents said, “He became withdrawn, he was depressed, didn’t want to go to school ... he slept a lot.” These signs of cyberbullying can be hard to distinguish from usual adolescent ups and downs. But if changes are drastic, happen quickly, or begin to affect grades or physical health — and especially if they seem tied to late-night texting or constant monitoring of the computer — it’s time to consult a professional.

★ **TIP** Whether it’s caused by cyberbullying or a breakup or something else, depression is something to be taken seriously. Start by talking to your child’s doctor or seek recommendations for therapists, and get help quickly. Reach out to school counselors or teachers, too.

💬 **CONVERSATION STARTER** “I’ve noticed you’re sleeping more and eating less. Also, your grades have gone down. I’m worried that you might be dealing with something at school or with your friends that you haven’t told me about. I think it’s serious enough that I’d like you to talk to a professional so we can figure out how to help you feel better.”

Detect it

Spot-check. When kids first start using devices and social media, tell them to expect spot-checks. They may not like it, but as they test the waters of communicating online, they may need a little course correction from you.

★ **TIP** Read what they write to others as well as what's written to them. Check to see that they're not excluding or talking unkindly about others. Note the positive as well as the negative stuff. You don't want to drive their conversations underground (to an app you aren't aware of, for example), but you also want to nudge them in the right direction.

💬 **CONVERSATION STARTER** "I was checking out your texting history and I noticed that you and your friends were calling Pablo names. I'm sure you were just kidding around, but that kind of joking can be hurtful, even if you don't mean it like that."

Be responsive to attempts to communicate. In the film, Zoe's cyberbullying stemmed from an occasion where she was drinking and involved in sexual activity. This likely made it difficult for Zoe to talk to her mother about it. When kids get into trouble with cyberbullying, they may not want to tell you all the details, for fear of repercussions.

★ **TIP** If you suspect something is going on with your child — as Zoe's mom did in the film — withhold judgment as you gather more information. You're more likely to get the details you need if you start from a position of compassion and curiosity.

💬 **CONVERSATION STARTER** "I got a call from the principal about a photo of you being passed around. You must be really upset. Can you tell me what happened?"

Handle it

Listen and be supportive. In the film, Zoe's mother found out about the photo being passed around at school. She reacted by blaming her and calling her "stupid." In this situation, Zoe's mother didn't have all the information to understand what was happening with her daughter. And rather than recognize that her daughter was upset, she pushed her away by yelling at her.

★ **TIP** While it's reasonable to be upset when you think your child has done something wrong, the best approach is usually to gather the facts before reacting. This requires finding an appropriate time to talk, using a calm voice, and being patient while listening to your child's explanation.

💬 **CONVERSATION STARTER** "I'm so sorry this happened. Thank you for telling me about it. I want to help you figure this out. Can you tell me how you're feeling?"

Develop a plan. Kids sometimes don't want to get adults involved in a cyberbullying situation because they're afraid you'll overreact. Recognize that your kid may be facing very real social risks by getting an adult involved.

★ **TIP** Encourage your kid to figure out what to do next. Sit down together and sketch out some options. These could include blocking the bully within the app or device they're using, taking screenshots of the evidence, talking to a friend, or getting a teacher or principal involved. As much as possible, let your child lead the discussion, and make sure you agree on the next steps before moving forward. An exception is if your child or someone else is at risk of physical harm.

💬 **CONVERSATION STARTER** "Let's think about what to do next. We don't have to figure it all out right away, but I'd like to hear your ideas on how to handle this. I'll follow your lead."

Handle it

Check in frequently. Cyberbullying — or any bullying — typically isn't a single incident. If your kid has been the target or a perpetrator, it's smart to keep an eye out in case it happens again. Also, you'll want to make sure that the plan you and your child agreed on is working. Kids might want to push the incident away or pretend it didn't happen — but that approach isn't likely to work for very long.

💬 **CONVERSATION STARTER** “Hey, I’m checking in to see where things stand with that group-texting incident. You and I had talked about you discussing it with your coach. Have you had the chance to do that yet?”

Consider changes to technology access. In David’s case, his parents noticed that “he was attached to his phone, and it went late into the night.” While you don’t want to punish a cyberbullying victim by taking away his or her phone or computer, you may want to consider limits on tech use.

★ **TIP** Choose places like the bedroom, the car, and the dinner table to be tech-free. This gives kids breaks from constant social interaction or bullying, as well as protecting time for sleep and family conversation — both important in building resilience.

★ **TIP** Aim for a balance of activities for your child, including face-to-face time with friends and family, household responsibilities, homework, sports and art, as well as time socializing or learning online. This can offer less opportunity for kids to get pulled into digital drama and more cushion against negative online activities.

If your kid is bullying others

Listen and be supportive. It can be hard to find out that your child has been a bully, but if it happens, it's important to accept it and make things right. Even great kids can feel the pull of peer pressure to be mean or get wrapped up in something they didn't expect.

★ **TIP** Find a time to talk and listen to your kid when you're feeling calm and won't be interrupted. Without excusing your child's behavior, offer compassion and understanding.

💬 **CONVERSATION STARTER** "I'm not happy to hear about what happened and that you were involved. It was a mistake, but that's part of growing up. I'm going to help you figure out how to correct your mistake, and I'll be here for you throughout the process."

Discuss options for action and apology. It's important that your child take responsibility for his or her actions and figure out how to repair the damage.

★ **TIP** As much as possible, let your child take the lead on making amends. Be ready to step in if his or her actions don't go far enough to repair the damage, which could include removing any mean social media posts and offering an apology to the target. Choose together whether to involve the school, and decide for yourself if you need to contact the victim's parents.

Determine consequences. Beyond apologizing, you may decide to limit access to technology for a period of time or take away access to a particular app.

★ **TIP** Find out if your child's school has a bullying-prevention program or digital citizenship curriculum that your child could get involved in.

If your kid is bullying others

Explore underlying issues. Sometimes kids become bullies because they're suffering themselves. Some social groups can also breed a culture of meanness.

★ **TIP** Talk to your kid, other parents, teachers, and anyone else who knows your kid well to try to root out the causes of the bullying incident. If you can identify some of the issues, figure out your next steps, from discussing school culture with the administration to helping to build up other friend groups.

Teach empathy. In the film, one former bully describes a moment when his victim broke down in tears and he saw "the humanity side of him." As much as possible, try to help kids understand others' perspectives and feelings.

★ **TIP** Movies, books, and TV shows can support lessons in empathy. Have a family movie night and discuss the film afterward.

★ **TIP** Sports — especially with a great coach — can reinforce the practice of empathy, such as when a player gets hurt and others take a knee or help them out.

★ **TIP** Display empathy for others in your day-to-day life. Comment on others' feelings or reactions in a way that models understanding and caring. Share your own positive social media interactions so kids get a sense of what they should expect of themselves and others.

Check yourself. In the film, one of the former bullies identified an incident where his father praised him for hurting someone in a fight. He said that had influenced him to become a bully, in part to gain acceptance from his father.

★ **TIP** If your kid has been a bully, consider how your own behavior could have communicated approval of that type of behavior. Sometimes just gossiping about a friend in front of your kid can send a message that talking badly about others is OK.

LATERHATERS

AT&T is empowering teens to rise above online negativity through the #LaterHaters campaign. Encourage your kids to follow Later Haters on Instagram @later_haters and check out the website: later-haters.att.com.

#LATERHATERS



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