

Questions about CyberBullying for Amy Ryan:

Hi Amy, what comes to mind when you think of what a "Responsible CyberCitizen" would be and how would a responsible cybercitizen deal with CyberBullying?

Amy's answer:

There are so many different ways I can think of to describe what it means to be a "responsible CyberCitizen". As a parent, I feel it is a necessity to know & understand computers well enough to enjoy their many benefits, while at the same time, to be aware of all the dangers associated with the internet, especially when dealing with youths. I personally do my best to model appropriate internet behavior with my children. I allow them limited access to the internet and they also know that our computers are filtered & that I can access the pages they visit at any time. My son is allowed to have a Facebook account but he has to provide me the password, it's a tradeoff, he gets to use my computers but I get to monitor his internet behavior. In doing so, I do not scold him when I feel he's being unsafe or not using his head, instead we discuss why I'm not comfortable with his internet behavior, and work towards a mutual understanding of why that behavior is not acceptable (unsafe or hurtful).

I constantly discuss with my children the importance of being careful while on the computer, we talk about current events that concern teens/children & the internet, & are continually trying to stay on top of how easy it is to become caught up in something that you can't easily get out of while on the internet. This goes both ways, I caution them about what they are putting out there as well as being cautious of others on the net, & on how to get themselves out of a difficult situation when needed.

The main thing about being a responsible CyberCitizen is to be AWARE & to spread AWARENESS across every platform possible.

As parents, what is the single most important thing we should tell our teen about CyberBullying?

Amy's answer:

From what we experienced, as well as what I've learned since this experience, is that youths tend to be braver online than they are in person. A youth, young teens especially, tend to make very bold statements online that are public & draw quite a bit of attention. They often don't know how to get themselves out of what they've started, so they either keep it going, or worse, they act it out in reality. I also think that they don't understand how their words affect the person they are bullying. They often don't really mean what they are saying or doing and they assume that everyone else is on board with them.

As a parent, & as a teacher, I do my best to talk with my kids & students about how teasing/bullying affects the one being bullied & about real life situations where this type of bullying has led to real life tragedies. It is very important that our teens understand the severity of their actions, & how others are affected by them.

Being a mother of a child who has been bullied online, what was the most difficult part of it besides knowing how it hurt your child?

Amy's answer:

The most difficult parts occurred once we came forward & discussed our situation publically. The 1st thing we experienced was being shunned by parents that didn't want to get caught up in it. We were also harassed by the parent's of those involved, and those parents' friends. My son even had the leader of this group of bullies create a website called "The Chain Gang of Tuscaloosa", where they were threatening him & posting violent videos of what they would do to anyone that reported them to the police. They posted offensive pictures on the site & made derogatory statements about my son in reference to them. We even had the brother of one of the bullies sending my son hateful Facebook messages a year after the fact, he was an 11th grader, my son was only in 8th., We blocked

him & all of the bullies at that point (his father is also bully, so we just let it go). Then, this same child was arrested for vandalizing lots of homes in our area, ours included. I was not surprised in finding out who did it.

Surprisingly though, the worst part of all was in the way many of the parents treated us afterwards. We did have a lot of parents come to us & thank us for bringing this problem to light because their children were suffering in the same manner, but a lot of parents shunned us & acted as if we overreacted & were stirring up trouble unnecessarily. One long time friend, who's child had no part in this, but whose 1st name was mentioned in the newspaper article, has even stopped speaking to us. She's given us the "silent treatment" for 2 years now.

Obviously, you knew who was doing the CyberBullying, so what was the resistance to stopping him? Is it that you couldn't prove the bullying was coming from him or are the laws and law enforcement hindered to enforce the laws?

Amy's answer:

This boy & his friends had been bullying my son for 3 years at this point. I had brought it to the attention of the schools they attended but the schools did little. Bullies are very good at doing so in discrete ways at school so there was little that could be done even though they were trying to help. This particular bully, during a birthday party of a mutual friend, had recently taken my sons new jacket, filled the pockets with rocks & thrown it into a lake. Another child fished it out & the parent of the birthday boy washed it & returned it so we chose to just ignore it.

A short time afterwards I was just playing around on the computer & I googled my son's name. This is when I discovered that this boy was planning on killing my son because my son had danced with a girl, at a different b-day party, that he had wanted to dance with. These comments were on his personal xanga.com site & it didn't seem that he knew they were public. There were many discussions between him & other teens about how & when they would kill him.

I was so taken aback that I didn't know what to do. I called a parent-friend that I knew went to church with this child's parents & asked for her advice. She informed me that they had no control over this child & that speaking to them would be in vain. I then decided to discuss all of this with the school resource officer & get his opinion of how to handle this. He told me that this was not "normal" teen behavior & recommended that I press charges & let the juvenile division of the police dept. handle it. I did so.

The police & courts were able to eventually stop him, but not until the parents took responsibility themselves. His parents minimized his actions & tried to place blame on us for over reacting. They had him shut down his site but still allowed him full access to the internet. I believe they were greatly surprised in finding out that not only had he gone behind their backs & created a new site, he was continuing to threaten my son & was recruiting others to join in on all of it. Once this was brought to their attention things calmed down, at least on the net. The child was ordered to take anger management classes & I have heard he is doing better.

It seems that the majority of CyberBullying stems from kids and the school setting, so are schools involved in providing any help and if so what?

Amy's answer:

No, because all of this took place outside of the school, they were not able to help in this situation. They did accommodate our request to have our sons schedule changed so that he & this child were no longer in the same classes.

Are there different methods or levels of CyberBullying and what constitutes CyberBullying as opposed to being a teenager who is angry at someone and saying something you normally wouldn't?

Amy's answer:

Bullying is bullying. I think the difference in CyberBullying is that you can choose to be an anonymous bully, which makes you bolder. Even if you

don't chose to be anonymous, you're still bolder. I think this is because you don't see the reactions of other like you would in a more public situation. If you're bullying in public, some of your peers might disapprove, which keeps some of the bullying in check. On the net, you're wide open to speak anything & everything.

What steps should parents take when a CyberBullying situation arises?

Amy's answer:

The very 1st step is to take it seriously. Talk with a school counselor about it, talk to anyone about it, but make sure it is stopped. If it's your child, pull them off the computer until they fully understand what they're doing. Don't just dismiss it as "normal" teen aged behavior. You don't want to find out too late that your child has been responsible, or even partially responsible, for a teen tragedy.

What steps can parents take to know more about what their children are doing online?

Amy's answer:

Invest in a reputable internet filter & monitor your kid's behavior. Understand how to use a computer yourself & keep up on what's going on with teens & the internet.

Do feel if you had a reliable computer monitoring service, like PC Pandora, it would have provided evidence and helped in communicating the problem with parents who would be reluctant to believe their child would be involved in something like this?

These parents were handed the evidence, their son had not tried to hide his identity at all. They chose to dismiss it as "kids being kids" & wanted to just brush it under the rug without dealing with the problem. We were so lucky to have hard evidence like this. I'm not familiar with the monitoring services that you're speaking of, sorry.

Who was more difficult to work with, the police, the school, or the parents of the bully?

Amy's answer:

Parents, see above answers.

What is the one thing that if you could, you would change about the way the Government, (local, state, fed) Corporation, Businesses, Organization etc..., handles certain issues or the way citizens handle things in regards to protecting our children on the internet, in school and the playground from CyberBullying, harassment, abuse, etc... What would that be?

Amy's answer:

Wow, difficult question. The very most important thing is for EVERYONE to understand that bullying is not acceptable, & not tolerable. I have no idea how to best handle this since a lot of the bullying comes from the parents themselves. Some bullies become so through ignorance, some by modeling their parent's behavior. My personal opinion is that we need to really focus on teaching our kids about bullying in school beginning in kindergarten & going through 12th grade. We need to have programs that address all of the different types of bullying & on how to combat them.

Following are questions we wanted to ask her son, but at this time it's still very hard for him to re-live the experience... So, Amy graciously tried to answer to the best of her ability, what her son may have answered...

He also did not want to answer some of these questions, because as she says... "I don't think he trusted that there would not be retaliations".

Questions about CyberBullying for Amy Ryan's, son:

Those who knew you before the CyberBullying, did they believe what was being said about you and did they stop hanging out with you?

Amy's answer:

Several parents told me their kids were shocked in finding out that he was being bullied. Bullies are good at keeping it in a closed system. Only those that will approve are privy to what they're doing.

Knowing what you know now, is there anything you would have done differently in stopping the CyberBullying sooner? Or another way to ask the question, if you went back in time to when the CyberBullying took place but, this time it was happening to your friend, knowing what you know now, what advice would you give him or her?

Amy's answer:

At the time I bet he would not have had a clue what to do about it. I doubt he'd even have told me about it. He just kept everything in.

How did you find out that someone was harassing you online?

Amy's answer:

I found it & asked him who the heck this boy was, that's when I realized that it was the boy that had thrown his coat in the lake. I was surprised because this boy had attended my son's b-day party only a few months earlier & seemed to like him.

Were any of the kids (including the bully) your friends?

Amy's answer:

Classmates, not friends

Did you have any support from your own close friends?

Amy's answer:

No, his friends were unaware of the bullying. We did discover after we went public that a lot of his friends were being bullied too. The victim is so embarrassed that they don't share what's going on.

What was the most difficult part of being bullied online?

Amy's answer:

I don't think he'd be able to explain this one, but it damaged his self esteem severely. When we were talking once he just flat out asked me "mom, why do they keep calling me gay? What am I doing wrong?" This broke my heart. There's really no way to answer this. Without getting into the bullies head you don't know what causes them to go after the person they go after.

What would you tell other teens about CyberBullying?

Amy's answer:

Don't be a dumb-___!

Just a guess at what he'd say here :)

We own and have created a website idea called BBS... Been Bullied Support this is a Forum, and if this service was available for you and other teens, do you think that it would help to talk to others your own age about what happened, and what you have gone through since?

Amy's answer:

I will try to get him to visit this & get a statement from him. This is a great idea. Teens don't want to come forward & admit they are being bullied but being able to in an anonymous way like this sounds brilliant to me. What is the web address?

Thanks again, Dave and Bill

Amy's answer:

Thank you two for allowing me this opportunity. I truly hope that others are helped by your show & by the resources you have available. I also hope that we do not experience any negative effects from this, but if we do we know we're doing good ;)