



BRAVE NEW CYBER WORLD

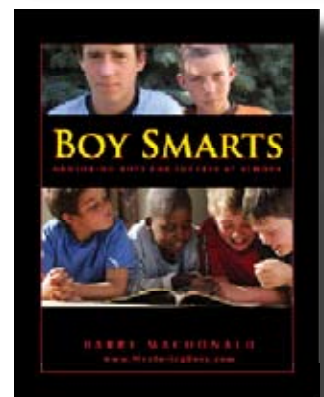
Cyberbullying Alert!

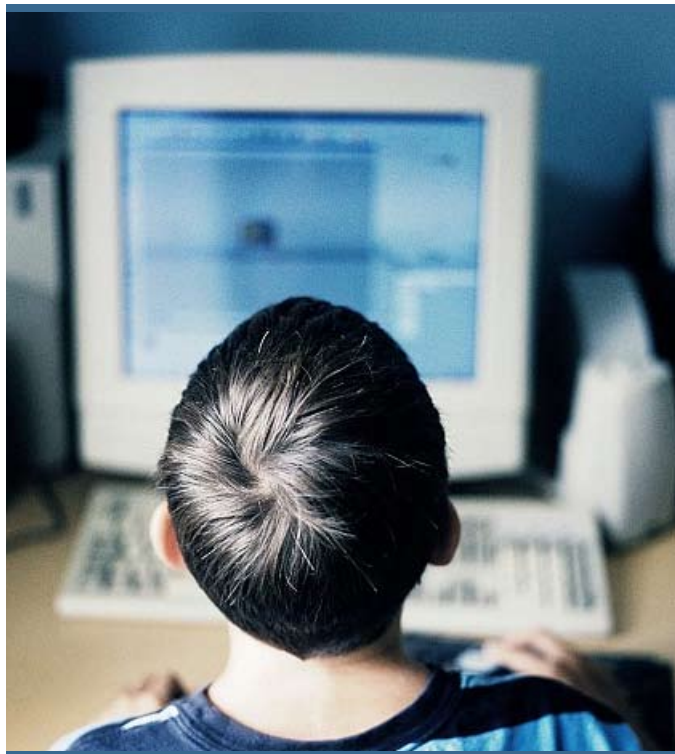
Are boys more likely to become cyberbullies than girls are?

Dear Barry,

Last night I learned that my 11 year old son was being pressured by some boys at his middle school to post an inappropriate question about a girl in his class on ASK.FM. Fortunately, he came to me in tears knowing that it was wrong to ask whether she was a virgin, but he worried that because these boys were popular they might post a question about him if he didn't do what they said. We visited the ASK.FM site together and he showed me his profile, his friend's profiles, and how it operates. As we explored questions and answers posted by his friends, I was appalled to read that a girl in Grade 7 at his school posted a question about whether a boy was gay. She asked, "i told you i was nifoc & you went mute are you SorG? LOL" (My son told me that "nifoc" means "naked in front of computer"). The shocking answers made me sit up and pay attention. Initially I thought social media was more of a girl thing, but it appears many boys are participating. I am deeply troubled by the potential for social media sites like ASK.FM to inflict malicious harm. What should a parent do?

Joanne, British Columbia





Dear Joanne,

For parents and teachers who may have any lingering doubt that technology is now a regular part of childhood, new statistics about children's interactions with technology are sure to convince them otherwise. A recent study conducted by *Research Now* for the Internet security company *AVG* found that approximately 70% of children aged 2—5 can use a computer mouse, but only 11% can tie their own shoelaces. About 60% of 4—5 year olds know how to play a computer game, but only 50% know how to ride a bike, and only 20% know how to swim. Fully 21% of 4—5 year olds know how to use a smartphone app while 17% of 2—3 year olds have the same skill. It is hard to imagine that it was only a little more than three decades ago when the chairman of the *Digital Corporation* proclaimed, "There is no reason anyone would want a computer in their home." Today, children as early as 10 years old are utilizing social media platforms such as *Facebook*, *Twitter*, *Instagram*, and *Ask.fm*, with little or no guidance from an adult. While the Internet has the potential to increase a child's social interaction and enhance collaborative learning experiences, it can also lure youth into real dangers.

HELP BOYS DEVELOP SOCIAL AND ETHICAL ONLINE AWARENESS AND RESPONSIBILITY...

The recent publicity around suicides of youth who have been cyberbullied has alerted us all to the realization that social media platforms and smart phones apps have the potential to inflict damage in ways that most of us never dreamed possible. Digitally enabled 24/7 negative school drama fosters many forms of cyberbullying: online taunting or humiliation on social media sites or in chat rooms, cruel sites targeting specific individuals, humiliation of others during online games, posting of photos on rating sites, and instant message or texting focussed on embarrassing, harassing, or ostracizing certain individuals.

Despite a widespread assumption that boys seldom participate in cyberbullying in social media, according to a 2006 University of Calgary study by Qing Li published in *School Psychology International*, boys are more likely to become cyberbullies than girls are. What can caring adults do to help boys develop more social and ethical online awareness and responsibility?

It's better to build boys than to mend men...

BOY SMARTS ACTION TALK

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In a world where the rate of technological changes and innovations keep accelerating, it is not an easy task to monitor a 12 year old boy's engagement with social networking sites such as *Facebook*, including the newer application many parents and teachers are alarmed about: *Ask.fm*. This Latvian-based web application that has been the subject of several recent media articles regarding cyberbullying, largely in response to two teen suicides apparently traceable to cyberbullying on *Ask.fm*.

This easy to use web application, which has a downloadable app for most smartphones, allows youth and adults around the world to post anonymous comments and questions to a person's profile. You can pose a question to one particular person or to all users, or you can answer any question that comes up on your feed. Those who pose the questions are completely anonymous, but those who answer are identified. Answers come in text or in video format, and users can also browse other people's profiles with the option of submitting questions directly to them. All this sounds relatively straightforward until you consider the potential for this platform to become an online forum to communicate hurtful, abusive, and sexualized content with the protection of anonymity. Apparently *Ask.fm* also has no formal reporting or tracking mechanisms or parental control options.

The January 13, 2013 issue of the UK newspaper *Daily Mail* reported: "Pupils and parents are being warned by head teachers about the dangers of a rapidly growing social networking site that puts teenagers at risk of vicious anonymous abuse. Schools across the country are sending out letters advising pupils not to use Ask.fm, which has more than 30 million users around the world and has been linked to suicides and serious bullying. The site lets anyone see the names, photographs and personal details

of boys and girls as young as 13, then post comments or questions on their profile pages that range from insults to sexual advances and threats of violence. Unlike other services such as *Facebook* and *Twitter*, there is no way to report offensive comments, increase privacy settings or find out who is behind anonymous bullying."

We can all appreciate that teenage boys view technology through a different lens than adults do; however, we need to consider how this application's integration with other popular social networking sites greatly increases the odds

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that a malicious comment may go viral. Open dialogue with boys is the place to start. Encouragingly, numerous studies indicate that cyberbullying decreases when children are educated about responsible online behaviour, respect for communal codes of conduct, and the consequences of inappropriate activities.

To strengthen your stance against cyberbullying, I have prepared a quiz for you to reflect on or use as talking points with your son. Even if you have a son who is not actively using social media, talking with him now will likely set the stage for dialogue later when he may become more interested. It might also later help you support your son when he sets his privacy settings for his **Facebook** account, determine what photos to post online, or decide how much personal information to post online.



Stand Up Against Cyberbullying Quiz

Answer True or False

1. Ninety-five percent of teens use the Internet, 78% of teens have a cell phone, and 47% of them own a smart phone. **T or F**
2. Just fewer than 50% of 12 year olds engage in social networking. **T or F**
3. More than 50% of parents are concerned about their child's online experiences. **T or F**

4. Most parents use parental controls to monitor their teenagers' online activities. **T or F**
5. Students are especially vulnerable to cyberbullying before and after school hours. **T or F**
6. A cyberbully is most likely an online stranger than someone you know. **T or F**
7. Fifty percent of students report incidents of cyberbullying to teachers when they occur. **T or F**
8. About 30% of middle school students have recently posted mean or hurtful comments to a peer online. **T or F**
9. Teenagers often underestimate the permanence of what they post online. **T or F**
10. It is okay for boys to use their computer in their bedroom as long as parents periodically supervise. **T or F**
11. If your son receives an email or an instant message (IM) from a cyberbully he should respond briefly and then immediately delete the message. **T or F**
12. When girls are victims of cyberbullying, they are more inclined to inform adults than boys do. **T or F**
13. In middle school *cool* kids bully more often than other students. **T or F**
14. There is always a clear dividing line between the type of people who bully and those who are victims of bullies. **T or F**
15. There is one single best strategy that parents can use to prevent cyberbullying. **T or F**
16. Once a boy reaches 14 years old it is too late to begin talking about cyberbullying. **T or F**

STOP cyberbullying

Quiz Answers

1. True. The recent 2012 study titled *Parents, Teens, and Online Privacy* surveyed just over 800 parents and teens and recently confirmed these findings. When you further consider that as of April 2013, *Facebook* and *YouTube* each have over one billion active users—with 72 hours of video being uploaded to *YouTube* every minute—it appears that digital technology is embedded in the fabric of our daily lives.

2. True. A full 46% of 12 year olds surveyed in the 2010 study *Social Media & Mobile Internet Use Among Teens and Young Adults* reported using a social network site. The study also found that as children get older, their participation rate increases steadily, with 95% of teens ages 14—17 participating compared with 88% of teens ages 12—13. The report also indicates that the typical teenager sends/receives 50 text messages per day, and 30% send/receive 100 texts a day. The biggest jump in usage is between grade 6 and 7. Whereas 83% of grade 6 students report frequent use of the Internet, 92% of 7th graders reported online activity. Remember too that social media sites identify the minimum age for users as 13 years but do little to monitor.

3. True. *Parents, Teens, and Online Privacy* reported that 63% of parents of teens ages 12—13 say they are *very* concerned about their child's interactions with people they do not know online and 57% say they are *very* concerned about how their child manages his or her reputation online. To help your son manage his online footprint visit *CommonSenseMedia.org* where you can also review recommended social media sites and apps along with listings of hand-picked age-appropriate and fun online games.

4. False. *Parents, Teens, and Online Privacy* discovered that only 50% of parents of online teens have used parental controls or other means of blocking, filtering, or monitoring their children's online activity. Remember, though, that while the Internet may be filtered on home or school computers, it is filtered much less on cell phones. Larry Magid, the co-director of *ConnectSafely.org* says "The best filter is the one between kids' ears." We must help create a culture of critical thinking for young people that will help them to regulate themselves.

5. False. According to the *Cyberbullying Research Center*, while traditional bullying happened mainly at or near schools, cyberbullying could happen any time during the day or night. Youth can use the cell phones so many seem to be tethered to, or Internet-enabled computers at home. To reduce late night cyberbullying—and encourage a healthy sleep, prevention sites recommend that children not sleep with their phones or personal devices.



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6. False. The *Cyberbullying Research Center* indicates that the concept of *stranger danger* is not readily applicable for online bullying. According to two articles published in the *Journal of Adolescent Health* (*Electronic Bullying Among Middle School Students* and *Examining the Overlap in Internet Harassment and School Bullying*), youth are often victimized by someone that they know, with the conflict that prompted the harassment often associated with school.

7. False. According to a major 2008 study reported in *Bullying Beyond the Schoolyard: Preventing and Responding to Cyberbullying* only about 40% of youth tell an adult about cyberbullying experiences. About 41% tell a parent and only 12% tell a teacher. Researchers believe that teens are reluctant to tell adults about incidents of cyberbullying out of fear that their online activities or use of cell phone will be restricted. In addition to concerns about activity restrictions, teens may not talk to adults about cyberbullying because they are emotionally traumatized, think it is their fault, or fear greater retribution. Parents and teachers need to work together to find productive means of education, prevention, and intervention in this social issue that will not just quietly go away on its own.

8. True. *Bullying Beyond the Schoolyard* reports on a survey of middle school students from a large school district with worrying findings. The survey found that

when students were asked about specific types of online harassment and aggression—sending a text message or e-mail to make someone angry, making fun of someone online, posting a private photo of others without permission—33.4% reported carrying out such behaviour in the previous 30 days.

9. True. According to Anastasia Goodstein, author of *Totally Wired: What your Teen is Really Doing Online*, “Teens don’t often think about the ‘cons’ of what they post, so you see them making mistakes publicly and permanently. I don’t think that teens realize the permanence of what they publish—it’s pretty impossible to take back.”

10. False. According to *Cyberbullying: Bullying in the Digital Age* (2012) and *Cyberbullying Prevention and Response: Expert Perspectives* (2011), the best location for computer is in a high-traffic area like the kitchen where a parent might walk by at any moment. Boys are more hesitant to view pornography or engage in cyberbullying when there is consistent supervision.

11. False. Your son shouldn’t respond as retaliating or engaging in conversation with a cyberbully will likely make matters worse. He should also save the IMs or e-mails as a record of the cyberbullying incident and tell an adult about what has occurred.

12. True. According to Qing Li’s Alberta study *Cyberbullying in Schools: A Research of Gender Differences*, female cyberbullying victims are more inclined to inform adults about the incidents than are male victims. The author cites evidence from Deborah Tannen, a linguist and author of *You Just Don’t Understand: Women and Men in Conversation*, suggesting that as boys get older, they often stop asking for help in order to maintain a posture of independence and also to avoid being put in a one-down position.

13. True. Jaana Juvonen is a UCLA professor of psychology who recently studied 1,895 ethnically diverse students at 11 Los Angeles middle schools to figure out whether aggression promotes social status, or whether those who are perceived as popular abuse their social power and prestige by putting other kids down. The study discovered that spreading rumours is rewarded by middle school peers, and also those students who are seen as *cool* bully more. You can read more about this study at <http://newsroom.ucla.edu/portal/ucla/PRN-cool-middle-school-kids-bully-242868.aspx>

14. False. According to the Canadian organization *PREVNet* (Promoting Relationships and Eliminating Violence Network), an umbrella network of leading Canadian research scientists, graduate students, and over 50 youth-serving organizations, bullying of all kinds occurs within a group dynamic, and is not simply associated with people of a certain temperament. Furthermore, those who bully have sometimes been bullied themselves. This excellent site, which has resources for schools, educators, parents and young people, emphasizes that as bullying occurs within the context of relationships, they attempt to move away from language labels of bullies and victims to the language of relationships.

15. False. There are many ways parents can help prevent cyberbullying. The BC site *EraseBullying.ca* offers parents several suggestions to help prevent or address cyberbullying:

—Encourage your child to not respond to cyberbullies—whether your child is a bystander or victim, he/she should not respond. This also means encouraging them not to *like* negative comments or pages that are targeting other students, or forwarding content that is targeting others.

—If your child is a victim or witnesses cyberbullying, keep evidence. Hold onto those text messages, emails, photos, etc. as they could help identify the bully.

—If your child is being threatened, harassed or being sent illegal content, contact the police and give them the details – include usernames of the bully, and any other identifying information you can collect. They will want to see proof, so show them all the evidence you collected.

—Try to block contact from the bully by blocking their phone number, email or username (for example, *Facebook* allows you to block and report a user if they are engaging in activity that violates *Facebook's* Terms and Conditions).

—Contact your child's school and let them know what is happening. Even if cyberbullying is happening at home, school staff should be made aware of the situation.

—If the bully is identifiable and known to you, print off evidence of the attacks and contact their parents. They may be responsive, but may also be defensive. Show them proof and ask them to intervene.

16. False. *PREVNet.ca* indicates that it is never too late to begin talking with youth about online safety and offers the following discussion starters to get an Internet safety conversation going with your child. Remember, the more often you talk to them about online safety, the easier it will get, so don't get discouraged if they don't respond immediately.

—Does anyone else have access to your passwords?

—What information is okay to share online? What information should you keep private?

—What could someone learn about you from what you post online? How might they use this information?

—Have you ever seen something posted online that you think the person might have later regretted having posting?

—Have you ever regretted anything you posted online? Would you be okay with me taking a look at what you have been posting online?

Cyberbullying, like all forms of bullying, is, at root, the attempt to boost one's own social status at the expense of others. We must begin to address this complex social problem by entering into dialogue with boys about ways to become responsible and ethical online citizens. We must practice tools of prevention, intervention, and the judicious use of formative, not punitive, consequences.

Ultimately, however, we wish to empower all youth so that they will not try to disempower their peers. To do this, we must learn to foster skills of empathy and respect that create inclusive communities for all involved. ■ ■ ■

Barry MacDonald

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Have your son's online experiences primarily been positive, or has he encountered challenges? What about video gaming? I welcome your feedback and stories for an upcoming newsletter. Please email your comments to info@mentoringboys.com — Thank you!

YouTube clips to view with your son...

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=D7uyScK3-CU>

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-5PZ_Bh-M6o



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