

Schools, Parents and Technology: Conquering Mean Behavior Together

Pre Submitted/ questions with responses

What are parents' responsibilities when their children are mocked for being involved in special ed? Should we address the parents directly or bring it to the school system? If so, who do we bring it to, and through what mechanism? Then if the situation gets worse because of the reporting how should the parents and school system proceed?

Please make a report of any mean-spirited behavior directly to the school. If the behavior happens outside of school, making a report can assist the school to increase vigilance and work with students to understand the impact of that behavior. To the extent possible, describe the behavior with specific quotes, the date/time and location of the behavior and, if possible, any other witnesses to the behavior. This will allow the school to investigate thoroughly and determine next steps. Please remember that off campus behavior is not subject to BOE policy unless it negatively impacts the safe and orderly running of the school or negatively impacts the teaching and learning process. Additionally, people with disabilities are a protected class of citizens under civil rights law. Any behavior that discriminates against students with disabilities that impacts their ability to fully participate in the school community should be reported to the school.

When the school district receives a report of bullying and/or discrimination, they implement interim safety measures while an investigation is pending to help ensure students are protected and the alleged behavior ends even before findings are made. Those safety measures are then modified and/or formalized (as appropriate) once the investigation has concluded.

What is being done in terms of talking to students about bullying/cyberbullying at each of the schools? The current Kindness programming is not a substitute for this.

The curriculum for digital citizenship is taught Pre-K 12. The lessons are delivered through our Library Media Specialists in units or courses based on curriculum standards. Here is an overview by grade:

- For our youngest learners in grades K-2, we've integrated a digital citizenship unit into the library curriculum, where students learn the importance of empathy, respect, and responsibility online. This includes lessons from Common Sense Media on stopping online meanness and Google's "Be Internet Awesome" program, which emphasizes kindness. The incorporation of a Growth Mindset unit further supports this, teaching empathy through lessons and read-alouds. Students are reminded of our Portrait of a Graduate attributes, especially being a Healthy Balanced Human Being and an Active Socially-Sensitive Citizen.
- Moving into grades 3-5, our curriculum shifts focus toward cyberbullying, with age-appropriate lessons that evolve from understanding the power of words to recognizing the roles of target, bully, and digital upstander. We delve into the concept of digital footprints, emphasizing that online actions are lasting, even if attempts are made to delete them.
- For middle school students in grades 6-8, we kick off each year with a Digital Bootcamp series from Cyber Civics. This includes lessons on the five principles of citizenship—honesty, compassion, respect, responsibility, and courage—and addresses issues like hate speech, the

importance of being an upstander, and the complexities of online identity. Collaboration with community organizations and school resource officers enriches our curriculum, providing perspectives on mean behavior, bullying, and internet safety.

- In high school, our Digital Literacy (FLIGHT) curriculum for grades 9-12 focuses on digital footprints and the construction of a positive social media "brand," culminating in the development of a WHS Capstone ePortfolio. Discussions extend to modern challenges such as deep fakes and parental oversharing. Additionally, recent legislative efforts like the "Kids Online Safety Act" are explored, highlighting our commitment to staying abreast of evolving digital issues.

Knowing when to intervene/anonymous reporting at MS level/teaching kids ways to diffuse online teasing?

As a parent the key is to assess each situation in context before you can answer when it is time to report bullying behavior online (or in person) Ask to look at your child's entire exchange online before concentrating only on the part that was aggressive or hurtful, as sometimes there has been meanness back and forth between kids that escalates. The first advice to give about an unwanted comment on your child's social media account is to delete the comment and if no more additional mean comments pop up the best response is to let it go. If there is any threat or racial or personal attack then an anonymous report is warranted. Make sure to walk the line between validating your child's feelings about the comments AND not overreacting and 'catastrophizing' the social drama between tweens and teens.

Online teasing is most often best diffused by ignoring and deleting comments, however most teens lack the self control to not jump into a fight, so parents need to teach their child that the aggressor wants a fight and if they ignore the comments they "win."

As a parent, I see over and over no consequences to the aggressor such as loss of privileges such as being kicked off a school organized sports team, or a disciplinary action. I hear zero tolerance, but really, the aggressor is easily let off the hook, no liability whatsoever, why?

Once a behavior is reported to the school the school administration conducts an investigation. If the investigation concludes that the behavior occurred and is in violation of BOE policy or state/federal law, the student receives consequences for the behavior. The Federal Educational Right to Privacy Act (FERPA) protects students from disclosure of educational records. As a result, the consequences for students are not published to anyone other than the student and his/her/their parents.

FERPA prevents administrators from sharing even the most basic information about students other than your child, such as whether a consequence was imposed (not to mention what the specific consequence was, if any). The student discipline laws in Connecticut require that students who are suspended receive in-school suspensions absent some limited exceptions (e.g., if a student poses a threat to the safety of the school community such that they must be removed from school). Therefore, the fact that a student who has been determined to have engaged in misconduct is seen in school does not necessarily mean that the student has not been disciplined. Moreover, students with disabilities may not receive a disciplinary consequence if their misconduct is determined to have been directly related to their disability.

How can we limit devices when the schools have kids on devices from practically day 1?

Student screen time has clearly increased over the past five years. Studies by Pew Research and others show that teens spend more time online, primarily on entertainment websites such as social media and video games. Studies differentiate between use of devices for educational purposes and entertainment in terms of their impact on the health of the student. However, with that said, teachers are cognizant of the time that students spend using their devices and use technology only when it supports and enhances the curriculum.

Technology is used (or not used) based on the needs of the lesson. In some cases, using online databases for research is necessary, as an example. For our younger students, technology is used infrequently while the time with online curriculum materials increases in the secondary grades.

We also have begun working with students on screen-free activities to teach balance as well as ensure students have breaks and learn self-regulating strategies. The Pew Research referred to also has seen an increase in students self-regulation and willingness to use social media and technology for less time. It's a good trend.

How should parents handle mean behavior among siblings?

Unless there is significant arguing or risk of physical harm I feel it is best to let siblings figure out their issues on their own. There should be family rules (that are also modeled by parental behavior both at home and in the community) about respect and kindness, as some examples. If those rules are not followed there should be consequences.

Sibling rivalry is normal and ignoring most of it is best. Parents should strive to intervene only when there is physical aggression or cruelty (saying harmful and very mean things to each other)

Can someone on the panel discuss Relational/Social Bullying, and how to handle it as parents and as the teen being bullied?

Relational or social bullying refers to emotional bullying which often takes place between tweens and teens. This can be between friends or friend groups. It involves deliberately hurting (or threatening to hurt) a person's relationships or feelings or acceptance, friendship, or group inclusion. The goal is to undermine another child's relationships with friends or harm their peers' reputations. In popular literature, the perpetrators are sometimes called "mean girls", although they may not all be girls or show vicious acts. Recent studies are showing more males are engaging in this type of bullying as well.

What can parents do?

Validate your child's feelings and listen to them. Ask how you can help. Ask, "Do you want to be heard? Do you want me to help solve the problem?" Giving them permission to feel heard without offering a solution will help open up the lines of communication. As parents we want to "fix" and help our children avoid the pain. Be mindful that as they process the bullying behaviors they can trust that you will hear them and when they are ready, begin to help solve the problem. Keep it in perspective and take what is shared seriously but don't overreact or say things to increase their fears. This can be hard to do as our emotions may be triggered. Review coping skills with your child and help them identify other supportive people in their lives. Make sure you help them check the facts as these situations are cause for big emotions and with that comes black and white thinking. We want to help our children control assumptions

so they can problem solve the next steps. It is important for us as parents to stay in a wise mind as bearing witness to our children's pain can be very challenging. Help your child develop a plan when they are ready and involve the school for support.

Ultimately, watch for changes in behavior and if your child has school avoidance problems or other concerning behavior, seek professional help. Notify the school of your concerns, so the school can address and help to put supportive measures in place.