Navigating online bullying to create a safer digital space

Discovering that your child may be experiencing or engaging in online bullying can stir complex emotions. It's essential to recognise that help is available for both you and your child to navigate these challenging interactions and that there are steps you can take to prevent them from occurring.

Understanding online bullying: defining the issue

Just like offline scenarios, online bullying arises from interactions where someone repeatedly engages in mean-spirited behaviour intended to cause harm. Disagreements, unwanted requests, or occasional rude actions do not necessarily constitute bullying. It's the repetitive nature and deliberate intent to inflict harm that makes it bullying.

Where online bullying occurs: identifying the spaces

Children actively participate in online activities, including playing, learning, and socialising. As a result, bullying can manifest across various digital domains. Private group chats on messaging platforms, online gaming environments, social media posts, and public comments all serve as potential spaces for online bullying to take place.

Recognising the signs: indicators of online bullying

As a parent, it's crucial to observe any changes in your child's behaviour that may signal their involvement in or experience of online bullying.

Keep a watchful eye for the following behavioural shifts:

- Increased distress after using the internet or mobile phone.
- Personality changes, such as appearing lonelier or distressed.
- Unexpected shifts in friendship circles.
- Decline in academic performance.
- Altered sleep patterns.
- Avoidance of school or clubs.
- Deterioration in physical health.
- Heightened secrecy regarding online activities.

It's important to note that these changes don't definitively indicate online bullying but can serve as indicators for further investigation and support.

For online bullying to occur, there must be someone who is bullying. It is never nice to think that your child might be choosing to be a bully, but keep an eye out for things like:

- A new social circle or an increase in concern with popularity status.
- Defensive or secretive use of devices – including quick switching of screens in your presence.
- Things you hear from other people in your community.
- Use of multiple accounts – such as friends sharing accounts or logins

- Increased behavioural issues at school.

- Increased insensitivity or aggression to others.

Addressing the bullying: steps to take

If your child confides in you about being bullied online, it's vital to respond calmly and acknowledge their need for support.

Reacting with anger, seeking retaliation, or restricting their access to the online world may not be helpful. Instead, consider the following actions:

- Express gratitude and empathy for your child's openness, recognising the courage it takes to speak up.

- Create a conducive environment for open conversation and active listening. Find a suitable setting that aligns with your child's preferences, whether it's engaging in a walk or playtime or having uninterrupted discussions.

- Involve your child in the decision making process and openly discuss the next steps with them. Where appropriate, let them share their thoughts on how to proceed and respect their choices.

- Collect evidence of the bullying incidents. While the temptation to remove them immediately may be strong, preserving evidence ensures that the platform can respond appropriately.

- Utilise blocking features to prevent your child from encountering hurtful content. Blocking the person or group responsible offers immediate relief and protection.

- Report the bullying incidents to the relevant platform. In Australia, laws govern online bullying material, and familiarising yourself with the reporting process outlined by the eSafety Commissioner will enable you to take appropriate action on different apps.

Addressing your child's bullying behaviour: prevention and consequences

Preventing bullying is always preferable, and this starts with cultivating empathy in your child. Encourage them to consider how they would feel if someone consistently treated them unkindly, fostering an understanding of the emotional impact.

Emphasise that there are real consequences for engaging in bullying behaviour, ranging from being banned from platforms to legal ramifications.

Key takeaways:

1. Understand the definition of online bullying and differentiate it from occasional conflicts or disagreements in online interactions.

2. Be aware of the various digital spaces where online bullying can occur, such as private chats, online games, social media platforms, and public comments.

3. Stay vigilant for behavioural changes in your child that may indicate their involvement in or experience of online bullying.

4. When addressing online bullying, remain calm and supportive, and take steps such as preserving evidence, blocking individuals or groups, and reporting incidents to the relevant platforms.

5. Foster empathy in your child to prevent bullying behaviour by encouraging them to consider how they would feel in the recipient's position and highlighting the real-life consequences of engaging in bullying online.

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