



Signs that your child may be a victim of cyber bullying include the child getting upset after spending time online or shutting off his or her device abruptly. PHOTO: ISTOCKPHOTO

# Teach kids to fend off cyber bullies

With increased cyber-bullying risks during the pandemic, parents should communicate and educate kids about protecting themselves online



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While it is common to spend more time on mobile devices during the pandemic, Ethan Lim, 16, knows that meal times are family bonding moments when he sets these aside.

"We talk about his day, find out about his friends and the topics he's interested in. This helps to keep a check on what's happening in his online world while we try to connect with him in real life during this period," says his father Walter Lim, 49, chief content strategist of Cooler Insights, a digital and content marketing agency. He is also a member of the Media Literacy Council.

Experts say kids around the world face increased cyber risks from spending extended periods on their devices while staying home.

Cyber bullying is the biggest danger for kids here, something parents can help to guard against by being more involved in their children's lives and online activities.

An agency of the United Nations had highlighted the potential dangers earlier this month.

Mrs Doreen Bogdan-Martin, a director at the Geneva-based International Telecommunication Union, said in an online briefing: "Many children are coming online earlier than their parents had intended, at much earlier ages and without the necessary skills to protect themselves, whether it is from online harassment or cyber bullying."

Light, an artificial intelligence-based start-up that detects and filters toxic online content to protect children, reports a 70 per cent increase in instances of hate speech between kids and teens worldwide from December last year to March this year. It analysed millions of websites, teen chat sites and gam-

ing platforms.

The sobering warnings are particularly relevant as Singapore children are among the most wired in the world.

They receive their first Internet-linked gadget at the average age of eight – two years earlier than the global average, according to a 2019 survey by search engine Google.

Ms Ann Hui Peng, director of Student Service @ Children's Society, says parents "who normally restrict screen time for their children suddenly need to relax their house rules" because of the stay-home measures.

This is because kids now have home-based learning (HBL), use video calls to keep in touch with extended family and friends, and stave off boredom by playing games on gadgets.

"This correspondingly has brought about the concern that some children may become addicted over time to communication and gaming devices, and these children may eventually face difficulties in readjusting back to pre-pandemic practices," she says.

The good news is that the Children's Society has not seen an increase in cyber-bullying reports from beneficiaries at its service centres during the circuit breaker. Neither has Touch Integrated Family Group, says Mrs Anita Low-Lim, its senior director.

However, Mr Daniel Koh, a psychologist at Insights Mind Centre, says more parents have approached his centre in the last two months because they are "concerned about the need to use more digital means and depending on it for outreach and communications".

Also, victims may not always report incidents, points out Associate Professor Kathryn Seigfried-Spellar, who teaches computer and information technology at the Purdue (University) Polytechnic Institute in the United States.

"Kids are usually not forthcoming with issues of cyber bullying because they're afraid of losing their technology. Some teens would rather be cyber bullied than have their Facebook page or Instagram account shut down," she says.

Ms Vyda S. Chai, a clinical psychologist at Think Psychological Services, notes that as parent-child tensions rise during the pandemic, kids "as young as seven and teens are turning to their social network platforms as a means of escape, making them more vulnerable to cyber bullying".

Meanwhile, many parents are exhausted from juggling HBL with working from home and may not be



Mr Walter Lim (far left, with son Ethan and wife Tina Tan) is a member of the Media Literacy Council. He believes in open communication with 16-year-old Ethan on online risks such as cyber bullying. PHOTO: COURTESY OF WALTER LIM

paying attention to what their children are doing online or on social media.

"Although cyber bullying has been around for a long time, we are living in unprecedented times, and when kids are anxious, stressed or bored, the opportunity to cyber bully is present," she says.

According to the Child Online Safety Index by international think-tank DQ Institute, cyber bullying is the biggest online danger for kids here. Forty per cent of those aged eight to 12 have been exposed to it, while 52 per cent of teenagers aged 13 to 19 surveyed were similarly affected.

The index surveyed 145,400 children worldwide, including 11,963 children and adolescents here from March 2017 to December last year. It was partly funded by Singtel.

The repercussions of cyber bullying extend far beyond short-term fears.

Just over a week ago, Japanese wrestler and Netflix reality show star Hana Kimura, 22, took her own life, allegedly after being cyberbullied.

Ms Ang Jia Yi, a counsellor with the Singapore Children's Society, recounts the case of Joshua (not his real name), 18, who was subject to "offensive, vulgar, rude and insulting messages" via WhatsApp by a bully in a group project chat last year.

The other friends in the chat gradually followed suit and Joshua lost interest in his studies and hobbies, and even had suicidal thoughts.

Even though his parents reported the incident to his school and the bully apologised privately, the incident and loss of friendships affected his sense of self-worth.

After five months of counselling, his emotional well-being has improved, but he keeps to himself and is wary about whom to trust, Ms Ang says.

Empathy is key when helping kids overcome cyber bullying, says

Mrs Low-Lim, who is also a member of the Media Literacy Council. This means parents should not dismiss incidents or ignore them.

"Instead, parents should talk to their children, seek to understand the situation and be a pillar of support for them in their time of distress."

To minimise online risks, parents should agree on screen-time limits with their kids and be good role models themselves, she said.

"Research has shown that communication between parents and children about how to consume media is more effective than only limiting a child's access to the media."

Ms Chai suggests that parents talk to their kids about what to do if they see or hear something they are uncomfortable with online or on social media.

They could point out red flags, such as someone asking them not to say something, or asking them for photographs or personal information.

When it comes to gaming, parents should be even more involved, says Ms Ann.

"Knowing where your child spends his online gaming time is not sufficient and we encourage parents to try gaming with their children so as to understand their children's virtual worlds, as well as to step in when necessary."

"For younger children, parents may want to deactivate the games' chat or message function."

She adds: "Remember that the more comfortable your child feels about coming to you when a threatening or uncomfortable situation arises, the better it will be as you can catch the problem early."

"If your automatic response is to withdraw the privileges of using those devices, it's less likely your child will approach you for help."

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## Spot the signs of cyber bullying

Parents should keep a lookout for unusual behaviour, which may indicate cyber bullying.

Ms Ann Hui Peng, director of Student Service @ Children's Society, and Mrs Anita Low-Lim, senior director at Touch Integrated Family Group, list the tell-tale signs.

These include sudden changes in behaviour, such as the child losing interest in favourite hobbies or activities, eating more or less than usual and changes in sleeping habits.

Children may also have unexplained stomachaches, headaches or panic attacks. They may withdraw from family and school activities or express suicidal thoughts.

Psychologist Daniel Koh of Insights Mind Centre adds: "At times, they may project it onto some other issues or people, so look out for unusual questions or speech."

They may get upset after spending time online or abruptly shut off or walk away from their device mid-use.

Hiding screens, shutting apps and games when a parent is near and an unwillingness to share information about their online activities are also among the indicators.

Besides engaging their children in conversations about online safety, parents can set parental controls on gadgets, carry out ad-hoc checks on their children's devices, including the browser history, and follow them on social media.

The Media Literacy Council's BetterInternet.sg website offers cyber-bullying resources for parents as well as a guidebook on bringing up kids in the digital age. Download it at [bit.ly/2zqk44E](http://bit.ly/2zqk44E).