

# Cyberbullying Scripts

## Talking to Teens about Online Harassment

Sameer Hinduja, Ph.D. and Justin W. Patchin, Ph.D.



Research has identified the importance of ongoing discussions between parents and children about online interactions. As such, we've created some sample "scripts" between a parent and a teenager to encourage cyberbullying-related conversations. We hope they are useful in encouraging parents to discuss this important issue with their tech-savvy teens.

### VIDEO GAMES:

**Parent:** Why haven't you been playing that online game you've been so addicted to lately?

**Teen:** I don't want to talk about it.

**Parent:** It's okay, you can talk to me. I promise everything will be okay.

**Teen:** Well, some guys have been calling me names and making fun of me during the in-game chat.

**Parent:** Who? What types of things are they saying?

**Teen:** It's the same group of guys. They have their own "clan" in the game and always play together. Every time I'm playing they enter the same online room as me and say that I'm "gay" and a "loser" and have no friends. They just make it no fun to play.

**Parent:** Okay. Just know that you didn't do anything wrong and we are going to solve this problem so you can keep playing without having to worry about being cyberbullied.

**Teen:** How are we going to do that? I don't even know their real names.

**Parent:** I think there is a setting to block certain usernames.

**Teen:** I didn't know we could do that. Thanks!

**Parent:** No problem. I really want you to remember that you don't have to allow others to be jerks to you online. You can control your gaming experience by taking advantage of the blocks and protections and controls that your gaming console and the online gaming network have. We may not know how to work them, but we can figure it out thanks to Google and trial and error. So let's work on this together! That way, you can focus on enjoying the game and not being distracted by drama or nonsense from others.

### FORTNITE:

**Parent:** How come you haven't been playing that Fortnite game you talk about? Is something going on?

**Teen:** No. I just haven't been feeling like playing it anymore.

**Parent:** Um, I know you better than that! Something is wrong and you're scared to tell me. So, I'll ask again. What's the matter?

**Teen:** Dad, it's not serious. Trust me. It's just some idiots who think it's funny to call me an animal and whatnot. It's annoying so I'm just done with it.

**Parent:** This is exactly why I didn't want to get you that game or let you play on it for so long. How long has this been going on? And don't lie.

**Teen:** Not that long. Sometimes it happens, that's why I said it's just annoying.

**Parent:** You still should've told me. Is that all they say to you? Do you know these people that you play with?

**Teen:** They call me the n-word a lot and make animal noises. And no, I don't know who they are so it's not like I can do anything.

**Parent:** Wow. That is seriously messed up. You may not know this but when people target another person because of their race, gender, religion, or sexual orientation, it can be considered a hate crime. That is a huge deal. And I know that no online game wants racists ruining the experience that people have. I'm confident that if we report their usernames, there will be

consequences for them – like their account banned or quarantined. Do you have any screenshots?

**Teen:** Nope, because they just say it through their microphone.

**Parent:** If we don't do something, more people are going to be targeted in this way. It's not right. And I know it's scary to speak up and defend yourself, but it is absolutely the right thing to do. If we don't, they win. We cannot let hate win.

**Teen:** Wow. I guess you're right. If I don't stand up for myself, no one will. I gotta do something. Let's keep chatting this out and figure out a plan.

## **SNAPCHAT:**

**Parent:** What have you been doing on the computer for the past hour?

**Teen:** Oh, nothing...just dealing with some stuff on my Snap.

**Parent:** What do you mean? Is everything okay?

**Teen:** It's fine, I don't want to talk about it.

**Parent:** You know you can tell me anything. I know something is bothering you, so what's up?

**Teen:** I posted a selfie to some of my friends, but somehow this other kid from my English class who didn't even receive it from me, well, he somehow got it and zoomed in to a part of the picture that's a bit awkward, and is using it to make fun of me.

**Parent:** Wow, that is awful. I'm so sorry.

**Teen:** Yeah, he posted the zoomed-in shot to his Public story and other people started piling on and making me feel like crap.

**Parent:** Listen, I know it may seem like the end of the world right now but we are going to fix this. First, we can report the user and the Story (if it hasn't disappeared) to Snap. Did anyone take a screenshot of it? I know the other person gets a warning when you take a screenshot of what they post, but if they are doing the wrong thing and hurting other people, they deserve to get in trouble! We can't be scared of them knowing that we took a screenshot. They have chosen to victimize you, and there should be consequences. I'm sorry this happened to you – some people are just going to be mean and we're not going to be able to understand it or control it. But we will do what we can. Also, it sounds like one of your "friends" leaked that photo to others, or otherwise isn't really your friend. You have got to try to figure that out and never share your Snaps with that person. You just can't trust them, unfortunately.

**Teen:** Thanks, Dad. That's a good point. Alright, we'll do what we can. I appreciate you not freaking out and staying calm and realizing that this does matter to me and isn't a small thing.

## **INSTAGRAM:**

**Parent:** Something's off with you. It used to be, every time I saw you, you'd be taking pictures and scrolling through Instagram. Now you barely look at your phone.

**Teen:** I just haven't been interested. It's not a big deal.

**Parent:** I didn't ask if it was a big deal, but it clearly is if you're shrugging it off.

**Teen:** Fine. Some girl I thought was my friend grabbed a picture of me from online, then made a finsta with it as the profile photo, and is using that account to post all sorts of rumors and gossip and nonsense just for laughs – but people think I am behind it!

**Parent:** Wow. What is a finsta?

**Teen:** It just means a fake or funny or secondary Instagram account that people might make to post stuff they don't really want to share on their normal, real account. Mom, it really wasn't a big deal till the page started getting comments from people all over school, and she'd reply to all of them pretending to be me. She even responded to a comment by her boyfriend AS ME, being all flirty and stuff, and now, everyone is coming up to me accusing me of moving in on her boyfriend. And they're calling me a wh\*re. But she's behind the account, not me! Everyone just thinks it's me because she used my pic in the profile photo. It's just a huge mess and I feel terrible.

**Parent:** Instagram is really responsive whenever there are cases of impersonation. You just have to send them evidence that it's not you behind the page. I'm sure they can also see that it's not the IP address associated with your posts on your actual Instagram. I don't want you to feel helpless. We can get help. The company will help us and we also need to let the school know and give them whatever digital evidence you have. I have to believe they will investigate and punish this girl, because clearly this is affecting your mental health and well being.

**Teen:** I just want this problem to go away. And I'm ready to do whatever it takes. Just please remain calm and always be checking in with me to see what I would like to see happen. Please.

**Parent:** You got it. I will work with you. Just know I am here for you.

**Teen:** Thanks, mom.

## **EMAIL:**

**Parent:** I want to talk to you about email and whether you've had to deal with any kind of email harassment.

**Teen:** Why?

**Parent:** Well, with all of the news stories about kids harassing each other using email, I want to know if this is happening to you. Have you ever been bothered or annoyed or mistreated by anyone via email?

**Teen:** There were a few times where people I don't know sent me weird emails, trying to make me upset. I'm not sure how they got my email address because I don't know them, but they did.

**Parent:** OK. I'm proud of you for telling me about this, and I want to help you so that you don't have to deal with this anymore. It is possible that these people got your email address from a friend of yours, or from one of the social networking sites you use? Have you ever posted any personal information like your email address or anything like that online?

**Teen:** No, I don't think so. I mean, I sometimes put my email address in messages I post on my friend's pages so it's easy for them to get back to me. But I guess those messages are viewable by everyone, though...so maybe that's how they got my information.

**Parent:** Well, even if you did post your email address in those messages, you don't deserve to be harassed or bothered like this. You just need to be careful about posting any personal information online, because you never know who will see it. There are some messed-up people out there, and I know you don't like getting these weird emails. For now, we can use the email software on your computer to block the senders of the harassing messages. We can also look up the email header information to find out which Internet Service Provider the messages came from. We can email that Internet Service Provider to tell them what's going on, and forward them the messages as evidence. They will take care of it from there. And, if any of these emails have threatened your personal safety, we can call the police and file a report. Hopefully this will take care of the problem, and you won't be harassed any more. What do you think?

**Teen:** Well, the emails I've received are just annoying and there haven't been any threats. I think we should just block the senders so I don't receive any more messages from them.

**Parent:** That sounds good. We can take care of it right now, and you can let me know if this doesn't fix the problem. I don't want you to have to deal with this on your own.

## **PHONES:**

**Parent:** I heard your phone buzzing a lot the other day. Are you having any problems with it?

**Teen:** No. It was just some people sending me text messages and they wouldn't stop.

**Parent:** What do you mean, they wouldn't stop? Are these your friends or someone else?

**Teen:** It's no big deal. It's just some people from school who think it's funny to flood my phone with stupid texts.

**Parent:** I'm so glad you told me about this. That must be pretty annoying.

**Teen:** Yeah. It's frustrating because I want to turn off my phone so I don't have to deal with it, but then my friends can't reach me.

**Parent:** You shouldn't have to deal with this. If someone is bothering you using your phone, we can report them to the cell phone company and have their number blocked. If it gets out of hand, we can change your phone number and you can give the new number only to the people you want to have it.

**Teen:** But I don't want to go through all of that because one or two people are harassing me and I can't get them to stop.

**Parent:** I understand, and I don't want you to get a new number if you don't have to. First we'll contact the cell phone company and let them know what's happening. If the harassing text messages continue from a different number, we'll block that one too. Then if it keeps happening, we will get you a new number.

## GROUP CHAT:

**Teen:** Mom? Dad? Do you think I can get another phone? With a new number? Or maybe just move back to Ohio?

**Parents:** What? Why? I thought you loved it here. What on earth is going on?

**Teen:** Nothing. I just want a change, I guess. My phone is being slow and since the new iPhone just came out, it makes sense that I get one.

**Parent:** Oh no. Something happened, and you don't want to tell us. We won't be upset about it. We just want to know why you're requesting a number change. You never let that phone out of your sight. I wouldn't be surprised if you have 30,000 messages from your friends.

**Teen:** That's exactly why. All these messages are making my phone slow and it's better that we do both. Move back to Ohio and I get a new phone.

**Parent:** What's going on?

**Teen:** <sigh>. Okay. I'm in a group chat with some friends and one of the girls sent me a screenshot of some messages between them. They made a separate group chat without me included and said some things.

**Parent:** Some things like rumors? Gossip?

**Teen:** Kind of. They're saying things like, "She talks too much," "She's a suck up," "She thinks she's better than everyone else," and making comments about asking James to hang out, and that "I'm acting like a sl\*t." When I walk past them, they ignore me, and pretend that I'm invisible. I don't know what to do.

**Parents:** Here's what we can do. We can change your number if that makes the situation better. Do you want us to talk to their parents? Probably not, but if you think it might help, I can. I know it's hard, but the way that they are treating you makes me feel like they don't deserve to have you as a friend anyway. And maybe right now you have no one else, but I promise you that more friends will come your way in time. I'm so sorry this is so hard right now, and that you feel so alone. Let me know how I can possibly help get you connected to others, maybe a new after school activity or club? I'm all ears.

**Teen:** Thank you for not pressuring me. Sucks when people you thought care about you show you their true colors. But it's fine, it's their loss. I'll think through what might help and get back to you. Thanks again.

## HURTFUL MEME:

**Parent:** Hey sweetie, how's school been?

**Teen:** The usual. Hanging out with friends and trying to get As.

**Parent:** What about online? I know you have Instagram, Twitter, TikTok, and Snapchat. No issues on those?

**Teen:** Well, there was this one issue. Someone created this meme where I look like a boy and that guys should check my birth certificate to make sure that I'm a girl. It was stupid, and a lot of people didn't believe it but, some people have been retweeting the meme.

**Parent:** I don't know how a meme works but I do know that social media platforms don't allow harassment, and any forms of cyberbullying usually violate their Terms of Service. I think we should start by contacting the platform and ask them to take it down because it goes against their rules and is personally affecting you. We can also contact the school if you find out who originally created it. I'm sure they have policies in place so that the other kid is disciplined. We'll figure it out - I'm here to work with you. You tell me what you'd like to see happen, and how things can get back to good for you.

**Teen:** Thanks, Dad. I'm sorry I didn't come to you about it sooner. If I knew it was this easy to talk to you about it, I would've done it long time ago.

## SEXTING:

**Parent:** So, how are things with you and Daniel? You should invite him for dinner Friday night, it's been a while.

**Teen:** It's been great. He's super sweet, Dad, and I've been asking him to come over and meet you guys but he's so busy with school and practice. But we text and video chat all the time.

**Parent:** Speaking of which, how often do you guys text?

**Teen:** Um, all the time. I send him funny pictures of the dog, and my graduation pictures.

**Parent:** Has he ever asked you for a nude?

**Teen:** DAD!!!!

**Parent:** I know you might be scared to tell me, but I want to protect you and make sure you protect yourself. I understand that you want to deepen intimacy in your relationship, but you just cannot trust guys as much as you think you can. And I know you believe he will never hurt you, but I'm asking you to trust me on this one: when relationships go south in high school, the ex's often react angrily and emotionally, and usually want revenge. Plus, you're technically creating and transmitting child pornography, because you're a minor.

**Teen:** Dear heavens. Dad. This is super heavy.

**Parent:** You have to understand that teens around our country have been made an example of by prosecutors and judges. I don't agree with it, because y'all just don't know what you're doing, but it can happen. And then you could get labeled a sex offender. But apart from that, I just really don't want you to lose control of private pictures you share when they go public. There is always so much fallout, drama, pain, and regret when that happens. And it could last for years and years.

**Teen:** <deep breath> Wow, I feel like you just totally unloaded on me. But I get it. I get what you're saying.

**Parent:** You have to know I want the very best for you, and I want you to stay safe and not be victimized or have any regrets. Thanks for listening.

## **SEXTORTION:**

**Teen:** Mom, I need your advice.

**Parent:** I'm all ears. This sounds really serious.

**Teen:** It is. One of the girls that I'm friends with in science class came to me and asked me for some advice. She was crying and I really want to help her but I'm not sure how.

**Parent:** What was she crying about?

**Teen:** There's this guy on the football team who asked her out on a date, and they've been dating for a little while but, he's been texting her like crazy!

**Parent:** Whoa. What has he been saying? Is he threatening her?

**Teen:** Kind of. She had sent him a picture of her with no shirt on and he claimed to have deleted it but never did. Now that she told him she wants to break up, he's telling her that he's going to share all the pictures she's sent him with everyone. Her face is in it and everything! He said the only way he'll delete it is if she comes over and sleeps with him for "breaking his heart."

**Parent:** Okay, this is very serious. First, tell her that she has to tell her parents. I know you guys are afraid of letting us know, but don't forget that we remember what it's like to be young, and in love, and have dealt with guys and girls who were all wrong for us. Next, tell her to save all those messages she received from him and contact the police because this is called "sextortion." She should probably call the State Police or the County police, since they generally have Computer Crimes Units to deal with this sort of thing.

**Teen:** What can the police do?

**Parent:** They can arrest him, and he'll be in lots of trouble. Especially if he's threatening her to have sex with him. I know she probably doesn't want the school to know, but this is a huge deal. He deserves to be suspended or expelled even, and we can't have this happening to another girl if your friend doesn't do anything about it. We also need to try to make sure that there are no other copies of those pictures and videos floating around. That's going to be really tough, though, because once it gets out there, you can't ever get it back.

**Teen:** I hear you. This is really rough. I'll pass on the advice and hope she listens, as this is for her own good – now and in the future.

## **TEXT THREAT:**

**Parent:** I notice you've been putting your phone face down every time it goes off during dinner and that your face seems to drain of its color. Is something going on?

**Teen:** Nope. I'm in a group chat with some classmates and the girls from the cheer team. They send gifs all the time and I never silence my notifications. It's nothing really.

**Parent:** Well, I'm only bringing it up because I was watching the news the other night and they were talking about how teens being afraid to use or check their own phone because of the

types of messages being sent to them.

**Teen:** I think I heard about that. That's crazy. I can't believe people feel okay sending threats to others.

**Parent:** Right, as your parent, I'm going to always worry about who you text and what they send you. I want you to know that anytime someone sends you a text that you feel uncomfortable with, I'm always here. People are jerks sometimes, and say things online they would never say face to face. If you or someone you know is being threatened on anything, don't be afraid to speak up and talk to me about it. I promise not to freak out on you. I promise to be calm and reasonable and just talk things out with you with the main goal of me trying to help you.

**Teen:** Okay, mom. I believe you. I will remember that.

## CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

To reiterate, one of the most important steps you can take to prevent and effectively respond to cyberbullying, or any other problem related to their technology use, is to regularly talk about online interactions with your kids. They will know where you stand on these issues, and will hopefully feel more comfortable coming to you with concerns. The earlier you initiate these conversations (yes, there will need to be more than one!), the better off you and your kids will be. As soon as they start using technology, talk with them about the potential risks and rewards of communication in cyberspace. As they grow older and more proficient with the technologies, discuss additional issues with them as appropriate.