



## Cyberbullying – teach teenagers to be resilient

By Michael Hawton, Psychologist (MAPS) and [Parentshop](#) founder.

No doubt we are all on the same page when it comes to cyberbullying. It's a terrible thing and some young people find themselves driven to take their own lives. It can be horrible.

However, I don't think the issue of bullying is a new problem at all. Far from it. Cyberbullying can be seen as just another version of a problem that has existed for generations. Mean people have always been around. Yes, I hear some of you saying, but the mean people didn't use a device and they didn't (usually) enter your home! Granted. What I am saying though is that the same *teasers* and *taunters* and *name-callers* were there - in many 'now-adults' lives - when we were younger.

**In other words, there have always been and there will always be young people who want to hurt other young people.**

When the topic of cyberbullying comes up, I often hear commentators addressing the problem of dealing with the perpetrators and not actually helping kids learn self-defence skills. While I absolutely think that we should be doing everything that we can to prevent this behaviour, I also believe we could approach the problem from another perspective, before it occurs.

What if we flipped this conversation on its head and we became better teachers of how to help our kids to be tougher in the face of another person's meanness? In other words, learn to discriminate between what is harassment and what is just mucking-about and the appropriate response to that. The research is showing that school bullying usually starts face-to-face and then it morphs to an online form. So, if you're talking to a young person, here are my 7 tips for helping them to rise above the poor behaviour of others in real life or online:

1. **Tell them to 'self-talk' themselves – both sternly and strongly – only people close to you matter.** Someone once told me that in life many people will hold negative views about you and some of those views will be ill-founded. Only worry about what your family and close friends think about you. The others do not know who you really are, and their views, are less important.
2. **Where there is a power difference and a pattern, encourage your child to report the bullies.** The more pieces of the jigsaw puzzle an authority has (e.g., a school leader) the more they can see a pattern, which they can use in holding a tough conversation with a bully.
3. **Encourage them to disconnect – and just 'stop' using their device for a while – and give themselves time to work out what to do.** It's tempting to go into a tizz when you first feel insulted by someone, but part of becoming more mature is knowing when and 'how' to give a proportional response – including when to stop worrying about things that have no easy

solution. You can't control other people, but you can control what *you* do.

4. **Encourage them to sleep well – and even meditate.** Sleep for at least 8.5 hrs per night for a teenager – and learn to meditate or go for walks in nature. Dr Andrea Mechelli who led research on the impact nature has stated “short-term exposure to nature has a measurable beneficial impact on mental wellbeing” (Haig. 2018, p.277)
5. **Don't confuse people's 'right' to complain or disagree with you as abuse or as an affront; they're not the same thing as bullying.** Ask your teenager to tell you what happened and give them feedback. For example, someone looking at you the wrong way is not bullying. It may be unpleasant but it's not bullying.
6. **Encourage your teen to build an army of allies:** being a bystander is being complicit to bullying but being part of a bigger network, who refuse to allow bullying to occur and report it as a team, is empowering.
7. **Embrace social media, positively:** know-how to block, mute and report trolls and hate speech. Digital abstinence is unrealistic, managing a 'friendship' network so allies are central is key to using social media to be... social!

On a concluding note, we teach young people to defend themselves in Karate or Tai Quan Do through preparation and training to learn discipline. Shouldn't we also be helping them to defend themselves psychologically?

Michael Hawton is founder of Parentshop, providing education and resources for parents and industry professionals working with children. He has authored two books on child behaviour management: *Talk Less Listen More* and *Engaging Adolescents*. You can find more information, including his books and self-paced online parenting courses at <https://www.parentshop.com.au/parent-courses/>

References:

Matt Haig, *Notes on a Nervous Planet*, Canon Gate, Edinburgh, 2018.