



ASK Jane

Q: Dear Jane,

My daughter just entered Middle School and has her own phone. As parents, we have set guidelines about usage, social media apps she can download, etc. However, no matter how much I think we're protecting her, I still know that cyber-bullying can happen. Can you give me any tips on how to talk with her about this issue? Should there be a problem, what are the best ways we can help her work through it, being mindful of not punishing her in the process (e.g. taking away her phone, etc.)?

Help!

Becky

A: Dear Becky,

Thank you for asking such an important question. I certainly understand that the prospect of your child's being cyber-bullied incites fear and worry. What incites the most worry may be how out of control you feel. With constant inundation on social media, it's only natural that many parents feel at a loss for how to protect their children from all the negative content and noise that flood children at the touch of a button.

First, congratulations for being a present and thoughtful parent. Your asking this question tells me you want what's best for your daughter. You've begun the conversation, you've set clear limits and expectations, and you've communicated your emotional availability to her. Fabulous job, Becky! You should be proud of yourself!

You've laid a foundation for continued open

communication, any parent's greatest ally. The key here is to maintain your excellent work modeling healthy and non-judgmental communication. It's important to remain positive and welcoming towards your daughter. This way, when she comes to you with little or medium-sized concerns, she'll remember the experience and come to you with big concerns.

Your goal is to have her feel comfortable sharing with you.

Practice using phrases like

"Wow, I am so sorry this happened," "I see how much that hurts you," or "My goodness, that was mean. I would feel the same way." All these statements clearly illustrate your support and empathy. This will allow your daughter to feel understood and taken seriously.

Also share that you plan to stand up for her. Communicate with other parents or school

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officials if necessary. It's important that you show you are in control of the situation and that you and your child are not going to "simply give in" to the bully's attacks or targeted words.

For instance, let's say that a cyber-bully demands your child be on the playground after school to "throw down." Be clear to your child that she doesn't need to and will not succumb to the bully's demands. Get ahead of the specific instance by reaching out to school officials or the other student's parent beforehand — this sends a clear message to everyone involved that you are aware, prepared, and take threats like this seriously.

Meeting in person at the school—parents, both children, and the school principal or teacher—further reinforces the idea that there are rules and behavioral expectations for being a part of a school community.

Be willing to talk through your daughter's feelings on this. Even if you make a decision in her best interest contrary to what she would want, your doing so calmly and rationally will speak volumes and allow her to feel emotionally safe. Your willingness to model direct, clear and respectful communication while interacting with other adults is also key. If your daughter were to see you interact negatively with others this would contradict your message. She'll need your example at home to help offset all of the negativity she will have been experiencing online.

Now, the second point I want to make may be hard to hear, for it's every parent's worst nightmare. There will probably come a day when your daughter is attacked or made to feel bad about herself due to social media.

What we know about cyber-bullying is that it's on the rise, and that it excludes no one. This attack may come in the form of an Instagram comment that upsets her, someone who posts an unflattering photo, or maybe even a deleted "friend" status due to a fight or disagreement.

It is important to have this conversation up-front so your child knows what to expect, how she might feel in response, and what the plan will be for addressing the problem head on. You want to instruct her to always tell an adult, no matter how afraid or embarrassed she may feel, and that you expect there to be several times throughout her adolescence where she'll feel and be the target of someone trying to belittle or upset her. Remind her that cruel or abusive statements tell more about the bully than about his or her target, and that bullies need to make others feel small so they can feel bigger and better about themselves. Also, remind her that people often say things online that they would never say in person because they can hide behind electronic masks.

You also want to instruct your child to share with you the threat or abuse she received. This way, you see for yourself what she's reacting to and can take a screenshot for evidence in case it's taken down later.

Talking about the difference between reputation and character can also reinforce the positive message that no matter what anyone says, your child's character is how she chooses to behave, and no one can take this from her, regardless of what anyone online says. Impress on her the need and ability to control the phone instead of having it control her.

Whatever form this problem may take, it's important to remain understanding and supportive. Children are most vulnerable when they feel ashamed and put down. This puts you in an excellent position to instill all of the things you love and respect about her, and will provide her with an emotional suit of armor with which to face the world.

Most sincerely,

Jane JPA