



# PREVENTING BULLYING AND CYBER BULLYING

by Texas Attorney General Greg Abbott

PARENTS, EDUCATORS AND LAW ENFORCEMENT officials are increasingly recognizing that bullying is a serious problem that can pose a real threat to a child's well-being.

Young victims of bullying can suffer long-term consequences that haunt them long into adulthood. A research study published in 2013 showed that 19 to 26-year-olds who were affected by bullying as children are four times as likely to have been charged with a felony as adults. For the perpetrators, bullying can cross the line and become a criminal violation with lifelong consequences.

Bullies typically choose their victims based upon a particular vulnerability or a specific trait. Some simply choose victims randomly. For example, a bully may target a child because of the child's height or academic successes. To intimidate their victims, bullies rely upon a variety of harmful behaviors such as hitting, teasing, threatening, spreading rumors, damaging belongings, and excluding others from social groups.

In an increasingly electronic world, cyber bullies rely on technology to torment others. Cyber bullying occurs when teenagers use the Internet, cell phones, or other devices to send or post

texts or images that are intended to hurt or embarrass their victims. Put differently, cyber bullies may attempt to destroy or smear a victim's reputation with emails, blogs, social media posts, text messages, and other electronic media.

Bullying situations often involve seemingly powerful aggressors and victims who feel helpless. Sadly, some students who suffer bullying at school may believe that violence is the only way to defend themselves – but it is not. Texas law allows bullied students' parents to request that their children be transferred to another classroom or school. The law also requires that all schools display a student code of conduct that imposes disciplinary consequences for young bullies.

Parents and students alike should be aware that some instances of cyber bullying can cross the line and become criminal conduct. Texas law defines criminal harassment as "sending repeated electronic communications in a manner reasonably likely to harass, annoy, alarm, abuse, torment, embarrass, or offend another." Texas teenagers who suffer from cyber bullying or harassment should save all communications from a bully and report those threatening or

hurtful messages to a parent, teacher, law enforcement officer, or other trusted adult.

By working to prevent young Texans' bullying, harassment and intimidation, adults can help protect young people and make our communities safer. Parents and teachers are often best poised to build a child's self-confidence and teach the student how to peacefully resolve their problems. Parents and school personnel should always take bullying seriously so that children are not embarrassed or afraid to tell adults that they have been bullied.

To help children deal with bullies, parents should work to bolster children's self-esteem and self-assertiveness. They should also teach their children to solve problems without resorting to violence. Victims of bullying should be taught that they should immediately report the bully or cyber bully to a trusted adult.

Parents should also teach children that if they witness bullying, there are positive steps to end a potentially dangerous situation and help the victim. Witnesses must not watch or encourage the bully, since bullies typically desire an audience. Instead, witnesses and bystanders should go to the victim's aid if it is safe to do so and report the incident to an adult. Parents

who observe any bullying should take action to stop it right away – even if their own child is responsible for the bullying.

To ensure children and teenagers know how to safely resolve a bullying incident, parents and teachers should teach students to:

- Report to an adult any type of bullying – including theft, physical attacks, online harassment, abusive text messages, etc.
- Protect themselves and others. Young Texans should follow rules and stay out of trouble, avoid gangs, walk to school with friends, and be aware of their surroundings.
- Be cooperative and respectful. Conflict resolution exercises, parental involvement in school or summer activities, and spending time with family can help offer children opportunities to experience appropriate social interaction with their peers.

Together, parents, children, teachers and law enforcement authorities can help prevent bullying and cyber bullying, reduce crime and build a brighter future for all Texans.

- September 2014