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## Rise in cyberbullying among adolescents during COVID-19

By Vera Kochan

The Moraga town council recently declared October to be Bullying Prevention and Moraga iKind Project Month. Unfortunately, COVID-19 has been the catalyst for a 70% increase in cyberbullying during shelter-in-place orders, according to Verywell Family, a website that provides information gathered from health professionals.

For many children and teens their contact with each other over the past seven months has largely been done virtually. Accustomed to a regimen of online classes, they continue to remain on the internet to socialize with the outside world. A 2019 study from the Cyberbullying Research Center found that students who are idle or bored spend an hour or more online.

Licensed marriage and family therapist, Margie Ryerson, ([www.margieryerson.com](http://www.margieryerson.com)), who is also a Lamorinda Weekly contributing writer states, "Parents should be aware that every form of social media provides potential access to cyberbullies. Some common social media sites where bullying occurs are: Snapchat, Instagram, YouTube, Facebook, Twitter, Ask.fm, Kik, WhatsApp and Pinterest."

A major crisis, such as a global pandemic, creates stress, confusion, anxiety and depression in adults as well as children. Over a prolonged period of time it can lead to misunderstandings, acting out or lashing out at others and risk-taking behavior. Ryerson lists a number of triggers that can lead to cyber bullying as: the need for power and control; retaliation for pain they've experience from others (revenge); boredom; lack of empathy toward others; relationship problems with family/friends; the need to elevate their self-esteem; and its addictive nature which provides a temporary lift and protection in that it's anonymous.

According to the Alameda Police Department, it is important for parents to take an active part in what their children are doing online. Approve every app on your child's phone and stay up-to-date with popular apps for teens. Have an open dialog with children about appropriate phone, app and social media usage. Also, remind them that once "send" is clicked there is no way to take it back.

"Parents can be more restrictive in light of the higher incidence of cyberbullying," Ryerson says. "While it's important for parents to have discussions about cyberbullying and what their children can do, teens won't necessarily share with parents when they are receiving harmful, nasty comments. Besides limiting use of screens for social media purposes, parents can encourage texts, FaceTime and phone exchanges for their children so that communication is personal and safe." Ryerson also suggests that parents can visit Google's Family Link for computer use and Apple's Screen Time and Family Sharing links for iPhone.

Probably one of the easiest methods for parents to monitor a portion of their child's social media activity is to have them hand over their devices at a predetermined time each evening. This not only helps to limit online usage, it is an opportunity for everyone to get a good night's sleep.

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