



Building parent-school partnerships

WORDS Catherine Gerhardt

Online Flaming

So what is online flaming? Catherine Gerhardt gives us the lowdown plus practical tips for parents to recognise the signs and how to respond should your child be affected.

A friend of mine lives with avid teenage gamers, and she was horrified to discover recently the language and the insults that her children were exposed to while engaging in a popular online game with their friends.

Flame wars have become a major online annoyance. When people start a flame war they are deliberately trying to stir up trouble, start a fight and get a reaction. Flaming is all too common on multi-player gaming sites, chat rooms, message forums and social media sites.

Most parents are aware of the trolls that can exist out there in cyberspace, and flaming is one of the skill sets that cyber bullies are familiar with. Flamers and trolls use insults to make personal attacks and say offensive things about a person's individual character, their family or sexuality even though they may know very little about them.

Psychologists have termed the behaviour behind flaming, the "online disinhibition effect." It means that people behave with less restraint online, and feel powerful behind the computer screen. Experts say a number of factors

contribute to online flaming: the apparent anonymity and invisibility of the Internet, the lag between sending a message and getting feedback, and the minimum authority that seems to exist in digital spaces.

As parents we often complain that we can't keep up with the technology our kids are using, however many of us agree that we want to be their first point of call if things go wrong. Parents can be their child's strongest asset in the line of defence against negative online experiences.

What parents can do:

Discuss with your children

what they do online and who they communicate with – try your best to know which social media/gaming sites they are using. Know that they may have more than one account on any social media platform. One of my daughter's friends has four Instagram accounts, each one carving out a unique social space.

Know passwords

Youth may feel this is an invasion of their 'privacy'; however it is a key component

of the responsibility that comes with the privilege of using the technology. In most cases parents have either supplied the device or pay the bills for usage – that means you have the responsibility and the right to control it. Mutual respect is required here, having password control does not give you permission to spy, and your child needs to know they are being monitored.

Let me tell you the story of another friend of mine who had been 'monitoring' her daughter online for several months. However, her daughter was not aware that every message and photo went through her mother's device as well. When a problem did arise the parent was unsure how to deal with it – after all she had been 'spying' and wasn't sure how to broach the subject with her daughter without giving herself away.

It is much better to have that conversation when setting up accounts, and start as you intend to go on.

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... Online Flaming ...

Start a conversation with your child about the importance of minimising the amount of personal information they give away. Many flammers prey on Internet users who seem vulnerable. If the flamer can find out any personal information about a target, then he or she will use it to cause that person additional distress. Some flammers seek out people who are enthusiastic about certain subjects, and they intentionally bash the subject while others will intentionally start arguments about any topic.

Watch for signs of change in your child's behaviour. If you notice that your child is spending more time online than usual, changes his or her group of good friends, stops spending time with them altogether, or seems withdrawn or depressed and disinterested in activities that he or she used to love, then there may be cause for concern. Keep an eye out for those quiet introspective kids who have always enjoyed their own company, but no longer want to be alone, and do once again not want to leave your side as they seek comfort in your presence.

Evaluate internal feelings This is the best way to tell if one is being flamed. Feelings of anger, aggression, revenge

or low mood after reading the text will probably indicate a flaming message. When we feel the strong need to defend ourselves we are likely to react and respond to the text, thereby playing right into the flamer's intent.

Encourage the message "Do Not Respond" The best defence against a flaming comment is to ignore. Do not respond or engage in baiting messages. Once they respond, they have started a conversation. A capable flamer can be cool and composed at first, using kind words and connection to lure the unsuspecting person in. You and your child may not recognise flaming immediately, with many flammers waiting until they get the person to engage in conversation before they attack. Instead they need to walk away from the comment.

Know the strategies. **The best way to deal with a flamer is to ignore** From the moment the flaming becomes apparent do not respond. Many websites and forums will have options which empower the user in flaming situations. Use the blocking feature which should be integrated into their practices, and report the behaviour to an online moderator or webmaster. It is also critical that the target

exit the site so they are not exposing themselves to more online flaming, and of course, let a trusted adult know about their experience.

At its mildest, flaming is a one-time, name-calling incident. At its worst, it is a persistent and tenacious taunting that can lead a child to suicide. Not all cases of flaming lead to youth suicide, regardless of what the media portrays. Anyone can become the target or the aggressor, and anyone can stop it. There are many options for getting out of negative online experiences.

The Federal Government has recently launched the Office of the Children's eSafety Commissioner. The Office provides Australians a range of up-to-date information and resources, coupled with a comprehensive complaints system to assist children who experience serious cyberbullying online.

<https://esafety.gov.au/>

CATHERINE GERHARDT is a dedicated advocate of developing resilience and critical thinking skills in children and young people. Catherine has more than 20 years of expertise in Community Services, Health and Welfare and a background in Social Psychology. As a parent of school aged children, she understands the commitment and challenges parents face ensuring they provide the right information to young people in a way that empowers them to develop their personal and social capabilities.



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