



Goldilocks and the CyberParents

One day little Goldilocks was wandering through the woods for a picnic. It was a beautiful day and the sun shone between the leaf-covered branches of the big and protective trees. She was singing softly and the birds seemed to sing along with her.

At the prettiest spot in the woods Goldilocks spread her picnic blanket and unpacked her cookies and juice box. Then she connected to her laptop's mobile wide-area network and logged into her FaceSpace page. A message popped up. "Oh, I love new messages," thought Goldilocks. She clicked to open it.

In big red bold letters someone called YouDon'tKnowWholam had written "You are sooo stupid! You're ugly too! Why don't you go and live in the deep, dark woods and get eaten by a bear!"

Goldilocks read it twice to make sure she didn't misunderstand the first time. "Who is YouDon'tKnowWholam? Why would YouDon'tKnowWholam send me such a mean message?" she thought out loud. "Stupid? Ugly? Live in the deep, dark woods? Eaten by a bear?" Goldilocks shut her laptop with a snap. She put her straw into the juicebox and unwrapped a cookie. But her stomach began to hurt every time she thought about the mean message, and she left the cookie with its warm "Mom's chocolate chip" smell unwrapped on her blanket, untouched.

The day seemed darker and the birds seemed far away, suddenly. The trees that had seemed so friendly a few minutes ago now looked scary, their leaves casting long and creepy shadows onto her picnic blanket. The sun must have gone behind a cloud because the woods seemed colder too. Even though she now had chills, Goldilocks couldn't restrain herself and opened her laptop again, hoping that she had misunderstood the message. "Maybe it's a joke from one of the three bears!" She said to herself as she crossed her fingers and logged in one more time.

But her crossed fingers didn't help at all. The message hadn't changed. And joining it were two new ones. "You're fat. You're so fat that you have to wear clothes you borrowed from those stupid three bears you are always hanging around with. You smell like them too!" And, perhaps the most devastating of all... "Aladdin heard you liked him and he was so freaked out that asked his genie to put him in the lamp to hide so you couldn't find him and try to kiss him!"

Fat? Aladdin found out she liked him and hated her and wanted to hide from her in his lamp? She could never go back to school. She couldn't even face her friends or family! Goldilocks felt even sicker, colder and scared. She looked in the nearby stream to see how fat she was. The ripples kept her image from being very clear, but she thought she looked a bit heavier than she had an hour ago. Maybe it was the juice in the juicebox! Maybe her mom should start buying diet juices or just give her water to drink. Even

though she could smell the cookie, she vowed never to eat a cookie again. She felt miserable. And she was hungry and thirsty.

Goldilocks kept replaying the messages in her head, and often would reread them too. After a while, she started to believe them. “YouDon’tKnowWholam was right! I did seem a little fat, at least in the reflection in the stream! And Aladdin hates me now! How can I face everyone in school? How could I face him? Would he even be able to go to the Happily Ever After School now that he was moving to the genie’s bottle to live?” she thought to herself.

“It is all my fault! No wonder everyone hates me!” she said out loud, frightening the rabbits and birds in the woods.

Then her cell phone buzzed, heralding a new text message with a blocked sender. “Everyone hates you! I hope the wicked queen sends you the poison apple instead of giving it to Snow White!” She already knew everyone hated her. But now they wanted her to get sick and maybe die from the poison apple given to her by the wicked queen?

Her head began to spin and she had to hold onto the tree to regain her balance. The woods seemed to close in on her. She heard an owl screech and a wolf howl. Why had she thought the woods were friendly? It was getting late, but she didn’t have the energy to get up and walk back home. Everyone hated her! Her stomach growled. But she couldn’t even eat her cookie or drink her juice, since she was so fat!

Goldilocks closed her eyes, as tears spilled from them, and she wrapped herself up in her picnic blanket, shaking. More text messages arrived, one after another. She could hear them. But Goldilocks buried her head in her small shivering arms and fell asleep, dreaming of the whole school laughing at her, pointing at her and the wicked queen knocking at her door.

The sun set. Goldilocks’ parents began to worry when she didn’t arrive home in time for dinner. They called Jack and Jill, Goldilocks’ friends, hoping she was with them. “Have you seen Goldilocks?”

Jack told Goldilocks’ parents that he thought she may have taken a walk in the woods. Jill said that she saw Goldilocks pack her picnic blanket, a cookie, and her juicebox.

Goldilocks’ parents looked at each other, clearly very worried. Her father grabbed his jacket and her mom grabbed her flashlight. They took Goldilocks’ little puppy, Ronald, too. “Come on, Ronald, we have to find our little girl!” Goldilocks’ father shouted as he and his wife disappeared into the woods behind their house with Ronald scampering behind.

The woods were cold and very very dark. Goldilocks’ mom was getting more and more worried. “She’ll be very cold,” she said. “She didn’t even have her sweater with her when she left the house and a cookie

and juicebox isn't enough. She'll be very hungry and thirsty too!" She scanned the woods with her flashlight looking for clues about where Goldilocks might have gone.

After searching for almost an hour, Goldilocks' parents sat down on a log, exhausted and scared. "I think we need help," her father said as he pulled out his cell phone. The phone rang, but no one answered. He heard a gruff voice on the answering machine, asking him to leave a message. "Papa Bear? It's Michael, Goldilocks' father. We think she is lost in the woods and are searching for her. I would appreciate anything you can do to help. Have you seen her today?" He then left his cell number and hung up. He turned to his wife who seemed to be close to panicking. "I'm sure they will call back soon. We could really use their help!" he said, as he took her hand to comfort her. "Let's get going. It's a cold and dark night. Goldilocks needs us."

Papa hadn't been home to receive Michael's phone call. He and his family were out clearing some fallen trees in the woods. They were prepared for the cold and had packed Mama's honey cakes to eat when they stopped for a snack. And they knew where to find the coolest freshest streams in the woods. They knew the woods better than anyone, since their little house was just inside the prettiest part of the woods. Baby looked up at his parents, "I wish Goldilocks were here with us," he said. "She loves Mama's honey cakes even more than her mom's special chocolate chip cookies."

Just then, he thought he could smell Goldilocks' mom's cookies. "I can almost smell her cookies now."

Mama looked up. She could smell the chocolate chip cookies too. She caught Papa's eye. "Papa, will you come with me for a minute? I need your help," Mama said as she ambled deeper into the dark woods. "Baby, you stay here and collect logs for firewood. We'll be right back."

Papa and Mama knew the woods well and followed the scent of chocolate chip cookies. They both looked worried too. They knew that the smell came from deep in the woods and that it was dark and cold and any little girl accompanying those cookies would be frightened and alone. They moved faster, exchanging anxious glances. When they came to the little clearing, at first they couldn't see Goldilocks. But they heard her cell phone vibrating with incoming text messages, nearby. Goldilocks was tightly wrapped in her picnic blanket, huddled against a giant oak tree. Her teeth were chattering and she was shivering. A chocolate chip cookie had fallen onto the leaves and a chipmunk was munching on it, oblivious to the three in the clearing.

Papa looked at Mama. "You take the blanket and her backpack. I'll carry her back to the house." Mama silently nodded. Effortlessly, Papa lifted up the little girl who snuggled against his warm coat, wrapping her arms around his neck. She whimpered something in her sleep – something about not being able to eat anymore because she was too fat and something that sounded like "poisoned apples." He patted her gently and lumbered back to their little house while Mama went ahead to get Baby and light a fire. By the time they neared the house, Papa could see the candles welcoming them home and smell fresh-

baked honey cakes. He could even hear the crackling of the fire. Mama was standing in the doorway with a warm quilt on her arm and Baby looking on, anxiously. She was holding a cup of honey cider to help comfort Goldilocks. But Goldilocks slept through it all.

“Is she okay?” Baby asked. He looked around trying to figure out where Goldilocks would be most comfortable. “Put her over here on my cot,” he offered while fluffing his little pillow. As Papa laid her gently down on Baby’s cot, Goldilocks woke up.

At first she looked confused, not sure where she was. Then she saw her friend Baby and knew she was sitting up on his cot. She smiled when she realized where she was. “Baby, you know your cot is just right!” They both laughed remembering how they had first met, when Goldilocks had stumbled into their little house trying out their chairs, porridge and beds. “How did I get here?”

Baby and Mama Bear explained. Papa Bear didn’t say anything. He just looked on protectively, happy to see that Goldilocks appeared to be fine. “I’ll call her parents,” he offered as Goldilocks drank her honey cider and started chewing on a warm honey cake.

Goldilocks had started to tell the Three Bears about the mean messages on her laptop and on her cell phone. It wasn’t long before her parents knocked on the door of the little house in the woods owned by the Three Bears. She had just gotten to the part about the wicked queen when Papa Bear walked into the room with her parents. But she stopped when she saw her parents’ worried and exhausted faces. They were covered with dirt, her father’s sleeve was ripped and her mother had leaves and twigs in her hair from searching in the woods for her.

Immediately her parents began to question her about what had happened, talking at the same time. Goldilocks began to explain, but when she got to the part about the mean messages saying she was fat, and about Aladdin hating her and the wicked queen and the poisoned apple, both parents stood frozen in place. Her mother was the first to move.

“I KNEW I SHOULDN’T HAVE LET YOUR FATHER BUY YOU THAT LAPTOP!!!” Her voice was shrill and she continued. “And that cell phone! It was supposed to help keep you safe, help you reach us when you needed to. Instead you were ATTACKED on it! And you’re not FAT! They are FAT! And Aladdin should count his lucky stars that you liked him. I hope he gets stuck in the lamp and turns into a genie himself! And the wicked queen! Don’t even get me started on her! I went to school with her, you know. And she was wicked even then. “Who’s the fairest of them all?” P-L-E-A-S-E ...!!! She wouldn’t know “fair” if it hit her in the face. She had a nose job, you know! And...” Goldilocks’ mother was hysterical. Baby Bear looked at Goldilocks who seemed more afraid of what her mother was going to do next, losing her cell phone and laptop and the “mama drama” than she was of the wicked queen. He looked at both of his parents who were watching all of this carefully and quietly.

At the same time Goldilocks' mother was having her hysterical meltdown, dialing the home number of Goldilocks' principal and trying to conference him in with the Department of Homeland Security, her father was pouring himself a cup of honey cider, seeming to be oblivious to everything his wife was doing. "Goldilocks, it's best when things like this happen that you just ignore them. It's not a big deal. We're happy we found you. Bad things could have happened to you in the woods at night alone. But the mean messages are just words. Remember "sticks and stones will break your bones, but words will never hurt you!" Goldilocks looked sad when he said this. She exchanged a glance with Baby Bear and a tear rolled down her cheek.

Goldilocks' mother now had the Whitehouse Head of Cybersecurity, the Chairman's office at Verizon Wireless, the Principal, the Police Chief, the Head of the local FBI office, and Homeland Security on one conference call, screaming at the top of her lungs for someone to do something and to put those horrible cyberbullies in jail!

"Dad, they were so mean!"

Her father patted Goldilocks on the head, "Sweetheart, they were only words. I think it's best that you just ignore them. What about those nice three little pigs you used to play with when you were younger. They seemed like nice playmates. And I don't remember that they even had a computer or cell phone." He continued rambling as he drank his honey cider. "Yes, I believe that ignoring it and finding new friends is the answer," he added, staring out the window.

Mama and Papa Bear looked at Baby Bear and then at Goldilocks. They couldn't stand it anymore. "Could we have a word with you for a moment? It's very important." Papa Bear said gently, but firmly to Goldilocks' parents. He looked at Goldilocks' mother, gesturing for her to hang up the phone.

She began to object, when she caught Mama Bear's eye. "I'll have to call you back," she said into the phone to the relief of all illustrious parties on the call.

Mama Bear handed them each another warm cup of honey cider and beckoned them into the front room, shutting the door to Baby Bear's room behind her. Then Mama Bear looked knowingly at her husband, put her paw on Goldilocks' mother's arm to comfort her and began. "I know how frightened you must be. Your beloved daughter was lost in the woods and you had no idea what might have happened to her. Luckily, we found her and she wasn't hurt physically."

She looked at Goldilocks' father too. "We know how much you love Goldilocks. We all do. I remember when she first came to our house and broke Baby Bear's chair, overturned our porridge bowls and ended up sleeping in Baby's cot that day. At first we were very upset, and when we called you asking you to come pick her up, we even thought about pressing charges for breaking and entering. But she charmed us in five minutes and is Baby's best friend and like a cub to us." She looked at Baby and Papa and smiled.

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“But, like our porridge that day, a parents’ response can be too hot or too cold. We, as parents, have to aim for the response that is just right!”

She turned to Goldilocks’ mother. “I know how much you love her. And how, like any mama bear, you would take on all the animals in the forest to protect her. But the best way to protect her is to let her know that you are there for her. Hug her. Make her comfortable. Let her know you will defend her, but wait until you know the facts.”

“Then promise not to make things worse and adhere to that promise. Blowing up, especially in front of her, only will make her more upset. She will be afraid that you may call Aladdin’s mother, or knock on the wicked queen’s castle door. She is afraid that in trying to take care of her you will only make things harder for her.” Mama patted Goldilocks’ mother’s hand. “Make her your first priority. Focus just on her. Tell her you love her and that, together, you will find a solution.”

Goldilocks’ mother objected. “Mama Bear, I know I should be calm and appear to be in charge and solid. But it is so hard to see someone bullying your little girl. I took one look at her face, and saw how cold, scared, and hurt she was and couldn’t help it. Someone has to pay...” She looked to the phone and moved to get up.

Mama Bear placed her paw on her hand once again, gently. “If you have to, once she is settled, go into the bathroom and scream with a washcloth in your mouth to muffle the sound! Just don’t let her see how upset you are. Let her see you as calm and in control. If you need to, do something that helps you regain perspective for five minutes, something you enjoy doing that calms you down. Cybersafety expert Parry Aftab calls that “Take 5!”

She looked at both distraught parents. “Then, help Goldilocks find her own Take 5! activity to distract her from the cyberbullying. Let little Ronald loose with her. He’ll take her mind off of the mean messages and help her regain perspective with your help.” Mama looked to Papa Bear. She had handled her part. It was up to him to handle his.

He cleared his throat and began to address Goldilocks’ father. “It’s hard,” he said. “As fathers we want to charge in and take on anyone who hurts our cubs physically. But we need to understand that although sticks and stones hurt in obvious ways, words can hurt even more and in ways we don’t contemplate.” He waited while Mama Bear poured more honey cider for everyone and then continued.

“Sometimes dads don’t appreciate the power of words to do serious harm.” Mama Bear looked encouragingly at her husband to continue.

Papa Bear cleared his throat. “I remember when I was a little cub, smaller than the rest of my litter.” Papa Bear looked off, picturing this hurtful memory. “There were other bigger cubs who used to push me around. One of them liked Mama Bear, who was the prettiest girl cub in our neighborhood.” He

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smiled at Mama Bear, who was sitting back sipping her honey cider with a smile on her face. “I could handle their physical bullying and knew that since most of the males in our family were late bloomers, I would get big eventually.”

“But they also used words to hurt me. They told Mama Bear that I was a coward, weak, and stupid. They said everyone hated me, and that I should leave the den and move away, since I smelled.” I was embarrassed that she could hear those things and worried that she would believe them. The words hurt more than the fighting did. And they hurt longer, too.”

Mama Bear reached forward and squeezed his paw. “When I heard these mean things, I knew they weren’t true. I knew he was brave and smart and the best bear cub I had ever met. And I told him so.”

Papa Bear added. “When Mama Bear came to me, she told me that she had heard these things and knew they weren’t true. She then helped me heal the hurt the words caused, and together we faced the bullies who had waged the war of words. It eventually stopped. And having her there with me, understanding how much the words had hurt, made all the difference in the world.”

Goldilocks’ parents looked at each other. It had been a difficult evening and they would face more difficult days before this problem was resolved. But their first priority was to make sure Goldilocks was safe and supported. Lawyers, FBI agents, school superintendents and the parents of the cyberbullies could wait. Her mother understood that her tirades and looking for someone to blame was only hurting Goldilocks more. And her father understood that by trying to minimize the hurt to Goldilocks, he was failing to acknowledge that she was upset and needed help. Both parents acted out of love. But one was too hot and the other was too cold.

They thanked Mama and Papa Bear for their advice and help. Then, they stood up and walked into Baby Bear’s bedroom. “Sweetheart, mom and I were talking and think that we can handle the cyberbullies tomorrow. Right now, let’s get you home into your own bed. We can talk about what happened and how we should handle it.”

They sat down on Baby Bear’s little cot and Goldilocks’ father held his daughter’s hand. “We know how much it hurt and how scary it was. We’ll make sure that the wicked queen never knocks on our door and that you are safe. And we promise not to do anything to make things worse. We love you. “

Her mother added, “And we want you to know that you are not too fat, not too thin, but just right. And you have so many friends and people who love you. You’re a straight ‘A’ student and your teachers all say you are one of the smartest students they have ever had. The mean things these cyberbullies said are more about their own flaws than yours. You need to remember who you are and how special you are.” Then she hugged her, with Goldilocks’ father joining in.

“We’ll take Goldilocks home now. And we can’t thank you enough for finding her, keeping her safe, and helping us understand how we can help and support her best. Thank you.” Goldilocks’ parents and the Bears hugged and at the door thanked them again. Goldilocks was already asleep in her father’s arms and little Ronald was asleep in the picnic basket.

Tomorrow wouldn’t be easy. There was much more her parents would have to learn about cyberbullying. But for now, they had done the most important thing – they had given their daughter the love and support she needed.

THE END

The Facts:

StopCyberbullying.org did a poll of almost 45,000 middle schools students a few years ago, and found that only 5% of students said they would tell their parents if they were cyberbullied, often fearing that their parents will take away the technology used to bully them, would over-react, or would under-react. While they named almost 70 different reasons they wouldn’t seek help from their parents, these three reasons were among the top.

When emergency room medical professionals are hit with many patients all needing their help, they do triage. They find the ones in the worst condition and address them first. Your child’s pain is the most urgent condition in the room. Give them a soft and secure place to land. Understand their pain. You are not expected to be an expert in cybercrime or abuse. You are just expected to be a loving and supportive parent.

Remind them that you love them. Promise not to make things worse or over-react and let them know you take this seriously. Help them remember who they are, their talents and their strengths. Help them find something to make them laugh like their puppy, favorite movie, or something silly. Laughter is still the best medicine in handling a cyberbullying situation.

The other things you’ll need to do are addressed in different articles by Parry Aftab and the StopCyberbullying materials. Read and complete the Cyberbullying Response Checklist for Parents which will help guide your response. The Parent’s Guide to Cyberbullying is a great resource too.

Advise them to “Stop, Block and Tell!” if they ever get a mean message. Have them *stop* and not answer back. *Block* the person and message. And *tell* you, as their trusted adult, if anything else happens. Be understanding and gentle with them. This is far more devastating than any of us can realize.

And remember, this too will pass.