Cancel culture is a new name for something that’s been going for a long time. Can you explain this?

Cancel culture is the current version of creating change through public shaming - or calling out. It has been used in positive ways, such as in the civil rights boycotts, and it has been used to control people and society, such as during the McCarthy era.

When boycotts escalate, it confuses dissent with punishment. Many victims of cancel culture are not powerful people. Particularly the way it’s used with kids.

Social media has changed both the speed and amplification of accusations. It has created a mob mentality where people jump on the bandwagon to be part of something - a new version of FOMO. It’s so common that ‘canceling’ has taken on new meanings, kind of like we say Kleenex for any tissue.

Canceling is the act of cutting someone off - but in the broader terms, it is social exclusion that is often accompanied by vicious personal attacks or based on misinformation. Example: At Skidmore College in New York State, a professor is being boycotted for merely attending a pro-police “Back the Blue” rally. He didn’t participate in any way, he didn’t speak or shout slogans, or carry a sign. He says he just wanted to hear what the demonstrators had to say. But an email circulated at the college saying, “Tonight, I and other Skidmore students witnessed Profs. David Peterson and Andrea Peterson at an anti-Black Lives Matter protest. We demand the immediate dismissal of both Skidmore staff members for engaging in hateful conduct that threatens Black Skidmore students.”
How has Parentology has covered this topic... from ‘call-out culture’ to today’s ‘cancel culture’?

- Networks hiring private investigators to check their stars’ social profiles for anything that could be problematic.
- Helena Duke calling out her family for being at the Capital riots.
- Cara Dumaplin of “Taking Cara Babies”
- Kelly Marie Tran from Star Wars

Does Cancel Culture speak to a general lack of critical thinking skills? How do we fix that?

The speed at which cancellation happens triggers emotional rather than thoughtful rational responses. Especially now when people are suffering from the trauma of COVID - everyone is experiencing some level of frustration, anxiety and depression. This makes them more reactive and less likely to make sure the information is accurate, that someone is not being tried and found guilty by undocumented accusations and beliefs.

Instinctively people assume that something must be true if: 1) so many people are saying it (where there's smoke, there's fire); 2) they hear something frequently (frequency increases beliefs); and, 3) when there is an implicit message in the cancel. (I’m a fan of James Charles, therefore I’m going to cancel Tati Westerbrook; or less silly, I’m in favor of social justice, therefore I’m going to cancel whomever it is that the crowd days is racist or misogynist.)

There’s a moral righteousness to canceling--right up until it gets to bullying.

Can you think of positive ways kids have used “canceling” to spark change? Examples?

- Disney theme park rides
- Mulan movie, Disney+ content
- #MeToo, George Floyd, Climate Change

Unfortunately, there are many more examples of canceling being negative. How is fifty thousand strangers humiliating a teenage girl over her choice of a prom dress supposed to drive social change? Humiliation is not a driver of social change

It’s all about the intention and execution. Everyone has the right to vote with their behavior, from what they choose to purchase to what they publicly support. The best use of “Cancel culture” raises awareness and creates a demand for social change. In 2016, Hollywood power couple Jada Pinkett Smith and Will Smith boycotted the Oscars, over #OscarsSoWhite. In 2015-16, all of the actors nominated for lead and supporting roles were white. While the Smiths received some initial backlash for “canceling” their subscription to the Oscars, it resulted in social change. In 2019, the Oscars set a record for the most wins by black nominees ever.
How might a kid be “cancelled” (via social media, but also via the physical world too)?

A 15-year-old boy who made a comment about another student being a "fag," and posted “down with the gays” on social media. His parents/administrators did intervene and explained to him why this was wrong. He wrote an apology letter immediately to the other students. But later, he was ostracized, lost many friends, and a group of students created a campaign to defriend him on social media with comments posted about his ignorance and stupidity that were harsh and downright mean.

Lack of critical thinking combined with teenage power dynamics resulted in a social identity boost at the expense of the boy. All the students felt morally justified, vindicated for their treatment of the boy, believing their behaviors were supporting socially justice and awareness. Meanwhile, other students wouldn’t let it go and he became a social outcast, resulting in serious depression. Good news, he had access to therapy. Bad news, it was therapy that didn’t need to happen.

Cancel culture seems to be at an all-time high, why is that?

Access to social media and emotional dysregulation due to COVID.

What could be the long-time consequences to a child who has been cancelled, or to those who do the cancelling? Effects to their digital reputation?

The Internet is permanent and searchable. Even if the boy above deletes all his offensive remarks, the incident may still be visible on other social accounts.

What to do if your kid has been cancelled?

Treat like bullying:


  Being bullied hurts. As awful as it is, don’t get stuck there. Don’t let the bully “win.”

What to do if your kid is the canceller?

- Find out why – communicate don’t scold
- Talk through the situation and brainstorm other approaches; try perspective switching
- Look for signs of low self-esteem or need for attention so you can address the root cause rather than the symptoms
- Provide meaningful and limited consequences
- Monitor the situation. There are lots of places to get professional help if you need it.

support@cybercivics.com | www.cybercivics.com | www.cyberwise.org
How could you teach a kid be an upstander in this situation?

- First, take a moment to analyze the situation. What is the apparent intention of the cancel attack?
- Then, teach your child that they could: 1) Give comfort to the target; 2) Confront the "canceller" and have a conversation; 3) Report situation to a trusted adult.

Takeaways for parents:

- Talk to your child about current “cancelling” events in the media (i.e., Dr. Seuss is a good one).
- Teach kids that their views and beliefs are valid, but they should be conscious of how and where they're sharing them. And of the consequences.
- Talk about the importance of their digital reputation (it can be hard for them to understand how seemingly innocent posts may impact their future.)
- Encourage face to face communication (this has been difficult during coronavirus). But kids need to be reminded about how important it is.
- Help kids build better critical thinking skills, especially when it comes to social media to help them determine if information and accusations are in fact justified by real evidence not just opinions. “Everybody says so” isn't critical thinking.