

Cyberbullying: What Parents Can Do to Protect Their Children



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As technology evolves, so do ways to bully

Imagine the “note.” A piece of paper ripped from a notebook, then scrawled with insults and passed from classmate to classmate. Students snicker as they read it, and eventually the note is intercepted by a teacher and torn into pieces. Now imagine the same note typed as a text message and quickly sent from one classmate to another. Students post it to the internet, where their friends read it and share it with even more people. The “note” cannot be torn and thrown away, but instead quickly moves through online sites to an audience of hundreds or even thousands.

If the word “bullying” makes you think of one child picking on another in the schoolyard, it is time to update your image of how students bully. While face-to-face harassment certainly still exists, cyberbullying is more prevalent every day. Through the use of cell phones, instant messaging, mobile devices, social networking websites, apps, and other technologies, bullying has found its way into cyberspace.

The internet has become a place for some children to post mean and inappropriate comments about others. Cyberbullying may already have affected your child. According to recent studies, 15.5 percent of high school students and 24 percent of middle school students said they have been targeted by cyberbullying (CDC, 2015a, 2015b). In another recent survey, 88 percent of teens reported seeing people being mean or cruel on a social networking site (Lenhart et al., 2011).

Cyberbullying: What it is and how it works

Cyberbullying is the use of technology, including internet access and cell phones, to harass, hurt, embarrass, humiliate, or intimidate another person. Students who bully, whether in person or through technology, often target those perceived as vulnerable, socially isolated, or who may not understand social norms.

2. | Cyberbullying: What Parents Can Do

Cyberbullying can take place in many ways. For example, some young people use social media, video games, texting, or anonymous apps to bully another child, post embarrassing pictures, share private information, or send threatening messages. Access to a wide audience is often used for students to encourage their peers to join them in targeting a peer with gossip, rumors, and untrue stories.

As a student shared, “All bullying hurts, whether in person or through technology. The end result is that bullying in any form is emotionally damaging.”

Cyberbullying: What makes it unique

While any bullying is characterized by the intentional, often repetitive, hurt or harm to another person or persons, there are distinguishing elements when it happens online or via smartphone:

- **The negative behavior usually happens outside the view of adults.**
While some bullying is very overt, such as pushing or damaging belongings, cyberbullying happens through phones and on computers or tablets, making it much more difficult for adults to detect.
- **Cyberbullying can be done anonymously.**
Those being bullied might not even know who is perpetuating the behavior, which makes it easy for one child to hurt another and not be held accountable.
- **Cyberbullying can reach a large audience.**
The information can be easily and quickly shared, which makes it difficult to contain or stop negative messages.
- **It is often easier to bully using technology because of greater physical distance.**
The person bullying doesn't see the immediate response by the target. They might not recognize the serious harm from their actions because they don't witness the target's response.

When a child is cyberbullied based on race, national origin, color, sex, age, disability, or religion, it is considered discriminatory harassment, and federal laws and protections apply. Visit [StopBullying.gov/laws/federal](https://www.stopbullying.gov/laws/federal) for more information.



A three-step plan to address cyberbullying with your child

Today's children are the first generation to use technology to bully others. Today's parents are the first who have needed to learn how to address this issue with their children. The following steps can help you explore this topic with your child:

1. Have the “cyberbullying” conversation.

Initiate a conversation with your child about cyberbullying. Bullying can be hard for children to talk about with their parents for many reasons. They might be embarrassed by what is happening, afraid that the bullying will increase if they tell, or think it is their own problem.

Cyberbullying can add additional complications. Many students might not interpret the mean and hurtful behavior that happens on their computer or cell phone as bullying. Children may also worry that they will lose access to their technology if they tell their parents about cyberbullying.

As you open the subject for discussion, let your child know that you recognize that phones, computers, and being connected online with friends is a significant part of their lives, but that you also want him or her to be safe from cyberbullying. Explain that if something hurtful is communicated online, it is considered bullying and it is important that you know about it.

To open the subject for discussion, tell your child:

- “I understand how important it is to communicate with your friends by phone and online.”
- “You deserve to be safe from bullying online, just like at school.”
- “If something happening online is hurtful to you, it is bullying and it's important to tell me about it.”

2. Set cyber safety rules.

You set safety rules for your child in the physical world, such as guidelines for when your child goes to the shopping mall or curfews for visiting a friend's house. Do the same in your child's cyberworld.

IDEAS FOR PARENTS

So, when should I start the cyberbullying conversation with my child?

Cyberbullying can start for many kids long before they are able to use social networking sites, which typically requires users to be 13 years of age. Cyberbullying can begin as soon as children have access to a cell phone, tablet device, or computer. There is potential for cyberbullying whenever children are using technology to interact. Parents should discuss online conduct and behavior, as well as cyberbullying, as soon as children begin using technology.



Specific advice to keep in mind:

- Remind your children that they never really know who is on the other end of cyber communication. It could be the person they think it is, but because they cannot see that person, they should always proceed with caution in their exchanges. Remind them not to do or say anything online that they wouldn't do or say in person. Stress that they should not reveal anything that they wouldn't tell a stranger.
- Advise them to never share their email or social media account password with anyone, even their best friend. That friend may share it with other people, or the friendship may end and their private messages could suddenly become very public.
- Decide whether or not you, the parent, will have access to your children's passwords for email accounts, social media, or other technology. If so, determine if and when you might use their passwords to check on account content.
- Help them determine what is and is not appropriate to share online. This can include avoiding sharing personal photos or data (such as a physical description, phone number, or address).
- Ensure that they keep social media accounts private and do not "friend" people they do not know. Establish rules about whether it's okay for your child to add friends they haven't met in person, such as a friend of a friend.
- Establish whether you and your child will be friends on social media accounts, and whether you want to moderate the content they share and post online.
- Set hours that technology can and can't be used. Decide if there will be limits on access to using technology to communicate with peers, such as no computer or texting after 9 p.m., in class, during mealtimes, or until homework is done.
- Create a code of conduct, such as they will not use social media to humiliate or embarrass other people, even if they are being targeted by cyberbullying.
- Establish that if your child experiences cyberbullying and shares that with you, their use and access to technology won't be restricted. However, if your child demonstrates cyberbullying behavior and you find out, identify consequences for your child.



3. Continue to be involved with your child's online use.

Once you have established rules about your parental access to your children's cell phones, text history, social networking sites, and other computer accounts that they may use for posting information, be sure to frequently remind your child about the importance of established guidelines.

As your child grows and has access to new technology, remember to evaluate your family's safety rules to determine if they are effective and age-appropriate. As a parent, you have a responsibility to know what your children are doing online. Explore parental control options through internet service and wireless providers, and continue to establish with your child what access you will have to their online interaction. Keep encouraging your child to talk with you about any inappropriate behavior, whether it's happening to them or they see it directed at others.

Steps to take if your child is being bullied online

Be supportive of your child

- Your message to your teen should be, "You don't deserve this. We support you, and we're here to help you."
- Let them know that you will work together to take steps to stop the bullying.

Document the situation

- Save the URLs of the location where the bullying occurred.
- Print emails or webpages containing negative behavior or posts.
- Screenshot any posts containing bullying.
- Save texts, if on your child's phone, or encourage your child to forward the texts to you.

6. | Cyberbullying: What Parents Can Do

Work with the school

- Ask about the school's bullying prevention policy.
- Determine your point of contact at the school for reporting cyberbullying.
- Provide documentation of the bullying to your child's school.
- Record your correspondence with the school and record the response.

Some parents report that their child's school says it is not responsible for addressing bullying that happens through the use of cell phones or the internet. As a first step, ask to see the school's bullying prevention policy. Many states have bullying prevention laws and policies that provide guidance to districts and schools on how to address bullying. These laws and policies often require that schools address cyberbullying within their school district's policy. Some state laws also cover off-campus behavior that creates a hostile school environment. Look up your state's policy at StopBullying.gov. You can also report cyberbullying to wireless and internet service providers, social media sites, or law enforcement.

Work with technology providers

If the cyberbullying is occurring on a social networking site:

- Check the social networking site's safety page, such as Facebook and Instagram.
- Report the cyberbullying to the social networking site.
- Block the person who is cyberbullying your child.

Next steps

For situations that aren't resolved with these steps:

- Research the bullying prevention laws in your state.
- Ask for a meeting with school authorities.
- Contact PACER's National Bullying Prevention Center.

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What if my child tells me that he or she has witnessed cyberbullying?

First, let your child know how powerful he or she is. Many bullying situations end when a peer intervenes, which gives students an important role in bullying prevention. However, many youths are unsure how to take the first step, especially online. As a parent, it's important to have the discussion with children and teens about the power they have to help others. There are many effective options, so encourage your child to do what feels right for them.

Give them ideas for action steps they can take online, such as:

- **Don't participate.** Don't "like" or share posts that are bullying someone. This sends the message that they don't agree with what's happening and takes attention away from the person cyberbullying.
- **Report it.** Even if content isn't targeting your child, they can still report it to the site or to an adult that they trust.
- **Respond with positive support.** If they feel comfortable, and if it's safe, post a comment showing solidarity with the target. Ask your child how they would feel if they were being cyberbullied, and how they would want someone to support them. Imagine what a difference one nice comment among a bunch of mean ones could make!
- **Reach out to the person being bullied.** Your child can send them a private message letting them know that they don't agree with what's happening, that they don't deserve to be treated like that, and that they're not alone.

IDEAS FOR PARENTS

Consider using the safety features offered by wireless and internet service providers, or social media sites that help block or manage cyberbullying:

- Privacy settings are evolving, and many computers, websites, cell phone and Internet providers, and apps have family safeguard and parental control features to offer customized solutions to cyberbullying.
- You can also review privacy settings on your child's online accounts, mobile apps, computers, and cell phones.
- Have your children take an inventory of their online accounts, and check to make sure you are comfortable with the amount and type (videos, photos, etc.) of information they're sharing with others. Suggest they delete, untag, or hide content they are concerned about.



What do I do if my child is cyberbullying others?

If you find out your child is cyberbullying, it's important to know that bullying is a behavior and that behavior can be changed. Children cyberbully for many reasons, including peer pressure, being bullied themselves, or not realizing the impact their actions have on another child.

Start by talking with your child, and explore reasons for their behavior. This conversation should allow your child to discuss how they are feeling, to speak up if they are being bullied by someone else, and to talk about other factors that may be leading to this behavior.

Next, teach empathy, respect, and compassion. Children who cyberbully often lack awareness of how others feel. Try to understand your child's feelings and help your child appreciate how others feel when they are cyberbullied. Let your child know that everyone has feelings and that feelings matter.

Then, make your expectations and consequences clear and consistent. Let your child know that bullying is not okay under any circumstances and that you will not tolerate it. Let them know that there will be consequences for their behavior. Be specific about what will happen if the cyberbullying continues, and take immediate action if you learn that he or she is involved in a cyberbullying incident. Try to find meaningful consequences that fit the situation, such as loss of online privileges or activities.

Finally, provide positive feedback and be patient. It takes time to change behavior. Be patient with your child as they learn new ways of handling feelings and conflict. Provide praise and recognition when your child handles online conflict well or finds a positive way to deal with their feelings. This type of positive reinforcement goes a long way! Keep your concern and support visible.



Cyberlife by the numbers — A new world for many parents

Cyberbullying

- The percentage of students who have experienced cyberbullying at some point in their lifetimes has nearly doubled (18 percent to 34 percent) from 2007-2016 (Patchin & Hinduja, 2016).
- 20 percent of students admitted to cyberbullying others (CRC, 2010).
- 53 percent of youth admit having said something mean or hurtful to others online. More than one in three youths report having done this more than once (No Bullying, 2016).

Parent perspective

- 58 percent of teen internet and cell phone users say their parents have been the biggest influence on what they think is appropriate or inappropriate when using the internet or a cell phone (Lenhart et al., 2011).
- Only 1 in 10 targets of cyberbullying report telling their parents about the issue (No Bullying, 2016).

Students online

- 75 percent of teens (ages 12-17) have a cell phone (including 58 percent of 12-year olds) (Lenhart et al., 2010).
- 95 percent of teens go online (Lenhart et al., 2011).
- 80 percent of teens who go online use social networking websites (Lenhart et al., 2011).

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About PACER's National Bullying Prevention Center

PACER.org/Bullying



Founded in 2006, PACER's National Bullying Prevention Center actively leads social change, so that bullying is no longer considered an accepted childhood rite of passage. PACER provides innovative resources for students, parents, educators, and others, and recognizes bullying as a serious community issue that impacts education, physical and emotional health, and the safety and well-being of students.

How does PACER's National Bullying Prevention Center help?

- Inspires entire communities to get involved with social change and promoting kindness, acceptance, and inclusion
- Offers classroom activities, toolkits, and lesson plans for educators
- Provides informative guides for parents to understand the dynamics of bullying, help their children through bullying situations, and learn how to communicate with school staff
- Educates students with age-appropriate resources and information to manage bullying situations, be supportive of their peers, and take action to prevent bullying in their school, community, and online
- Creates school-wide opportunities to address bullying, including National Bullying Prevention Month in October and Unity Day, initiatives both founded by PACER's National Bullying Prevention Center

 **PACER's
National Bullying Prevention Center®**

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