

# A Parents' Guide to



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## **Top 5 Questions Parents Have About Cyberbullying**

### **1. What *is* cyberbullying anyway?**

For the most part, cyberbullying is bullying, only it happens online or on phones or other connected devices. As for what bullying is, that depends on who you ask, but most experts agree that it involves repeated harassment and some type of power imbalance – and, when young people are involved, it usually has something to do with what's happening with peers at school. It's important to remember that not every mean comment or unpleasant interaction rises to the level of bullying. Sometimes it's just what kids call "drama." We mention this because too many kinds of behavior are called "cyberbullying," which can cause overreaction and inappropriate responses.

### **2. How likely is it that my child will be cyberbullied?**

Some studies say only 4.5% of teens have ever been cyberbullied and others say the figure's as high as 24% (more on this below). Either way, too many students have experienced cyberbullying, but it's important to note that most have not, and most don't bully others. We point this out not to minimize a serious problem, but to emphasize that bullying is not a norm. Kindness, not cruelty, is the norm and, just as with other social problems, communicating the facts reinforces positive behaviors and actually reduces the problem.

As for any one child, it depends so much on the person, his or her peer group and their context. A positive school culture can make a difference, especially for higher-risk populations, such as special-needs students or lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) youth. For just about all kids, "online" is social – a shared experience – so no single individual has complete control over what happens in digital spaces. Research has found that a child's emotional makeup and home and school environments predict online risk better than any technology he or she uses. Treating others (and oneself!) with respect and kindness can really help keep social media use positive.

### **3. How do I know if my child is being cyberbullied?**

Even if you have a good feel for your kids' emotional state, social skills, and peer relations – key factors in how well their online (as well as offline) experiences go – it's a good idea to ask whether cyberbullying's going on with them or any of their friends. You may not get a clear answer right away, but engage your kids in occasional conversations about how things are going online as well as offline. See what they know about cyberbullying, ask if they know others who have experienced it, if it's a problem at their school and what they would do if they were cyberbullied or knew about others who were. If they seem obsessed about checking text messages and social apps, it could be because they're worried about what's being said about them. It may not be bullying, but it may be a sign your child needs a little extra support. The federal government's [StopBullying.gov](http://StopBullying.gov) website suggests that parents be on the lookout for signs such as difficulty sleeping, frequent nightmares, declining grades, not wanting to go to school, feelings of helplessness or decreased self-esteem.

#### **4. What's the best way to keep cyberbullying out of my child's life?**

There isn't a single answer for everybody, because each child's social experience is unique. If your child does experience cyberbullying, as a target or a bystander, supportive parenting can go a long way toward minimizing the impact. Loving support sometimes means listening or offering perspective, sometimes talking through strategies for regaining a sense of control over the situation – helping your child grow the resilience that lessens the impact of social cruelty. It may sound simplistic, but since young people make no distinction between online and offline, parents shouldn't either. The same values of respect and kindness toward self and others that you've modeled and taught your kids in everyday life apply in social media too, and they will have a positive effect on their experiences in digital spaces just as in offline life. [If you know of a child in crisis, go to our Web page, Resources for Youth in Crisis ([ConnectSafely.org/crisis](http://ConnectSafely.org/crisis)). If there's a serious threat of physical harm, call 911.]

#### **5. What do I do if my child is cyberbullied?**

Cyberbullying cases are as individual as the people involved. So the general advice that's all over the Web – not to react or retaliate, block the "bully," and print out and keep evidence in case it'll be needed – can help in some cases. But the most important thing to do is talk with your kids about what's going on, help them think through what happened, how they feel about it, and what they're going to do about it. No one knows how to resolve a situation without understanding it fully. It's important to involve your child in the process, not just take over yourself, because the main goal is to help him or her strengthen the self-confidence that might've been shaken and restore a sense of physical and/or emotional safety.