

Parent's Guide to Cyberbullying

Bullying is a serious, long-standing social problem that now occurs in digital spaces as well as physical ones. But, contrary to what you might have heard or read, it isn't just a youth problem, it isn't getting worse, and it isn't more of a problem online than offline. Because of the rise of social media in the middle of the last decade, bullying and peer harassment have been getting a lot of news coverage, so – rather than increased bullying – what we're really seeing is increased attention to it and a lot more concern about it.

Thanks to increased research, we know more about the problem and what will help, and we're more motivated as a society to address it. We also know that the problem isn't the technology people use. Technology can help amplify it and create another "place" where it happens, but – just like bullying – cyberbullying is rooted in relationships, in how people interact in everyday life. As for young people, since they spend a lot of time on social media, their interaction – good, bad or neutral – happens in apps, texts, games and sites too.

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%. 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.

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.

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. 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.

4. What do I do if my child is cyberbullied?

Cyberbullying cases are as individual as the people involved. So our general advice is 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.

5. What if my child witnesses cyberbullying?

If your child does experience cyberbullying as a witness or bystander, it's important to talk through some strategies as to how they can help their peers. Being kind goes a long way. Suggest your child sit with a child who's being bullied or invite them to hang out.

Advice for parents

Know that you're lucky if your child asks for help. Most young people don't tell their parents about bullying online or offline. So if your child's losing sleep or doesn't want to go to school or seems agitated when on his or her computer or phone, ask why as calmly and open-heartedly as possible. Feel free to ask if it has anything to do with mean behavior or social issues. But even if it does, don't assume it's bullying. You won't know until you get the full story, starting with your child's perspective.

Bullying and cyberbullying usually involve a loss of dignity or control over a social situation, and involving your child in finding solutions helps him or her regain that. Because bullying is almost always related to school life and our kids understand the situation and context better than parents ever can, their perspective is key to getting to the bottom of the situation and working out a solution. This is about your child's life, so your child needs to be part of the solution.

Respond thoughtfully, not fast. What parents don't always know is that they can make things worse for their kids if they act rashly. A lot of cyberbullying involves somebody getting marginalized (put down and excluded), which the bully thinks increases his or her power or status. If you respond publicly or if your child's peers find out about even a discreet meeting with school authorities, the marginalization can get worse, which is why any response needs to be well thought out.

More than one perspective needed. Your child's account of what happened is likely completely sincere, but remember that one person's truth isn't necessarily everybody's. You'll need to get other perspectives and be open-minded about what they are.

The ultimate goal is restored self-respect and greater resilience in your child. This, not getting someone punished, is the best focus for resolving the problem and helping your child heal. What your child needs most is to regain a sense of dignity. Sometimes that means standing up to the bully, sometimes not. Together, you and your child can figure out how to get there.

One positive outcome we don't think about (or hear in the news) enough is resilience. We know the human race will never completely eradicate meanness or cruelty, and we also know that bullying is not, as heard in past generations, "normal" or a rite of passage. We need to keep working to eradicate it. But when it does happen and we overcome it – our resilience grows. So sometimes it's important to give them space to do that and let them know we have their back.

Adapted from: <https://connectsafely.org/cyberbullying/>



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