



Cyberbullying

Bullying is aggressive behavior that is intentional and involves an imbalance of power or strength. Usually, it is repeated over time. Traditionally, bullying has involved actions such as: hitting or punching (physical bullying), teasing or name-calling (verbal bullying), or intimidation through gestures or social exclusion. In recent years, technology has given children and youth a new means of bullying each other.

Cyberbullying, which is sometimes referred to as online social cruelty or electronic bullying, has been defined as “an aggressive, intentional act carried out by a group or individual, using electronic forms of contact, repeatedly and over time against a victim who cannot easily defend him or herself” (Smith et al., 2008, p. 376).

Cyberbullying can involve:

- Sending mean, vulgar, or threatening messages or images
- Posting sensitive, private information and/or lies about another person
- Pretending to be someone else in order to make that person look bad
- Intentionally excluding someone from an online group (Willard, 2007)

Children and youth can cyberbully each other through:

- Emails
- Instant messaging
- Text or digital imaging messages sent on cell phones
- Social networking sites
- Web pages
- Blogs
- Chat rooms or discussion groups
- Other cyber technologies

Bullying via instant messaging appears to be particularly prevalent (Dehue et al., 2008; Kowalski et al., 2008; Sourander et al., 2010).

How common is cyberbullying?

Research studies have produced different answers to this question. Rates of cyberbullying vary depending on the definition of cyberbullying that is used, the ages and characteristics of children surveyed, and the time frame involved (Kowalski & Limber, under review).

- In a Cox Communications (2009) survey 13-18 year-olds were asked how often they had ever been involved in cyberbullying.
 - 15% said they had been cyberbullied online
 - 10% had been cyberbullied by cell phone
 - 7% said they had cyberbullied another person online
 - 5% had cyberbullied another person by cell phone
- A study by Fight Crime: Invest in Kids (2006) investigated how often children (6-11 year-olds) and teens (12-17-year-olds) had been cyberbullied during the previous year. One-third of teens and one-sixth of the children reported that someone said threatening or embarrassing things about them online.
- In a survey of middle school students, Hinduja and Patchin (2009) found that 9% had been cyberbullied *in the last 30 days*, and 17% had been cyberbullied *during their lifetime*; 8% had cyberbullied others in the last 30 days and 18% had done so during their lifetime.

- In a study by Kowalski and Limber (2007) with students in grades 6-8, 18% said they had been cyberbullied at least once *in the last couple of months* and 6% said it had happened two or more times; 11% had cyberbullied others at least once in the last couple of months, and 2% said they had done it two or more times.

Who is involved in cyberbullying?

Although some studies have found that girls are more involved in cyberbullying than boys (Cox Communications, 2009; Kowalski & Limber, 2007; Pew Internet & American Family Life Project, 2007), others have found similar rates among boys and girls (Hinduja & Patchin, 2008).

When middle school students were asked about the identity of the person who cyberbullied them:

- 52% identified another student at school
- 36% said they had been cyberbullied by a friend
- 13% had been cyberbullied by a sister or brother
- 48% did not know who had cyberbullied them (Kowalski et al., 2008)

Children and youth who are involved in cyberbullying are also quite likely to be involved in “traditional” forms of bullying. In a study of middle school students (Kowalski et al., 2008), 61% of cyber “victims” also reported being victims of “traditional” bullying; 55% of cyber “bullies” also said they had bullied others in “traditional ways.” Cyber “bully/victims” (who cyberbully others and also are cyberbullied) were heavily involved in “traditional” forms of bullying—64% had been bullied and 66% had bullied others.

Where are children cyberbullied?

Most cyberbullying is done away from school (Dehue et al., 2008; Smith et al., 2008), although more cyberbullying may occur during school than many adults realize. For example, in a telephone survey of preteens (6-11-year-olds) and teens (12-17-year-olds) (Fight Crime: Invest in Kids, 2006):

- 45% of preteens and 30% of teens who had been cyberbullied received the messages while at school.
- 44% of preteens and 70% of teens who had been cyberbullied received the messages at home.
- 34% of preteens and 25% of teens who had been cyberbullied received the messages while at a friend’s house.

Children’s reactions to cyberbullying

Most teens (60% of boys and 70% of girls) see online bullying as a serious problem and feel that there should be stricter rules about it (70% of boys and 80% of girls) (Cox Communications, 2009).

Many children and teens who are cyberbullied fail to report it to parents or adults at school (Agatston et al., 2007; Dehue et al., 2008; Smith et al., 2008). According to a telephone survey of preteens and teens (Fight Crime: Invest in Kids, 2006):

- 51% of preteens but only 35% of teens who had been cyberbullied had told their parents about their experience.
- 27% of preteens and only 9% of teens who had been cyberbullied had told a teacher.
- 44% of preteens and 72% of teens who had been cyberbullied had told a friend.
- 31% of preteens and 35% of teens who had been cyberbullied had told a sibling.
- 16% of preteens and teens who had been cyberbullied had told no one.

How does cyberbullying affect children?

Little research has explored the possible effects of cyberbullying on children. When students are asked how they believe cyberbullying affected them, they indicate that it made them sad and unwilling to attend school (Raskauskas & Stoltz, 2007).

A survey of Finish teens aged 13-16 found that victims of cyber bullying were at a higher risk of having psychosomatic problems, such as frequent headaches and problems falling asleep (Sourander et al., 2010).

A survey of middle and high school students in the U.S. found that children who were cyber “bully/victims” (had cyberbullied others and also had been cyberbullied) had the highest rates of anxiety, depression and school absences compared to cyber “bullies”, cyber “victims” and children who weren’t involved in cyberbullying. By contrast, children not at all involved in cyberbullying had the highest self-esteem and grades and the fewest symptoms of health problems (Kowalski & Limber, under review).

How does cyberbullying differ from other traditional forms of bullying?

Research and experience suggest that cyberbullying may differ from more “traditional” forms of bullying in a number of ways (Kowalski et al., 2008; Slonje & Smith, 2008, 2005), including:

- Cyberbullying can occur any time of the day or night.
- Cyberbullying messages and images can be distributed quickly to a very wide audience.
- Children and youth can be anonymous when cyberbullying, which makes it difficult (and sometimes impossible) to trace.

What can adults do to prevent and address cyberbullying?

Adults may not always be present in the online environments of children and youth. Therefore, it is extremely important that adults pay close attention to cyberbullying and the activities of children and youth when using these newer technologies.

- [Suggestions for Parents: Tips to Prevent Cyberbullying](#)
- [Suggestions for Parents: Tips for Dealing with Cyberbullying](#)
- [Suggestions for Educators](#)

Suggestions for parents: tips to help prevent cyberbullying:

- Make an agreement with your children to keep all internet capable devices out of children’s bedrooms.

- Talk regularly with your child about online activities that he or she is involved in. • Talk specifically about cyberbullying and encourage your child to tell you immediately if he or she is the victim of cyberbullying, cyberstalking, or other illegal or troublesome online behavior. Explain that you will not take away their technology if they confide in you about a problem they are having.
- View the SBN! Campaign’s [Webisodes](#) with your child and discuss in particular [Webisode 5](#) that addresses cyberbullying.
- Encourage your child to tell you if he or she is aware of others who may be the victims of cyberbullying.
- Explain that cyberbullying is harmful and unacceptable behavior. Outline your expectations for responsible online behavior and make it clear that there will be consequences for inappropriate behavior. Explain that treating others well online may also protect them from being harassed or cyberbullied.
- Although adults must respect the privacy of children and youth, concerns for your child’s safety may sometimes override these privacy concerns. Tell your child that as a responsible parent you may review his or her online communications if you think there is reason for concern.
- Consider installing parental control filtering software and/or monitoring programs, but do not rely solely on these tools.

Suggestions for parents: tips for dealing with cyberbullying:

Because cyberbullying can range from rude comments to lies, impersonations, and threats, your responses may depend on the nature and severity of the cyberbullying. Here are some actions that you may want to take after-the-fact.

- Strongly encourage your child not to respond to the cyberbullying.
 - Do not erase the messages or pictures. Save them as evidence.
 - Try to identify the individual doing the cyberbullying. Even if the cyberbully is anonymous (e.g., is using a fake name or someone else’s identity) there may be a way to track them through your Internet Service Provider. If the cyberbullying is criminal (or if you suspect that it may be), contact the police and ask them to do the tracking. Jurisdictions and states differ in their definitions of what constitutes criminal behavior, but the following may constitute a crime (Willard, 2007):
 - Threats of violence
 - Extortion
 - Obscene or harassing phone calls or text messages
 - Harassment, stalking, or hate crimes
 - Child pornography
 - Sexual exploitation
 - Taking a photo image of someone in a place where he or she would expect privacy
 - Sending inappropriate language may violate the “Terms and Conditions” of email services, Internet Service Providers, Web sites, and cell phone companies. Consider contacting these providers and filing a complaint.
 - If the cyberbullying is coming through email or a cell phone, it may be possible to block future contact from the cyberbully. Of course, the cyberbully may assume a different identity and continue the cyberbullying.
 - Contact your school. If the cyberbullying is occurring through your school district’s Internet system, school administrators have an obligation to intervene. Even if the cyberbullying is occurring off campus, make the school administrators aware of the problem. They may be able to help you resolve the cyberbullying or be watchful for face-to-face bullying.
 - Consider contacting the cyberbully’s parents. These parents may be very concerned to learn that their child has been cyberbullying others, and they may effectively put a stop to the bullying. On the other hand, these parents may react negatively to your contacting them. So, proceed cautiously. If you decide to contact a cyberbully’s parents, communicate with them in writing—not face-to-face. Present proof of the cyberbullying (e.g., copies of an email message) and ask them to make sure the cyberbullying stops.
 - Consider contacting an attorney in cases of serious cyberbullying. In some circumstances, civil law permits victims to sue a bully or his or her parents in order to recover damages.
 - Contact the police if cyberbullying involves acts such as:
 - Threats of violence
 - Extortion
 - Obscene or harassing phone calls or text messages
 - Harassment, stalking, or hate crimes
 - Child pornography
 - Sexual exploitation
 - Taking a photo image of someone in a place where he or she would expect privacy
- If you are uncertain if cyberbullying violates your jurisdiction’s criminal laws, contact your local police, who will advise you.

Suggestions for educators

- Educate your students, teachers, and other staff members about cyberbullying, its dangers, and what to do if someone is cyberbullied.
- Be sure that your school’s anti-bullying rules and policies address cyberbullying.

- Closely monitor students' use of computers at school.
- Use filtering and tracking software on all computers, but don't rely solely on this software to screen out cyberbullying and other problematic online behavior.
- Investigate reports of cyberbullying immediately. If cyberbullying occurs through the school district's Internet system, you are obligated to take action. If the cyberbullying occurs off-campus, consider what actions you might take to help address the bullying:
 - Notify parents of victims and parents of cyberbullies of known or suspected cyberbullying.
 - Notify the police if the known or suspected cyberbullying involves a threat.
 - Closely monitor the behavior of the affected students at school for possible bullying.
- Talk with all students about the harms caused by cyberbullying. Remember—cyberbullying that occurs off-campus can travel like wildfire among your students and can affect how they behave and relate to each other at school.
- Investigate to see if the victim(s) of cyberbullying could use some support from a school counselor or school-based mental health professional.
- Contact the police immediately if known or suspected cyberbullying involves acts such as:
 - Threats of violence
 - Extortion
 - Obscene or harassing phone calls or text messages
 - Harassment, stalking, or hate crimes
 - Child pornography
 - Sexual exploitation
 - Taking a photo image of someone in a place where he or she would expect privacy

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