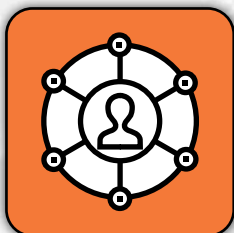


# CYBERBULLYING: WHAT PARENTS SHOULD KNOW



PACER's

**National Bullying Prevention Center®**

Create a World Without Bullying | [PACER.org/bullying](https://PACER.org/bullying)

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## Cyberbullying: What It Is and How It Works

Students now live at a time of instant access to cell phones, tablets, or computers, which open the door to exciting new ways of connecting, interacting, and learning. However, these new modes of communication also present new challenges for parents. Not only do parents have to help children and youth navigate in-person social situations, they also need to prepare them for healthy relationships online. Parents have the opportunity to guide their children through this new virtual world.

*Cyberbullying is the use of technology to intentionally harass, hurt, embarrass, humiliate, or intimidate another person.*

### CYBERBULLYING DEFINED

Cyberbullying is bullying that takes place over digital devices like cell phones, computers, and tablets. Cyberbullying can occur through text and apps, or online in social media, forums, or gaming where people can view, participate in, or share content. Cyberbullying includes sending, posting, or sharing negative, harmful, false, or mean content about someone else. It can include sharing personal or private information about someone else, causing embarrassment or humiliation. Some cyberbullying crosses the line into unlawful or criminal behavior.

*Source: StopBullying.gov*

Cyberbullying can happen anywhere there is online social interaction. For example, some young people use social media, video games, texting, or anonymous apps to bully other youth, post embarrassing pictures, share private information, or send threatening messages. Students can use their access to a large online audience to encourage their peers to join them in targeting someone with gossip, rumors, and untrue stories.



## Cyberbullying: What Makes It Unique From Face-To-Face Bullying

While all bullying is characterized by intentional, often repetitive, hurtful behavior toward another person or group, there are distinguishing elements when it happens online or via smartphone.

### Cyberbullying is:

- **Persistent.** Most students have access to some form of technology at all times, which means cyberbullying can happen any time—in the morning, afternoon, and evening—not just while children are at school. It happens while at home or in the community.
- **Hard to detect.** 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.
- **Anonymous.** 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.
- **Capable of spreading to a much larger audience.** Information online can be shared easily and quickly, which makes it difficult to contain or stop negative messages.
- **Easier to be hurtful.** It is often easier to bully using technology because of greater physical distance. The person bullying doesn't see the immediate response from the person being targeted. They might not recognize the serious harm caused by their actions because technology distances them from the real-life pain they could be causing.
- **Permanent.\*** Once something is shared on the internet, it is often available to everyone, everywhere. It can be challenging to completely delete information once it is on the internet.

**Note: The one advantage to “permanence” is that online bullying does leave tangible evidence.** Unlike physical or emotional bullying, online bullying leaves a digital footprint; the words, images, or videos posted can be documented through screenshots or saving URLs and texts, which can be useful.



## Talking With Your Child About Technology and Bullying

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

### 1. Talk about potential for bullying

Start 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, be afraid that the bullying will increase if they tell, and they may believe that it is their problem to solve on their own.

Cyberbullying can add 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 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 them to know how to be safe and handle cyberbullying. Explain that if something hurtful is communicated online, it is important that they tell you so that you can work through the situation together.

To open the subject up 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"

### SO, WHEN SHOULD I START THE CYBERBULLYING CONVERSATION WITH MY CHILD?

Parents should discuss online conduct and behavior, as well as cyberbullying, as soon as children begin using technology. There is potential for cyberbullying whenever children are using technology to interact. It can begin as soon as children have access to a cell phone or computer that they can use to connect to gaming sites, social media, text, direct messaging, or group chats.

## 2. Establish online guidelines

You set safety rules for your child in the physical world, such as guidelines for when your child goes to the mall or curfews when visiting a friend's house. Do the same in your child's cyberworld but be sure to include them in the process. Ask your child what's important to them concerning their internet use and set boundaries that reflect keeping those activities safe and positive.

*Specific advice to keep in mind:*

- Remind your children that they never really know who is on the other end of online 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 passwords with anyone, even their best friend. That friend may share it with other people, or the friendship may end, and then their private messages could suddenly become very public.
- Decide whether you, the parent, will have access to your children's passwords for email accounts, social media, or other technology. If so, determine when you might use their passwords to check on account content.

### CONSIDER YOUR CHILD'S POINT OF VIEW

Though adults view certain websites and social media warily and often with well-earned suspicion, engaging your child in a productive conversation about their views is really important. Creating an ethical use of technology agreement together, based on respectful dialogue, will help the child's future participation in any agreement.

- 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).
- Look through some of your child's favorite online accounts together to talk about what appropriate posts look like. Giving specific examples of appropriate online content will help them better understand healthy internet use.
- 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 using technology to communicate with peers, such as no computer or texting after 9 p.m., in class, during mealtimes, or before 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 access to technology won't be restricted

#### **BE CLEAR, BE OPEN**

Make sure that any restriction of technology is covered in the agreement you've made with your child so that they understand what will and will not happen if they talk to you. Always aim to keep the lines of communication open, so that they will feel comfortable coming to you with difficult conversations. If your child demonstrates cyberbullying behavior 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 the 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 child is doing online. Explore parental control options through internet service and wireless providers and continue to establish what access you will have to your child's online interactions. If past guidelines are no longer working or no longer apply to your child's use of technology, then sit down with your child and have the conversation again. Keep encouraging your child to talk with you about any inappropriate behavior, whether it's happening to them, by them, or to others.



## Steps to Take If Your Child Is Being Bullied Online

### Be supportive of your child

If your child shares that they are being bullied online, chances are you might be the first person they've told. As cyberbullying is often an isolating experience, reinforce the message that they are not alone.

#### IDEAS FOR PARENTS

What should you tell your child?

1. This is not your fault. Make sure they know they should not blame themselves.
2. You are not alone. Many children feel that no one can help and that nothing will change.
3. It is not up to you to stop the bullying; we will work together. It's important that youth and adults are both involved in working toward a solution.
4. Bullying is never okay. Even though it happens, that never makes it right.
5. No one deserves to be bullied. All students have the right to be treated with dignity and respect.

### Promote self-advocacy

Learning how to communicate what you need is a powerful skill for youth. Self-advocacy—which means communicating on your own behalf, sharing what you need, and then taking action—is especially important in bullying situations as they may be feeling powerless to change what is happening to them and being part of the solutions helps give them some of the power back.

- Encouraging children to share their ideas will help restore confidence and teach them how to self-advocate
- A child-centered solution will help provide the child with a sense of ownership over positive outcomes and engage them in achieving those outcomes

#### THINK THROUGH THE RESPONSE AND SOLUTIONS

Use the “Student Action Plan,” available at [PACER.org/Bullying](https://www.pacer.org/Bullying), which helps students and their parents think through the situation and potential solutions for bullying situations.



## **Document the situation, keep a detailed record**

One of the unique aspects of cyberbullying is that it leaves behind a trail of evidence documenting the hurt your child has experienced. Keeping a detailed record of this evidence will help when planning how to resolve the situation.

- Save the URLs of where the bullying occurred
- Print emails or webpages containing negative behavior or posts
- Screenshot any posts containing bullying
- Save texts or encourage your child to forward hurtful texts to you

## **Work with the school**

Today, most schools include cyberbullying in their bullying prevention policy, whether it happens on or off school premises or during school hours. These policies can help prevent cyberbullying and explain how this online behavior might impact your child at 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 their response

### **COMMUNICATE WITH YOUR CHILD'S TEACHERS**

School staff are often able to see how students interact with peers, and can notice patterns in behavior and classroom dynamics. Establishing a collaborative relationship with the staff at your child's school is an important step in advocating for your child. Be sure to check in with them often—this can even be done through email. By establishing this relationship and building a partnership, you will be able to talk through any concerns about social interactions at school that might involve bullying.

When there is a cyberbullying situation, ask for a meeting. This can be with a teacher, but also ask if the principal, a social worker, or an administrator should attend. During the conversation or meeting, you can use the steps below to outline a possible plan with your child's school to address bullying.

- Describe the problem clearly
- Explain how the online bullying is impacting your child offline and in all parts of life
- Provide any documentation that you have, such as screenshots or text messages
- Encourage input from all members at the meeting
- Brainstorm (without evaluating the ideas)

- Choose a solution by consensus (all in agreement)
- Develop a plan
- Define who is responsible for an action and when will it be done
- Put that plan in writing
- Create a timeline and criteria to evaluate success
- Follow up and report outcomes

*Note: It's important to think through how to involve your child in the meeting. As a starting point, let them know there is a meeting and ask for their input (see Student Action Plan) about what they would like shared. If you feel it's appropriate, invite them to the meeting.*

### **Work with technology providers**

If the cyberbullying is occurring on a social networking site:

- Check the social networking site's safety page
- Report the cyberbullying to the social networking site
- Document the bullying with screenshots, saved texts, or photo downloads
- Block the person who is cyberbullying your child

### **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, with new family safeguard and parental control features designed 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 child 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.

### **Next steps**

For situations that still aren't resolved, try these additional steps:

- Research the bullying prevention laws in your state at [StopBullying.gov](http://StopBullying.gov)
- Ask for a meeting with district staff or school administrators
- Reach out to your state's safe and supportive school center



## What If My Child Tells Me They Have Witnessed Cyberbullying?

First, let your child know how powerful and impactful their response can be. Many bullying situations end when a peer intervenes, which means students have an important role in bullying prevention. However, many 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 or engage. Don't "like" or share posts that are bullying someone. This sends the message that they don't agree with what's happening and it takes attention away from the person who is 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—wouldn't they want someone to support them? Imagine the 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 what's happening is wrong, they don't deserve to be treated like that, and they're not alone.

### CYBERBULLYING BY THE NUMBERS

There are two sources of federally collected data on youth bullying:

- The 2017 School Crime Supplement (National Center for Education Statistics and Bureau of Justice) indicates that, among students ages 12-18 who reported being bullied at school during the school year, 15% were bullied online or by text
- The 2017 Youth Risk Behavior Surveillance System (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention) indicates that an estimated 14.9% of high school students were electronically bullied in the 12 months prior to the survey

*Source: StopBullying.gov*



## 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 others. Start by talking with your child and exploring 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. They also often have difficulty understanding that what we do online has real-life consequences; share with them how their online behavior can impact how someone feels or thinks. 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 circumstance 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 they're involved in a cyberbullying incident.

Finally, provide positive feedback and be patient. It takes time to change behavior. Be patient with your child as they learn new ways to handle 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.

### ADVICE TO GIVE YOUR CHILD TO PREVENT THEM FROM CYBERBULLYING OTHERS

- Think before you post. If you're upset, sad, or angry, wait to post or respond. Give yourself some time to cool down, so you don't do something that you can't take back.
- Never publicly reveal anything that you wouldn't be comfortable with anyone knowing. Remember that when you share something online, it can potentially be seen by anyone, including your parents and teachers.
- When you make comments about someone else, imagine how you would feel if someone said that about you



## Cyberbullying Students of Protected Classes

Parents have legal rights when their child is part of a protected class and is the target of bullying or cyberbullying. The distinction between bullying and harassment is that when the bullying behavior directed at the target is also based on their status as part of a protected class, that behavior may then also be defined as **harassment**. Protected classes include race, color, religion, sex, age, disability, and national origin.

According to the Office for Civil Rights (OCR) and the U.S. Department of Justice (DOJ), online and offline bullying may be considered harassment when the conduct is sufficiently serious that it interferes with (or limits) a student's ability to participate in (or benefit from) the services, activities, or opportunities offered by a school.

### **There are legal protections and provisions for students with disabilities who are being harassed.**

All students with disabilities have protections under federal law to ensure they receive a free, appropriate public education. The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) is a federal law. It requires that each child who has a disability and qualifies for special education and related services must receive a free and appropriate public education (FAPE). The State Department of Education in each state enforces IDEA. Students with an Individualized Education Program (IEP) would qualify for these protections.

Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 (often referred to as "Section 504") and Title II of the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990 (Title II) are other federal laws that apply if the harassment denies a student with a disability an equal opportunity to education. The Office for Civil Rights (OCR) enforces Section 504 and Title II of the ADA. Students with a 504 plan or an IEP would qualify for these protections.

If a student with a disability is being bullied, these federal laws require schools to take immediate and appropriate action to investigate the issue and, as necessary, take steps to stop the bullying and prevent it from recurring.

The bullying of a student with a disability on any basis, not just their disability, may result in a denial of FAPE that must be remedied by the school. The IEP or 504 team should convene when bullying of a student with a disability occurs on any basis in order to determine whether the student's needs have changed and whether FAPE is still being provided.



## Five Things to Know and Share With Your Children

### 1. Cyberbullying is an issue that can even impact younger children

Often, the perception is that cyberbullying only happens on social media platforms, which require individuals to be at least 13 before signing up and using these services according to the Children's Online Privacy Protection Act (COPPA) regulations. However, children can be subjected to or participate in inappropriate online behavior as soon as they have access to technology. If they have access to text messaging, group chats, an email address, or a gaming site, there is the potential for cyberbullying.

### 2. If your child sees cyberbullying, encourage them to take action when they feel comfortable

Research shows that peers can be very effective at intervening in a bullying situation. Possible responses include direct confrontation, but this can be very challenging to do and is often not as effective as being supportive of the person being bullied. When someone sees cyberbullying, their response could be to:

- Write something positive about the person being targeted
- Contact the person being bullied and let them know they're not alone
- Take a screenshot of the bullying and report it to a parent or an adult at school
- Report the bullying content to the social media platform and ask to have it removed according to the platform's community guidelines

### 3. Keep records of any cyberbullying

An important part of addressing a cyberbullying situation is keeping a record of what has happened. Your child may want to delete what is being sent so that they don't have to see it again, but it's important to NOT immediately delete evidence of bullying. Records can provide proof of the cyberbullying to social media providers, school personnel, or law enforcement officials.

- Parents and their children can work together to save the evidence: take screenshots of inappropriate behavior in emails, text messages, posts, website pages, and photos
- Print out evidence when necessary
- Don't delete anything until you've made a copy that includes dates, identity of sender, and other relevant information
- Make sure to record the date and description of any bullying incidents that are happening in person, as well

#### 4. If your child experiences cyberbullying, encourage them to tell someone

Cyberbullying generally happens in an environment where adults can't see it; unless the kids involved tell someone, usually no adults will know. Encourage your kids to talk with you, but understand that there may be times when they have difficulty confiding in a parent about something. If you are comfortable with it, let them know they can speak with another adult they trust, like a teacher, counselor, or coach.

##### REASONS WHY YOUNG PEOPLE MAY NOT TELL AN ADULT

**They were told just to “ignore it.”** A common response to bullying is to “just ignore it,” which is well intentioned but not helpful. It's hard to ignore negative behavior that is repeatedly directed at you.

**They think they should handle it on their own.** Some kids see bullying as something they need to fix or that they maybe did something to deserve it.

**They're concerned about contacting the other kid's parents.** Some kids think that their parent's response will make the situation worse, like calling the other kid's parent and getting upset with them.

**They don't want their phone taken away.** Limiting your child's use of phones, tablets, or other technology won't stop the situation. It's the bullying, not the technology, that needs to stop.

**They don't want anyone to worry.** Some kids believe that their parents have enough to deal with and they don't want to add another problem to handle.

**The situation is too personal.** Some kids get picked on because of something they did, like behaving inappropriately at a party. If they tell an adult about being bullied, then they also have to explain their own actions. That's not an easy thing to do when you already feel bad about what happened.

#### 5. Talk with your child about policy and rights

Let your child know that they have the right to be safe from bullying at school and outside of school, offline and online. Every state has a bullying prevention law or policy that helps districts and schools address bullying. These laws and policies often require that schools address cyberbullying in their district policy. Some state laws also cover off-campus behavior that creates a hostile school environment. If your child experiences cyberbullying, ask to see the school's bullying prevention policy to learn more about the role the school can play in helping your child address the issue.





## How Does PACER's National Bullying Prevention Center Help?

### Inspires communities by:

- Promoting a shared conversation and response to bullying in which everyone works together to create safe environments for students
- Creating kinder, more accepting, and more inclusive communities where fewer students experience bullying, more people speak out, and no one feels alone
- Providing free resources on three websites each designed for a specific audience. These highly respected, web-based resources are available at:

#### **PACER.org/Bullying** –

Resources for parents, educators, and students

#### **PACERTeensAgainstBullying.org** –

Interactive, relevant ways for middle and high school students to address bullying

#### **PACERKidsAgainstBullying.org** –

Fun, engaging activities and information for elementary school students

### Provides **FREE** bullying prevention resources, including:

- Classroom activities, toolkits, and lesson plans for **K-12 educators**
- Informative guides for **parents** to understand the dynamics of bullying, help their children through bullying situations, and learn how to communicate with school staff
- Age-appropriate resources and information for **students** to manage bullying situations, be supportive of their peers, and take action to prevent bullying in schools, communities, and online
- **School-wide and community opportunities** to address bullying through social change, including National Bullying Prevention Month in October and Unity Day—initiatives both founded by PACER's National Bullying Prevention Center

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## About Us

Founded in 2006, PACER's National Bullying Prevention Center actively leads social change to prevent childhood bullying, so that all youth are safe and supported in their schools, communities, and online.



**PACER's  
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Together We Can Create a World Without Bullying

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