Top Tips for Preventing Cyberbullying

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Cyberbullying is a very serious problem and there are several precautions that can help with preventing it before it even starts. Let's take a look.

Cyberbullying is a problem, but how big a problem remains to be determined. Its apparent growth may be due to the increased prevalence of electronic devices, individuals' obsessions with going online and staying connected, and the awareness that these factors could cause problems, including increased mental health issues such as substance abuse.

According to some surprising cyberbullying statistics, the rate of the problem may be declining. Such declines are the findings of ConnectSafely, a nonprofit organization that says it is "dedicated to educating users of connected technology about safety, privacy, and security." It says the current rate of cyberbullying is 14.9%, down from 16.2% in 2011.

But the Cyberbullying Research Center says cyberbullying is at an all-time high (36.5%), at least for those reporting lifetime cyberbullying.

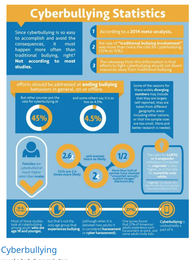
What is Cyberbullying?

Cyberbullying or electronic bullying is bullying that does not take place in person but via electronic devices—laptop or desktop computers, smartphones, tablets—and as much as 92% via online forums and message boards—Facebook, Twitter, Instagram—public or private.

Not everything that's mean and posted on social media is cyberbullying. Just like every mean or insensitive comment at a party or other social gathering isn't bullying. The generally agreed-upon definition of bullying requires three elements:

- The harm caused by the bully's behavior or words must be intentional.
- The target must have less real or figurative power than the bully.
- The action must be repeated over time.

Individuals involved in bullying or cyberbullying involvement include bullies, the bullied, and bystanders. Sometimes bullies are themselves bullied, creating another category bully-victims.



Types of Cyberbullying

There are many types of cyberbullying, including:

- Doxxing (doxing): Publishing someone's personal information without consent, possibly enabling identity theft.
- Outing: Publishing someone's embarrassing or humiliating photos, text messages, or other information without consent.
- Happy slapping: Publishing embarrassing or damaging photos and videos of someone.
- Imping: Impersonating someone to humiliate them, such as to make them seem racist or homophobic. Another term for this practice is fraping.
- Trickery: Gaining and abusing someone's trust to get them to reveal embarrassing information.
- Denigrating or dissing: Spreading gossip or rumors about someone.
- Exclusion: Deliberately leaving someone out of a thread, activity, or event to which their friends or other members of the group are invited.
- Flaming: Like trolling, except one person is directly targeted with insults, abusive language, or profanity.
- Cyberstalking: Electronically monitoring someone's activities and whereabouts, making false accusations, and/or threatening them with physical harm.
- Digital self-harm: Some young people—as many as 9% in one study—admitted to sending themselves cyberbullying messages, hate speech, and death threats. Some have committed suicide afterward.

Cyberbullying Statistics

Since cyberbullying is so easy to accomplish and avoid the consequences, it must happen more often than traditional bullying, right? Not according to most studies.

According to a 2014 meta-analysis, the rate of "traditional bullying involvement" was more than twice the rate for cyberbullying (35% to 15%). The takeaway from this information is that efforts to fight cyberbullying should not divert resources away from traditional bullying. Instead, efforts should be addressed at ending bullying behaviors in general, on or offline.

But other sources put the rate for cyberbullying at 45%, and some others say it is as low as 4.5%.

Some of the reasons for these widely diverging numbers may include that they are largely self-reported, that they are taken from different geographic areas including other nations, or that the sample sizes are too small. More and better research is needed.

Females are cyberbullied at much higher rates than males. Girls are 2.6 times more likely, and women twice as likely. More than half of women have received "unwanted sexually explicit images" electronically.

The rates for LGBTQ or transgender individuals compared to cisgender or heterosexual individuals are higher, as is the rate for nonwhite over white. Cisgender are people who identify with the same genders they were assigned at birth.

Most of these studies look at cyberbullying among youth who are age 18 and younger, but that's not the only age group that experiences bullying (although when it is between two adults it is considered harassment or cyber harassment). One survey found that 27% of American adults experience such harassment at work, and some adults bully kids. Cyberbullying is undoubtedly a part of it.

Who Cyberbullies and Why?

The type of person who becomes a cyberbully varies greatly. As there are many forms of cyberbullying, there are many types of cyberbullies.

One common factor among young people is that the bully is seven times as likely to know the bullied very well—to be a current or former friend or love interest—than to be a stranger. With adults, more than one-third of cyber-harassers are strangers.

A study of Massachusetts freshmen at Bridgewater State College found that of the 22% who admitted to being a cyberbully, the most common motives were:

- Out of anger or for revenge. Female bullies (54%) were more likely to cite this reason than male bullies (38%). This includes what StopCyberbullying.org labels vengeful angels, people who retaliate for some perceived harm to themselves or friends.
- As a joke. Females, 30%; males, 44%.
- Just "something to do." Females, 13%; males, 15%. Includes bored so-called mean girls who want to impress their clique.
- Peer pressure. Females and males, 3%.

Other individuals who are bullied or cyberbullied become cyberbullies themselves to gain some power, control, or payback. StopCyberbullying.org called members of this group the power hungry or revenge of the nerds because they may not be physically strong but they have good computer skills.

Still, others don't see themselves as cyberbullies at all. They don't realize the harm they may be potentially causing, or see it as a harmless joke.

Parents who suspect that their child is a cyberbully could look for signs, such as:

- A history of bullying or cyberbullying
- A history of being the target of bullies or cyberbullies
- Avoiding discussion of their online activities
- Having multiple active online accounts
- Suspiciously switching screens or closing programs when others approach

If the parents' suspicions turn out to be true, they should not overreact. They will almost certainly need to block all online access—except possibly for schoolwork—for a probationary period, but that cannot be the only measure they take.

The parents must find out why and to what extent the cyberbullying took place and ensure that it doesn't happen again. They should explain why it was wrong. Then, they could require the child to write an essay detailing what they did, why they did it, and an explanation of why they now know it was wrong. This approach may encourage long-term changes in behavior.

Dangers of Cyberbullying

But, didn't everybody experience bullying at some point in their lives? Didn't it teach them resilience, make them stronger, and prepare them for adult life?

Sometimes it does, but cyberbullying may have worse consequences than traditional bullying. Though there may also be a physical threat of violence associated with in-person bullying that is not possible in purely electronic bullying, cyberbullying may include other distressing elements that make it hard to avoid, such as:

- It may be anonymous. The bullied don't know who is doing the bullying, which makes it harder to avoid or gauge how serious the bully is.
- It can happen any time, any day. Unlike a school or work bully, who can only taunt or threaten other individuals when they are in the same place at the same time, many people carry smartphones or other electronic devices with them at all times, exposing them to cyberbullying around-the-clock.
- It may have a longer reach. Personal data and embarrassing information or photos can be placed on social media where all of one's friends and family—as well as total strangers—can see them. Once online, it is extremely difficult to completely and permanently remove them. The target may not even know about such a data dump at first. But they may feel its effects by the reactions of prospective employers and dating partners.
- Also, it is not always true that words can never hurt us or that what doesn't kill us makes us stronger. Cyberbullying and online harassment may have severe long-term consequences, such as:
- Bad grades
- Identity theft
- Damaged reputations
- Substance use disorder. In one study, "7% began abusing alcohol and/or drugs" after being cyberbullied
- Suicide and attempted suicide. Sometimes cyberbullying does result in death. People who have been cyberbullied are 3 to 9 times more likely to consider committing suicide. Between 2008 and 2015, the number of young people in hospitals because of suicidal thoughts or attempts doubled, with cyberbullying blamed for most of the rise. And the suicide rate doubled for girls ages 10 to 19.
- Other mental health issues. Depression, anxiety, and low self-esteem are more common among young people who were bullied, on or offline.

Cyberbullying and Mental Health

There seems to be a link between those who have been bullied, electronically or in person, and those who have mental health issues such as depression, anxiety, and substance use disorder. Almost 50% of "adolescent psychiatric patients" in one study had been cyberbullied. And the cyberbullied reported "greater levels of depressive symptoms," as did bully-victims (between 5.4% and 11.2% of teens).

However, there's no consensus on which problem came first and caused the other. It may be that people who are bullied suffer mental health issues because they are bullied, or that people who already have a mental health disorder are bullied because of their disorder.

Increasing the danger is that the cyberbullied often don't tell anyone—not friends, family, or teachers—that they are cyberbullied. It is the same for cyberbullied adults: only 39% told anyone, asked for help, or even attempted to resolve the situation on their own.

One common reason for fear that their parents would try to protect them by taking away their electronic access.

Cyberbullying and Substance Abuse

Regardless of the cause and effect, a study found that bullying in fifth grade led to more depression in seventh grade and more substance use by 10th grade. Both bullying and cyberbullying are associated with licit and illicit substance use, alcohol and drugs, but cyberbullying is associated with psychoactive substance use and problematic use.

One reason could be the self-medication hypothesis, in which co-occurring addiction and mental illness are explained by the individual with depression or bipolar disorder or schizophrenia attempting to use drugs to treat their symptoms.

It's also possible that teens who are bullied, banding together with other youths—any youths, even if they aren't really friends or share interests or even like each other—for protection how to peer pressure and use the same drugs. Because of their depression or other mental health issues, they haven't established wider friendships or explored other interests.

Ways To Prevent Cyberbullying

It is not possible to completely prevent the risk of cyberbullying. Teens spend up to nine hours a day using electronic devices (including streaming music and videos). Even if individuals stay off of social media entirely, cyberbullies can still text other people about those individuals or set up fake accounts in their names.

The risks can be minimized, however. Parents can play an important preventive role, such as by:

- Discussing cyberbullying with their children: what it is, how to recognize it, and why it is wrong to engage in it.
- Encouraging communication with their children, including listening to them.
- Explaining that they should not spread hurtful information or gossip because it might make them a cyberbully and a target for retaliation.
- Being understanding. If children don't feel they can come forward with questions or concerns because of their parents' reactions, they won't.
- Trying to learn about what your child does online. If parents know what sites their children are visiting and what they post on social media, they may be able to protect them from cyberbullying. Parental control apps can do this unobtrusively.
- Working to set ground rules for your child's online activity. Children need boundaries, even if they aren't rigorously defined.
- Peer support, having friends, is also a protective factor against cyber-victimization.
- A group of artists created a new genre, the web opera — discusses cyber bullying and abuse.

Recognize the Signs of Cyberbullying

To deal with cyberbullying, people need to know it is taking place. But identifying cyberbullying can be difficult because:

- 80% of cyber-bullied teens do not tell anyone, parents or peers, that they have been cyberbullied. They don't want to be branded as a tattletale or a poor sport.
- By itself, cyberbullying does not leave physical signs or scars.

Signs of Cyberbullying

While cyberbullying may be difficult to determine, there are changes in behavior that might indicate cyberbullying, such as:

- Sleep problems
- Withdrawn, depressed, angry, or anxious behavior, especially after electronic device use
- More frequent use of social media
- Other changes in online behavior
- Declining grades and/or work performance
- Decreased desire to attend school
- Lower self-esteem

Advice for Parents on Cyberbullying

When cyberbullying is suspected, detected, or reported, the temptation may be to react immediately or to respond in kind. Instead, take a deep breath and consider a more temperate approach:

- Talk with your child about cyberbullying.. Even if parents have monitoring apps, children still know more about how cyberbullying affects them and how it affected them. Understanding is necessary to correct them.
- Block the cyberbully. On most social media, you can choose not to receive messages from specific accounts. If the cyberbully finds you on a forum or in a chatroom, leave. If they have violated the site's terms of service, report them to the site's monitor.
- Save evidence. Parents should preserve evidence as soon as they discover it. They can take screenshots of incriminating pages before they are deleted. The same parental control apps that help parents monitor their children's online activity can also save evidence of cyberbullying.
- Decide what should be done. Parents and their children must work together to respond to cyberbullying. It's more important to end cyberbullying than to punish it.
- Include the child in the process. It is also important to restore children's sense of safety and self-esteem. Including them in your discussions will help. Together, parents and children can decide on responses that minimize the impact but do not escalate it.
- Teach your child safe online behavior. Practicing such behavior may protect against further cyberbullying.Like with most of life's complex problems, no one solution is right for all cases of cyberbullying. If real harm has occurred, legal action may be necessary. If mental health or substance use disorders manifest, proper psychological and medical treatment must be sought.

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Crisis Hotlines

National Suicide Prevention - Crisis hotline *800.273.TALK (8255)*

Crisis Text Line – Text *741741*

The Trevor Project – Hotline *866 488 7386 (LGBTQ+ ages 13-24)*

National Runaway Safeline - Hotline *800 786 2929*

Bullying Resources

stopbullying.gov – Get Help Now

Stomp Bullying Now – Online Chat

Victims of Crime Resource Center – Helpline *1 800 842 8467*

Cyberbullying Research Center – Resources

Pacer's National Bullying Prevention Center – Resources