

Cyberbullying:

Identification, Prevention, and Response

2023 Edition



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CYBERBULLYING
RESEARCH CENTER

People have been bullying each other for generations. The latest generation, however, can utilize technology to expand their reach and the extent of their harm.

This phenomenon, termed [cyberbullying](#), is defined as: “willful and repeated harm inflicted through the use of computers, cell phones, and other electronic devices.” Basically, we are referring to incidents where individuals use technology to harass, threaten, humiliate, or otherwise hassle their others. For example, a person can send hurtful texts to others or spread rumors using smartphones or tablets. Some have also targeted others through hurtful content on social media, [livestreaming](#) platforms, and [metaverse environments](#). Still others might repeatedly threaten or stalk through private messages or anonymous apps.

While we have conducted international studies on [the experiences of adults](#), our research primarily involves children and adolescents. It is this population that we will focus on since so many youth-serving professionals, parents, and guardians have requested help to best serve those under their care.

What are some negative effects that cyberbullying can have on a person?

There are [many detrimental outcomes](#) associated with cyberbullying that reach into the real world. First, many targets report feeling depressed, sad, angry, and frustrated. In addition, [research](#) has tied experience with cyberbullying to low self-esteem, depression, anxiety, family problems, academic difficulties, delinquency, school violence, and suicidal thoughts and attempts. Over 60% of the students who experienced cyberbullying stated that it deeply affected their ability to learn and feel safe at school, while 10% said they skipped school at least once in the previous year because of cyberbullying.

Where does cyberbullying commonly occur?

Cyberbullying occurs across a variety of venues and mediums in cyberspace, and it shouldn’t come as a surprise that it occurs most often where adolescents congregate online. In the early 2000s, many youth hung out in chat rooms, and as a result that is where most harassment took place. [With most](#)

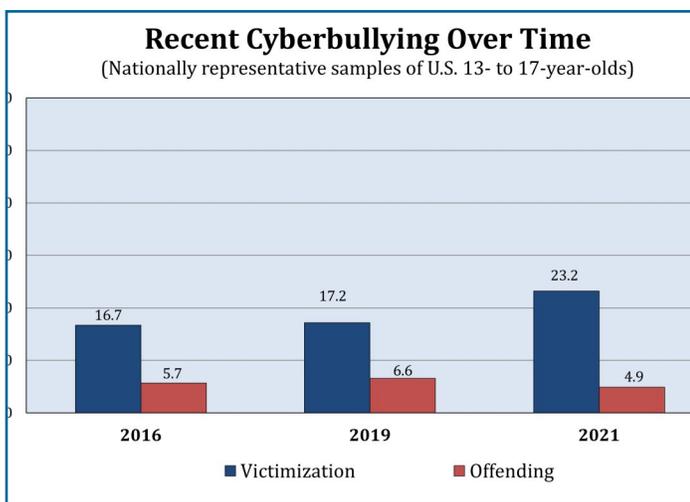
[youth drawn to social media](#) (such as Instagram, Snapchat, TikTok, and Twitter), voice/text chat in popular games (such as Roblox, PUBG, Overwatch, Call of Duty Black Ops, Fortnite, God of War) and video-sharing, streaming, and community sites (such as YouTube, Discord, and Twitch). This trend has led to increased reports of cyberbullying occurring in those environments—although their frequency, type, and the context varies greatly. We are also seeing it happen in XR (extended reality), inclusive of augmented reality (AR) and virtual reality (VR) spaces (also termed the “metaverse”), in social gaming sites, and on anonymous apps.



Cyberbullying by the numbers

[Estimates of the number of youth who experience cyberbullying vary widely](#) (ranging from 10-40%+), depending on the age of the group studied and how cyberbullying is formally defined. In our research, we inform students that cyberbullying is when someone “repeatedly makes fun of another person online or repeatedly picks on another person through email or text message or when someone posts something online about another person that they don’t like.” Using this definition, about 29% of the students who have been a part of our most recent 12 studies over the last fifteen years have said they have been the victim of cyberbullying at some point in their lifetime. Across these studies, about 16% admitted to cyberbullying others during their lifetime. In our 2021 [study](#) of a nationally-representative sample of approximately 2,500 middle and high schoolers in the U.S., 45.5% said they had been cyberbullied during their life-

time, while 23.2% said they had been cyberbullied within the previous 30 days. With regard to offending, 14.4% revealed they had cyberbullied others during their lifetime, while 4.9% admitted doing so in the last 30 days.



If we focus just on our last three studies, all of which involve relatively large (2,500-4,700 participants) nationally-representative samples collected in 2016, 2019, and 2021 using the same methodology and identical instrument, we can identify some recent trends in cyberbullying behaviors over that time period. More students reported that they had experienced recent cyberbullying in 2021 (22.6%) compared to previous years (17.2% in 2019 and 16.7% in 2016), but fewer students reported that they had cyberbullied others (4.9% in 2021 compared to 6.6% and 5.7% respectively in 2019 and 2016).

As another reference point, we conducted a [nationally-representative study of over 1,000 tweens](#) (9- to 12-year-olds) in 2020 and found that 14.9% had witnessed cyberbullying, 14.5% had been cyberbullied, and 3.2% admitted to cyberbullying others. In this study, 94% of tweens who were cyberbullied said it negatively impacted their life in some way. Nearly 70% said it affected their feelings about themselves, about one-third said it affected their friendships, 13% said it affected their physical health, and 6.5% shared it influenced their schoolwork.

Cyberbullying vs. traditional bullying

While often similar in terms of form and technique,

cyberbullying and traditional bullying have many differences that can make the latter even more devastating. With cyberbullying, targets may not know who is targeting them, or why. The aggressor can cloak his or her identity using anonymous accounts and pseudonymous screennames. Second, the hurtful actions of those who cyberbully can more easily go viral; that is, a large number of people (at school, in the neighborhood, in the city, in the world!) can participate in the victimization, or at least find out about the incident with a few keystrokes or touchscreen impressions. It seems, then, that the pool of potential targets, aggressors, and witnesses/bystanders is limitless.

Third, it is often easier to be cruel using technology because cyberbullying can be done from a physically distant location, and the aggressor doesn't have to see the immediate response by the target. In fact, some teens simply might not realize the serious harm they are causing because they are sheltered from the target's response. Finally, while parents and teachers are doing a better job monitoring youth at school and at home, many adults don't have the technological know-how (or time) to keep track of what teens are up to online. As a result, a target's experience may be missed and an aggressor's actions may be left unchecked. Even if those who bully are identified, many adults find themselves unprepared to adequately respond.

Why is cyberbullying a major issue?

Because online communication tools have become a ubiquitous and essential part of the lives of youth, it is not surprising that some will utilize devices, apps, and platforms to be malicious or menacing toward others. The fact that teens are constantly connected to technology means they are susceptible to victimization (and able to act on mean impulses toward others) around the clock. And since some adults have been slow to respond to cyberbullying, many feel that there are little to no consequences for their actions.

Obstacles in the fight to stop cyberbullying

There are two primary challenges today that make it difficult to prevent cyberbullying. First, even though this problem has been around for over two



decades, some people still don't see the harm associated with it. Some attempt to dismiss or disregard cyberbullying because there are "more serious problems to worry about." While it is true that there are many issues facing adolescents, parents, teachers, and law enforcement today, we first need to accept that cyberbullying is one such problem that will only get worse if ignored.

The other challenge relates to who is willing to step up and take responsibility for responding to the inappropriate use of technology. Parents often say that they don't have the knowledge or time to keep up with their children's online behavior, and that schools should be covering it in detail during class time and through other programming. Educators are often doing their part through policies, curricula, training, and assemblies, but sometimes don't know when and how to intervene in online behaviors that occur away from school but still involve their students. Finally, law enforcement is hesitant to get involved unless there is clear evidence of a crime or a significant threat to someone's physical safety. As a result, cyberbullying incidents either slip through the cracks, are dealt with too formally (or informally), or are otherwise mismanaged.

Based on these challenges, we need to create an environment where all youth feel comfortable talking with adults about this problem and feel confident that meaningful steps will be taken to resolve the situation. We also need to get everyone involved - youth, parents, educators, counselors, law enforcement, medical professionals like pediatricians, social media companies, and the community at large. Each stakeholder must do more.

The role of parents and caregivers

[The best tack parents and caregivers can take when their child is cyberbullied](#) is to make sure they feel (and are) safe, and to convey unconditional support. Parents must demonstrate to their children through words and actions that they both desire the same end result: **that the cyberbullying stop** and that life does not become even more difficult. This can be accomplished by working together to arrive at a mutually-agreed upon course of action, as many times it is appropriate (and important) to solicit the child's opinion as to what might be done to improve the situation. It is so critical not to be dismissive of their perspective, but to validate their voice and perspective. Targets of cyberbullying (and those who observe it) must know for sure that the adults who they tell will intervene rationally and logically, and not make the situation worse.

If it is deemed necessary, parents should explain the importance of scheduling a meeting with school administrators (or another educator they trust) to discuss the matter. Parents may also be able to contact the parent or guardian of the aggressor, and/or [work with the Internet Service Provider, Cell Phone Service Provider, or Content Provider](#) to investigate the issue or remove the offending material. Many times, the target simply wants the content removed or account deleted so they can move on with their life. The police should also be approached when physical threats are involved or a crime has possibly been committed (extortion, stalking, blackmail, sexual exploitation of minors, etc.).

Overall, parents must educate their children about appropriate online behaviors just as they convey appropriate offline behaviors. They should also monitor their child's activities while online – especially early in their exploration of cyberspace. This can be done informally (through active participation in their child's internet experience, which we recommend most of all) and formally (through software). Spying on kids and unnecessarily invading their privacy, though, should only be done as a last resort (and with their knowledge!) when there is a significant cause for concern, since it conveys distrust and may encourage youth to go further underground.

“There were these girls that thought it was okay to be taking pictures of me with out my permission and would put a text box under saying that i was a fat ugly no good slut and that i should kill myself and that they wanted to jump me...” ~ 14 year-old girl from Utah

In time, parents will need to give their children more freedom, privacy, and responsibility. They will never be able to monitor their child’s activities 24/7, nor should they need to do so. As a result, it is crucial that parents [cultivate and maintain an open, candid line of communication with their children](#), so that they are inclined to reach out when they experience something unpleasant or distressing online. Reinforce positive morals and values about how others should be treated with respect and dignity. Point out models to emulate in society, and use viral mistakes made by other youth and adults as teachable moments.

[Resilience](#) - the skill to bounce back after facing adversity - is also important to cultivate with intention at this stage. Instead of swooping in and rescuing youth from all of their social and relational struggles, [help them hone the ability](#) to deflect, disrupt, dispute, shrug off, or otherwise ignore hurtful things that others say or post. This can occur by [helping them internalize positive beliefs](#) (rather than self-defeating thoughts) after being cyberbullied, or by [spotlighting relatable overcomers in books and movies](#) with whom they can connect. Relatedly, [role-playing scenarios](#) can be used to discuss how best to respond in certain situations. We’ve also recently studied [digital resilience](#) - which we define as “positive attitudes and actions in the face of interpersonal adversity online.” Here, we discovered that those youth who are able to laugh off or otherwise dismiss others who are trying to be cruel to them, as well as those who skillfully can stay calm and nonreactionary when interacting online, can successfully deal with cyberbullying.

Parents may also utilize an age-appropriate [“Technology Use Contract”](#) to foster a crystal-clear understanding about what is and is not appropriate with respect to the use of various devices and online communication tools. When there are violations, immediate logical consequences must be given that are proportionate to the misbehavior. Youth need to learn that inappropriate online actions will

not be tolerated. Get them to understand that technology use and access is a privilege, and not a right—and with those privileges come certain responsibilities that must be respected.

[If a parent discovers that their child is cyberbullying others](#), they should first communicate how that behavior inflicts harm and causes pain in the real world. We must remember that kids are not socio-paths—they are just kids who sometimes lack empathy and make mistakes. Give them the opportunity to address the behavior and move on. That said, consequences should be firmly applied depending on seriousness and intentionality (and escalated if the behavior continues). Moving forward, it is essential that parents pay even greater attention to the technology use of their child to make sure that they have internalized the lesson and are continually acting in responsible ways.

Finally, empathy-building must be a priority action in homes. *Affective* empathy involves feeling or experiencing the emotions of someone else while *cognitive* empathy refers to understanding their feelings. Research consistently shows that lower levels of empathy are linked to various problem behaviors, and in our own published work we found that adolescents with higher cognitive empathy and higher total empathy (affective + cognitive) were significantly less likely to cyberbully others.

As such, parents must seek to cultivate empathy by intentionally putting children in situations that make them uncomfortable and that can soften their heart. This might involve community service projects, missions trips, or similar activities. We might also elicit their reflections on personal experiences and then open their eyes to what they may be missing. Perhaps ask them to make a list of the top three absolute saddest times in their life or the top five things they wish they could change about themselves or in their life. Discuss the immediate and long-term impacts of these struggles. Get them to think about how they wished others would treat them, come alongside them, or otherwise support

them. Ask them if anyone they know might have gone through something similar. Here is a great time to also talk about how they might have been marginalized or rejected for perceived “differences” and how it can happen to others. Remind them that we need to treat everyone with the realization that life is hard, that everyone is going through something painful, that we all fundamentally desire love and belongingness, and that our words and actions are hold so much power. As children grow up, parents should continue to point this out in the lives of those in their children’s social circle (and even in media consumed together).

The role of schools

The most important preventive step that schools can take is to [educate their community](#) about responsible use of their devices at all times (ideally through a concerted focus on [digital citizenship](#)). Students need to know that all forms of bullying are wrong and that those who engage in harassing or threatening behaviors will be subject to discipline. Take the time to regularly discuss issues related to appropriate online communications in various areas of the general curriculum. These messages should be reinforced in classes that regularly utilize technology. Signage also should be posted around campus to remind students of the rules of acceptable use. In general, it is crucial to establish and reinforce an environment of respect and integrity where violations result in informal or formal sanction.

Furthermore, school district personnel should review their harassment and bullying policies to ensure that it allows for the discipline of students who engage in cyberbullying. If their policy covers it, cyberbullying incidents that occur at school - or that originate off campus but ultimately result in a

substantial disruption of the learning environment - are [well within a school’s official authority to intervene](#). The school then needs to make it clear to all stakeholders. In some cases, simply discussing the incident with the offender’s parents will result in the behavior stopping. If inappropriate behaviors continue, additional steps need to be taken (e.g., threat of litigation).



How should schools respond?

Students should understand that cyberbullying will result in consequences at school, and [our recent research shows that this known potential has a strong deterrent effect on youth](#). Utilize school liaison officers or other members of law enforcement to thoroughly investigate incidents, as needed, if the behaviors cross a certain threshold of severity. Once the offending party has been identified, develop a response that is [commensurate with the harm done and the disruption that occurred](#).

Moreover, schools should come up with [creative response strategies](#), particularly for relatively minor forms of harassment that do not result in significant harm. For example, students may be required to create anti-cyberbullying posters to be displayed throughout the school, or a public service an-

“Ever since I was 9, I've been cyberbullied. I would always get made fun of by my old friends, including people on line. I've been sent death threats, I was only 10. I've been told to cut and kms. I've been talked shit about for years and no matter what I would've done they never stopped. It started with just how I looked, moving onto who my friends were and my interests. Every time I tried to stand up for myself they would always make me feel like a fool and that I was just overthinking everything. Because of that, I've been diagnosed with severe anxiety and mild depression. I started cutting myself and even considered suicide more than 10 times.” ~ 13 year-old girl from New Jersey, USA

nouncement (PSA) video conveying an anti-bullying and/or a pro-kindness message. Older students might be required to give a brief presentation to younger students about the importance of using technology in ethically-sound ways. The point here, again, is to condemn the behavior (without condemning the child) while sending a message to the rest of the school community that bullying in any form is wrong and will not be tolerated.

Even though the vast majority of these incidents can be handled informally (calling parents, counseling the aggressor and target separately, expressing condemnation of the behavior, temporary removal from school-based sports and clubs), there may be occasions where formal response from the school is warranted. This is particularly the case in incidents involving serious threats toward another student, if the target no longer feels comfortable coming to school, or if cyberbullying behaviors continue after informal attempts to stop it have failed. In these cases, detention, suspension, changes of placement, or even expulsion may be necessary. If these extreme measures are required, educators must clearly articulate the link to their school and present evidence that supports their action(s).

The importance of school climate

The benefits of a positive school climate have been identified through much research [over the last thirty years](#). It contributes to more consistent attendance, higher student achievement, and other desirable student outcomes. Though limited, research done on school climate and traditional bullying also underscores its importance in preventing peer conflict. [One of our studies](#) found that students who experienced cyberbullying (as targets *or* aggressors) perceived a poorer climate at their school than those who had not experienced cyberbullying. Those who cyberbullied others or who were the target of cyberbullying were less likely to agree with those statements.

As such, it is critical for educators to [develop and promote a safe and respectful school climate](#) - one marked by shared feelings of connectedness, belongingness, peer respect, morale, safety, and even school spirit. [A positive on-campus environment will go a long way in reducing the frequency of](#)



[many problematic behaviors at school, including bullying](#). In this setting, educators must demonstrate emotional support, a warm and caring atmosphere, a strong focus on academics and learning, and a fostering of healthy self-esteem while also providing structure and setting high expectations for behavior. [In schools with healthy "authoritative" climates, students know what is appropriate and what is not](#).

What can youth do?

First and foremost, youth should develop a relationship with an adult they trust so they can talk about any experiences they have online (or off) that make them upset or uncomfortable. When possible, [teens should ignore minor teasing or name calling](#), and not respond to the aggressor as that might simply make the problem continue. If they can develop the ability to demonstrate [resilience](#), it will bode well for their future since there will always be others who want to tear them down as they journey towards personal and professional success in life.



Youth should also use the account and privacy settings within each device, app, or network to control who can contact and interact with them, and who can read their online content. This can significantly reduce their victimization risk.

With the use of screenshots, screen recordings, chat or text logs, and date/time stamps, youth should take the time to report any harassment, threats, impersonation, or other problems they see or experience (we have a frequently-updated list of Internet, gaming, and social media companies and their contact information at [cyberbullying.org/report](https://www.cyberbullying.org/report) so they know exactly where to get help).

Finally, youth should [pause before they post—and make wise decisions with what they share or send or post online](#), considering the possibility that anyone and everyone may see it (including their parents, and others with opportunities to give them).

Don't stand by

Those who witness cyberbullying generally do not

want to get involved because of the hassle and problems they fear it might bring upon them, yet often recognize that what they are seeing is not right and should stop. However, by doing nothing, bystanders are doing something—they are passively encouraging the behavior. [By actively standing up—in that moment or right afterward](#) (by defending and/or encouraging the target, helping to block and report the harassment, saving digital evidence, and reaching out to an adult), they [can make a big difference in improving the situation](#), as targets often feel helpless and hopeless and need someone to come to the rescue. Finally, they should never directly or indirectly contribute to the behavior – by forwarding hurtful messages, laughing at inappropriate jokes or content, condoning the act just to “fit in,” or otherwise silently allowing it to continue.

To be sure, sometimes it is hard for a student—alone—to step up on behalf of others. However, it is a lot easier to do when the help and support of one or two other friends. Encourage youth to band together with others if they are nervous about intervening or responding by themselves.

One of the most promising findings from our examination of [twens across the US](#) was that the most have sought to help those being targeted when they see it happen. Previous research has found that younger students are more likely than older students to intervene in school bullying, but that the relevance of age becomes less important when it comes to cyberbullying. We found that 66.3% of tweens are willing to step in to defend, support, or otherwise assist those who are bullied online when they see it. The importance of helping behaviors need to be reiterated, reinforced, and rewarded as early in life as possible so they become habitual instead of based solely on emotions in the moment.

When should law enforcement get involved?

Law enforcement officers also have a [role in preventing and responding to cyberbullying](#). They first need to be aware of ever-evolving state and local laws concerning online behaviors, and equip themselves with the skills and knowledge to intervene as necessary. [In our research](#), we found that almost one-quarter of officers did not know if their state had a cyberbullying law. This is surprising since their most visible responsibility involves responding

“During the school holidays, I got onto Instagram as usual. That was when I saw my notifications constantly ringing it was my private account so I was confused and checked the notifications. When I checked the comments and messages it was filled with my friends asking why and even people I thought was close to me cursing me out. A loyal friend of mine believed me and explained the situation where someone had tweaked parts of my Instagram stories and shared it on an anonymous account. Making all my friends turn on me and start to hate me I felt so lost and confused and also angry on how or even why would someone do this to me till this day I practise safer online habits and stopped my bad habit of oversharing online.
~ 15-year-old boy from Singapore

to law violations (e.g., harassment, threats, stalking). Even if the behavior doesn't appear to rise to the level of a crime, discretion should be used to appropriately handle the situation. Indeed, a simple discussion of the legal issues involved in cyberbullying may be enough to [deter some youth from future misbehavior](#).

Relatedly, officers can play an essential role in preventing cyberbullying from occurring or getting out of hand in the first place. They can speak to students about cyberbullying and online safety issues more broadly to discourage them from engaging in risky or unacceptable actions and interactions. They might also address parents about local and state laws, so that they are informed and can properly respond if their child is involved in an incident.

Do your part

To be sure, there are many stakeholders who necessarily must be involved in addressing cyberbullying. We work with many social media and gaming companies that are increasingly doing their part through in-app features, AI, messaging strategies, and other safety mechanisms. Families and communities must step up and realize their role to teach and model the competencies all youth need. Youth professionals (counselors, teachers, social workers, pediatricians, nurses, coaches, and others) gradually are learning what they should do through research and professional development opportunities. Whenever there is a platform to reach youth about this issue, it should be used because of its deep relevance to their lives. Seize those opportunities to instruct and inspire. As you do what you can, we stand at the ready to assist—just reach out!

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The **Cyberbullying Research Center** (cyberbullying.org) provides the latest research, downloadable fact sheets and top ten tip sheets, project-based learning ideas, policy and programming guidance, interactive maps and activities, and a wealth of other resources to promote the positive use of social media, phones, gaming platforms, the metaverse, and more.

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