

Bullying and the Era of Technology

October is National Bullying Prevention Month. Bullying has been a problem since the beginning of time, and it can happen in a variety of forms. The emergence of the internet and social media in more recent years created something entirely new: cyberbullying.

According to [stopbullying.gov](https://www.stopbullying.gov), cyberbullying includes sending, posting, or sharing negative, harmful, false, or mean content about someone else, and can include sharing personal or private information about someone else causing embarrassment or humiliation. Furthermore, cyberbullying has the potential to have an even more detrimental effect than traditional bullying, as the power of the internet spreads far and wide.

“It can be something that’s even a lot different than what we had 10 years ago. It can be verbal. It can be images, threats, or shared images between people who aren’t the person being bullied. It’s a fairly diverse kind of topic. Especially when it happens on the internet,” says Joseph Siegel, an OSF HealthCare licensed clinical social worker.

Cyberbullying most commonly occurs through text messaging and on social media platforms like Facebook, Instagram, Snapchat, and TikTok. It can occur anywhere online, making it the most common type of harassment that middle and high school students experience. In fact, a [report](#) by the Pew Research Center found that 60% of teens in the U.S. indicated that they have been cyberbullied or harassed online at some point.

While cyberbullying is unfortunately far too common, it is not always reported to parents or other adults. Siegel recommends taking the time each day to talk to your child about how their day went to help them open up.

“A good 10 to 15 minute conversation every day about what happened during the day, what was good, what was bad, and what did they struggle with. Use open-ended questions and don’t necessarily try to solve problems they are experiencing but just listening and understanding what they’re saying and how they’re feeling in these situations. That is an important first step,” advises Siegel.

Even if you are putting in your best effort to get your child to open up, they may be apprehensive to share the details of their day with you. Some signs your child might be a victim of cyberbullying you can watch for include: wanting to avoid social media or their phone altogether, especially if this is not typical behavior; having negative reactions or facial expressions when looking at their phone; deleting social media accounts; avoiding social situations; becoming withdrawn; or exhibiting signs of depression or anxiety. Most importantly, recognizing these behaviors is key.

If you learn your child is a victim of cyberbullying, listen to them and try to respond calmly – and continue to ask questions to learn more about what is happening. Stopbullying.gov provides some important steps to take: do not respond to or forward cyberbullying messages; keep evidence of the cyberbullying, including dates, times, and other specifics and saving any screenshots when possible; and block the person who is doing the cyberbullying. It is important to [deal with the bullying](#) head on and not avoid the situation. One thing to be sure to avoid, Siegel says, is calling the parent or guardian of the bully.

“It is recommended that we try to resist calling the other parent. That often can make the situation much more complex or even taken to a different level completely. That is what schools do – they mediate these kinds of conflicts all the time and are very good at it. If you feel like you need to talk to the other parent, then it’s probably better to talk to the school instead, so they know what is happening and can document it,” Siegel explains.

Not only have [laws](#) been implemented in some states to prevent cyberbullying, but the National Institutes of Health (NIH) has linked cyberbullying to a significant increase in anxiety, depression, and suicidal thoughts in young adolescents.

If your child is a victim of cyberbullying, you may feel helpless and may not be sure where to start. Once school officials have been informed of the situation, there are other steps that can be taken to help stop the bullying. When adults respond quickly and consistently, it not only lets the bully know their behavior is unacceptable, but also lets the child who is being bullied know they are not alone.

“In terms of cyber bullying, there is a government website – [cyberbullying.org](https://www.cyberbullying.org) – that is a fantastic resource for parents in terms of how to best handle different kinds of cyber bullying,” says Siegel.

It is important to provide support for your child if you learn they are or have been a victim of cyberbullying – or any other form of bullying – and connecting them with a mental health professional, in addition to the support they are given at home.