

# National Center Brief

## Preventing Cyberbullying in Schools and the Community

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Bullying is a form of emotional and physical abuse that is characterized by a power imbalance in which a bully chooses victims that he or she perceives as vulnerable. Bullying is deliberate and repeated over time. It can occur in different forms, for example:

- Physical bullying—poking, pushing, hitting, kicking
- Verbal bullying—yelling, teasing, name-calling, insulting, threatening
- Indirect bullying (also called “relational bullying”)—ignoring, excluding, spreading rumors, telling lies, getting others to hurt someone

Extensive research on bullying has shown that it has major long- and short-term effects on the victim that range from low self-esteem, anxiety, and depression to school avoidance and academic failure (Swearer, Song, Cary, Eagle, & Mickelson, 2001). In cases of extreme bullying, some tormented victims have thought about or resorted to committing suicide, or “bullicide” (van der Wal, de Wit, & Hirasing, 2003).

Bullying also has major effects on the immediate bystanders, who may feel:

- pressured to participate in the bullying
- anxious about speaking to anyone about it
- powerless to stop the bullying
- increasingly vulnerable to being victimized themselves
- afraid of being associated with the victim or the bully
- guilty for not having defended the victim (Storey, Slaby, Adler, Minotti, & Katz, 2008)

With the spread of technology-mediated communication in recent years, comes a new form of bullying that can occur anywhere and can take a similar toll on the victim. [Cyberbullying](#) is a growing form of bullying that involves sending or posting hurtful, embarrassing, or threatening text or images using the Internet, cell phones, or other electronic communication devices. Other forms of cyberbullying include creating Web sites that contain harmful or highly personal materials or images that may damage the victim’s reputation or friendships, distributing questionnaires that poll classmates about a student’s physical traits, and excluding victims from online groups. Since many students have access to the Internet outside of school, cyberbullying can occur at any time of day, and its effects can be difficult to avoid.

## What Makes Cyberbullying Different from Other Bullying?

Many aspects of cyberbullying make it unique and potentially more harmful and problematic than traditional bullying. The sense of anonymity provided by screen names or other virtual identities allows bullies to distance themselves from the situation, often making them less inhibited in their cruelty toward their victims (Keith & Martin, 2005) and less aware of the consequences of their actions (National Crime Prevention Council, 2009). This anonymity also provides an easy opportunity for bullies to falsify their identities or impersonate others. The effects of cyberbullying can also be more widespread than traditional bullying, as electronic information is so easily disseminated beyond its intended audience. In this way, cyberbullying is persistent and often indelible and irreversible.

While both boys and girls engage in cyberbullying, research indicates that girls are often more likely than boys to become involved in it, as both perpetrators and victims (Keith & Martin, 2005). When acting as the perpetrators of bullying, girls are more likely than boys to display “relational bullying,” where they engage in “the hurtful manipulation of peer relationships/friendships that inflicts harm on others through behaviors such as ‘social exclusion’ and ‘malicious rumor spreading’” (Crick & Grotpeter, 1995). Online, this abuse is carried out mainly through instant messaging, online conversations (chatting), and e-mails.

## Facts About Cyberbullying

In a survey of more than 1,500 youth in grades 4–8, conducted by i-SAFE America Inc. (2004), students reported the following:

- 58 percent said that someone has said mean or hurtful things to them online
- 53 percent reported having said something mean or hurtful to another person online
- 58 percent said that they have not told their parents or another adult about something mean or hurtful that happened to them online

Similar to traditional bullying, cyberbullying appears to increase in elementary school, peak during middle school, and decline in high school.

## What Can Schools Do?

As cyberbullying often takes place outside of school, it is a more difficult form of bullying for schools to address. However, given its increasing prevalence, there are actions that school administrators can and should take to decrease cyberbullying and its effects:

1. Assess the level of cyberbullying in the school or district. Meet with students, parents, school staff, and technology personnel within the school for recommendations on how to survey students. Administrators may want to establish an anti-cyberbullying task force with the school board attorney, principal, disciplinary officer, librarian, and student and parent representatives to gain a better understanding of the problem, and then work with this group to develop anti-cyberbullying initiatives.
2. Create an awareness campaign for teachers, parents, the community, students, and school staff to inform them about the forms that cyberbullying takes and how it can be prevented or stopped within

the jurisdiction of the school. The Health Resources and Services Administration [Stop Bullying Now!](#) Web site contains a campaign [Activities Guide](#) with creative ideas on how to spread the word about bullying prevention.

3. Engage students in the creation, dissemination, and application of a policy for acceptable use of the school's information technology resources. This acceptable use policy (AUP) should spell out what constitutes cyberbullying, specifically prohibit the use of the Internet for bullying, include strategies for preventing and stopping cyberbullying, and specify the negative consequences for policy violations. The AUP should also include a provision for cyberbullying that occurs outside of school if these actions adversely affect the victims' safety and well-being while in school.  
Note: The AUP should emphasize preventive and educational actions as much as, if not more than, disciplinary actions. Sample AUPs are available through the [U.S. Department of Justice's Computer Crime & Intellectual Property Section](#) and through the [Indiana Department of Education](#).
4. Educate students on how to avoid cyberbullying and how to respond to and report cyberbullies. Discuss with them the adverse consequences of bullying behavior, including school discipline, civil litigation, and criminal prosecution. Teach students not to give out any private information. Encourage them to report to an adult any form of cyberbullying that they witness or experience.
5. Provide professional development opportunities for staff and teachers on cyberbullying. School counselors can guide teachers in recognizing and responding effectively to signs of cyberbullying. Remind teachers of the AUP and the appropriate actions they can take if they suspect cyberbullying among their students.
6. Determine how the school's efforts can be coordinated with those of the community. Establish a relationship with local police and invite law enforcement to talk with kids about cyberbullying. Ask a representative from a local Internet service provider to explain the company's regulations against cyberbullying.
7. Educate parents about cyberbullying—what forms it takes and how their children may be affected. Ask parents to sign, with their student, an AUP stating that they won't use computers to harass other students. Ask parents to agree to be responsible for their children's use of the Internet outside of school. (See below for more tips for parents.)
8. Coordinate with other schools in the district to provide consistent cyberbullying prevention education as students progress from primary to secondary school.
9. Review relevant state laws. Many states have anti-bullying laws, some of which provide anti-cyberbullying legislation. [Bully Police USA](#) provides a compilation of state-by-state legislation on bullying as well as a description of the [key components of anti-bullying legislation](#). If needed, petition state legislatures to add a cyberbullying component to existing state laws that prohibit traditional bullying.

## What Can Parents Do?

Since most cyberbullying occurs outside of school on family-owned mobile phones and computers, parents have a great deal of responsibility for addressing this problem. However, this may be easier said than done. Most parents do not want to believe that their child is capable of being a perpetrator, and few

parents realize how common cyberbullying actually is. In addition, teenagers often demand Web privacy from their parents, making it particularly challenging to monitor their Web activity.

Still, there are a number of things that parents can do to help prevent cyberbullying in their own homes:

1. **Understand what cyberbullying is** and how technology can be used to bully others. The technology divide between generations can make this difficult, but the more educated parents are, the more likely they are to notice when their children are bullying or are being victimized.
2. **Contact the Internet service provider (ISP)** and learn about the ISP's recommendations and regulations against cyberbullying. Ask what parental controls the ISP offers that would allow parents to monitor their children's Internet activities.
3. **Learn what their children are doing online** and be comfortable talking to them about it. Be clear about which sites on the Internet they can visit (and which sites are off-limits), what they can do there, and how much time they can spend online (Beale & Hall, 2007).
4. **Talk to their children** about what to do if they receive or see a cyberbullying message. Parents might suggest that their children ignore the posting or that they calmly but firmly ask the cyberbully to remove the harmful material (Storey et al., 2008).
5. **Remind their children** to protect their personal information by not sharing private information, such as their full names, addresses, phone numbers, or passwords.
6. **Notify school officials** if there is an incident that involves the school and/or other children at school.
7. **Save ongoing harassing messages** so they can be reported to e-mail services, ISPs, Web sites, cell phone companies, etc. Cyberbullying is typically a violation of the "terms of use," and violators are often subject to adverse action (Anti-Defamation League, n.d.).
8. **Keep computers used by children in common areas of the home** (Health Resources and Services Administration, n.d.).
9. **Look for signs** that a child might be a victim of cyberbullying, for example, having sleeping problems, avoiding school or falling behind in homework, acting sad or withdrawn, exhibiting mood swings, showing a sudden disinterest in computers, rapidly switching screens when a parent enters the room, becoming anti-social, or crying for no apparent reason.

For more on how to prevent cyberbullying, read our recent blog post, "[Cyberbullying: You Have the Power to Stop It](#)"

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