



Cyberbullying and Suicide

Cyberbullying

Cyberbullying is bullying that occurs through digital technology, such as social media, text messaging, or e-mail. Like other forms of bullying, it is distinguished by three elements:

1. There is intent to harm another person.
2. The hurtful and aggressive behavior is repeated.
3. There is a real or perceived imbalance of power—socially or physically—between the victim and the bully.

Examples of cyberbullying can range from spreading harmful rumors to verbal threats and attacks. Cyberbullying is especially harmful for several reasons:

- It can occur 24 hours a day, 7 days a week.
- The bully can remain anonymous.
- The hurtful messages or images can be spread quickly and widely.

Cyberbullying is widespread. In 2013, nearly one in seven students (14.8%) ages 13–17 reported being cyberbullied through e-mail, chat rooms, instant messaging, websites, or texting in the past year.¹ Although any adolescent can be a victim of cyberbullying, girls, youth with disabilities, and those perceived as lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender are especially vulnerable.²

Warning Signs That a Teen Is Being Cyberbullied

- Acting withdrawn or depressed
- Showing reluctance to go to school
- Falling behind in schoolwork
- Changing his or her online communication patterns
- Showing nervous or tense behavior when checking an account or receiving a text message



The Relationship between Bullying and Adolescent Suicide

Although most youth who are involved in bullying—whether verbal, physical, or online—do not engage in suicide-related behavior, studies have shown that youth who are involved in bullying—either as victims or as bullies—are at higher risk of suicide-related behavior.³ Furthermore, some researchers have found that cyberbullying is more closely linked with suicidal behavior than face-to-face bullying.^{4,5}

Following are some concrete steps that youth and their parents can take to intervene in acts of cyberbullying—and to prevent it before it starts.



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Preventing—and Intervening in—Cyberbullying

Bystanders (people who witness bullying) can have an impact on both bullying and cyberbullying. However, because cyberbullying takes place online, a bystander of cyberbullying often witnesses the behavior away from the view of parents and other adults. Therefore, she or he has the potential to intervene when acts of cyberbullying occur. Parents can empower teens by discussing the steps that a bystander of cyberbullying can take:

- Speak up on behalf of the victim. Inform the bully that the unkind behavior is hurtful and will not be tolerated.
- Refuse to give the bully an audience. Do not share, send, or forward negative messages.
- Reach out to support the person being cyberbullied. Be a friend to the victim, send supportive messages online, and encourage the victim to talk with a trusted adult.
- Tell a parent, school official, or other trusted adult.
- Report cyberbullying to the site on which it is occurring.

Parents can also play an active role in cyberbullying prevention. By educating teenagers about the appropriate and responsible use of online technologies, parents can help keep their own children—as well as other youth—safe online. Here are some steps that parents can take:

- Learn more about the types of digital technology that youth are using—including messaging apps and texting acronyms. While it may seem hard to keep up with the ever-changing digital platforms, Internet safety websites can keep parents updated on what's popular among teens.
- Jointly create a family online safety contract with ground rules about safe use of digital technology (e.g., privacy settings, monitoring, and consequences for misusing the Internet).
- Monitor teen Internet use. Know which sites your teen is using and the usernames and passwords so that you can check on them, especially if you suspect your child might be a victim of cyberbullying.
- Monitor teen phone use. Create simple rules for teens to follow at home, such as no phones in the bedroom at night.
- When cyberbullying does occur, report it to the online service provider, your child's school, and/or law enforcement.

Resources

- Promote Prevent: Cyberbullying: <http://preventingbullying.promoteprevent.org/cyberbullying>
- Center for Disease Control and Prevention: The Relationship Between Bullying and Suicide: What We Know and What It Means for Schools: <http://www.cdc.gov/violenceprevention/pdf/bullying-suicide-translation-final-a.pdf>
- Promote Prevent: Family Media Agreements for Internet Use—Example Contract: <http://www.promoteprevent.org/family-media-agreements-internet-use-sample-contract>
- Family Online Safety Institute: Teens and Online Messaging Apps: <https://www.fosi.org/good-digital-parenting/understanding-messaging-apps>

¹ Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. (2014). Youth risk behavior surveillance—United States, 2013. Retrieved from <http://www.cdc.gov/mmwr/pdf/ss/ss6304.pdf>

² Promote Prevent. Understand Cyberbullying. Retrieved from <http://preventingbullying.promoteprevent.org/cyberbullying/understand-cyberbullying>

³ Centers for Disease Control & Prevention. (2014). The relationship between bullying and suicide: What we know and what it means for schools. Retrieved from <http://www.cdc.gov/violenceprevention/pdf/bullying-suicide-translation-final-a.pdf>

⁴ van Geel, M., Vedder, P., & Tanihon, J. (2014). Relationship between peer victimization, cyberbullying, and suicide in children and adolescents: A meta-analysis. *JAMA Pediatrics*, 168(5), 435–442.

⁵ Kessel Schneider, S., O'Donnell, L., Stueve, A., & Coulter, R. S. W. (2012). Cyberbullying, school bullying, and psychological distress: A regional census of high school students. *American Journal of Public Health*, 102(1), 171–177

