



Breaking the Cycle of Youth Cyberbullying

NEEDS ASSESSMENT REPORT



MediaSmarts

MediaSmarts is a Canadian not-for-profit charitable organization for digital media literacy. Our vision is that people across Canada have the critical thinking skills to engage with media as active and informed digital citizens. MediaSmarts has been developing digital media literacy programs and resources for Canadian homes, schools, and communities since 1996. MediaSmarts also conducts and disseminates original research that contributes to the development of our programs and resources and informs public policy on issues related to digital media literacy.

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Suggested Citation

MediaSmarts. (2026). *Breaking the Cycle of Youth Cyberbullying. Needs Assessment Report*. Ottawa.

Funding Acknowledgement

Funded through the
Government of Canada's
Crime Prevention Action Fund

Financé par le Fonds d'action
en prévention du crime du
gouvernement du Canada



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Land Acknowledgement

MediaSmarts acknowledges that it is based on the traditional unceded and occupied lands of the Algonquin Anishinaabeg. With gratitude, we acknowledge the territory to reaffirm our commitment and responsibility to building positive relationships with Inuit, First Nations, and Métis peoples from coast to coast to coast.

We strive to ground our research processes in care and reciprocity, and this includes being in a constant state of learning – especially when it comes to understanding the digital wellbeing and experiences of Indigenous peoples and communities across Canada. We commit to creating and maintaining respectful processes and relationships that recognize and seek to address power imbalances across the digital media literacy landscape.

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Introduction

This section includes a general introduction to the Breaking the Cycle of Youth Cyberbullying (BTC) project and the structure of this report.

The Breaking the Cycle of Youth Cyberbullying (BTC) project is a five-year intervention project led by MediaSmarts. It is aimed at developing, piloting, adapting, and disseminating a culturally safe, evidence-based cyberbullying program for youth ages 12-17 in educational and community settings across Canada, giving special focus to youth with greater exposure to violence. In this report, we detail the methodology and results of the needs assessment we conducted in March and April 2026 to understand the current needs and concerns of youth in Canada regarding addressing and preventing cyberbullying.

Cyberbullying has been defined as “any behaviour performed through electronic or digital media by individuals or groups that repeatedly communicates hostile or aggressive messages intended to inflict harm or discomfort to others.”¹ To address the risk and protective factors associated with youth cyberbullying, specifically its [retributive cycle](#), our project recognizes the underlying social dynamics and cultural norms that contribute to online violence. Through a trauma- and violence-informed approach, the BTC project understands cyberbullying as online violence that requires collaborative and sustainable interventions at individual, interpersonal, community, and systems levels.

¹ Robert S. Tokunaga, “Following You Home from School: A Critical Review and Synthesis of Research on Cyberbullying Victimization,” *Computers in Human Behaviour*, 2010, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chb.2009.11.014>.

Over the course of the project, MediaSmarts will develop digital media literacy resources to engage and educate youth on the harms of cyberbullying at three levels:

- A whole-school assembly aimed at changing the social norms that make cyberbullying seem either harmless or justifiable, including follow-up resources for use at home with parents/caregivers.
- Classroom resources designed to confront justifications for engaging in cyberbullying and teach emotional regulation and conflict resolution in an online context.
- Specialized content for youth with greater exposure to violence, or those identified as engaging in cyberbullying.

We will tailor the BTC program to meet the wide-ranging needs of youth ages 12-17, and the parents/caregivers, educators, practitioners, and administrators who support them in school and community settings across Canada. We will give specific attention to the cultural and safety needs of youth from diverse groups across Canada wherever possible within the development, implementation, and dissemination of the BTC program intervention. We intend to reach these project objectives and outcomes over five phases:

PHASE ONE- NEEDS ASSESSMENT:

Detailed in this report, this phase involves preliminary research, including a literature review and environmental scan of best practices, and a needs assessment through qualitative focus groups with youth ages 14 to 19 to ensure the BTC program reflects the best available evidence regarding youth cyberbullying experiences in Canada. Specific attention is given to the unique needs of youth with greater exposure to violence.

PHASE TWO- PROGRAM DEVELOPMENT:

Building on MediaSmarts' expertise in online harms prevention and in collaboration with project partners, MediaSmarts' education staff will use the research findings from phase one to develop the BTC program for students in grades 7-12 including:

- Facilitation materials for a school assembly
- Classroom lessons and resources
- Parent/caregiver resources
- Specialized content for school counsellors, health practitioners, social workers, and community practitioners working with youth who experience greater exposure to violence and/or are in contact with the criminal justice system.
- Professional development (train-the-trainer) materials for administrators, educators, and community practitioners.

PHASE THREE- PILOT TESTING:

MediaSmarts' staff will facilitate train-the-trainer sessions with six to eight partners who will pilot test the BTC program in school and community settings across Canada. A specific focus will be on partners who work with youth that experience greater exposure to violence and/or who are in contact with the criminal justice system. We will gather feedback in the pilot testing phase through pre- and post-program evaluation surveys.

PHASE FOUR- ADAPTATION:

Drawing on feedback gathered during the testing phase, MediaSmarts' education and research staff will adapt the program content to further address the needs of youth especially those from equity-deserving communities and youth that experience greater exposure to violence.



PHASE FIVE- PROMOTION AND DISSEMINATION:

MediaSmarts' communications and outreach staff will promote and disseminate the BTC program with schools and community partners across the country. MediaSmarts' staff will then conduct additional train-the-trainer sessions. The research team will share and promote youth-informed and evidence-based practices for addressing and preventing youth cyberbullying in Canada within our network of academic, policy, industry, education, and community-based partners.

We welcome opportunities to collaborate throughout the course of this project. If you are interested in connecting with us about the Breaking the Cycle of Youth Cyberbullying (BTC) program or have suggestions to share, please contact us at info@mediasmarts.ca.

Report Structure

This report details the needs assessment phase of this project, which is a crucial step in developing resources that meet the needs of youth and the trusted adults who support them in home, school, and community settings. The structure of the report is as follows: We will first discuss some key findings from the literature review and environmental scan in the section titled “**what we learned from the literature.**” Following details on the research **methods** used in this needs assessment, we will discuss the **key findings** from our focus groups with youth. This section will highlight how youth understand cyberbullying, including its contributing factors and consequences, what courses of action youth take when experiencing, witnessing, or engaging in cyberbullying, and what kinds of support they need from the adults in their lives. We will then offer **recommendations** arising from these findings and end the report with some **next steps** for the BTC project. Relevant **appendices** are also included at the end of the report.

What We Learned from the Literature

This section includes an environmental scan and review of the available evidence on youth cyberbullying, including best practices on how to design interventions to prevent and address it.

Cyberbullying is significantly more common amongst youth than adults,² and its prevalence is spurred on by the increasing movement of social life (e.g., playing games) and essential services (e.g., school tasks) online.³ Cyberbullying is often considered more harmful than offline bullying due to the lack of geographical boundaries and the ease of anonymity online.⁴ Moreover, its negative effects, such as depression, anxiety, and substance use, extend to both targets of and those engaged in cyberbullying.⁵

To respond to this online safety issue, research continues to explore experiences, risk factors, and interventions to address youth cyberbullying. What follows are key insights from our environmental scan and literature review of available evidence on addressing and preventing youth cyberbullying, with an emphasis on youth-engaged, multi-level, and trauma-informed approaches.

Creative, Youth-Engaged, and Participatory Methodologies

A common characteristic in identified best practices for developing youth cyberbullying interventions is the use of research methodologies centered on understanding youth perspectives. This includes actively involving youth in all stages of intervention

Cyberbullying is defined as any behavior performed through electronic or digital media by individuals or groups that repeatedly communicates hostile or aggressive messages intended to inflict harm or discomfort to others (Tokunaga, 2010).

2 K. T. A. Sandeeshwara Kasturiratna et al., "Umbrella Review of Meta-Analyses on the Risk Factors, Protective Factors, Consequences and Interventions of Cyberbullying Victimization," *Nature Human Behaviour*, 2025, <https://doi.org/10.1038/s41562-024-02011-6>.

3 Chengyan Zhu et al., "Cyberbullying Among Adolescents and Children: A Comprehensive Review of the Global Situation, Risk Factors, and Preventive Measures," *Frontiers in Public Health*, 2021, <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpubh.2021.634909>.

4 Justin W. Patchin and Sameer Hinduja, "Bullies Move Beyond the Schoolyard: A Preliminary Look at Cyberbullying," *Youth Violence and Juvenile Justice*, 2006, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1541204006286288>.

5 Laura Marciano et al., "Cyberbullying Perpetration and Victimization in Youth: A Meta-Analysis of Longitudinal Studies," *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication*, 2020, <https://doi.org/10.1093/jcmc/zmz031>.

research, including design, testing, and refinement.⁶ Youth-informed programs are demonstrated to be more relevant, credible, and effective⁷ compared to adult-defined frameworks that may misunderstand youth perspectives.⁸ Examples include specific practices such as forming youth advisory groups or broader approaches such as **youth participatory action research (YPAR)**.⁹ **YPAR** engages youth as co-researchers, collaborators, and/or consultants in research processes shifting youth from passive subjects to active leaders and advocates.

Scholars have also found that multiple methodological approaches are required to understand the complexity of youth cyberbullying.¹⁰ Qualitative methods allow for rich exploration of youths' perceptions, including arts-based methods and storytelling which allow youth to steer away from personal disclosure. Creative methods that lean further into artistic expression, such as graphic vignettes, are also viewed as particularly promising.¹¹ These involve a set of scenarios represented through incomplete images or comic strips given to participants for completion. Participants can write and draw to create unique stories that reflect their experiences. This kind of methodology allows youth to use multiple and creative ways to articulate their experiences, including what may be unspoken.¹²

However, added challenges arise in participatory work with youth – there is a need to balance protection with the right to participate in

Youth Participatory Action Research (YPAR) engages youth as co-researchers, collaborators, and consultants shifting youth from passive subjects to active leaders and advocates.

6 Barbara Spears and Jette Kofoed, "Transgressing Research Binaries: Youth as Knowledge Brokers in Cyberbullying Research," in *Cyberbullying through the New Media*, Psychology Press, 2013; Donna Cross et al., "If It's about Me, Why Do It without Me? Genuine Student Engagement in School Cyberbullying Education," *The International Journal of Emotional Education*, 2015; Rebecca Dennehy et al., "Young People's Conceptualizations of the Nature of Cyberbullying: A Systematic Review and Synthesis of Qualitative Research," *Aggression and Violent Behavior*, 2020, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.avb.2020.101379>.

7 D. M. Green et al., "A Qualitative Meta-Study of Youth Voice and Co-Participatory Research Practices: Informing Cyber/Bullying Research Methodologies," *International Journal of Bullying Prevention*, 2022, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s42380-022-00118-w>.

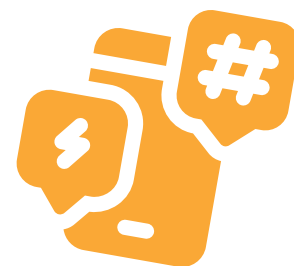
8 Rebecca Dennehy et al., "Young People's Conceptualizations of the Nature of Cyberbullying: A Systematic Review and Synthesis of Qualitative Research," *Aggression and Violent Behavior*, 2020, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.avb.2020.101379>.

9 *ibid.*

10 Peter K. Smith et al., "The School Bullying Research Program," in *The Wiley Blackwell Handbook of Bullying*, John Wiley & Sons, Ltd, 2021, <https://doi.org/10.1002/9781118482650.ch3>; Paul Horton and Selma Therese Lyng, "Qualitative Methods in School Bullying and Cyberbullying Research: An Introduction to the Special Issue," *International Journal of Bullying Prevention*, 2022, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s42380-022-00139-5>.

11 Fotini Bonoti et al., "Drawing an Angry Perpetrator and a Sad Target: Children's Understanding of Emotions of School Bullying Perpetrators and Targets," *International Journal of Bullying Prevention*, 2024, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s42380-023-00167-9>; Daria Khanolainen and Elena Semenova, "School Bullying Through Graphic Vignettes: Developing a New Arts-Based Method to Study a Sensitive Topic," *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, 2020, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1609406920922765>.

12 Daria Khanolainen and Elena Semenova, "Self and Others in School Bullying and Cyberbullying: Fine-Tuning a New Arts-Based Method to Study Sensitive Topics," *Qualitative Psychology*, 2023, <https://doi.org/10.1037/qua0000236>.



work that affects them.¹³ In less structured creative environments, including when youth are collaborating on research, it may be harder to safeguard against risks such as re-traumatization or other unintended harms. Researchers require more time and resources to promote ethical and safe involvement without restricting young people's participation. Best practices for researchers looking to collaborate with youth include: intentional reflection throughout the research process (for example, intentionally addressing power dynamics in research design and practice), added attention to ethical considerations in study design (for example, using scenarios instead of asking about personal experiences), and flexibility in responding to issues that may emerge (for example, dynamic, renegotiable consent).¹⁴

Multi-level Integrated Interventions

Since youth cyberbullying can occur anywhere and is not limited to specific geographic locations such as the home or school, research indicates the importance of multi-level integrated interventions at individual, community, and systems levels.¹⁵ This includes the home to school connection¹⁶ and involvement of community practitioners such as social workers, healthcare providers, and law-enforcement. Effective communication, collaboration, and referrals among teachers, parents/caregivers, community experts, and practitioners — particularly regarding their respective roles and challenges in addressing youth cyberbullying — is essential to developing meaningful and lasting solutions.¹⁷

13 Azza Warraitch et al., "Ethical Considerations for Participatory Research with Children and Young People in Bullying Research: A Rapid Review," *International Journal of Bullying Prevention*, 2026, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s42380-026-00351-7>.

14 *ibid.*

15 Pamela Tozzo et al., "Family and Educational Strategies for Cyberbullying Prevention: A Systematic Review," *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*, 2022, <https://doi.org/10.3390/ijerph191610452>.

16 Chengyan Zhu et al., "Cyberbullying Among Adolescents and Children: A Comprehensive Review of the Global Situation, Risk Factors, and Preventive Measures," *Frontiers in Public Health*, 2021, <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpubh.2021.634909>; Dorothy L. Espelage and Jun Sung Hong, "Cyberbullying Prevention and Intervention Efforts: Current Knowledge and Future Directions," *The Canadian Journal of Psychiatry*, 2017, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0706743716684793>.

17 Rosario Ortega-Ruiz et al., "Knowing, Building and Living Together on Internet and Social Networks: The ConRed Cyberbullying Prevention Program," *International Journal of Conflict and Violence*, 2012, <https://doi.org/10.4119/ijcv-2921>; Elias Aboujaoude et al., "Cyberbullying: Review of an Old Problem Gone Viral," *Journal of Adolescent Health*, 2015, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jadohealth.2015.04.011>; Min Lan et al., "Effectiveness of Anti-Cyberbullying Educational Programs: A Socio-Ecologically Grounded Systematic Review and Meta-Analysis," *Computers in Human Behavior*, 2022, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chb.2022.107200>; Stephanie F. Dailey and Rosellen R. Roche, "The SHIELD Framework: Advancing Strength-Based Resilience Strategies to Combat Bullying and Cyberbullying in Youth," *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*, 2025, <https://doi.org/10.3390/ijerph22010066>.

One foundational best practice in a multi-level intervention is to create informational resources (like awareness campaigns¹⁸) about cyberbullying for youth and their communities of support (including parents, school staff, and healthcare providers).¹⁹ Ensuring that not only youth but the adults who support them understand and know how to address youth cyberbullying is an important component of successful interventions.

At Individual and Peer Levels

At the individual and peer level, a best practice is the development of resources that help youth build self-esteem, empathy, emotional regulation skills, and self-efficacy in addressing youth cyberbullying.²⁰ This reduces the likelihood of youth cyberbullying while strengthening bystander confidence and capacity to address cyberbullying among peers.²¹ Approaches that promote empathy development can be especially effective in impacting bystander engagement.²²

Digital media literacy education has also shown significant effectiveness in both addressing and preventing youth cyberbullying. While increased technology use is associated with a greater likelihood of experiencing cyberbullying, digital media literacy can moderate this relationship among youth.²³

At Home

Several studies have identified parental/caregiver involvement as a best practice to reduce youth cyberbullying. Research highlights the importance of balanced parental approaches in doing so —

18 Stephanie F. Dailey and Rosellen R. Roche, "The SHIELD Framework: Advancing Strength-Based Resilience Strategies to Combat Bullying and Cyberbullying in Youth," *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*, 2025, <https://doi.org/10.3390/ijerph22010066>.

19 Dorothy L. Espelage and Jun Sung Hong, "Cyberbullying Prevention and Intervention Efforts: Current Knowledge and Future Directions," *The Canadian Journal of Psychiatry*, 2017, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0706743716684793>.

20 Robin M. Kowalski et al., "A Developmental Approach to Cyberbullying: Prevalence and Protective Factors," *Aggression and Violent Behavior*, 2019, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.avb.2018.02.009>.

21 Jennifer L. Doty et al., "A Model of Personal Relationships and Cyberbullying Perpetration among Adolescents: A Person*environment Model," *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships*, 2024, <https://doi.org/10.1177/02654075241227394>.

22 Cagil Torgal et al., "A Meta-Analysis of School-Based Cyberbullying Prevention Programs' Impact on Cyber-Bystander Behavior," *School Psychology Review*, 2023, <https://doi.org/10.1080/2372966X.2021.1913037>.

23 Sisi Tao et al., "Digital Technology Use and Cyberbullying Among Primary School Children: Digital Literacy and Parental Mediation as Moderators," *Cyberpsychology, Behavior, and Social Networking*, 2022, <https://doi.org/10.1089/cyber.2022.0012>; MediaSmarts, *Young Canadians in a Wireless World, Phase IV: Relationships and Technology - Online Meanness and Cruelty*, 2023, <https://mediasmarts.ca/sites/default/files/2023-03/Online%20Meanness%20and%20Cruelty%20-%20YCW%20Phase%20IV.pdf>.

combining emotional warmth and connectedness, such as being affectionate, responsive, and openly communicative, with clear, developmentally appropriate boundaries and expectations.²⁴

Parent-youth collaboration and communication are also key to effectively addressing cyberbullying. This includes shared decision-making, rule setting, and open discussion about internet use and online engagement and behaviours.²⁵ A collaborative and organic approach to rule-setting — one that engages young people in discussions about the behaviours and values expected of them online — combined with education about the consequences of harmful online behaviour, such as cyberbullying, supports the development of autonomy, competence, and overall wellbeing in digital spaces.²⁶

While parent/caregiver awareness of children's internet use is effective in reducing both experiences of, and engagement in, cyberbullying,²⁷ parents have identified that limited digital media literacy is a barrier to maintaining this awareness. This limited awareness may result in youth having direct and unmediated access to online spaces, increasing the likelihood of cyberbullying occurring without parent/caregiver knowledge — and reducing the likelihood that young people will receive the parental support they need if it does occur.²⁸ As such, another best practice is the development of digital media literacy training for parents/caregivers.²⁹ Research suggests that informal, flexible training formats, such as leaflets, posters, and paper-based handouts (that can be reviewed at their own pace) may be more effective than formal, targeted information sessions.³⁰ Anecdotal evidence from MediaSmarts suggests that parents and caregivers also value having access to an expert with whom they can ask questions and collaboratively problem-solve.

24 Jennifer L. Doty et al., "A Model of Personal Relationships and Cyberbullying Perpetration among Adolescents: A Person*environment Model," *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships*, 2024, <https://doi.org/10.1177/02654075241227394>.

25 Caitlin Elsaesser et al., "Parenting in a Digital Age: A Review of Parents' Role in Preventing Adolescent Cyberbullying," *Aggression and Violent Behavior*, 2017, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.avb.2017.06.004>.

26 Jennifer L. Doty et al., "A Model of Personal Relationships and Cyberbullying Perpetration among Adolescents: A Person*environment Model," *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships*, 2024, <https://doi.org/10.1177/02654075241227394>.

27 Robin M. Kowalski et al., "Bullying in the Digital Age: A Critical Review and Meta-Analysis of Cyberbullying Research among Youth," *Psychological Bulletin (US)*, 2014, <https://doi.org/10.1037/a0035618>

28 Erickson et al., "The Boundaries between: Parental Involvement in a Teen's Online World," *Journal of the Association for Information Science and Technology*, 2015, <https://doi.org/10.1002/asi.23450>.

29 Lan et al., "Effectiveness of Anti-Cyberbullying Educational Programs: A Socio-Ecologically Grounded Systematic Review and Meta-Analysis," *Computers in Human Behavior*, 2022, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chb.2022.107200>.

30 Erickson et al., "The Boundaries between: Parental Involvement in a Teen's Online World," *Journal of the Association for Information Science and Technology*, 2015, <https://doi.org/10.1002/asi.23450>.

At School

Whole-school interventions — that engage the entire school community rather than targeting individuals alone — have shown effectiveness in addressing cyberbullying.³¹ This includes setting classroom rules and giving students the opportunity to anonymously report cyberbullying.³² Some elements of a whole-school approach, such as parent/caregiver meetings, educator training, and playground supervision, are associated with a reduction in cyberbullying *engagement*.³³ Other elements, such as cooperative group work, are associated with reduction in experiences of cyberbullying.³⁴ Crucially, a whole-school approach must maintain awareness of the intersectional impacts of youth cyberbullying. For example, a systematic review of 100 Canadian empirical studies found that “girls and members of ethnic minority groups are more likely to be cyberbullied.”³⁵

Educator-led discussions with youth about cyberbullying and online safety has proven most effective within intervention programs, while the absence these discussions has been shown to increase the likelihood of cyberbullying.³⁶ Classroom-based discussions not only reduce cyberbullying, but they are also critical to addressing the complex nature of bystander behaviour in online spaces.³⁷ Witnesses to cyberbullying may act as defenders, reinforcers, or passive bystanders, often influenced by anonymity, social pressure, and a

31 J. David Smith et al., “The Effectiveness of Whole-School Antibullying Programs: A Synthesis of Evaluation Research,” *School Psychology Review*, 2004, <https://doi.org/10.1080/02796015.2004.12086267>; Hannah Gaffney et al., “What Works in Anti-Bullying Programs? Analysis of Effective Intervention Components,” *Journal of School Psychology*, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jsp.2020.12.002>.

32 Chengyan Zhu et al., “Cyberbullying Among Adolescents and Children: A Comprehensive Review of the Global Situation, Risk Factors, and Preventive Measures,” *Frontiers in Public Health*, 2021, <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpubh.2021.634909>.

33 Maria M. Ttofi and David P. Farrington, “Effectiveness of School-Based Programs to Reduce Bullying: A Systematic and Meta-Analytic Review,” *Journal of Experimental Criminology*, 2011, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11292-010-9109-1>.

34 *ibid.*

35 David P. Farrington et al., “Cyberbullying Research in Canada: A Systematic Review of the First 100 Empirical Studies,” *Aggression and Violent Behavior*, 2023, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.avb.2022.101811>.

36 K. T. A. Sandeeshwara Kasturiratna et al., “Umbrella Review of Meta-Analyses on the Risk Factors, Protective Factors, Consequences and Interventions of Cyberbullying Victimization,” *Nature Human Behaviour*, 2025, <https://doi.org/10.1038/s41562-024-02011-6>.

37 Jennifer L. Doty et al., “A Model of Personal Relationships and Cyberbullying Perpetration among Adolescents: A Person*environment Model,” *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships*, 2024, <https://doi.org/10.1177/02654075241227394>; Cagil Torgal et al., “A Meta-Analysis of School-Based Cyberbullying Prevention Programs’ Impact on Cyber-Bystander Behavior,” *School Psychology Review*, 2023, <https://doi.org/10.1080/2372966X.2021.1913037>.

diffused sense of responsibility,³⁸ yet research has shown that bystander intervention can be an effective response to cyberbullying.³⁹

Studies have also found a correlation between youth who are bullied in school and those who are bullied online.⁴⁰ However, cyberbullying-specific interventions have been found to be more effective than broader anti-bullying interventions that include cyberbullying as a component.⁴¹

System-Level Interventions

Cyberbullying research also points to systems-level interventions as necessary. Online platforms, for example, are identified as having a greater responsibility in preventing youth cyberbullying.⁴² This includes encouraging positive online behaviour and implementing empathy prompts that encourage users to reconsider potentially harmful posts, comments, and interactions.⁴³ Research also highlights the need for clear and comprehensive cyberbullying policy. Despite the presence of cyberbullying legislation globally, and in Canada, legal responses have typically addressed the most severe cases while being slower to respond to the broader landscape of online harms.⁴⁴ Effective cyberbullying legislation should include specific definitions that explicitly reference different technologies, sanctions proportionate to the repetition of harmful behaviour, clear protocols for reporting and investigating incidents, recognition of cyberbullying activities that occur outside of school settings, and procedures for proactive prevention.⁴⁵

38 *ibid.*

39 Nicholas Brody and Anita L. Vangelisti, "Bystander Intervention in Cyberbullying," *Communication Monographs*, 2016, <https://doi.org/10.1080/03637751.2015.1044256>.

40 Samantha Salmon et al., "Bullying Victimization Experiences among Middle and High School Adolescents: Traditional Bullying, Discriminatory Harassment, and Cybervictimization," *Journal of Adolescence*, 2018, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.adolescence.2017.12.005>; Brett Holfeld and Faye Mishna, "Internalizing Symptoms and Externalizing Problems: Risk Factors for or Consequences of Cyber Victimization?," *Journal of Youth and Adolescence*, 2019, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10964-018-0974-7>.

41 Joshua R. Polanin et al., "A Systematic Review and Meta-Analysis of Interventions to Decrease Cyberbullying Perpetration and Victimization," *Prevention Science*, 2022, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11121-021-01259-y>.

42 Nadia S. Ansary, "Cyberbullying: Concepts, Theories, and Correlates Informing Evidence-Based Best Practices for Prevention," *Aggression and Violent Behavior*, 2020, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.avb.2019.101343>.

43 *ibid.*

44 Sohni Siddiqui and Anja Schultze-Krumbholz, "Successful and Emerging Cyberbullying Prevention Programs: A Narrative Review of Seventeen Interventions Applied Worldwide," *Societies*, 2023, <https://doi.org/10.3390/soc13090212>; Dorothy L. Espelage and Jun Sung Hong, "Cyberbullying Prevention and Intervention Efforts: Current Knowledge and Future Directions," *The Canadian Journal of Psychiatry*, 2017, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0706743716684793>.

45 Sameer Hinduja and Justin W. Patchin, "Cyberbullying Legislation and Case Law: Implications for School Policy and Practice," *Cyberbullying Research Center*, 2024, <https://cyberbullying.org/cyberbullying-fact-sheet-a-brief-review-of-relevant-legal-and-policy-issues>.

Trauma-Informed Practices

Trauma is defined as “an event, series of events, or set of circumstances that is experienced by an individual as physically or emotionally harmful or life threatening and that has lasting adverse effects on the individual’s functioning and mental, physical, social, emotional, or spiritual well-being.”⁴⁶ Research consistently demonstrates that cyberbullying has significant negative psychological outcomes for youth mirroring those of other traumatic experiences, including anxiety, depression, and suicidal ideation.⁴⁷ These psychological impacts also increase the likelihood of further experiences of and engagement in cyberbullying, creating a cycle of trauma.⁴⁸ As a result, there is an increasing push to incorporate trauma-informed approaches in youth cyberbullying interventions.⁴⁹

A recent study by Hinduja & Patchin (2025) found that all forms of youth cyberbullying, including indirect forms such as exclusion, are strongly associated with trauma.⁵⁰ The scholars therefore recommend that schools incorporate **a trauma- and violence-informed (TVI)** approach in their policies. A TVI approach is one that recognizes the widespread impact of trauma and the potential paths for recovery, identifies the signs and symptoms of trauma among students, families, staff, and responds by fully integrating knowledge about trauma into policies, procedures, and practices while actively working to prevent re-traumatization.⁵¹

Trauma is an event, series of events, or set of circumstances that is experienced by an individual as physically or emotionally harmful or life threatening and that has lasting adverse effects on the individual's functioning and mental, physical, social, emotional, or spiritual well-being. (Sameer and Patchin, 2024).

A Trauma-informed approach recognizes the widespread impact of trauma and the potential paths for recovery, identifies the signs and symptoms of trauma among students, families, staff, and responds by fully integrating knowledge about trauma into policies, procedures, and practices while actively working to prevent re-traumatization.

46 SAMHSA, “SAMHSA’s Concept of Trauma and Guidance for a Trauma-Informed Approach,” *SAMHSA Publications and Digital Products*, 2014, https://www.health.ny.gov/health_care/medicaid/program/medicaid_health_homes/docs/samhsa_trauma_concept_paper.pdf.

47 Robin M. Kowalski et al., “Bullying in the Digital Age: A Critical Review and Meta-Analysis of Cyberbullying Research among Youth,” *Psychological Bulletin (US)*, 2014, <https://doi.org/10.1037/a0035618>.

48 Sheryl A. Hemphill et al., “Predictors of Traditional and Cyber-Bullying Victimization: A Longitudinal Study of Australian Secondary School Students,” *Journal of Interpersonal Violence*, 2015, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0886260514553636>; Emily B. O’Day and Richard G. Heimberg, “Social Media Use, Social Anxiety, and Loneliness: A Systematic Review,” *Computers in Human Behavior Reports*, 2021, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chbr.2021.100070>.

49 Stephanie F. Dailey et al., “Addressing Bullying and Cyberbullying in Public Health: A Systematic Review of Interventions for Healthcare and Public Health Professionals,” *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*, 2025, <https://doi.org/10.3390/ijerph22111682>; Sameer Hinduja and Justin W. Patchin, “Cyberbullying through the Lens of Trauma: An Empirical Examination of US Youth,” *BMC Public Health*, 2025, <https://doi.org/10.1186/s12889-025-22692-6>.

50 Sameer Hinduja and Justin W. Patchin, “Cyberbullying through the Lens of Trauma: An Empirical Examination of US Youth,” *BMC Public Health*, 2025, <https://doi.org/10.1186/s12889-025-22692-6>.

51 SAMHSA, “SAMHSA’s Concept of Trauma and Guidance for a Trauma-Informed Approach,” *SAMHSA Publications and Digital Products*, 2014, https://www.health.ny.gov/health_care/medicaid/program/medicaid_health_homes/docs/samhsa_trauma_concept_paper.pdf.

There are few trauma-informed best practices explicitly identified in youth cyberbullying research. Hinduja & Patchin (2025) recommend that schools develop an awareness of the impacts of trauma on youth and adopt best practices to support them, such as grounding techniques, and the establishment of a crisis intervention plan to provide an emotional ‘first aid’ response to traumatic incidents including cyberbullying. In Canada, for example, the [Mental Health First Aid](#) training program teaches adults the skills needed to identify when a young person may be experiencing difficulties and how to assist, and/or support them during a crisis. This includes how to recognise signs of a crisis, how to communicate respectfully, and how to respond to various challenges that may arise. Hinduja and Patchin (2025) highlight the [National Institute for Trauma and Loss in Children](#) in the United States, which offers several steps for educators to foster a trauma-informed school environment, such as promoting awareness of how trauma impacts child behaviour and facilitating unstructured, outdoor activities or play.⁵² In clinical research, trauma-focused cognitive behavioural therapy has been identified as an effective approach to supporting and treating both youth who have experienced and engaged in cyberbullying.⁵³

A TVI framework rests on six key principles: safety; trustworthiness and transparency; peer support; collaboration and mutuality; empowerment, voice, and choice; and cultural, historical, and gender issues.⁵⁴ Most of the best practices highlighted in the research align with these six principles. For instance, participatory, youth-engaged, and creative methods, can support the safety principle by potentially avoiding the disclosure of traumatic experiences, thereby reducing the risk of re-traumatization and stigmatization. Additionally, whole-school approaches, peer discussions, and parent/caregiver mediation align with the principles of peer support, collaboration, and mutuality.



52 SAMHSA, "SAMHSA's Concept of Trauma and Guidance for a Trauma-Informed Approach," *SAMHSA Publications and Digital Products*, 2014, https://www.health.ny.gov/health_care/medicaid/program/medicaid_health_homes/docs/samhsa_trauma_concept_paper.pdf.

53 Stephanie F. Dailey and Rosellen R. Roche, "The SHIELD Framework: Advancing Strength-Based Resilience Strategies to Combat Bullying and Cyberbullying in Youth," *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*, 2025, <https://doi.org/10.3390/ijerph22010066>.

54 SAMHSA, "SAMHSA's Concept of Trauma and Guidance for a Trauma-Informed Approach," *SAMHSA Publications and Digital Products*, 2014, https://www.health.ny.gov/health_care/medicaid/program/medicaid_health_homes/docs/samhsa_trauma_concept_paper.pdf.

Methods

This section details the research methods used in the Breaking the Cycle (BTC) needs assessment phase.

Focus Group Design

The [research team](#) at MediaSmarts designs projects that create safe spaces for young people to share their experiences, concerns, strategies, and solutions related to the internet and digital technology. Our research positions participants as experts, actively involving them in designing interventions and resources that meet their needs. These findings then serve as the foundation for our advocacy, knowledge mobilization, and the educational resources we create and share with communities across the country.

The BTC project is built directly on this approach. Key findings from this need assessment — highlighting the voices and experiences of young people — will inform the development of a digital media literacy intervention, which includes resources for youth and the adults, schools, and communities that support them, as well as specialized content for youth with greater exposure to violence. This research study was designed using the trauma- and violence-informed (TVI) approach outlined in our [literature review](#). Given the sensitivity of this topic, we recognized that youth (especially those with greater exposure to violence) may be reluctant to share their perspectives, potentially facing stigma if they do. As such, the research and education teams at MediaSmarts, worked collaboratively to create interactive, arts-based focus groups centred on the TVI principles outlined above.⁵⁵

To understand the needs and experiences of young people regarding cyberbullying, we conducted a total of six focus groups, lasting about 90 minutes each, with 32 youth aged 14 to 19 across Canada. Two sessions were comprised of youth with greater exposure to violence. All focus groups were audio-recorded with participants' consent and all identifying information was removed during



⁵⁵ According to SAMHSA (2014) a TVI framework rests on six key principles: safety; trustworthiness and transparency; peer support; collaboration and mutuality; empowerment, voice, and choice; and cultural, historical, and gender issues.

transcription; no identifying information was included in either analysis or reporting. All participants received a \$50 e-gift card to thank them for their time and contributions. These focus groups were guided by the following research questions:

- How do young Canadians understand and define cyberbullying?
- What are young Canadians perspectives on and experiences with cyberbullying?
 - What are their motivations for engaging in, and suggested best practices for responding to, cyberbullying?
- What do young Canadians think is the best way for other young people to engage in preventing and addressing cyberbullying?
- What do they think are the best ways for adults to support/help children in situations of cyberbullying?

Participant Recruitment

We partnered with six youth-serving organizations to recruit participants for the Breaking the Cycle (BTC) needs assessment:

- BGC Canada (youth advisory council)
- Centre on Hate, Bias and Extremism (Ontario Tech University)
- Maryvale
- Students Commission of Canada
- Windsor Essex Child/Youth Advocacy Centre
- Yorktown Family Services

Partner organizations circulated our recruitment posters within their own networks (e.g., organizational newsletters) or with pre-formed youth advisory committees that they engage with. These recruitment materials explained the study’s purpose, topics, and activities. Interested individuals were invited to reach out directly to MediaSmarts for further information. By recruiting through partners, we could ensure that any identifying information associated with potential participants remained with their trusted supports until they chose to engage with MediaSmarts.

Four of the six focus groups were linked to specific partner organizations — meaning each group consisted of youth recruited from the same organization. One of these groups was conducted

online and the other three sessions were held in-person. The remaining two focus groups were conducted online and brought together youth from different local communities connected to two of our recruitment partners. Focus groups with youth who have greater exposure to violence were intentionally held in person, in familiar and supervised environments where youth already participate in programming. This ensured that trained staff — such as counsellors or social workers — were on hand to protect privacy, monitor participant wellbeing, and provide immediate support if needed.

Throughout the recruitment process, potential participants had multiple opportunities to review key information about the study. Interested participants received letters of information outlining the study's purpose, topics, and process. Youth and their parents (for youth under the age of 16) were required to complete consent forms before being scheduled for a focus group. After completing their forms, participants received a copy for their records ahead of the session. At the start of each focus group, researchers reviewed the key points of consent, invited questions and clarifications, and reobtained consent orally.

Recruitment was done on a first-come-first-serve basis; eligible youth, up to a maximum of 15 per focus group, were invited to participate in the study. In total, we recruited 32 participants from across the country in collaboration with our community partners. Although participants were primarily from Ontario, we had participants from Alberta, British Columbia, New Brunswick and the Northwest Territories. Most of the participants self-identified as girls. About 40% of participants identified as Caucasian/White - the remainder who answered this question were closely split between Asian, Black, and Indigenous (First Nations, Inuit, Métis). Almost 50% of participants identified as having a mental illness, about 30% identified as having an intellectual, cognitive, or learning disability, and about 22% identified as having a physical disability. Detailed demographics are reported in [Appendix C](#).

Focus Group Procedures

Before each focus group, researchers shared MediaSmarts' current resources relating to cyberbullying alongside immediate community supports in case of emotional distress. Participants were then given the option to fill out a short, anonymous demographic survey.

Consistent with a TVI approach, the focus groups opened with a short, interactive icebreaker game, to help build camaraderie among participants and to further build rapport and trust with facilitators who participated alongside them.

After the icebreaker, participants engaged in scenario-based group discussions where we explored their perceptions, understanding, and experiences of cyberbullying using four imagined scenarios (included in [Appendix A](#)). These scenarios, developed by MediaSmarts' educational experts, depicted situations in which youth experienced or engaged in cyberbullying and/or online violence. We deliberately chose to utilize fictional scenarios to explore how participants perceive cyberbullying without necessarily drawing on their personal experiences. Throughout the focus groups, discussions were intentionally focused on broader behaviours and systems, steering away from personal disclosures and judgement. The scenarios were developed to avoid stigmatizing language, blame, and shame – facilitators also actively monitored for these throughout the focus group discussions. After facilitators read a scenario out loud to participants, participants were asked⁵⁶:

- To **establish** what was happening – whether they thought cyberbullying had occurred in the scenario and to whom;
- What the **reaction** might be – what they thought might happen next and how they thought the characters might respond; and
- How they would have liked others to **act** – whether they would have preferred it went differently, at what point, and how they would feel if it happened to them.

⁵⁶ For a detailed copy of the focus group guide, including the specific questions and prompts used, please reach out to the research team at researchadmin@mediasmarts.ca.

After discussing all four scenarios, participants engaged in a final group discussion about how they think adults and other youth can intervene to support young people experiencing cyberbullying and online violence. Finally, youth were invited to participate in a virtual collaging activity (see [Appendix B](#) for examples) that represented their experiences of cyberbullying and/or their reflections on the scenarios they explored in the discussions.

To close each session, researchers recapped the discussion and invited final comments on what experts and organizations developing resources for cyberbullying should keep in mind. Participants were reminded of the project's next steps and how their input would inform the development of BTC program resources for educational and community settings across Canada. Researchers closed by thanking participants and resharing MediaSmarts' current resources on cyberbullying and online violence, alongside supports for emotional distress should it arise.

Collaborative Analysis

Focus group data was analyzed collaboratively by the research team using a triangulated approach, drawing on both transcript analysis and researcher observations. While transcribing the focus groups, researchers independently noted high-level themes emerging from the data. These were then refined collaboratively throughout the analysis process, with the team developing a comprehensive coding book to organize key codes and emerging themes. The coding book, which included a table of contents to help both the research and education teams navigate the findings, spanned 27 pages and served as the backbone of an outline that gave shape to this needs assessment report. Following MediaSmarts' research-to-resource model, these findings were then shared with the education team to help inform the development of BTC program resources.

Limitations and Acknowledgements

One limitation of this research relates to the age range of focus group participants. Since recruitment was conducted through youth-serving community organizations on a first-come, first-served basis, we were unable to guarantee an even age distribution across focus groups. As a result, no participants under the age of 14 were present. Additionally, three participants were over the age of 17. This occurred because some partner organizations connected us with their pre-existing youth advisory committees, which included members over 17. We chose to include these participants to avoid disrupting the existing structure, rapport, and trust within these pre-formed groups.

We thank all participants who took the time to contribute to this research. Your experiences, concerns, and suggestions are summarized in the following sections of this report and will help shape digital media literacy interventions that reflect the lived-experience and needs of young Canadians.



Key Findings: Youth Perspectives on Cyberbullying

This section details the key findings from our interactive, arts-based focus groups with youth, including their definitions of cyberbullying, its contributing factors, consequences, and what courses of action or inaction help to address and prevent youth cyberbullying. We highlight critical needs identified by youth and include select quotes from participants throughout.

Understanding Cyberbullying

In focus groups, young people revealed complex definitions of cyberbullying as they discussed each cyberbullying scenario presented to them. In considering the various aspects of each scenario, including who was engaging in, experiencing, or witnessing cyberbullying, they demonstrated their parameters for defining it. Following [MediaSmarts previous research](#) with youth, participants' definitions did not always include the word 'cyberbullying'. At times, they referred to being mean, being extreme, or being hurtful. Youth also mentioned actions that were a targeted personal attack, uncalled for, or crossing a line. We understood this as reflecting the everyday language young people use when discussing cyberbullying. This section unpacks what youth explicitly labelled as cyberbullying, including what they understood as especially mean, hurtful, or crossing a line. Any names included in participant quotes refer to characters from the fictitious scenarios presented in discussions ([Appendix A](#)).

Definitive Definitions

There were several actions, intentions, and outcomes that youth unequivocally understood as cyberbullying.

Most participants defined cyberbullying as **targeted personal attacks**. They stated that an act was cyberbullying if it unnecessarily attacked someone online, such as through digging up dirt on someone or saying something mean about someone. For instance, in one scenario we presented to youth (see [Scenario 1](#)), after one character (Kyle) makes a mean comment about his classmate's art piece online, people dig up an old tasteless comment he made and use that comment to call him 'worthless'. Several participants expressed how this was an attack on Kyle that crossed a line.

“Well, Kyle said something mean about the art, but they [classmates] went like really deep. I don't think they needed to attack him like that.”

“If you disagree with something online, move away from it. You don't have to leave a nasty comment. And then using someone's digital footprint and finding a comment that they made ages ago that couldn't even be relevant to who they are as a person now, you wouldn't know. I think, that's also an attack.”

In each focus group, many participants echoed the idea that an action or reaction that feels disproportionate, extreme, and/or unnecessary is an element of cyberbullying. We heard youth in multiple groups discuss how different characters “didn't have to do” what they did or “didn't have to react” in the way that they did. This indicates that the **severity, proportionality, and necessity of an action are key parameters in young people's understanding of cyberbullying**.

Several participants also focused on the idea of one's online past or digital footprint being used against them.

“I mean, they're using evidence from years ago against him in a scenario where he just voiced his opinion.”

This is linked to young people’s understanding of cyberbullying as an act that has the potential of **ruining someone’s reputation**. For example, in reference to [Scenario 3](#), participants stated that joking about someone being a thief, or creating a deepfake implying someone is cheating on their romantic partner, is serious because it could cause long-lasting online rumours about them.

“[Her boyfriend] may accuse her of cheating because of this deepfake, and she may not be able to prove her innocence. And so that may ruin her reputation in the future.”

Some participants noted that in small towns, spreading rumours to damage relationships is a common form of bullying.

In response to another scenario (see [Scenario 4](#)), participants also discussed how negative comments about a deceased person may count as cyberbullying because it tarnishes the deceased person’s memory among their loved ones. On the other hand, some youth suggested that negative comments about a deceased person may be justified if they did something wrong. This connects to the idea that the necessity and proportionality of an action are key measures for youth in defining cyberbullying.

Youth also understood **doxxing** as a form of cyberbullying. Doxxing may be [defined](#) as “the intentional online exposure of an individual’s identity, private information, or personal details without their consent with the intent of causing harm.” Youth emphasized that invasions of privacy, such as through sharing sensitive information about someone’s mental health, can have hurtful consequences.

“[Cyberbullying is the] invasion of privacy. You don’t show people what someone else has told you in privacy and confidence because that’s just rude and it’s betraying their trust.”

Doxxing can be connected to threats of physical harm if it involves sharing information about a person’s physical location. Most youth understood online **threats of physical harm** as cyberbullying. In discussions about a scenario (see [Scenario 4](#)) where someone is dared to share their location after online conflict, youth responded with worry about what this might lead to.

Doxxing is the intentional online exposure of an individual’s identity, private information, or personal details without their consent with the intent of causing harm.

“I think asking for his location is cyberbullying because what is that alluding to? You know, you’re saying you’re going to show up? What are you going to do when you show up? This is like a threat in a way.”

Youth were concerned about the potentially extreme consequences of such threats.

“Living in a town where a lot of people ask for your location then come and do bad stuff to you... I would not trust sharing my location because I feel like something bad would happen to me. So, I’d feel scared...”

“I would say the threat for Jason to share his location would be cyberbullying. Again, because it could come off as a death threat.”

Our community of focus in this needs assessment was youth with greater exposure to violence. During our analysis of focus groups, we noticed that these youth were more likely to name extreme or violent potential outcomes, such as murder or death. They were also more likely to assume the eventual involvement of the criminal justice system when considering how cyberbullying may escalate. Additionally, the ways they spoke about cyberbullying invoked legal framings, such as discussions about how digging up dirt on someone may be “holding evidence against” them or how an online deepfake could be used to “frame” someone for a crime. This increased awareness of the potential for violence and the criminal justice system may reflect participants’ exposure to potentially violent situations and their outcomes.

Youth also understood cyberbullying as relating to **persistent teasing**.

“...she’s making fun of him consistently online, that’s cyberbullying.”

A few participants identified consistent or frequent mean comments, jokes, or actions as cyberbullying, indicating that **frequency and recurrence are key measures in young people’s definitions of cyberbullying**.

In several sessions, youth identified **retribution** as part of their understanding of cyberbullying. When discussing the scenarios, most youth anticipated retaliation as a likely response to hurtful actions they defined as cyberbullying — including personal attacks, ruining reputations, doxxing, threats of physical harm, and persistent teasing.

“I think he might possibly retaliate just because he’s been hurt, and now he might feel like he has to get back at them...”

“Revenge happens when people feel personally attacked, take things personally.”

Revenge was not only identified as a reaction to cyberbullying but was also understood as part of a “vicious cycle” that defines it— a finding that aligns with our [previous research](#) on the retributive cycle of youth cyberbullying.

“...what I’ve seen online is usually it ends up a back and forth until one party eventually gives up and usually it’s with the last hurtful comment.”

“I feel like it’s this vicious cycle. Everyone’s being aggressive, but also everybody’s being hurt in return.”

One participant noted the fine line between revenge, hurt, and empathy that often leads to this retributive cycle.

“She just wanted him to feel how it feels being in her position. And I feel it’s better to understand someone when you’ve been through their place because sometimes... Things happen for a reason and at least you get to understand things better. Imagine I started a rumour about someone and then it hurt them really bad, it ruined their reputation. So, they did the same thing back to me and I suddenly felt their pain because I thought it was all jokes and fun and it would never happen to me until it actually happened to me.”

The above quote indicates how retribution may be perceived by someone experiencing cyberbullying as a way to generate empathy for their pain. However, participants noted that this only leads to more hurt. Youth understood retribution simultaneously as a reason

for, a reaction to, and a defining feature of cyberbullying. Again, this is consistent with MediaSmarts' [previous findings](#) that retribution is a commonly cited reason for youth engaging in online meanness and cruelty, which means that youth who experience cyberbullying are also more likely to engage in it. The cyclical nature of cyberbullying suggests that interventions need to consider the overlap between those experiencing and engaging in cyberbullying. Methods and Outcomes

In focus groups, youth noted that cyberbullying does not have to be direct. **Bullying by proxy** or indirect bullying, such as through sharing or liking mean posts or running an anonymous gossip account that encourages mean posts, was considered cyberbullying.

“I would also say the person who runs the anonymous account is kind of being mean for even posting that... as well as the people who liked the original post to get it popular -- that mean comment. You don't need to like the post of someone being rude to someone else.”

One participant further emphasized that supporting someone engaging in cyberbullying and helping them find content that will be used for cyberbullying also counts as bullying.

“...they're still mean trying to contribute to the pain of Kyle by finding stuff and helping her out and supporting her actions. It still counts as being mean even if you weren't directly a factor.”

Participants' awareness of how indirect actions can contribute to or count as cyberbullying demonstrates that young people are engaged in or considering aspects of responsible **digital citizenship**. Digital citizenship is the ability to navigate digital environments safely, responsibly, and respectfully. This requires thinking about how actions, direct or indirect, contribute to cultivating respectful online spaces, as youth demonstrated in their discussions of bullying by proxy.

For some youth, the technology involved shaped their understanding of what constitutes cyberbullying. In one scenario, several participants identified the use of artificial intelligence (AI) to create a deepfake, as well as taking and sharing photos, as key factors in their assessment.

Digital Citizenship is the ability to navigate digital environments safely, responsibly, and respectfully.

“[Cyberbullying is] definitely the use of AI there...And then not to mention the photos of Noah that aren’t even connected to what’s happening.”

In other words, for these participants, cyberbullying was defined as **technology-facilitated online bullying**, with the specific technological tools used central to how they define it. Youth noted how aspects of AI, including its realism and wide reach, can amplify the negative consequences for those experiencing cyberbullying.

“...the deep fake of Olivia, with how realistic AI is getting, well, whether or not he used AI or Photoshop or something, if it looks that realistic, people could say she is a cheater and then it spreads and then worsens the situation for both of them.”

“...once your face is in AI, that can be generated over and over again and changed into something else or something worse. I think I’ve heard of AI images actually being used to frame people for stuff. So, if it’s generated over into different stuff, like they’re in a relationship or they’re doing, I don’t know, anything, basically... AI is limitless.”

Young people’s choice to highlight technology reflects emerging literature on online harms which demonstrates how specific technologies can be used to extend, promote, or even create various forms of online harms.⁵⁷ The literature emphasizes, as youth do in the quotes above, that **the technologies we use are not just a means through which harms are experienced or enacted – they are part of the harm itself.**

Nuanced Understandings

Participants’ understanding of cyberbullying became more nuanced when it came to certain actions. The same action could be classified as cyberbullying or not depending on the intentions behind it, its recurrence, its visibility, and who was involved. This was true when the behaviour in question involved **joking, sharing an opinion, or being rude.**

57 Linda R. Zhong et al., “An Exploratory Study of Technology-Facilitated Sexual Violence in Online Romantic Interactions: Can the Internet’s Toxic Disinhibition Exacerbate Sexual Aggression?,” *Computers in Human Behaviour*, 2020, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chb.2020.106314>.

Even when jokes were mean, some youth did not classify joking as cyberbullying if everyone seemed to be joking around together. The response to a negative action or comment was important to participants' understanding of whether cyberbullying is taking place. When talking about a scenario (see [Scenario 2](#)) in which one friend posts a 'cringey' video of another, one participant expressed that if the target of the video is also in the video's comments joking around with their friends, then it may not be cyberbullying to post the 'cringey' video in the first place.

“It depends on the response. If it's like...him and his friends in the comments... making jokes and he's even in the comments... That's a different scenario.”

However, participants identified joking as cyberbullying when the jokes targeted a difficult situation one of the characters was facing. In one scenario (see [Scenario 3](#)), for instance, a character makes jokes about another being a thief — someone who has recently had to leave his family home and is living in a shelter. Youth collectively agreed this was cyberbullying because of the target's circumstances; being unhoused meant that comments about being a thief moved beyond “just a joke” into something harmful enough to be classified as cyberbullying.

Young people's divided opinions about whether jokes count as bullying are worth noting. [Previous MediaSmarts studies](#) have found that youth often report engaging in online meanness as a form of 'joking around', suggesting they may easily dismiss the hurt that may be caused by such behaviour. However, the nuance evident in these focus group discussions reveals that youth have specific parameters for defining when a joke crosses a line and becomes cyberbullying.

Like joking, youth sometimes distinguished between **rudeness** and bullying. Some participants expressed that it is not necessarily cyberbullying to make a rude comment. One participant put it this way:

“...bullying is multiple occurrences and to the extreme, just saying a rude comment is just being rude, not really bullying.”

The above quote demonstrates that **frequency, recurrence, as well as severity are important to youth in determining whether something counts as bullying**. Severity, or how extreme an action was, came up repeatedly in youth discussions of cyberbullying and, as we discuss

later in this report, in determining what is worth reporting to trusted adults. Interestingly, although some participants distinguished rudeness from bullying, others used the terms synonymously, reflecting the varied and nuanced ways youth understand and define cyberbullying.

Finally, youth had divided responses on whether **sharing opinions** or expressing how you feel about something counts as cyberbullying. Some participants stated that “just expressing how you feel” is not bullying, even if the expressed opinion may be mean or negative.

“I wouldn’t say Jason was cyberbullying because he was just sharing his opinion. Because again, he was upset.”

“...he just voiced his opinion. Yeah, it was a mean opinion at that, but...”

Youth suggested that sharing a negative opinion in the heat of the moment may not count as cyberbullying. As with joking or rudeness, however, others pointed to the severity and personal nature of the opinion as what distinguishes ‘just an opinion’ from cyberbullying. Participants did not count sharing an opinion as cyberbullying when the opinion was about something rather than someone. Conversely, youth collectively understood commenting on a person’s character and identity as cyberbullying. This was highlighted by youth repeatedly in a scenario (see [Scenario 1](#)) involving a character making a mean comment about a classmate’s art piece.

“There’s a difference between...commenting on a piece and then commenting on a person...His stance was just calling an art piece, which a lot of people do all the time...is judge an art piece not the person. Not once did he say anything mean about the person, he just said it about the art piece which is valid.”

For youth, intent and reach also matters. Opinions could be bullying if they were intentionally hurtful, for instance when an opinion is paired with a clearly hurtful action such as publicly sharing private or sensitive information. One participant noted that the reach of an opinion, meaning how many people see it, could factor into whether an opinion crosses the line into cyberbullying.

“I would say Chloe definitely is [mean] way more than Kyle, cause yeah, he said one mean comment, but [Chloe] attacked him for expressing an opinion that most people probably wouldn’t see.”

The above quote implies that one action is less likely to count as cyberbullying because it would not be seen by many people online. The quantifiers youth used when determining what defined cyberbullying were a key takeaway from their nuanced understandings of it. They frequently used minimizing language such as ‘just’ when speaking about the three actions on which they had divided opinions – they spoke about ‘just joking’, ‘just sharing an opinion’, or ‘just being rude’. They also used numerical quantifiers like ‘one mean comment’ or ‘just once’, pointing to the idea that **recurrence and frequency were important in determining what was and was not bullying**. As mentioned previously in this section, necessity, proportionality, and severity were additional key quantifiers – **cyberbullying was determined by whether an action seemed necessary, justified, extreme, or proportional to what came before**. These quantifiers reflect where youth may draw a line or justify various acts of cyberbullying.

All four scenarios presented to participants were cyberbullying narratives involving multiple people being mean, being hurt, and witnessing cyberbullying. In all focus groups, youth initially recognized how everyone in each scenario was both hurting and being hurt. However, as conversations shifted to discussions of degree, who was being hurt more or who was being meaner, youth occasionally changed their minds, identifying one person as primarily the target and another as primarily the bully, depending on who they thought was significantly more mean or hurtful. These discussions revealed the complex ways youth categorize, measure, understand, negotiate, and justify cyberbullying.

Contributing Factors to Cyberbullying Escalation

In each scenario, participants were asked what they thought might happen next. Although some youth felt that de-escalation was possible, through a character's apology or choice to stop being mean, almost all anticipated some form of escalation. Participants identified several factors that shape how and why cyberbullying may escalate.

Heated emotions were a frequently identified factor in the escalation of cyberbullying.

“So, it's these emotions that cause this escalation, that causes this - people to lash out and say these things in the first place.”

“I don't think everybody's head is in the right mindset to deal with these issues.”

Many participants stated that **age** and **emotional maturity** were factors in whether cyberbullying escalates and how those involved choose to deal with it. Youth talked about age and emotional maturity in intertwined ways — with age came knowledge, experience, and emotional maturity.

“Like it maybe depends on their age and how old they are, but...[the cyberbullying] could stop, depending on their maturity.” Survey

Conversely, older age and greater maturity were seen as factors in de-escalating cyberbullying.

“I've gotten [in] really big arguments with my friends and usually it gets big but then we're like...maybe we should talk about this like mature people rather than just going back and forth on each other?”

“The older grades, you kind of come to your senses and you're like, okay, I'm not going to react because like we've been here before, we have probably experience with it. You have knowledge on it, and you don't want to do anything that is going to make things escalate further than it needs to be.”

Participants' assumptions that older youth can independently de-escalate cyberbullying reflects [previous MediaSmarts findings](#) that older youth tend to handle online harms more independently, while younger youth are more likely to turn to trusted adults for support. Participants further demonstrated divided opinions on the correlation between age, maturity, and experiences of cyberbullying in focus groups discussions. They gave greater leniency to youth in scenarios where they seemed younger, while expecting youth they perceived as older to know and do better. However, they also noted that trusted adults could act in immature ways. Since age and maturity do not always align in cyberbullying situations, interventions should include guidance for youth of all ages.

A few participants also named family or **household values**, or how someone was raised, as a contributing factor in how cyberbullying may escalate.

“Yeah, especially with how someone’s brought up and if someone’s brought up a certain way, they might resort to physical violence while the other person reacts with just kind of stepping away from the fight altogether.”

As previously mentioned in the [Understanding Cyberbullying](#) section, youth with greater exposure to violence were more likely to anticipate physical violence as a form of escalation, reflecting their lived experiences.

Participants also identified the act of **being online** as a contributing factor, discussing how being behind a screen makes people behave badly. Some youth pointed to the perceived “lack of real-world consequences” and “cloak of anonymity” in online environments.

“There is like a cloak of anonymity online, and that it often provides a sense that you’re untouchable, or that there’s going to be no real-world consequences, which can encourage lots of these, like the cyberbullying and this behaviour, that we see all too frequently online.”

“...people talking behind somebody’s back happens a lot, especially over social media, because a lot of people don’t talk badly in person, like again, like people become different people online.”

“I feel like a lot of cyber bullying is just the inability to cope with an issue and you’re taking it out because you’re a keyboard warrior because you can be anybody who you wanna be online.”

Participants’ discussions reflect current cyberbullying literature, which notes the risk factor created by online anonymity.⁵⁸ The possibility of anonymity online is linked to an increased likelihood of engaging in cyberbullying, and young people’s identification of the online environment as an escalating factor echoes their broader understanding of cyberbullying as inherently technology-facilitated. Youth regularly expressed how specific technologies or platforms are key to defining, encouraging, or creating new forms of cyberbullying (e.g., AI generated deepfakes). This is further evident in their discussions of how **platform design** can encourage the escalation of cyberbullying.

A few participants highlighted that digital communication can be easily misread, as the inability to perceive tone often leads to confusion and conflict.

“It’s just so hard to tell what’s going on online. You can’t tell, especially through your texting and comments, people’s tone. You can’t tell what they mean by what they’re saying online.”

In addition to the confusion created by the inability to recognize tone of voice and body language online, participants also spoke about how algorithms may intentionally amplify hateful comments and content, and how social media tends to distort reality.

“...a lot of things on social media are so warped and far from the truth, so it could be like looking in a shattered mirror. You see fragments of the picture not the whole thing.”

⁵⁸ Nadia S. Ansary, “Cyberbullying: Concepts, Theories, and Correlates Informing Evidence-Based Best Practices for Prevention,” *Aggression and Violent Behavior*, 2020, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.avb.2019.101343>.

“Posts I’ve seen on Instagram or even TikTok, like that’s my own social media, when they’re doing a hate comment.... I think I’ve found more that the hate comments are more recent like they’re at the top. You know what I mean? [Rather] than at the bottom so you have to search for it.”

[MediaSmarts’ previous research](#) highlights that young people are aware of how algorithms and platform design play a significant role in their online lives. Despite not fully understanding the technical elements involved, youth recognize the negative impacts of these design choices, as reflected in the quotes above. Participants expressed that given the prevalence of negativity on platforms, platforms should do more to promote and surface positive content. If platform design contributes to the escalation of cyberbullying, platforms must take responsibility for reforming the aspects of their design that facilitate it.

Consequences of Cyberbullying

Youth also discussed the consequences of cyberbullying, with a specific focus on those affecting targets. Primarily, participants highlighted the consequences on someone’s **reputation** and their **digital footprint**, expressing concern about rumours that could exist indefinitely online and the long-term consequences for those they target.

“...those [online rumours of cheating, flirting, stealing] can come back. Just, nothing gets deleted on the internet, right? And so even as we see like...celebrities are just people who do something wrong, people will deep dive and find things from their past and use it against them and those things, even though they’re fake, can still be used against them.”

Participants referenced celebrities as well as people in their own lives whose digital footprints had been used against them and worried the same could happen to themselves. They further specified the potential long-term, negative consequences of a digital footprint containing damaging rumours.

“...really serious jobs like government and police and all that... They can find a lot online, more than you think like even text messages even though you think they’re private. If they’re in direct messages or in group chat or something, it’s still online. It’s going to be there forever, it doesn’t matter if you delete the message or whatever, or you delete a photo of it, it’s gonna be there, everyone’s going to know about it some way or another.”

The above quote suggests that rumours arising from cyberbullying could lead to loss of employment or involvement with the criminal justice system. This concern was particularly notable among youth with greater exposure to violence, who seemed especially concerned about how online information could be used against them, possibly reflecting previous experiences with law enforcement. For these youth, damaging rumours, such as jokes about being a thief went beyond cyberbullying.

“...the photos of Noah and the belief that he’s a thief is not only cyberbullying, but I think it could also affect his public life. Because sometimes, depending on what job you go into, they do look online, your presence, your digital footprint and everything. And seeing that he is a thief over and over and again, that could lead to “maybe he is”, do they have to check his criminal record, stuff like that.”

Again, youth with greater exposure to violence invoked legal language more frequently than other participants, naming serious legal consequences to cyberbullying, demonstrating that in their experience, cyberbullying may have higher stakes. These youth were also more likely to express concern about the **escalation of conflict** as a consequence of cyberbullying, specifically that it may escalate to violence — both physical violence between classmates and even intimate partner violence in situations involving romantic partners.

“... if they come to his house, that could be trespassing, they try and hurt him, attempted murder, there’s a limitless list of stuff they could do to him.”

“...people in relationships who are possessive could also lead to worse things in that relationship.”

Some youth also anticipated escalation involving the criminal justice system.

“I think it’d continue and if Olivia catches wind of what Noah did, it might get to the point where I feel like Olivia might frame Noah for a more serious crime and to a point where Noah would have to go to court to defend himself. And if he’s already not having a good financial situation, imagine the lawyer debt he’ll be in if that happens.”

“As long as she’s confident enough in it and she goes to the police, she can report him for anything.”

Youth with greater exposure to violence were more likely to discuss these concerns about extreme and unanticipated violence, as well as potential severe repercussions in their offline lives, particularly involving the criminal justice system. Their experience with violence and its outcomes may mean they are acutely aware of how an online comment can escalate into violent and persistent, offline consequences. Interventions should consider how young peoples’ lived experiences shape their understanding of and concerns about cyberbullying, and which forms of support they are most likely to respond to.

Youth also identified **ruining relationships** or friendships as a potential consequence of cyberbullying, noting that if they experienced cyberbullying from a friend, they would likely end that friendship.

“Obviously if someone shared personal information like that from something you said in confidence... You wouldn’t want to be friends with that person again. Your trust with them would be ruined.”

They also noted how certain kinds of cyberbullying can ruin a romantic relationship, such as in one scenario (see [Scenario 3](#)) where a deepfake is created of one character flirting with someone who is not her boyfriend.

“[the deepfake] will just ruin their relationship because of something that was wrong.”

Youth also spoke about the **emotional impacts of cyberbullying** on those who experience it, frequently noting that targets may feel sad, hurt, anxious, embarrassed or overwhelmed.

“If it happened to me, I feel like I’d probably be scared to go out in public, probably have anxiety and to go around and stuff like that, feel judged maybe.”

“I’d feel targeted, then I wouldn’t really want to be around our school because I know everyone’s talking about it.”

“So, when there’s sort of stuff happening online, I find it can kind of overtake your life. You could be thinking about it all the time and it can make it hard to do other things.”

In describing their virtual collage, one participant spoke to the loneliness and emotionally turbulent feelings that cyberbullying targets may experience:

“...how you feel when you’re alone and in the mood... when something cyberbullying happens to you. That’s how you feel... you have feelings of mood and changes of everyday life and you...feel like you want to bury yourself underneath sand.”

Although youth highlighted the emotional impacts on those experiencing cyberbullying, they also reflected on how those engaging in it might feel, including shame, regret, guilt, and embarrassment.

“I feel like he’s gonna regret what he did a lot...he’s gonna feel really guilty about that.”

This reflects young people’s empathy and awareness of the harm cyberbullying causes to everyone involved, which is well supported by the literature. Research shows that both those experiencing and engaging in cyberbullying report negative psychological and wellbeing outcomes including depression, anxiety, loneliness, and substance use.⁵⁹

⁵⁹ Laura Marciano et al., “Cyberbullying Perpetration and Victimization in Youth: A Meta-Analysis of Longitudinal Studies,” *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication*, 2020, <https://doi.org/10.1093/jcmc/zmz031>.

Finally, youth highlighted how the consequences of cyberbullying extend beyond those directly involved, creating collateral damage or **collective hurt**.

“I think this also kind of shows the kind of collateral damage that can occur when you’re taking these arguments and these disagreements online. Because it’s open and visible to so many people, the potential for hurting others who you might not mean to is there and it can happen quite easily.”

“Brian is not only just making fun of Ali having panic attacks, he’s also making fun of everyone who has panic attacks...when someone sees that and they actually do have panic attacks, it’s like...they feel also targeted...”

In one focus group, youth discussed how deepfakes or falsified photos may involve someone who does not know their image is being used, exposing them to collateral harm despite not being involved in the original conflict. In considering the collective consequences, or wider impacts, of online actions on those beyond the immediate persons involved, youth demonstrated meaningful awareness of digital citizenship.

Courses of Action and Inaction

As they considered each cyberbullying scenario, participants identified several courses of action, and/or inaction, that characters might take, and reflected on what they themselves might do or have done when experiencing or witnessing cyberbullying. Three key responses emerged: telling a trusted adult, resolving it privately (independently, with those involved, or with peers), and doing nothing, which we identify and unpack below as part of a larger theme of **collective apathy**.

Telling An Adult

When asked whether the characters in each scenario might tell an adult about cyberbullying, most participants said they would tell an adult at some point in the conflict, but youth had varying perspectives on which adults they might turn to, when, why, and whether it would actually help. When asked which adults they would

turn to, participants most commonly mentioned parents, followed closely by teachers. Fewer identified other adults such as guidance counsellors or therapists, and one participant mentioned services such as Kids Help Phone.

WHEN TO TELL AN ADULT

Youth had different perspectives on when to involve an adult. Most agreed that adults should be informed in **extreme or serious situations**, such as threats of physical violence or abuse.

“I know that a lot of kids don’t want their parents to be involved with this sort of stuff, especially as a teenager, you want that independence. But there are some times, like when threats are being uttered or extreme disrespect, that you can’t handle on your own - or something that puts your life or somebody else’s lives in danger. I think that needs to be...someone has to intervene. I don’t think there’s another choice.”

In such cases, for instance, if someone had been doxxed, youth also felt that law enforcement should be involved.

“...if there’s potential for real danger there, because sharing your location, that’s a threat and that’s something you should go to an authority figure or law enforcement...because there’s the potential for harm to your person...”

Some participants thought adults should be informed when there is a risk to a young person’s mental health, such as, if someone is experiencing panic attacks. In these cases, youth noted that adults in organizations designed to support youth in crisis, such as therapists or services like Kids Help Phone, can be particularly helpful.

Youth also thought adults should be informed **if those involved are very young**.

“I don’t think they would tell an adult...unless one of them is significantly younger.”

This echoes participants' earlier view, when discussing factors that impact cyberbullying escalation, that older teens may have greater emotional maturity and better tools to de-escalate cyberbullying. On the other hand, younger youth may need more adult support and are therefore more likely to seek it out.

For some participants, they would only turn to an **adult they trusted**.

“An adult they tell, it’d have to be someone they deeply trust...Somebody they’d be willing to share their information with.”

Others would turn to an adult **if they could provide a helpful, mature, unbiased perspective**, something they felt their peers might lack the maturity to provide.

“Well, I just think adults are more mature and they know what to do in that situation while friends would just side with other friends and [be] biased in that situation.”

Participants did not always think telling an adult would be helpful — as explored in the following section on why youth may choose not to tell an adult — but when young people did find adults helpful, it was because adults could offer an experienced and unbiased perspective in navigating cyberbullying.

“I think you could try to work it out on your own but having an adult who has experience and who has dealt with this sort of stuff before can really help just kind of bring that rationale a little bit. So, it’s like, “I know what you’re going through, I was your age once”. I think you don’t have to listen to it, but it’s always just the third person who’s not going to be biased.”

A few participants mentioned that adults should be informed **as a last resort**, if other means of conflict resolution have failed. One youth explained that adults will typically bring conflict to an end, even if not necessarily in a helpful way.

“Adult’s just going to end it, not make it better, not make it worse...”

Young people's view of telling an adult as a last resort, or as reserved for serious situations, reflects their repeated demonstrations that **severity is a key parameter in their understanding of cyberbullying**. The level of severity is not only how youth identify cyberbullying but also how they determine what course of action to take in response.

Interestingly, some youth did not consider telling an adult in certain scenarios, assuming **adults would already know** or inevitably find out as the situation escalated. When asked why, participants suggested that adults might witness cyberbullying on public posts (such as on a memorial page), discover it through monitoring their children's social media, or be informed through institutional channels including schools notifying parents. In these cases, youth saw no need to tell adults.

“I feel like if the harassing each other back and forth got to a point, an adult would probably get involved or hear about it or find out somehow. Like a parent. Especially because a lot of parents have their friends' social medias, or their kids' social medias...”

WHEN NOT TO TELL AN ADULT

On the other hand, youth were equally firm about when characters in the scenarios would be unlikely to inform adults of cyberbullying.

Almost unanimously, youth stated that they would not tell an adult **if a relationship is involved**. Across every focus group, participants felt that the presence of a romantic relationship made it unlikely that those involved would seek adult support. When asked why, participants explained that young people may not be comfortable sharing details of their romantic lives with adults.

“...do you really want to talk to your parents about your boyfriend...?”

Some youth suggested that relationship conflicts should be resolved privately, and that young people's romantic lives are simply not adults' business.

“...if you're in a relationship you can figure it out on your own...I don't think parents or teachers would get involved, because that's not really their business.”

Some participants noted that the potentially dangerous implications of having a possessive partner might discourage someone from telling an adult, precisely because of the danger it might pose to that person.

“...if she feels too scared to let her parents know because she’s dating the guy, she doesn’t want her parents to think that oh, she’s in danger, she needs to break up with them...”

“I feel like Olivia wouldn’t tell her parents because she’s already in this possessive relationship...And that obviously shows that she doesn’t really feel comfortable going to her parents about things because if she did she probably would’ve gotten out of that possessive relationship before that so...”

These quotes suggest that youth in potentially unsafe relationships may already lack adult involvement in their lives, making them even less likely to inform an adult, or seek help, when harm occurs. This is worth noting because when youth are not comfortable talking to trusted adults (especially their parents/caregivers) about certain topics, they are often left more vulnerable to harm and less likely to access the support they need. Cyberbullying research highlights that parental approaches balancing warmth and connectedness with clear boundaries and expectations can foster greater trust and increase the likelihood of youth sharing what is happening in their lives.⁶⁰

However, even with the presence of trust and comfortability, some youth questioned how helpful telling an adult about cyberbullying would be.

“Even if it reaches an adult, even if someone told an adult, I just don’t see how an adult would be fully helpful in this situation.”

Some youth felt that telling an adult might feel like an overreaction, **if the situation was not extreme.**

⁶⁰ Jennifer L. Doty et al., “A Model of Personal Relationships and Cyberbullying Perpetration among Adolescents: A Person*environment Model,” *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships*, 2024, <https://doi.org/10.1177/02654075241227394>.

“...there isn’t so much happening and unless one of them is significantly younger or really feels, you know, extreme emotions about the situation...telling an adult would feel like an overreaction in a way, especially just knowing teenagers on the internet. I think most people would just move on. And unless this became a bigger issue, they would not take it to an adult.”

Unless a situation became extreme, youth did not understand telling an adult as a necessary or helpful response to cyberbullying. This suggests that youth may conclude the risk of an unhelpful adult reaction is not worth taking, unless they feel they have no other choice.

Youth also felt that telling an adult would be less helpful **when heated emotions are involved**, doubting adult’s ability to effectively intervene. This skepticism was particularly evident in one scenario (see [Scenario 4](#)), involving cyberbullying following a death, in which participants questioned whether adults could meaningfully intervene.

“I think everyone would feel very strong emotions in this situation and they would feel very strongly on where they stand, and so I don’t think an adult can come and tell Jason, “Hey, you know, you’re in the wrong.” Maybe they can say, “Hey, you’re in the wrong for posting that thing”, but they can’t tell them that he’s wrong for feeling this way. And the same for Wyatt’s family, you can’t be like, “Hey you guys are in the wrong for feeling grief or, you know, mourning him.” So...I don’t really know how helpful an adult would be in this situation, even if they knew.”

Some participants thought that adults can only do so much when cyberbullying is motivated by strong emotions, suggesting their input may be unable to facilitate meaningful resolution. In addition to adults being unable to calm others’ heated emotions, youth noted that adults themselves may bring their own heated emotions, or bias, to a situation rather than provide the helpful, outside perspective that youth described valuing in their discussions of why they would tell an adult.

“...it’d be very, very hard to find an adult who’s objective about the situation.”

“...if you’re having a conversation with a parent, they’re probably like “no, your kid’s wrong” and then that will start an argument.”

*“...sometimes parents can bring in past situations and like assume things and just escalate things more than it needs to be for you when they’re getting involved. For example, like if you’re having a fight with your friend or something... they can be like, “oh I told you so and so is a bad friend, you should have never hung out with them...”
Sometimes parents don’t react how they need to in situations.”*

Additionally, youth stated that **if adults are not willing to listen fully and actively** to fully understand the situation, it may not be worth telling them about cyberbullying.

“I think in a lot of situations like this, you’ll find that adults often jump the gun. They assume they know about the situation or they jump to, “this is exactly what we have to do” without fully consulting the people actually involved.”

Youth noted that not listening or fully understanding a situation may lead to misinterpretation, which in turn would hinder conflict resolution. In general, most participants expressed skepticism about adults’ ability to help youth experiencing cyberbullying, even without citing specific reasons. For instance, when discussing a scenario (see [Scenario 4](#)) in which parents were assumed to be observing a conflict on a memorial page, one participant suggested that parental presence might worsen the cyberbullying rather than resolve it.

“...it’s good that adults are witnessing this is happening, but at the same time... because they’re not fixing the problem, they’re just fuelling the fire at this point. They’re just adding to the severity of it. They’re not fixing it; they’re making it worse.”

Some participants expressed frustration with the perceived unhelpfulness of parents in the scenarios presented, which may reflect their own experiences with cyberbullying.

“They’re supposed to be the responsible ones!”

Participants seemed to imagine an ideal world where youth could comfortably turn to adults when experiencing cyberbullying, but doubted this would result in meaningful help, for the reasons identified above. This gap between the ideal and reality appeared to be a source of frustration for some participants. Youth also offered several suggestions for how parents could better support them when informed about cyberbullying, which we detail in an upcoming section on [How Adults Can Help](#).

Youth acknowledged that adults’ inability to help may stem from more than just their perceived lack of objectivity and patience. Participants also identified adults’ digital media literacy skills as a key barrier, noting that adults with **(perceived) lower digital media literacy skills** may be less equipped to address cyberbullying effectively. When adults are unfamiliar with how certain platforms or technologies work, youth felt it would be difficult to rely on them for support. For example, participants thought adults would struggle in situations involving deepfakes, given their (perceived) limited understanding of AI and how to respond to its misuse.

“...adults don’t seem to be as familiar with technology and artificial intelligence as we are. So, I would say that would kind of be a hesitation factor [in telling and adult].”

“...most people I talk to don’t realize what you can do with AI at this point. I think that adults are also the more gullible people when it comes to AI, like a lot of teenagers and young adults, they’re online a lot or all of the time and they see that stuff all the time.”

Additionally, while youth were confident in their own ability to report cyberbullying online, they were less certain that their parents would know how to do the same. This concern aligns with research identifying adults’ digital media literacy as a barrier to effectively addressing cyberbullying — suggesting that digital media

literacy interventions aimed at parents/caregivers and other trusted adults could better equip them to support youth through these experiences.⁶¹

Youth also expressed concern that reporting cyberbullying to adults would not be worthwhile or helpful **if it would get them in trouble.**

“Okay, I think a big fear when turning to adults or parents is that there will be further punishment for your wrong actions. Even if you have already gotten repercussions, the fear is that there’s gonna be more punishment or judgment from the adults or the parents’ side.”

Youth identified the fear of punishment as a key barrier to disclosing cyberbullying to adults, particularly when they felt implicated in the behaviour themselves. Forms of punishment, especially taking away devices, were seen as a deterrent to reporting, regardless of whether youth were experiencing or engaging in cyberbullying.

Youth also worried about telling adults **if it might get others (such as their friends or peers) in trouble.**

“I think it would be helpful for them personally, but it wouldn’t be helpful for others possibly because...they might say something about the [class gossip] account and then that will get a lot of people in trouble. Now obviously they did that to themselves, they participated in that trying to...putting people’s names on a public account and posting tea about them but it would just cause a bunch more problems for the two friends because people would be like “Oh, you guys are the reason that the entire account [got shut down].”

Some participants expressed concern that telling adults may **cause more peer conflict**, particularly if they were labelled a snitch as a result.

61 Lan et al., “Effectiveness of Anti-Cyberbullying Educational Programs: A Socio-Ecologically Grounded Systematic Review and Meta-Analysis,” *Computers in Human Behavior*, 2022, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chb.2022.107200>.

“I feel like though if she were to snitch, then she could be known as a snitch and then everyone would start talking about her...”

One participant further noted that involving an adult may lead to resentment and tension among those involved, potentially worsening the conflict rather than resolving it.

“I think they would hold a bit of more grudge since they like told an adult. I feel like one of them would like feel resentment towards them and even hate them more...”

Participants in one focus group noted this would be especially true if law enforcement became involved in a potentially violent situation, as those engaging in cyberbullying might become more aggressive if they learned that someone had reported them. These barriers, centred around the fear of making things worse, are worth noting given that the severity of a situation was one of the primary reasons youth gave for informing adults in the first place. The concern that adults may escalate an already serious situation points to an important thought pattern to address in cyberbullying interventions. Youth who feel they can only involve adults in extreme situations yet simultaneously worry that doing so may make things worse, may ultimately choose not to seek adult help at all.

As discussed in the [Needs](#) and [Recommendations](#) sections, participants offered suggestions for how parents/caregivers can respond more effectively when youth disclose cyberbullying, with the goal of helping youth feel comfortable turning to trusted adults before situations become extreme and therefore are more difficult to resolve.

Resolve It Privately

Several young people suggested that the best course of action for someone experiencing cyberbullying was to resolve it independently or directly with those involved. Participants expressed that youth often feel they do not have a trusted adult to turn to, and that they cannot rely on adults to be meaningfully helpful

“Children and teens usually, as of now, don’t go to adults very much because they feel like they can’t count on them to solve it, especially if it’s an online matter. It’s kind of harder for the adults to act when they don’t know how to access these certain things or who these people are. So, it becomes very difficult and I don’t think anyone would really go to an adult about it, probably just keep it to themselves or someone their age.”

“To be honest, in this generation, with how like a bunch of kids were raised and stuff, I think that no one would really go to an adult. They would just keep it to themselves, or they would butt in and try to handle it themselves. Like I hate to say it, but I would try to end fights like that myself and I’d end up getting hurt. It’s sad how this generation people think they can’t go to adults for stuff like this...because of everything that’s going on in the world.”

Youth expressed disappointment at often feeling alone when navigating cyberbullying situations. The tone of their responses conveyed a clear desire to be able to turn to adults, tempered by a lack in confidence that adults could be relied on. This is consistent with MediaSmarts’ [previous research](#), which has found that feeling “like nobody cares” is among the most reported experiences of youth who have been bullied.

In the absence of adult support, youth considered various ways to address cyberbullying independently, such as reaching out directly to those involved, taking responsibility and apologizing, or asking the person responsible why they did what they did. A sense of personal responsibility emerged as a key reason for resolving conflicts privately. Youth appeared to assume that if a situation is your responsibility or your ‘business’, such as in the case of a romantic relationship, it should be handled privately rather than by involving others. This assumption is worth considering for cyberbullying interventions, as **messaging regarding online safety and responsibility must be framed collectively**, emphasizing that young people’s network of trusted adults and peers are part of that responsibility.

Participants did consider turning to peers, such as friends or siblings, as part of a private resolution. Unlike adults, peers may be more likely to witness cyberbullying as it occurs and may therefore already be aware of an ongoing situation. Several participants stated that youth would be more likely to disclose cyberbullying to peers than adults, and some acknowledged that friends or siblings may play a meaningful role in supporting those who experience it.

“Personally, if I was in that scenario, I’d want a mutual friend to come in, tell us how stupid our argument is... and we’d make up and like... “That was a really stupid argument, and I’m really sorry I hurt you for that.” Just like someone to make us realize that the argument itself is stupid and that we shouldn’t be having it in the first place is sometimes what some people need and, I know I need that sometimes.”

However, youth noted that the effectiveness of peer support depends largely on the maturity of those involved and the nature of the relationship. For instance, while a group chat among peers may be a space for encouraging resolution, participants acknowledged it could just as easily escalate conflict if people began taking sides. Some youth emphasized that certain situations are better kept private, as involving others risks complicating or escalating the conflict.

“...the more people that see it... the more it will get spread.”

Additionally, one participant noted that disclosing cyberbullying to friends may carry social risk, as it might make the person appear immature and unreliable in the eyes of their peers.

“Yeah, it’s definitely not smart to bring a friend in...it makes you look immature, unreliable, it doesn’t make you look better, so I feel like solving on your own, whatever it takes, is definitely [better].”

Mirroring their divided views on peer involvement when experiencing cyberbullying, youth were similarly split on what they would do as witnesses. Several stated that they would intervene and act.

“I think anyone can get involved too because... if you’re seeing it, you probably should get involved and try and resolve the situation instead of like, there’s a bystander watching it happen.”

Some youth referenced a sense of moral obligation to intervene as witnesses of cyberbullying.

“I feel like, for me personally, I have a strong sense of morals and what I think is okay and what’s not. And so, I would definitely make it known how I feel, like, “hey, you took it too far” and “hey, you made an unnecessary comment” you know.”

However, others stated that they would not get involved, reflecting a broader theme of **collective apathy**.

Collective Apathy

The theme of collective apathy emerged in discussions about witnessing cyberbullying. Across the scenarios presented, nearly all youth believed that a wide audience, potentially everyone online, may be witnessing the situation unfold. At minimum, participants assumed that their peers and known trusted adults would likely be aware of what was happening. However, despite this assumed visibility, there was little discussion of how witnesses may play an active role in shaping what happens next.

Youth conveyed a broader sense that cyberbullying is often collectively witnessed online without anyone acting, as in the case of adults observing cyberbullying on a memorial page (see [Scenario 4](#)) without intervening. When asked directly what witnesses might or should do in a specific scenario, some participants encouraged inaction or apathy, suggesting it is best to stay out of it and not get involved.

“I would probably, it’d be best to move on, I don’t know, just because...if you’re getting yourself involved that has nothing to do with you, I don’t think it’s right to... It seems a bit extra.”

“...leave it alone because I feel like... If you get involved too, even though it’s none of your business and you just randomly just saw it...”

As with their definitions of cyberbullying, **ideas of necessity and proportionality arose in participants' discussions of courses of action for witnesses.** Getting involved was seen as 'extra' or unnecessary. This was compounded by an individualistic rather than collective sense of responsibility; what happens online was viewed as none of their business, which served to justify non-engagement. Youth also expressed reluctance to intervene due to the risk of drawing unwanted attention to themselves. This is consistent with [MediaSmarts' previous research](#), which has found that the fear of becoming a target is the primary concern keeping witnesses from intervening in bullying situations.

Participants also conveyed a sense that the online environment makes cyberbullying feel removed and impersonal. In discussing the factors that contribute to escalation, youth noted that the perceived lack of offline consequences and the cloak of anonymity online can encourage harmful behaviour. The flip side of this, however, is that youth feel less personally responsible and less connected to what is happening online, contributing to an online environment where cyberbullying is collectively witnessed and, through inaction, collectively enabled.

Cyberbullying literature has noted the complexity of the bystander effect in online contexts.⁶² The bystander effect, the phenomena whereby people become less likely to intervene as the number of bystanders increases, is amplified in online spaces where 'everyone' is potentially watching. Anonymity, a diffused sense of responsibility, as well as the risk of backlash, make online witness behaviour more complex to address, and collectively reinforces a culture of apathy.

62 Cagil Torgal et al., "A Meta-Analysis of School-Based Cyberbullying Prevention Programs' Impact on Cyber-Bystander Behavior," *School Psychology Review*, 2023, <https://doi.org/10.1080/2372966X.2021.1913037>.



Needs: How Can Adults Help?

At the close of each focus group, participants were asked directly how they thought adults could best support youth in addressing cyberbullying. Youth identified multiple ways in which adults could meaningfully intervene.

What we heard most from youth was that adults **should listen, actively and meaningfully.**

“What I would say is, again, listen to both sides from all perspectives, and if you see your child or something acting differently, don’t immediately put in or corner them and try to force them to say it because it’ll just make them feel unsafe and that they can’t explain it...”

Rather than taking over, adults should take their cues from the young person disclosing the cyberbullying.

“Be understanding of every scenario...because that is affecting the person telling you. If you do not understand it, ask for clarification. They are telling you something that’s happening and your job is to listen and ask questions if you do not understand...”

Youth also emphasized that adults **should be observant.** Some spoke specifically about educators’ unique position in this regard, noting that teachers may be better placed to observe relational changes between classmates. One participant said that teachers naturally “see more” than parents/caregivers, given that cyberbullying most commonly involves classmates. While the conflict itself may not be visible at home, due to its online nature, the resulting tensions between students are often outwardly apparent in the school environment.

Youth also stressed that adults should **respect their boundaries, especially regarding their privacy and confidentiality.** As with visibility, some participants framed this concern specifically within the school setting.

“...if a student comes to any adult and tells them about their problems, specifically a teacher or principal or guidance counsellor, and that adult goes to tell the student also involved in the problem, then they should keep the student who came to them anonymous...”

“But teachers specifically - or schools are horrible at handling situations because they have no way of keeping anything a secret or keeping anything under control. And they cause rumours. Like, one of my friends went to a principal or a guidance counsellor about a problem she was having online with another girl and...They brought this girl into the office and told her everything about what was happening. Even who said it, what they said happened, the person specifically - and then it caused even more problems and everything got out of hand just because they decided they had to mention the name of the person who brought it to them confidentially. That person trusted them to handle the situation, and they handled it like poorly. They just kept oversharing.”

In one focus group, participants engaged in an extended discussion about how the lack of confidentiality in school settings acts as a barrier to reporting bullying. They noted that failing to protect certain information, such as the identity of the person who disclosed, tends to escalate rather than de-escalate the situation. Youth were clear that adults should not share what they have been told with others involved in the conflict unless the severity of the situation outweighs protection of anonymity.

“[Schools] cross the stories over and tell people what other people said...But it's just not needed, they should just keep stories separate and just listen to each side... and just kind of tell...without telling each other, you know?”

Youth expressed a genuine desire to turn to adults, but wanted assurance that doing so would not expose them to negative social consequences among their peers, such as being labelled a snitch.

Youth wanted adults to respect boundaries, but it was of equal importance that **adults know when to step in** once informed of cyberbullying.

*“I would say know boundaries,
but also know when to step in.”*

Participants noted that at times, **adults have told them to handle things on their own**, which is not a helpful response. When informed of cyberbullying, adults should be prepared to take meaningful action. At the same time, youth demonstrated a nuanced understanding of when adult intervention is necessary regardless of privacy concerns. Some youth acknowledged that in cases of clear and serious harm, the need for adult involvement outweighs the protection of anonymity. Once again, this reflects the central role that assessments of severity play in how youth understand cyberbullying and determine courses of (in)action in response to it.

Youth expressed that **adults should approach disclosures of cyberbullying with objectivity and an open mind, avoiding blame, shame, or judgment**, including responding with “I told you so” or “you shouldn’t have done this.”

“I feel like most...kids don’t tell adults because they’re afraid that they’re going to get in trouble for retaliating. I think just listening with an open mind and not... scolding your kid would make them feel like they can actually be open and be... free of judgment when they’re talking.”

“I feel like parents always, even though they’re parents, they step themselves into, “I’m the leader, I’m your superior role.” And sometimes you just have to kind of acknowledge your kid as your friend rather than, “you’re my kid.” Or, even if you are their parent, their protector, you’re not always, “I know better than you, you have to trust me, you have to tell me everything”, but you have to step down at their level to understand them and open up to them rather than just them seeing you as a more like a threatening superior.”

Blame, shame, and punishment, as youth indicate above, tends to backfire. Rather than reducing the likelihood of cyberbullying, they reduce the likelihood of youth disclosing their experiences to trusted adults. Participants shared that in their own lives, judgemental responses from adults have left them feeling disrespected, belittled, and threatened. Youth emphasized a perceived sense

of adult superiority that makes adults appear unapproachable in cyberbullying situations. Maintaining an open and objective perspective, rather than responding with judgement, is one-way adults can build the trust and comfort necessary for youth to feel safe coming forward.

Interestingly, one participant suggested that **punishment or discipline**, such as taking away phones, could be a helpful response to cyberbullying. However, this view was directly opposed by other youth, who dismissed it as a reactive 'quick fix' that fails to address the root of the issue.

Youth stated that **adults should acknowledge their bias, consider multiple perspectives, and offer thoughtful advice.**

“Parents can also...do it maturely instead of just taking their kids’ sides...they could also try to take both sides instead of taking their own kids’ sides, because that would be more mature.”

“I would say remove their own bias...Just try to look at every perspective, like we’re doing now, without having personal bias. So, let’s just say a parent has a child that’s upset. You have to look at both sides, not just your child’s side. I think the big thing for me, so if the parent sees the online stuff happening before they get told about it, don’t assume “I need to go talk to my kid, I need to figure this out,” so that maybe they can figure it out themselves. But if it starts to get more serious and you can still tell there’s something going on and they don’t want to tell you maybe step in, but don’t push them about it. Kind of be more like a shoulder to lean on rather than a knight in shining armor.”

As explored in the section discussing [Contributing Factors to Cyberbullying Escalation](#), young people worried that parents’ biases and heated emotions can inadvertently escalate cyberbullying. Youth expressed frustration that adults, who are expected to model responsible behaviour, can fuel conflicts by taking sides or acting impulsively without considering the consequences. Youth want assurance that when they disclose cyberbullying to a trusted adult, they will be met with a mature, unbiased perspective that prioritizes the best course of action. Youth also emphasized a desire to be

treated as autonomous and capable. They want their perspectives to be considered, to be consulted on decisions that impact their own lives, and to have adults take their lead while offering advice and a range of support options.

“I think adults just need to be a little bit more open minded when it comes to support - making sure that they can give the youth that they’re helping out different supports... or even a youth telling an adult how they think it’ll help and getting that feedback from that adult. So overall just... Instead of telling youth what to do, giving them options, and hearing out what their solutions might be.”

Cyberbullying literature similarly emphasizes the value of approaches that respect and build young people’s autonomy and competence, such as co-developing digital skills and rules or guidelines alongside youth.⁶³ Young people suggest that adults should engage in shared decision-making and other autonomy-supporting approaches when helping youth address ongoing cyberbullying.

Youth expected adults to facilitate mediation and de-escalation

when needed. Participants expressed on multiple occasions that they expect adults will de-escalate conflict when it becomes too extreme. In one focus group, youth specifically noted that adults can play a role in stopping and containing the viral spread of cyberbullying rumours, a stark contrast to peers, who may be more likely to amplify rumours and escalate cyberbullying.

“...the adults would be able to ensure that those things that were shared are taken down so that they’re no longer circulating online...”

When it came to mediation specifically, youth suggested that adults can de-escalate conflicts by facilitating conversations between those involved. Participants suggested concrete actions such as reaching out to other parents/caregivers to help resolve the situation.

63 Jennifer L. Doty et al., “A Model of Personal Relationships and Cyberbullying Perpetration among Adolescents: A Person*environment Model,” *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships*, 2024, <https://doi.org/10.1177/02654075241227394>.

“I think an adult could reach out to other parents of people that are affected and that could just stop it right from who was being hurt in the first place.”

Youth expressed that adult involvement gives weight to conflict resolution efforts and creates a greater sense of safety for those who are experiencing cyberbullying. In some cases, the presence of an adult was seen as enough to encourage de-escalation.

“I feel like the first step is to facilitate a conversation. And I think any adult could do that. I think with the presence of an adult, they’d feel more inclined to like stay even in the same room, or interact because now there’s a pressure, I guess.”

“And also, the security of knowing that there’s someone here to calm this down if it goes out of whack... When there’s acknowledgement of a situation by adults, trusted figures, I think people are less inclined to spend time gossiping or talking about it and it might kind of mellow the situation out, you know, like, hey, this is being dealt with.”

Some youth suggested more direct forms of adult involvement in de-escalation. For instance, one participant noted that educators could make classroom changes, such as separating students in conflict, as a response to cyberbullying. With respect to schools specifically, **youth emphasized the role that educators play in teaching communication skills and promoting anti-bullying.** Participants viewed schools as a key setting for addressing cyberbullying, given that conflicts commonly occur among peers or classmates. One participant noted that because youth communicate and socialize at school, conflict is more likely to emerge, and be visible, in that environment.

Youth stated that **educators should initiate discussions about cyberbullying when they notice changes in student behaviour.** They also specifically emphasized the importance of schools teaching respectful communication skills:

“How to communicate with the individual you’re having conflict with, and how to resolve the conflict without attacking the other individual or possibly getting into a fight.”

Youth also emphasized the importance of anti-cyberbullying programs in schools. Some participants noted that their schools had strong anti-bullying policies, which they felt made it less likely that bullying would go unnoticed by adults.

“...our school’s...very, very against bullying, I feel like over these past few years they’ve definitely got more support and... It’s kind of tough to be seen actually bullying with that.”

Youth identified guidance counsellors as a potential key source of support for those experiencing cyberbullying, though they acknowledged that limited availability can be a barrier to accessing this support.

“I feel like at our guidance counsellor’s office, they more so do course selections, and then they have their regulars that they would see for like mental health, and then a lot of friend stuff. Like I know people who have reached out who are not regulars for the guidance counsellors and they have a while to wait to get in. So I feel like their almost specialties are dealing with those friend problems and course selections and not so much the guidance in between, which I feel is really unfortunate, but that’s just my personal opinion and how I’ve experienced it at my school.”

This suggests that schools should position guidance counsellors as a key point of contact for youth disclosing cyberbullying. Providing youth with safe, accessible spaces to report and discuss their experiences is a crucial component of addressing cyberbullying.

Finally, youth emphasized that **adults need digital media literacy training** so they can better understand and support youth experiencing cyberbullying.

“I just think adults should be aware of all the different platforms in which someone can go on. And the varying degrees of aggression, like verbal aggression, in said platforms.”

“I think it’s also important that they’re educated in these [online] spaces and they understand the different nuances and just the different types of sharing and activities that can go on in these places. Because without this knowledge, I think they’re unable to fully comprehend the situation and properly assist.”

Youth recognized that adults also need support to effectively address cyberbullying. A key role of cyberbullying interventions, then, is equipping the trusted adults in young people’s lives with the knowledge and tools to support them.

The key findings outlined above paint a nuanced picture of how youth understand, experience, and respond to cyberbullying. They also point clearly to what young people need from the adults and institutions in their lives. The following recommendations draw directly from these findings, centering youth perspectives, to guide meaningful and effective responses to cyberbullying.

Recommendations: What Youth Need from Cyberbullying Interventions

This section provides recommendations for developing interventions and support for youth involved in cyberbullying (including those experiencing it, those engaging in it, and those witnessing it). Drawing on our focus group findings, we also provide actionable guidance for the trusted adults who support them as well as for educational institutions and community organizations.

The findings from this needs assessment reinforce that youth cyberbullying is complex, relational, and shaped by the broader digital and social environments in which young people live. Participants emphasized that cyberbullying is not only about isolated online harms, but also about patterns of escalation, retaliation, public visibility, reputational damage, and emotional distress that can move fluidly between online and offline spaces. Youth also highlighted the importance of considering how lived experiences — particularly experiences of violence, marginalization, or system involvement — shape how young people interpret, respond to, and experience cyberbullying.

The following recommendations draw on both the literature review and youth focus group findings to support the development of trauma- and violence-informed (TVI) cyberbullying interventions.

Developing Youth-led Cyberbullying Interventions

Based on our conversations with youth, we provide the following recommendations for those developing cyberbullying-specific programs for youth:

- **Define cyberbullying in youth-centred terms.**
 - Youth often described cyberbullying using everyday language — calling it “being mean,” “extreme,” or “an attack.” They used parameters such as whether the act is personal, could damage present or future reputations, and whether it is persistent. Frequency,



recurrence, and severity were the primary factors youth used to determine what counts as cyberbullying and how to respond to it.

- Defining cyberbullying in terms youth recognize and use themselves can help better reflect their experiences and improve identification when it occurs.
- ***For youth with greater exposure to violence:*** *cyberbullying may intersect with or be difficult to distinguish from other forms of harassment, intimidation, or coercion they experience. Definitions and examples used in interventions should reflect this broader landscape of experiences of online and offline violence.*
- **Teach mediation skills.**
 - Youth described turning to peers — such as friends and siblings — to help mediate conflict before or instead of involving an adult. Providing youth with effective peer mediation skills can empower them to act and help de-escalate situations.
- **Teach communication skills.**
 - Youth identified knowing how to engage with others involved in cyberbullying without escalation and through respectful communication skills as a critical component of an intervention. This includes awareness of how tone of voice can be misread in text-based communication and strategies to mitigate this.
- **Teach emotional regulation skills.**
 - Hot emotions were identified as a common thread in the retributive cycle of cyberbullying. Consistent with TVI practice, regulation skills such as grounding techniques, mindfulness, reframing, and sensory regulation can help prevent escalation and break the cycle of retribution.⁶⁴
 - Age was noted as a factor in “emotional maturity.” Interventions should provide age-appropriate techniques or ensure that content can be adapted across grade-levels.
 - ***For youth with greater exposure to violence:*** *emotional regulation content should be delivered within a trauma-informed framework that acknowledges the cumulative impact of prior harm. Standard regulation techniques may need to be adapted or scaffolded to account for trauma responses.*

64 Julia Palmieri and Julie L. Valentine, “Using Trauma-Informed Care to Address Sexual Assault and Intimate Partner Violence in Primary Care,” *The Journal for Nurse Practitioners*, 2021, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.nurpra.2020.08.028>.

- **Foster empathy without activating retributive emotions.**
 - Participants described empathy as an important protective factor, often framed as understanding what it feels like to “be in someone else’s place.” However, interventions should cultivate this perspective-taking in ways that do not activate or reinforce retributive impulses. Rather than emphasizing shared pain or reciprocal hurt, activities and discussions should guide youth toward empathy as a de-escalation strategy — understanding another’s experience intellectually — without inducing the emotional distress that can fuel the retributive cycle of cyberbullying.
 - *For youth with greater exposure to violence: Empathy-building activities should be delivered only by trauma- and violence-informed practitioners, after building trust. These activities should be paired explicitly with retributive cycle content so that it can help interrupt retaliation rather than reinforce it. Facilitators should also be attentive to how empathy exercises may (re) surface trauma or, in contexts shaped by community violence,⁶⁵ can be perceived as a sign of weakness. Framing empathy as a strategic skill for navigating conflict — instead of a purely emotional or moral response — may be more accessible and safer for this community.⁶⁶*
- **Foster intellectual humility.**
 - Youth in our focus groups generally associated being older with greater maturity and independence. [MediaSmarts research](#) has similarly found that older youth tend to believe this about themselves, however, this bias can affect how they respond to criticism or conflicting views.
 - Intellectual humility — the understanding that your knowledge has limits and that you may be wrong — can enhance emotional regulation. Those open to learning and changing their thinking are more likely to remain calm when faced with disagreement and to respond less defensively.

65 Anyerson Stiths Gomez Tabares et al., “The Effect of Empathy and Callous- Unemotional Traits on Externalizing Behavior in Juvenile Offenders: The Mediating Role of Moral Disengagement”, *International Journal of Social Psychiatry*, 2025, <https://doi.org/10.1177/00207640251328818>.

66 Beacon House Therapeutic Services and Trauma Team, *Developmental Trauma Close Up*, 2020, <https://beaconhouse.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/Developmental-Trauma-Close-Up-Revised-Jan-2020.pdf>.

- **Foster collective responsibility and digital citizenship.**
 - Youth demonstrated an increased awareness of digital citizenship — understanding how to engage online in ways that are ethical, respectful, and responsible. However, many held contradictory beliefs tied to the idea that some situations are “no one else’s business” beyond those directly affected.
 - Interventions must **highlight collective responsibility as an essential component of digital citizenship**. Keeping the online environment safe and ethical is a shared responsibility — one that includes standing up for others online and recognizing that young people do not need to face conflict alone. Responsibility also extends to their networks of trusted adults and peers.
- **Teach digital media literacy (DML) skills, keeping them current as technology evolves.**
 - Youth noted how online spaces can amplify conflict, as people are more likely to engage in harmful behaviour from behind a screen, and social media platforms boost negative content, increasing its visibility and reach. Advances in digital technology — including the growing capabilities of artificial intelligence — create additional opportunities for online violence. Educating youth about these dynamics empowers them to navigate the digital landscape confidently and safely.
 - DML skills are equally critical for the trusted adults who support youth in responding to cyberbullying. We provide specific recommendations for building adult DML skills in the next section on how adults can support youth.
- **Share multiple resources.**
 - Recognizing that youth may not always turn to adults, interventions should connect youth with accessible organizational and institutional supports — such as [Kids Help Phone](#) or local community and school-based support (including increased availability of guidance counsellors).
 - *For youth with greater exposure to violence: peer support, distrust of institutions, or prior negative experiences with adults may make sharing many resources especially important. Ensure that the resources shared are accessible, culturally safe, and relevant to this population.*

How Adults Can Support Youth

Youth outlined several ways for adults to support them in situations involving cyberbullying. The following recommendations apply to any adult, including parents/caregivers, practitioners, and educators, on how to best respond. These recommendations also apply to those developing interventions for adults who support youth.

- **Listen first.**
 - Above all else, youth emphasized that adults should listen actively and meaningfully. Rather than taking over, adults should take their cues from the young person disclosing the cyberbullying.
- **Respect privacy and confidentiality.**
 - In school settings especially, it is crucial to provide a way for youth to report cyberbullying while protecting them from the negative social consequences of doing so. Youth expressed hesitation to report because they worry that adults (such as educators or counsellors) may reveal their identity, which often escalates the situation and can result in peer stigma.
 - Listening to all perspectives without disclosing personal information shared in confidence can help reduce bias and foster trust.
 - *For youth with greater exposure to violence: confidentiality concerns may be heightened, particularly if cyberbullying is connected to community violence dynamics, intimate partner violence, or involvement with the justice system. Adults should be especially attentive to the potential for retaliation and the risks that disclosure may carry for this population.*
- **Be observant.**
 - Educators were identified as adults well-positioned to notice when conflict or tension arises among classmates. Youth expect educators to act on what they observe, whether by reaching out, initiating a discussion among youth and/or their parents, or making practical classroom changes such as adjusting seating arrangements.
- **Know when to step in.**
 - While youth want their boundaries respected, they also expect adults to intervene when necessary, including at the cost of their anonymity when the situation's severity warrants it.



- If there are **signs of serious psychological harm** (such as panic attacks or depression) or **physical danger** (such as doxxing or threats of violence), youth expect adults to act.
- Interventions should help adults understand these thresholds and respond accordingly, ideally before situations become extreme and therefore more difficult to resolve.
- **Listen without judgment.**
 - Youth stressed that adults should listen to all perspectives without blame, shame, or judgment, avoiding responses such as “I told you so” or “you shouldn’t have done this.” Judgmental approaches tend to backfire, reducing the likelihood that youth will disclose their experiences of cyberbullying.
 - *For youth with greater exposure to violence: non-judgmental responses are especially critical. These youth may already anticipate negative reactions from adults or institutions, and a judgmental response can permanently close the door to future disclosure.*
- **Respect youth autonomy and agency.**
 - Adults should listen to young people’s perspectives rather than overriding them with assumptions or presumed ‘best courses of action’. A collaborative approach, one where youth feel heard and involved, increases the likelihood of disclosure and trust. Cyberbullying literature emphasizes the value of autonomy-supporting approaches, such as co-developing digital skills and guidelines for online behaviour alongside youth.
- **Acknowledge your bias.**
 - Adults may hold biases based on their relationships with youth, for example, parents may be more biased towards their own children and educators may be biased towards certain students. This bias can result in premature judgment on certain youth or in certain contexts. Practicing emotional regulation can also help adults manage these biases and providing the grounded, even-handed response youth need.
- **Identify multiple solutions.**
 - Where possible, offer multiple options for youth to consider when navigating cyberbullying, allowing them to choose an approach that fits their comfort level, preferences, and the nature of the situation.

- **Build and maintain digital media literacy skills among trusted adults.**
 - Youth did not always count on adults to understand the complexity of digital technology or how it can be leveraged in online violence. For example, youth are concerned that adults lack the knowledge and skills to de-escalate situations involving artificial intelligence (deepfakes).
 - Supporting adults to confidently navigate the digital world as it continues to evolve is paramount.
- **Stay connected with schools.**
 - Parents/caregivers are better positioned to support youth when they are informed about what is happening in school environments. Responding promptly and constructively when educators reach out about concerns, and proactively seeking information about school policies, reporting processes, and available supports, helps ensure that home and school responses are aligned.

Building Safer Environments: Schools, Communities, and Policy

Youth emphasized how institutional culture, practices, and policies play an important role in preventing and addressing cyberbullying. The following recommendations provide practical steps for schools, community organizations, and policymakers to consider.

Schools

- **Implement anti-cyberbullying programs.**
 - Youth highlighted the importance of school-wide programs that raise awareness of cyberbullying and how to prevent and address it. For guidance on program development, refer to [the above section](#) for recommendations.
- **Develop and implement anti-cyberbullying policies.**
 - Develop and implement anti-cyberbullying policies co-created with youth input to ensure they are relevant and trusted. Clear policies with defined rules, expectations, and reporting processes help manage cyberbullying situations. Developing reporting mechanisms that protect youth from negative peer consequences is essential.

- **Cultivate safe spaces for youth.**
 - Incorporating mental health supports, such as counselling services, within school structures can help youth experiencing cyberbullying. Youth specifically identified **guidance counsellors** as trusted contacts, though they noted limited availability as a barrier. Schools should consider positioning guidance counsellors as a primary point of contact for cyberbullying disclosures.
- **Teach healthy and respectful communication skills proactively.**
 - Educators should initiate classroom discussions about cyberbullying when they notice changes in student behaviour, rather than waiting for formal reports or specific moments in school activity calendars.
- **Strengthen the school-to-home connection.**
 - Schools play a key role in bridging the gap between what happens online and what adults at home are aware of. Establishing clear, proactive communication channels between educators and parents/caregivers, not just in response to incidents, but as an ongoing practice, helps ensure that trusted adults are equipped and aligned in their support of youth.
 - This may include sharing information about emerging online trends, platform changes, or digital media literacy resources with families, so that home and school environments reinforce one another. Youth are better supported when the adults in their lives have open and clear communication to facilitate shared understandings.
 - *For youth with greater exposure to violence: the school-to-home connection may require more intentional and relationship-based outreach. These families may have had negative or adversarial experiences with schools or institutions, and trust cannot be assumed. Schools should consider how to communicate in ways that are welcoming, non-punitive, and culturally safe — framing outreach as collaborative support which should be distinct from disciplinary action.*

Community Organizations

- **Provide accessible, informal support for youth.**
 - Community organizations are well-positioned to offer youth safe spaces outside of the home and school to discuss cyberbullying experiences. Counsellors and youth workers can provide confidential outlets for disclosure, with a clear understanding of when it may be necessary to involve other adults, such as parents/caregivers.
- **Build the capacity of community practitioners.**
 - Social workers, healthcare providers, youth workers, and other community-based practitioners should be equipped with up-to-date knowledge of cyberbullying dynamics, including the role of emerging technologies. Cyberbullying-focused programs, rather than those that address it within broader bullying frameworks, have been shown to be more effective.⁶⁷
 - **Digital media literacy training** is key to enabling practitioners to recognize and respond to cyberbullying effectively.
- **Foster collaboration between community and school settings.**
 - Effective communication between community practitioners, educators, and parents/caregivers is essential to coordinated responses. Community organizations can play a bridging role in connecting youth to the broader network of support they need.

Online Platforms

- **Platforms are not neutral spaces.**
 - Design choices directly shape how cyberbullying unfolds and spreads online. Youth identified several platform-level factors that contribute to cyberbullying escalation and harm, including algorithmic amplification of conflict, anonymity, virality, and the growing role of AI-generated content.

⁶⁷ Joshua R. Polanin et al., "A Systematic Review and Meta-Analysis of Interventions to Decrease Cyberbullying Perpetration and Victimization," *Prevention Science*, 2022, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11121-021-01259-y>.

- **Reduce the algorithmic amplification of harmful content.**
 - Platforms should audit and adjust recommendation algorithms that amplify conflict, hate, and cruelty. Content that targets individuals, including harassment, identity-based hate, and non-consensual intimate imagery, should not be boosted by engagement-driven systems. Platforms should actively promote content that models positive digital citizenship.
- **Strengthen reporting, moderation, and transparency mechanisms.**
 - Reporting tools should be accessible, responsive, and age appropriate. Platforms should be transparent about how moderation decisions are made and provide meaningful recourse when harmful content is not removed. Response outcomes should be publicly reported.
- **Develop safeguards for AI-enabled harm and image-based abuse.**
 - As AI-generated content becomes more sophisticated and accessible, platforms must develop proactive safeguards against deepfakes, AI-generated non-consensual intimate images, and other emerging forms of technology-facilitated bullying. Reactive moderation is insufficient — platforms must anticipate and design against these harms.
- **Apply moderation equitably and transparently.**
 - Content moderation has historically been applied in ways that [disproportionately silence marginalized communities](#), including Indigenous, racialized, and 2SLGBTQ+ youth, while failing to adequately address hate directed at these same groups. Platforms must ensure that enforcement mechanisms are applied consistently, equitably, and with meaningful accountability when they are not.

Government Policy

- **Hold platforms responsible for facilitating cyberbullying specific conduct.**
 - Government regulation should establish clear obligations for platforms to address cyberbullying-specific behaviours, including targeted harassment, identity-based hate, non-consensual sharing of intimate images, and the algorithmic amplification of conflict and harmful content.

- **Develop online harms legislation to reflect emerging and technology-facilitated harms such as cyberbullying.**
 - Laws must keep pace with rapidly evolving technologies, including AI-generated content and deepfakes. Policies should be reviewed and updated regularly, with particular attention to the experiences of equity-deserving youth who face disproportionate harm.
- **Invest in youth-informed research and intervention development.**
 - Government funding should support the development, evaluation, and dissemination of evidence-based cyberbullying interventions that are grounded in the perspectives and lived-experience of young people, particularly those from equity-deserving communities and those with greater exposure to violence.

Supporting Youth with Greater Exposure to Violence

Youth with greater exposure to violence represent a priority population for the BTC project. This includes youth who have experienced trauma, those in contact with the criminal justice system, and those living in contexts where violence (online and offline) is more prevalent. The following recommendations are specific to this population and should be read alongside the guidance in the sections above.

- **Ensure a trauma- and violence-informed (TVI) approach.**
 - All programming and adult responses involving youth with greater exposure to violence should be grounded in TVI principles: recognizing the widespread impact of trauma, identifying signs and symptoms of trauma, and actively working to prevent re-traumatization. This includes being attentive to how cyberbullying may intersect with, escalate from, or contribute to other forms of violence in young people's lives.



- **Recognize heightened barriers to disclosure.**
 - Youth with greater exposure to violence may face additional barriers to reporting cyberbullying, including deeper distrust of adults and institutions, fear of retaliation, concerns about confidentiality in high-stakes situations (e.g., community violence, intimate partner violence), and prior negative experiences with systems meant to protect them.
 - Building trust over time, rather than expecting immediate disclosure, may be a more successful approach.
- **Engage community practitioners with specialized expertise.**
 - For youth with greater exposure to violence, community practitioners (including social workers, mental health professionals, and justice-involved service providers) play an especially important role. These practitioners should be equipped with cyberbullying-specific knowledge, trauma-informed intervention frameworks, and digital media literacy skills.
 - Specialized content for school counsellors, health practitioners, social workers, and community practitioners working with this population is a key component of the BTC program development.
- **Address the retributive cycle explicitly.**
 - Youth with greater exposure to violence may be more likely to engage in retributive cyberbullying as a response to harm they have experienced. Interventions should directly address the cycle of retaliation, helping youth understand it, interrupt it, and access support to break it, without shaming or blaming them.
- **Provide robust connections to crisis supports.**
 - Given that youth with greater exposure to violence may be less likely to turn to known adults for help, ensuring strong connections to community supports, including anonymous helplines, peer support programs, and community-based services, is particularly important.

Conclusion and Next Steps

This section outlines the next steps for the Breaking the Cycle of Youth Cyberbullying (BTC) project.

This needs assessment report highlights young Canadians' perspectives, needs, and concerns relating to cyberbullying, with special focus on youth with greater exposure to violence. Focus groups with youth revealed strong and complex parameters with which they define cyberbullying and understand their own responses to it, as well as the support they require from peers and trusted adults in their lives. An overarching through-line across focus groups was the uniqueness of bullying in an online context, where anonymity, a perceived lack of consequences, technology-facilitated and amplified conflicts, and evolving technologies like AI facilitate cyberbullying and leave a detrimental digital footprint for those involved. Youth also noted the complications added by adults with limited digital media literacy skills, which leave them without adequate support in online spaces.

Across focus groups, youth expressed awareness that individual action alone is not enough to mitigate cyberbullying — multi-level interventions and cross-sector pathways are required. Youth need support from the trusted adults in their communities, and social media platforms must take responsibility for facilitating and amplifying cyberbullying. All stakeholders — at individual, interpersonal, community, and systems levels — need an evidence-based understanding of young people's needs to coordinate interventions that respond to their lived experiences. This needs assessment contributes to a growing evidence base documenting the unique nature of cyberbullying, which differs significantly from offline bullying due to the technologies that promote, extend, and create new forms and facets of harm. The recommendations developed in this report are intended to support this coordinated, multi-level response — addressing how interventions can support youth directly, and how adults, institutions, communities, platforms, and policymakers can better support youth.

The focus groups documented in this report represent the first phase of a multi-phased, five-year intervention project aimed at developing, piloting, adapting, and disseminating a culturally safe, evidence-

based cyberbullying program for youth ages 12-17 in educational and community settings across Canada. The findings ensure that the BTC program reflects the cyberbullying experiences of young Canadians, including those with greater exposure to violence.

In the next phase, MediaSmarts' staff, in partnership with youth and youth-serving organizations, will develop a suite of resources that engages and educates youth on the harms of cyberbullying at three levels:

- A school-wide approach aimed at shifting the social norms that make cyberbullying seem harmless or justifiable, including facilitation materials for a school assembly and follow-up resources for parents/caregivers;
- Classroom resources designed to confront justifications for cyberbullying and build emotional regulation and conflict resolution skills in online contexts; and
- Specialized content targeting youth with greater exposure to violence.

These resources will also include professional development (train-the-trainer) materials for administrators, educators, and community practitioners. MediaSmarts will then pilot test the program with youth-serving partner organizations and classrooms across Canada, gathering feedback through pre- and post-program evaluation surveys. Drawing on that feedback, MediaSmarts' education and research staff will adapt the program to further address the needs of youth — particularly those with greater exposure to violence.

Following adaptation, the BTC program will be promoted and disseminated to schools and community partners across the country. The MediaSmarts' research team will continue to share and advance youth-informed, evidence-based practices for addressing and preventing cyberbullying within our network of academic, policy, industry, education, and community-based partners.

Effective cyberbullying interventions require a coordinated approach — one that supports youth, the trusted adults in their communities, and the systems and policies that shape their online lives. Researchers, organizations, practitioners, and policymakers interested in accessing the full suite of BTC program resources, MediaSmarts-led training opportunities, or exploring collaboration are encouraged to contact us at info@mediasmarts.ca.

Appendices

Appendix A: Focus Group Scenarios

Scenario 1

Maya and Anh share a deeply personal digital art piece exploring their experiences with social anxiety in an online art forum. A classmate named Kyle finds it and shares a link to it on his social media feed, leaving the comment: “This is a total cringe-fest.”

Maya and Anh’s friend Chloe sees the comment and immediately responds by “calling out” Kyle: she posts a response video where she calls him a “toxic monster” and declares him “cancelled.” All their other friends join in, digging through Kyle’s older posts for any other evidence they can use against him. One of them finally finds what they were looking for: a tasteless, context-free joke Kyle made in a fan forum when he was barely twelve years old. She screenshots it and sends it to Chloe, who blasts it to her Story with the caption “Proof Kyle’s ALWAYS been worthless”.

Scenario 2

Ali and Brian, who have been inseparable for years, find themselves in the middle of a falling-out after a petty argument over a weekend trip spirals out of control. The tension shifts from private DMs to public spaces when Brian screenshots a message Ali sent him months ago in total confidence—a vulnerable confession about Ali’s recurring struggles with panic attacks. Brian posts it to his Story with the caption “Someone needs to get a grip.”

Ali feels furious as he watches the view count climb and decides that Brian needs to feel the same level of exposure. He finds a very cringey old video from when Brian wanted to be a YouTuber and sends it to “Sunnyside Tea,” an anonymous account where people share gossip about their classmates.

Scenario 3

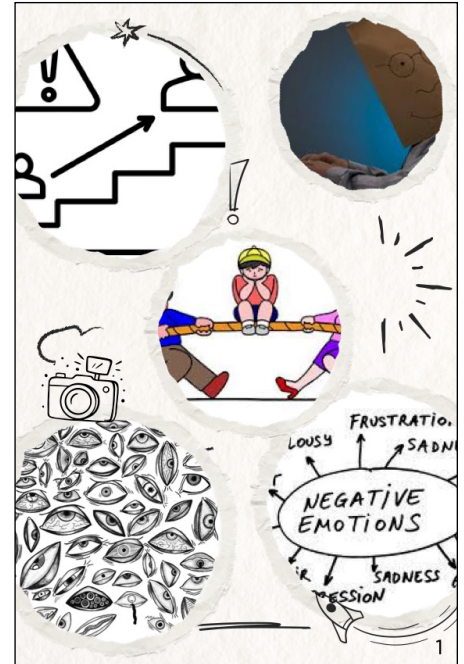
Noah had to move out of his family home suddenly and is living in a shelter until he can find somewhere more permanent. He tried to keep this secret, but a classmate named Olivia found out. Now Olivia thinks it's hilarious to make jokes suggesting that Noah is a thief: any time anything goes missing, she posts a photo she has of Noah with a guilty look on his face. Noah sends Olivia a private message telling her to stop, but Olivia doesn't. Noah knows that Olivia's boyfriend is very possessive, so he makes a deepfake that makes it look like Olivia is flirting with another boy and sends it to her boyfriend.

Scenario 4

When Wyatt died, his classmates immediately set up a memorial page for him online. Jason gets frustrated seeing all the positive posts and videos of people crying on the page, and texts in a small group chat "Now that he's dead everyone acts like he's an angel. I'm not going to be part of that, I remember how he treated my sister."

Somehow the text is shared more widely, and Jason's classmates start calling him out in all his chats and social networks. Jason gets angry and posts a GIF on the memorial page of a candle that's been knocked over as a sign of disrespect. This angers his classmates even more, especially Wyatt's close friends and family. One of Wyatt's best friends makes a fake memorial page for Jason and dares him to prove he isn't afraid by sharing his location with everyone.

Appendix B: Virtual Collages



Appendix C: Focus Group Demographics

Demographic	Category	Number of youth (32 total)	Percentage of youth
Province/Territory of residence	Alberta	2	6.3%
	British Columbia	1	3.1%
	New Brunswick	2	6.3%
	Northwest Territories	2	6.3%
	Ontario	25	78.1%
Gender	Boy	8	25.0%
	Girl	22	68.8%
	Non-binary/genderqueer/gender non-conforming	1	3.1%
	Two-Spirit	1	3.1%
Which of these best describes who you might have a crush on?	Boys	15	46.9%
	Girls	8	25.0%
	Boys and girls	6	18.8%
	Unsure	3	9.4%
Racial identity	Asian	3	9.4%
	Black	5	15.6%
	Caucasian (White)	13	40.6%
	Indigenous (First Nations, Inuit, Métis)	3	9.4%
	Person of Colour	3	9.4%
	Unsure	5	15.6%
	Prefer not to say	5	15.6%
Identifies as having a physical disability (e.g., wheelchair user, vision impairment, hearing impairment, etc.).	Yes	7	21.9%
	No	20	62.5%
	Unsure	5	15.6%
	Prefer not to say	1	3.1%
Identifies as having an intellectual, cognitive, or learning disability (e.g., dyslexia, ADHD, autism or autism spectrum, etc.).	Yes	10	31.3%
	No	17	53.1%
	Unsure	4	12.5%
	Prefer not to say	1	3.1%
Identifies as having a mental illness (e.g., bipolar, anxiety disorder, major depression, etc.).	Yes	14	43.8%
	No	13	40.6%
	Unsure	5	15.6%