



Breaking the Cycle of Youth Cyberbullying

**SUMMARY OF FINDINGS AND
RECOMMENDATIONS: FOR YOUTH**

INTRODUCTION

The Breaking the Cycle of Youth Cyberbullying (BTC) project is a five-year project led by [MediaSmarts](#) - Canada's centre for digital media literacy. Through the BTC project, MediaSmarts is building a program to help stop cyberbullying for youth ages 12-17, in schools and communities across Canada. To make sure the program understands what cyberbullying is like for youth today, and to help adults (like parents, teachers, and counsellors) support them, we talked to youth like you. We'll use what we learned to help us develop resources for youth, and the adults who support them, and then we'll test them out with school and community groups before sharing it across the country.

Here is what we learned.

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HOW DO YOUNG PEOPLE UNDERSTAND CYBERBULLYING?

When we talked to youth in our focus groups, they didn't always use the word 'cyberbullying'. Instead, they used words like 'mean', 'rude', 'hurtful', and 'extreme.' Youth told us many things can count as cyberbullying, like:

Personal attacks: saying something mean about someone online or digging up stuff from their past to use against them.

Ruining someone's reputation: spreading damaging rumours about someone online, or bringing up their past to make them look bad

Doxxing: exposing someone's private information online without asking them (like their address or phone number) to hurt or scare them.

Threats of physical harm: threatening to hurt someone, like daring them to share their location after an online fight.

Persistent teasing: making fun of someone online over and over again.

Retribution: doing something hurtful back to someone who hurt you, to get revenge or make them feel what you felt. This can turn into a "vicious cycle," where people keep hurting each other to get revenge.

Indirect bullying: sharing or liking mean posts, supporting (or cheering on) someone who is bullying someone else online, or running online accounts that encourage mean posts.

Technology-facilitated online bullying: using special technology like AI deepfakes (fake videos or images that look real) to spread false rumours about someone.



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.

—YOUTH FOCUS
GROUP PARTICIPANT

Youth in our focus groups didn't always agree on what counts as cyberbullying like **joking, being rude, or sharing an opinion.**

But they came up with a few ways to help figure it out:

1 HOW EXTREME OR HARMFUL IT WAS

A joke could turn into cyberbullying if it went “too far” or if it was about something difficult someone was already going through (for example, loneliness or a break-up).

2 WHETHER IT MATCHED WHAT HAPPENED BEFORE

Making a mean joke because someone made a mean joke about you first might just be a joke. But if your joke is meaner or more hurtful than theirs, it can cross into cyberbullying.

3 HOW OFTEN AND HOW MANY TIMES IT HAPPENED

One rude comment might just mean someone is “being rude.” But if they keep making rude comments, that’s cyberbullying.

4 WHETHER IT WAS MEANT TO HURT SOMEONE

If someone shares your private information online because they want to hurt you, that’s clearly cyberbullying.



This is how youth drew the line between cyberbullying and just being mean, rude, or joking around. But not everyone agreed on where that line was and a lot of youth even changed their minds throughout the discussion. They also talked about how, most of the time, people are getting hurt and hurting someone else at the same time. These conversations showed us just how complicated it can be to figure out what really counts as cyberbullying.



WHY DOES CYBERBULLYING KEEP GOING OR GET OUT OF HAND?

Youth in our focus groups talked about what can cause online conflicts to keep going or blow up, like:



There is like a cloak of anonymity online, and it often provides a sense that you're untouchable, or that there's going to be no real-world consequences.

—YOUTH FOCUS GROUP
PARTICIPANT

Heated emotions: strong feelings (like anger, fear, sadness) can cause people to lash out without thinking.

Age and experience: younger or less experienced people may not know how to calm things down or stop a conflict, while older or more experienced people may have more practice handling conflicts.

Household values: how someone was raised may affect whether they get more heated or choose to walk away from an online conflict.

Being online: feeling anonymous behind a screen and like there aren't really any real-world consequences can make people act worse online than they would in person.

Platform design: the way social media and other online spaces are designed can make conflict and negativity feel bigger than it really is. It's easy to misread someone's tone when you can't see or hear them, and it's easy to end up focused on negative or hateful comments, since algorithms tend to push that kind of content front and centre on our feeds.

WHAT HAPPENS BECAUSE OF CYBERBULLYING?



When there's 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.

—YOUTH FOCUS GROUP
PARTICIPANT

Youth also talked about what can happen after cyberbullying takes place, like:

Ruining someone's reputation: hurtful rumours can stick around online for a long time and keep causing problems like getting someone in trouble with the law or even costing them a job.

Conflicts getting out of hand: cyberbullying can sometimes turn into physical violence or even get the police getting involved.

Ruining relationships: friendships or relationships can fall apart when someone feels hurt or betrayed by false rumours or mean comments.

Negative feelings: people who get hurt may feel sad, lonely, anxious, embarrassed, or overwhelmed. People who hurt others may feel shame, regret, guilt, or embarrassment.

Hurting people who aren't even involved: online conflicts can end up hurting people who had nothing to do with it (like if someone's photo is used to create a deepfake without them knowing, or if someone makes fun of panic attacks and other people who deal with panic attacks see the comment and feel hurt by it too).





WHAT DO PEOPLE DO IF THEY EXPERIENCE OR WITNESS CYBERBULLYING?

Youth in our focus groups talked about when they think young people would actually tell an adult about cyberbullying. They said it usually happens in situations like:

WHEN IT'S SERIOUS

If someone's mental health or physical safety is at risk, trusted adults (like parents, teachers, therapists, or even police when there is violence) should get involved.

WHEN YOUNGER KIDS ARE INVOLVED

Younger youth may need more support from an adult.

WHEN IT'S AN ADULT THEY TRUST

Youth find it easier to open up to someone they already trust.

WHEN AN ADULT CAN OFFER GOOD ADVICE

Adults sometimes have more experience and can offer ideas or solutions that young people may not have thought of.

AS A LAST RESORT

If they've already tried everything else, young people may tell adults so they can help them end the conflict.



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

—YOUTH FOCUS GROUP PARTICIPANT



Some youth felt that adults might *already know* about cyberbullying like if they saw it happen in a public post, checked their kid's social media, or heard about it from their school. But youth in the focus groups also felt that there are times when young people would **not** want to tell an adult about cyberbullying, like:

If a relationship is involved:

youth may feel uncomfortable sharing details about their romantic life with adults or feel like it's something they should handle privately. Some youth also pointed out that young people probably won't tell an adult if they're in an unsafe relationship, which can leave them stuck in a dangerous situation without support.

If it doesn't feel serious

enough: telling an adult may feel like it's blowing things out of proportion.

If emotions are running high:

adults may not be able to calm things down and could even bring their own strong emotions to the situation, making it worse.

If adults don't really listen:

if adults jump to conclusions before fully understanding what's going on, they can misread the situation and make it worse.

If adults don't seem to 'get'

technology: if it seems like adults do not understand how social media or things like AI work, young people may feel like they can't really help.

If it might them in trouble:

being afraid of getting punished makes youth unlikely to tell adults.

If it might get someone else (like their friends) in trouble:

youth may want to protect their friends if they're involved in the conflict too.

If it could cause more drama:

telling an adult may get someone labelled a 'snitch,' and the person who gets in trouble may hold a grudge which could end up making things worse instead of better.



It's sad how, in this generation, people think they can't go to adults for stuff like this.

—YOUTH FOCUS
GROUP PARTICIPANT

Besides telling an adult, youth came up with two other things people might do if they're being cyberbullied or see it happening to someone else:

1 HANDLE IT THEMSELVES

If young people don't feel like they have an adult they can trust, they may choose to handle it alone. That could mean talking it out with the person they're in conflict with, apologizing if they were the one being mean, or asking the person why they did what they did. They may also ask their friends or siblings to help, but some young people worry that could make them look immature, or that having more people involved might spread the conflict and make it worse.

2 DO NOTHING

Youth in the focus groups thought that most people, like adults or friends, would probably see cyberbullying happening but do nothing about it. Some youth said it's better to stay out of it, since getting involved is "extra" or unnecessary drama, and may even make you the next target. Others thought that being online can make things feel distant, like it's not really your problem.

Youth in the focus groups talked about these options for what young people might do if they experience or see cyberbullying, but they didn't think all of them were the right choice. They pointed out that some of these choices, like dealing with it alone, might come from feeling alone (or isolated) or feeling like adults just can't help them.



At the end of the focus groups, we asked what adults could do to help young people feel more supported, so they're more likely to speak up instead of feeling like they have to handle cyberbullying alone. Youth had great suggestions for adults, like listening without judgement, knowing when to step in, and respecting privacy. We took their suggestions and combined them with research on what actually works to support young people experiencing cyberbullying to develop recommendations for adults (including parents, teachers, and others) who want to support youth.

Recommendations →



RECOMMENDATIONS FOR ADULTS WHO WANT TO SUPPORT YOUTH

Listen first: don't jump in and take over. Really listen to what the young person is telling you about what's happening.

Respect privacy: when a young person shares something with you, keep it private when you can. It helps build trust.

Be observant: teachers can pick up on tension between classmates. They can reach out, start a conversation to help work things out, let parents know, or even switch up classroom seating to separate the people involved.

Know when to step in: Even though young people usually want privacy, adults should step in if there's a risk of physical harm (like someone threatening to hurt them), or psychological harm (like panic attacks or depression).

Listen without judgement: avoid blaming and shaming responses like "I told you so" and "you shouldn't have done that." Comments like these may make youth less likely to come to adults to discuss online problems in the future.

Respect young people's opinions and choices: listen to what young people think and work together to try to figure out the best way forward.

Check your own bias: youth worried that if parents automatically assume their child is right, or teachers assume their favourite student is right, they may misunderstand the situation or make it worse. Adults need to manage their own emotions and bias so they don't accidentally make things worse.

Look at more than one solution: offer different options for handling the situation and talk to the young person about which options feels best. Talk to the young person about what is comfortable for them, but also what the right thing to do is even when it might be uncomfortable.

Keep learning about tech: youth worried that adults may not know what to do about things like AI deepfakes. The more adults understand about technology and online platforms, the more likely young people will feel adults can help them.

Stay connected with schools: parents should know what's happening at school. Staying in touch with teachers and understand what rules and support systems the school has in place helps them better support young people experiencing cyberbullying.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR SCHOOLS



Set up anti-cyberbullying programs:

raise awareness across the whole school about cyberbullying, including how to prevent it and what to do if it happens to you.

Set up anti-cyberbullying policies:

work with youth to create clear rules, expectations, and safe ways to report cyberbullying.

Create safe spaces for youth: offer mental health supports, like counselling. Youth in the focus groups said guidance counsellors could be a helpful and supportive person to report or talk about cyberbullying with.

Teach healthy and respectful communication skills: teachers can start conversations about cyberbullying in the classroom.

Strengthen the connection between school and home: parents and teachers should stay in touch to share information and resources that help youth experiencing cyberbullying. Youth feel more supported when school and home have similar rules and ways of helping.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR COMMUNITY ORGANIZATIONS

Support youth: Offer a safe space for youth to share what they're going through, keep it private when possible, and be upfront about when other adults (like parents) need to be told.

Training: Community workers (like social workers or healthcare providers) should be trained on how to help youth experiencing cyberbullying, including staying up-to-date on different types of cyberbullying, online platforms, and technologies.

Collaboration: Community workers can team up with teachers, parents, and other trusted adults in young people's lives to build a stronger support network around them.



RECOMMENDATIONS FOR

ONLINE PLATFORMS

Reduce negative content: fix algorithms that encourage negativity, conflict and hate, and promote positive content instead.

Moderate content: regularly check and remove harmful content and be clear about how and why something was or was not removed.

Make reporting easy: make it simple and clear for people to report cyberbullying and other harmful content.

Protect against AI-generated content: as AI tools get better and easier to use, platforms need to protect youth from deepfakes and other types of cyberbullying that are harder to spot and stop.





RECOMMENDATIONS FOR

PEOPLE WHO DESIGN ANTI-CYBERBULLYING PROGRAMS

We also created recommendations for people who design anti-cyberbullying programs for youth. These recommendations are about making sure programs are helpful to young people and reflect their experiences:

Use everyday language: Programs should talk about cyberbullying using words youth use like “being mean”, “extreme”, “an attack” instead of terms like “cyberbullying” which youth may not use themselves.

Teach youth how to talk things out: show youth how to calm situations down, talk to others about issues, and figure out the best way to respond to cyberbullying.

Teach youth how to manage their emotions: help youth learn to calm heated emotions using skills like deep breathing, paying attention to their feelings and looking at situations from many points of view. These skills should be taught according to multiple grade levels.

Help youth understand each other: show youth what it’s like to be in someone else’s place, without making them feel upset or wanting revenge, since this usually helps to resolve conflicts.

Show youth we can all be wrong sometimes: help youth see that it’s easy to think you’re right about something and actually get it wrong. If we accept that we can all make mistakes, we’re more open to learning and listening to each other, which makes it easier to solve conflicts.

Encourage everyone to take responsibility online: teach youth that we all need to be kind, respectful, and responsible online, and that everyone (including parents, teachers, and young people) have to work together. If we speak up when we see someone being bullied, no one has to face it alone.

Teach up-to-date digital skills: help young people build skills for handling conflict online, which can actually be harder than dealing with conflict in-person. That’s because people can act worse when they feel anonymous online, social media can make hate and negativity spread faster, and technologies like AI can create new ways to bully someone.

Share multiple resources: along with trusted adults (like parents, teachers, guidance counsellors, or community workers), make sure youth have resources at home, at school, and in their community to help them if they experience cyberbullying. Resources like [Kids Help Phone](#) and [OneStopTalk](#) can make a big difference.

SUPPORTING YOUTH WHO HAVE EXPERIENCED VIOLENCE

While all these recommendations apply to youth in general, in this project, we wanted to give special focus to youth who may have experienced violence in their home or community.

Research shows these youth may be more likely to experience or take part in cyberbullying. In the focus groups, we noticed that youth who have been exposed to violence were more likely to bring up extreme or violent ways a conflict could continue, like physical violence, getting the police or lawyers involved, or even a deepfake being used to frame someone for a crime. So, we've included some **specific recommendations for adults who support youth who have experienced violence:**

Recognize the trauma they've been through: adults and programs supporting these youth need to understand the trauma they may have experienced, and how cyberbullying may add to or bring back memories of past violence.

Understand that it may be harder for them to open up: youth who've experienced violence may find it hard to trust adults and institutions (like schools or the police) especially if they've had bad experiences with systems that were supposed to protect them. They might also worry more about what could happen if they speak up. Building trust with these young people takes time, and that trust matters to support them well.

Bring in trained community workers: for youth who've experienced violence, it helps to involve people with the right training like social workers, mental health professionals, or justice-involved service providers who know how to support these youth.

Talk about the cycle of revenge: youth who've experienced violence may be more likely to want revenge if someone hurts them. It's important to help them see that revenge usually leads to more hurt, and to show them better ways to break the cycle and get the help they need, without blaming or shaming them.

Connect them with crisis supports: since these youth may be less likely to turn to adults for help, it's important to connect them with community resources, like anonymous helplines or peer support programs, where they can get help.



MAIN TAKEAWAYS

We talked to youth from across the country in our focus groups and they gave us lots of helpful things to think about when building a program to help stop youth cyberbullying. The main takeaways are:

1 CYBERBULLYING CAN BE MANY THINGS

like saying mean or threatening things to someone online or even liking or sharing mean online posts about someone. Young people sometimes think that one mean comment may not count as cyberbullying, and others have different opinions on what counts, which shows how complicated it is to understand cyberbullying.

2 CYBERBULLYING CAN GET OUT OF HAND AND REALLY HURT PEOPLE

especially when people have strong emotions or don't know how to talk it out. Being online can also make people feel anonymous or make negativity seem normal and acceptable, which can make situations worse, and it can hurt people's reputation, their feelings, and their relationships.

3 TELLING ADULTS CAN BE EASY SOMETIMES AND NOT SO EASY OTHER TIMES

Young people feel like they can tell an adult when cyberbullying gets out of hand, or if they trust the adult and feel like they would give good advice. But they feel uncomfortable telling an adult sometimes, like if a relationship is involved, if they might get into trouble, or if it would cause more drama.

4 ADULTS CAN HELP YOUNG PEOPLE

Adults (like parents, teachers, or others in the community) who want to support youth going through cyberbullying can listen to them, give them advice, and help them talk things out. Adults can also help kids build digital skills and find resources for responding to cyberbullying.



NEXT STEPS

We'll use everything we learned to help us create a program with resources like:

Guides to help everyone at school (students, teachers, and parents) understand cyberbullying, how serious it can be, and what to do about it. Some will be used at a school assembly, and some can go home with parents.

A guide for adults who help youth in the community, especially youth who've experienced or witnessed violence, like doctors, therapists, or social workers.

Classroom activities that help students manage their emotions and work things out online.

Right now, we're creating these resources. We'll test them out with a few schools and organizations across Canada and ask what's working and what's not. Then we'll use that feedback to keep what's working and fix (or cut) what isn't. We want this program to be as helpful as possible for everyone, especially young people who've experienced or witnessed violence. Once it's ready, we'll share the final program so schools and communities across Canada can use it.

Want to be part of this?

If you want to be part of this program, like having your class or your school help us test these resources, or if you have questions or just want to share your thoughts about the research, please email us at

researchadmin@mediasmarts.ca