

Helping our kids navigate cyberbullying. A parent's guide.



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Helping our kids navigate cyberbullying – A parent's guide

For most young people, life online is all about socializing, and while most of this socializing is positive, some kids and teens are using the technology to intimidate and harass others – a phenomenon known as cyberbullying.

Although many parents – whose social lives played out in schoolyards, not on social networking sites – may feel over their heads when it comes to dealing with cyberbullying, they are still very important in helping their children successfully navigate this new social terrain. Parents are the number one group of people that kids turn to for help with online meanness, and two thirds say that talking to their parents makes the situation better.¹

To help you help your kids make the situation better, this guide includes information about cyberbullying and practical tips to recognize and address this issue.

What is cyberbullying?

The term “cyberbullying” can be a bit misleading. Unlike the traditional definition of bullying, which involves a difference in power or strength between children who bully and the children they target, a lot of the activities that adults might see as cyberbullying happen between children of roughly the same status. It can also be very difficult to tell who's actually doing the bullying in a cyberbullying scenario. Finally, much of the abusive behaviour that takes place within offline relationships may also take place online or be enhanced by digital technology.

One of the challenges in dealing with cyberbullying is that the term itself doesn't mean very much to kids and teens, who are more likely to describe what adults call cyberbullying as “getting into fights”, “starting something” or simply “drama.”² In fact, the most common reason given for online meanness by both boys and girls is “I was just joking around,” followed by “the person said something mean and cruel about me first” and “the person said something mean about my friend first”.³



1) Li, Joyce, Craig, Wendy. (2015) Young Canadians' Experiences With Electronic Bullying. MediaSmarts: Ottawa.

2) Marwich, Dr. Alice, and Dr. danah boyd. The Drama! Teen Conflict, Gossip, and Bullying in Networked Publics.

3) Steeves, Valerie. (2014) Young Canadians in a Wired World, Phase III: Cyberbullying: Dealing with Online Meanness, Cruelty and Threats. MediaSmarts: Ottawa.

What does it look like?

There are several ways that young people bully others online. By far, the most common behaviour is name calling, with smaller numbers of kids saying they've harassed someone in an online game, spread rumours, posted an embarrassing photo or video of someone, or made fun of someone's race, religion, ethnicity, or sexual orientation.⁴

How common is it?

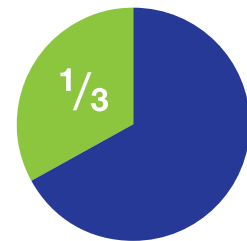
Just over a third of Canadian kids and teens say that someone has said something mean or cruel to them online, and just under a third say that someone has threatened them online (posting things like "I'm going to get you" or "You're going to get it"). Roughly a quarter say that they have been mean to someone else online.⁵

Even though we hear a lot in media about "mean girls", overall, boys are much more likely to be involved in cyberbullying. Kids and teens who are marginalized for reasons such as poverty,⁶ disability,⁷ being a member of a visible minority group,⁸ and having a lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender status⁹ are also much more likely to be targets.

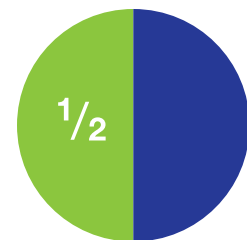
Although kids may pass off online meanness as a joke, cyberbullying can be even more devastating than face-to-face bullying. One reason for this is the potential presence of countless invisible witnesses and/or participants, which creates a situation where the young person being cyberbullied is left unsure of who knows, and whom to fear. Technology also extends the reach these young people have, enabling them to harass their targets anywhere and at any time.

There is little doubt that cyberbullying can be traumatic: one third of students who have been bullied online report symptoms of depression, a figure which rises to nearly one half for those who experienced both online and offline bullying.¹⁰

While cyberbullying should be reported, it can be very difficult for young people to step forward: How do you report an attack that leaves no physical scars? Will the consequences of telling an adult that you are being cyberbullied be worse than the bullying itself? Adults want to help, but many feel ill-equipped to handle bullying in a digital world.



1/3 of kids who are bullied online experience depression



1/2 of kids who are bullied online and offline experience depression

4) Steeves, Valerie. (2014) Young Canadians in a Wired World, Phase III: Cyberbullying: Dealing with Online Meanness, Cruelty and Threats. MediaSmarts: Ottawa.
5) Ibid.
6) Cross, E.J., R. Piggan, J. Vonkaenal-Platt and T. Douglas. (2012). Virtual Violence II: Progress and Challenges in the Fight against Cyberbullying. London: Beatbullying.
7) Livingstone, S., L. Haddon, A. Görzig, K. Ólafsson, with members of the EU Kids Online Network (2011) EU Kids Online Final Report.
8) Cross, E.J., R. Piggan, J. Vonkaenal-Platt and T. Douglas. (2012).
9) Hinduja, S., and Patchin, J. (2011) 'Cyberbullying Research Summary Factsheet: Bullying, Cyberbullying and Sexual Orientation'.
10) Kessel Schneider, Shari, Lydia O'Donnell, Ann Stueve and Robert W.S. Coulter. "Cyberbullying, School Bullying, and Psychological Distress: A Regional Census of High School Students." American Journal of Public Health. (January 2012) 102:1, 171-77.

Roles

People involved in cyberbullying are generally labelled as being perpetrators, targets, and witnesses. But because both offline and online meanness can go back and forth amongst kids who know each other, it's not surprising that there is a significant overlap between kids who have engaged in online meanness and those who have experienced it. In fact, kids who have been cyberbullied are significantly more likely than kids who haven't been cyberbullied to electronically bully others and it's not at all unusual for both parties in a cyberbullying scenario to see themselves as being the victims.¹¹



Witnesses are especially important in bullying scenarios and can be just as important as targets or perpetrators in how an incident plays out.¹² We don't tend to think of kids who witness bullying as being 'victims', but they may also suffer negative effects that are as bad as or worse than the child being picked on.¹³ The good news is that most kids want to help – 65 percent who witness online meanness do something about it.¹⁴ When witnesses to bullying stand up and defend the target, it can make a tremendous and positive difference – but not in every situation; they still need guidance from adults to make sure what they do doesn't make the situation worse.

Whether it's by directly joining in the bullying, encouraging the perpetrator, or re-victimizing the target by sharing a bullying post or video, there may be just as many times where intervening can do greater harm to the child being targeted, to the witness, or both – and kids and teens may have a number of good reasons for not wanting to get involved:

- Fear of making yourself a target. Saying that anyone who witnesses bullying should confront the perpetrator is like saying that everyone who sees a mugging should try to stop it. Standing up to defend a target – especially if you turn out to be the only person who stands up – can easily lead to becoming a target yourself without necessarily having a positive effect on the situation.
- Fear of losing social status. Even if intervening or reporting doesn't make them a target, this can still have long-term effects on a young person's social status, either by becoming associated with the target or by being labeled a "snitch" – both of which may easily be preludes to being a target of bullying.



11) Steeves, Valerie. (2014) Young Canadians in a Wired World, Phase III: Cyberbullying: Dealing with Online Meanness, Cruelty and Threats. MediaSmarts: Ottawa.

12) Hawkins, D., Pepler, D. & Craig, W. (2001). Naturalistic observations of peer interventions in bullying. *Social Development*, 10, 512-527.

13) Rivers et al. Observing bullying at school: The mental health implications of witness status. *School Psychology Quarterly*, 24 (4): 211.

14) Steeves, Valerie. (2014) Young Canadians in a Wired World, Phase III: Cyberbullying: Dealing with Online Meanness, Cruelty and Threats. MediaSmarts: Ottawa.

- Fear of escalating the situation. Both targets of and witnesses to bullying often fear that standing up to or reporting bullying to a parent or teacher is more likely to make things worse rather than better. Research has found that while teachers rate highly as a source of information about cyberbullying, youth are extremely reluctant to turn to them for help – especially in schools with “zero tolerance” policies in place to respond to cyberbullying complaints in a particular way.¹⁵

A good starting point for talking to your children about what to do if they witness cyberbullying is “first, do no harm.” As well as telling them not to participate in the bullying, encourage them to think carefully about the possible consequences of different interventions before doing anything. Instead of telling young people to report and intervene each time they witness cyberbullying, we want to encourage them to see themselves as active participants in the situation, and consider different approaches, depending on the circumstances, such as:

- **Comfort the person being targeted privately:** One of the worst things about being bullied is feeling that nobody cares about what’s happening. Letting someone know you care can be a big help and won’t make things worse.
- **Help the target report what’s happening or talk about it to their parents or friends.** Kids say that helping them talk to parents or friends or report it to the service provider is one of the best things witnesses can do. It’s also important to help them document what’s happening by keeping copies or making screenshots (see <http://www.take-a-screenshot.org> for how to do this) so they have evidence if they decide to report it.
- **Post something nice about the target.** If you want to do something public, stay positive: let people know that you’re not on the bully’s side by posting something good about the target. You can also say things like “We don’t say mean things to people here” or “Bullying isn’t what this place is about” to make sure everyone knows this behaviour isn’t tolerated in your online community.
- **Talk to the person doing the bullying privately.** If you want to talk to them, do it with something like a private message, text, or IM so they don’t feel embarrassed. If they say they’re only joking, remind them that what’s a joke to one person can really hurt someone else. If they say they’re getting back for something done to them or to a friend, tell them that escalating the drama will only make things worse.
- **If something is happening right now that you have to stop,** try distracting the person who is doing the bullying or giving the target a chance to get out of the situation without being embarrassed.



15) Ibid.

How do I know if my child is being cyberbullied?

Signs that your child is being electronically bullied can include:

- a reluctance to use the computer, cell phone, or go to school
- being hyper-vigilant about the cell phone and/or social networking accounts
- being upset or aggravated after using cell phones or computers
- general anxiety, distress, sleeplessness
- withdrawal from friends and usual activities.



What should I do if my child is targeted?

- Even if the situation just sounds like a little 'online drama' to you, take it seriously. Listen and provide advice if your child asks for it. Make sure to check in regularly to make sure things are going better. One of the biggest reasons why kids and teens don't go to adults for help is because they worry that adults won't take the situation seriously. Letting them know you care and are there for them can go a long way in alleviating these fears.
- Report online bullying to your Internet or cell phone service provider. Most companies have Acceptable Use Policies (AUPs) that clearly define privileges and guidelines for people who use their services, and the actions that can be taken if those guidelines are violated. They should be able to respond to reports of cyberbullying over their networks, or help you track down the appropriate service provider to respond to.
- Report incidents of online harassment and physical threats to your local police. Some forms of online bullying are considered criminal acts. For example: under the Criminal Code of Canada, it is a crime to communicate repeatedly with someone if your communication causes them to fear for their own safety or the safety of others. Consult the MediaSmarts article Cyberbullying and the Law for more information:

<http://mediasmarts.ca/digital-media-literacy/digital-issues/cyberbullying/cyberbullying-law>.



Teach your child how to respond to an online bully. Print the handout What to Do if Someone is Mean to You Online:

<http://mediasmarts.ca/teacher-resources/what-do-if-someone-mean-you-online-tip-sheet>

- Don't fight back,
- Save the evidence,
- Talk to someone about it, and
- Report it to the site where it's happening or to police if it's making you feel scared, making it hard for you to go to school or do things you enjoy, if you are being physically threatened, or if someone is threatening to publish something that would hurt or humiliate you.

What should I avoid doing if my child is being cyberbullied?

It can be difficult for kids and teens to come forward when they are being bullied; even to mom or dad.

To build trust, try not to overreact. Don't forbid your child to go online or use their cell phone in the hope of eliminating the source of the problem: for your child, this is equal to social death and will leave her or him feeling even more vulnerable and victimized (not to mention the fact that an extreme reaction such as this will probably cause your child to avoid confiding in you again when feeling threatened). Also, don't blame your child for what has happened – even if they're partly responsible. While poor decisions can be a good learning opportunity down the line, when they first come to you for help, you want to be on their side to help them work through it.

Other things to avoid:

- Telling them to stop “tattling” or “snitching”
- Telling them they should solve the problem themselves
- Minimizing or ignoring the situation



How can I prevent cyberbullying?

Unfortunately, meanness is going to happen both online and offline. Although we can't entirely prevent cyberbullying, we can help our kids be ethical, resilient, and informed.

We can reduce many of the risks associated with Internet and cell phone use by having open, ongoing conversations with our children about their online activities and by setting up rules that grow along with them.

MediaSmarts' research shows that having family Internet rules on things like treating people with respect can have a positive impact on your children's online behaviour.

This tip sheet can get you started:

http://mediasmarts.ca/sites/mediasmarts/files/pdfs/tipsheet/TipSheet_FamilyOnlineRules.pdf

Research also shows that bullying rates drop when kids know that it is against the rules and how to report it.

Tell your children to come to you right away if they feel uncomfortable or threatened online. Don't take it for granted that your child will do this: only 8 percent of teens who have been bullied online have told their parents.

Encourage your children to take action if they see someone being bullied. This doesn't necessarily mean confronting the bully: talk to them about things they can do that are most likely to help the person being bullied and least likely to make the situation worse. Refer to the section on Witnesses above for tips on how they can intervene in ways that won't make things worse for them or the target.

In order to fight cyberbullying effectively we need to change the culture in which it happens, starting with helping kids understand that what may seem like "just a joke" can have a powerful effect on someone else. It's also important to teach them that cyberbullying may be less common than they think it is: kids and teens often overestimate how common bullying actually is, even though most say that their own online experiences are positive. Knowing the facts is important because when young people believe that bullying behaviour is the norm, they are more likely to engage in and tolerate it – and when they understand how uncommon bullying actually is, bullying rates drop.



Cyberbullying and the law

There's a lot of confusion amongst parents – and kids – about where cyberbullying sits under Canadian law. Although it's important not to exaggerate legal consequences (kids tune out when you do this), it is important to know where online meanness and harassment crosses legal lines.

- **Some forms of electronic bullying are considered criminal acts.** Under the Criminal Code of Canada, it is a crime to communicate repeatedly with someone if your communication causes them to fear for their own safety or for the safety of others.
- **Publishing – or threatening to publish – intimate images without consent** also falls under the Criminal Code.
- **A cyberbully may also be violating the Canadian Human Rights Act** if he or she spreads hate or discrimination based on race, national or ethnic origin, colour, religion, age, sex, sexual orientation, marital status, family status, or disability.
- A thorough explanation of federal and provincial laws relating to cyberbullying can be found at: <http://mediasmarts.ca/digital-media-literacy/digital-issues/cyberbullying/cyberbullying-law>



Working With Schools

Although many schools are teaching students about cyberbullying, and many teachers are expected to address cyberbullying amongst their students, our education system is often struggling to keep up with and address this issue. For instance, although almost two thirds of students say their school has a rule relating to cyberbullying, only three quarters of these students say that the rules are helpful and having these rules doesn't do much to stop kids from participating in this sort of behaviour.¹⁶

Parents can work with schools to help address these problems in a number of ways such as:

- Challenging “zero tolerance” policies that escalate cyberbullying situations and act as barriers to students speaking out when cyberbullying occurs.
- Advocating for evidence-based (as opposed to “one-size-fits-all” intervention programs that include a whole school approach; provide support both for targets and perpetrators after an incident; and work at multiple levels – in the classroom, school-wide, and in connection with parents and the surrounding community.¹⁷
- Support school-based programs that build empathy in youth; that teach them to avoid the “empathy traps” of digital communication; provide them with effective tools for managing their emotions and dealing with online conflict; and promote treating others with respect.
- Work with schools to create school cultures based on empathy, rights, responsibility, and respect, both online and off.



How can I learn more?

As much as possible, show an interest in your child's online life: Where does he or she go online? What does he or she do? What is it about these online experiences that are so absorbing? If you're in the habit of sharing your own online experiences with your child, she or he will be more likely to talk to you when having a negative experience.

If you want to better understand your child's online experience, visit MediaSmarts' site at: <http://mediasmarts.ca/digital-media-literacy/digital-issues/cyberbullying>

16) Steeves, Valerie. (2014) Young Canadians in a Wired World, Phase III: Cyberbullying: Dealing with Online Meanness, Cruelty and Threats. MediaSmarts: Ottawa.

17) Craig, Wendy. Testimony before the Senate Committee on Human Rights, December 12, 2011.



How you can participate in TELUS WISE

- Visit us at telus.com/wise if you have any questions or if you want to book a free in-person TELUS WISE session for you child's school and/or parent group.
- Contact us at wise@telus.com
- Join the conversation online with [@TELUS](https://twitter.com/TELUS) on Twitter and using [#TELUSWISE](https://twitter.com/hashtag/TELUSWISE)

