
Executive Summary

How big a problem is cyberbullying? Judging by media coverage, which frequently focuses on the most sensational and extreme cases, it's an epidemic and schools and legislators have often responded with heavy-handed measures. Students, on the other hand, often say that cyberbullying is less of an issue than adults perceive it to be – though even they, in many cases, overestimate how common it is. MediaSmarts' study *Cyberbullying: Dealing with Online Meanness, Cruelty and Threats* suggests that so far as Canadian youth are concerned the answer is somewhere in between, presenting a portrait of online conflict that demands more nuanced, contextualized and evidence-based responses.

► He Said She Said – Mean and Cruel Behaviour

In the survey, students were asked a series of questions on their experiences with mean and cruel online behaviour and online threats. In their answers, some commonly held perceptions were challenged, most notably those relating to 'mean girl' culture online, the types of behaviours that are most problematic for youth, traditional models of bullies versus victims and the reciprocal nature of online conflict. Additionally, online conflict is highly gendered with significant differences in how boys and girls experience mean, cruel and threatening behaviours online.

Being involved in mean and cruel behaviour is a common online experience for a significant minority of students.

- Twenty-three percent of students report that they have said or done something mean or cruel to someone online.
- Thirty-seven percent of students report that someone has said or done something mean or cruel to them online that made them feel badly.

Grade 8 appears to be a turning point; both behaviours rise throughout grades 4-8 and then stay relatively stable throughout grades 9-11.

- Behaving meanly increases across the grades, from a low of 6 percent in Grade 4, to 31 percent in Grade 8, to a high of 38 percent in Grade 11.
- Older students are more likely to report that someone has been mean to them.

The vast majority of this kind of behaviour involves name calling, but the overall number of students reporting this behaviour – although significant – is still relatively low.

- Eighteen percent of students say they have called someone a name online.
- When it comes to other negative behaviours:
 - six percent of students report that they have harassed someone in an online game
 - five percent have spread rumours
 - four percent have posted an embarrassing photo/video of someone
 - three percent say that they have made fun of someone's race, religion or ethnicity and two percent have made fun of someone's sexual orientation
 - one percent report that they have harassed someone sexually (e.g. said or did something sexual when the person did not want them to)

Contrary to popular conceptions of the “mean girl”, boys are more likely than girls to be mean or cruel online.

- Boys are more likely than girls to harass someone in an online game, make fun of someone's race, religion or ethnicity, make fun of someone's sexual orientation or sexually harass someone.
- Girls are more likely than boys to post an embarrassing photo/video or call someone a name.
- There is no significant difference in the percentage of boys and girls who spread rumours (4% of all boys surveyed compared to 5% of all girls surveyed).

Online meanness is often less an attack of a “bully” against a “victim” than it is an ongoing part of the relational conflicts that arise as part of the drama of teen life.

- There is a significant overlap (39%) between students who have said or done mean things and students who have had mean things said about them.
- Retaliation is also a factor: the second and third most common reasons given by students for being mean online was because someone had said something mean or cruel about them first and because someone had said something mean and cruel about a friend first.

Many students see meanness as a common form of interaction with little perceived harm.

- Over half (55%) of students participating in mean and cruel online behaviour say they are “just joking around.”
 - Boys (64%) are more likely than girls (45%) to use this excuse for being mean or cruel online.
- Boys are also more likely to say that they were motivated by boredom or by the fact their friends were doing it.
- Girls are more likely to report being mean online because someone has said something mean about them first (52%), and also because they don't like the person, the person said something mean about a friend or because they were angry.

Feelings about mean and cruel online behaviour

- Although 37 percent of students say that someone has been mean or cruel to them online, only 11 percent say this is sometimes (8%) and often (3%) a problem for them.
 - Younger students and girls are more likely to feel this way.

Sexting

Given recent concerns over sexting, in our survey we asked students in grades 7-11 specific questions on this issue. The findings from these questions will be discussed more fully in a subsequent report; however, in the context of cyberbullying, our data suggests that the overlap between sexting and online meanness is quite small.

- Only four percent of students in grades 7-11 report that they have forwarded a sext that someone had sent them to someone else.

› You're Going to Get It' – Dealing with Threats Online

- Thirty-one percent of students report that someone has threatened them online.
 - The majority of these students report this is a rare occurrence (once a year or less).
 - Only nine percent of these students report receiving online threats on a regular basis (once a month or more).
- The majority of the students (70%) who report receiving threats once a month or more do not see them as a serious problem.
- One third of students who receive online threats once a month or more – three percent of the total sample – report that these are sometimes, or often, serious problems for them.

When grade and gender are taken into consideration:

- Boys and older students are more likely to make online threats.
- Students in younger grades are most likely to report that online threats are often or sometimes a serious problem for them, peaking in Grade 5.
- Girls are twice as likely as boys to see online threats as a serious problem.

› Student Strategies for Dealing with Conflict Online

Students use a number of strategies to respond to online meanness and threats.

Generally, students of all ages use similar methods to deal with online meanness and threats, with parents playing a significant role in helping children and teens handle online conflict. And despite – or perhaps because of – the power of technology to amplify online drama, students often prefer face-to-face negotiation to resolve online clashes.

The most common response overall for both meanness (50%) and threats (55%) is to ask parents for help.

- This is especially true for students in grades 4-7.
- Although asking parents for help drops throughout high school, even in Grade 11 many students will still turn to parents for help with online meanness (19%) and threats (26%).
- Half of all students – especially those in grades 4-6 – would tell their parents if someone sent them something over the Internet or on their phone that made them really uncomfortable.
- Seventy-two percent of students agree with the statement that, “If I have a problem online (for example, someone posts something hurtful or sends me a photo that makes me uncomfortable) I can trust my parent(s) to help me solve it.”

Top Six Strategies

For mean and cruel behaviour:

Grades 4-6	Grades 7-11
Ask parent(s) for help	Ignore it and hope it would go away
Ignore it and hope it would go away*	Talk face-to-face with the person who posted it*
Ask another trusted adult*	Ask friends for help*
Ask a teacher for help	Ask parents for help
Talk face-to-face with the person who posted it	It would not bother me so I would do nothing
Ask friends for help	Privately email or message the person who posted it

* Tied for these grades

For online threats:

Grades 4-6	Grades 7-11
Ask parent(s) for help	Ask parent(s) for help
Ask another trusted adult	Ask friends for help
Ask friends for help	It would not bother me so I would do nothing*
Ask a teacher for help*	Ignore it and hope it would go away*
Ignore it and hope it would go away*	Talk face-to-face with the person who posted it
Call the police	Ask a teacher for help

* Tied for these grades

- Overall, contacting the police trails behind contacting other adults, although students are almost twice as likely to contact the police if a threat is involved (23% compared to 11% for meanness).
- French language students in Quebec are more likely than English language students in the rest of Canada to ask a teacher, another trusted adult or the police for help in dealing with online meanness.
 - They are also more likely to ask a teacher for help in dealing with an online threat, but there is no difference between these students when it comes to contacting the police regarding a threat.
- More students rely on face-to-face confrontation than on private communications over a networked device to deal with conflict, and posting an online response to an incident is the least preferred option for all grades.

There are different patterns of responses for boys and girls.

- For both meanness and threats, girls are more likely than boys to:
 - ask parents, friends, teachers or other trusted adults for help
 - privately message the offending party
 - ignore the conflict in the hope that it will go away
- Boys are more likely to not be bothered and so do nothing.
- When someone is mean or cruel online, girls are more likely than boys to confront the offending party face-to-face.
- When a threat is involved, boys are more likely to confront the offending party in person.
- The most common first responses to online meanness and threats are:
 - asking parents for help
 - ignoring it and hoping it will go away
 - doing nothing because they are not bothered by it
- If the first responses don't work, the most common second responses are:
 - asking parents for help
 - asking friends for help
 - ignoring it and hoping it goes away
- Parents and friends continue to be popular choices if the first two responses don't succeed.
 - However, for online meanness, talking face-to-face with the poster is another popular response.
 - Common third responses to threats include contacting the police and asking another trusted adult for help.
 - Students are also much more likely to talk to a teacher as a second or third option.

► Bystanders and Interveners – Helping Others in Conflict

The good news is that many youth who witness people being picked on online will often do something about it. The bad news, however, is that part of this helping behaviour may include

retaliatory meanness, which reinforces the need for providing youth with more nuanced and pro-social strategies for when they witness online conflict.

- Sixty-five percent of students report that, when they have seen someone being mean or cruel to another person online, they have done something to help the person who is being picked on.
 - Girls are more likely than boys to help someone in this situation.
 - Students in grades 6 through 9 are slightly more likely to help than younger and older students.
 - Compared to students who have not participated in conflict online before, students who have been targets of mean, cruel or threatening behaviour, or who have behaved this way towards others themselves, are more likely to report helping someone who is being picked on online.

► Rules and Attitudes about Cyberbullying in School and at Home

In keeping with the important role of parents, having household rules about treating others with respect online strongly correlates with more pro-social behaviour on students' part.

- Forty-seven percent of students have household rules about treating others with respect online.
- Having this rule correlates with lower levels of mean and threatening behaviour.
 - Students with no family rules about treating others with respect online are 59 percent more likely to be mean or cruel than students with rules and are twice as likely to make threats.

When it comes to schools, the picture is more complicated.

- Most students (62%) report that their schools have rules or policies to deal with cyberbullying.
 - However, over one third do not know whether or not there are rules in place.
- There is very little correlation between the presence of school rules and whether or not a student has engaged in meanness or threatening behaviour online or has been a recipient of meanness or threats.

Teachers are the most common source of information about how to deal with cyberbullying, even though they are among the last people students will go to for help with conflict.

- Sixty-two percent of students have learned about cyberbullying from teachers.
 - Parents are the second most common source of information.
 - The percentage of students learning from teachers stays fairly constant from grades 5-11, while the percentage of students learning from parents drops from one half in Grade 4 to one quarter in Grade 11.
 - By Grade 11, friends and online sources also rise in importance.

A large majority of students (81%) agree with the statement, “I feel respected and valued as a member of my school community.”

- Perhaps not surprisingly, students who have either done mean or threatening things online or have had others do mean or threatening things to them are less likely to feel respected and valued.
- They are also more likely than other students to agree with the statement, “Bullies are usually popular at school.”

Three quarters of the students who are aware that their school has rules or policies regarding cyberbullying think that they are sometimes or often helpful.

- However, the percentage of students who think the rules are never or rarely helpful increases across grades to a high of 35 percent in Grade 11.
- This ambivalence may be attributed to students’ perceptions that adults are overly sensitive to their interactions and have trouble identifying bullying when it occurs. A large majority of students agree with the statement, “Sometimes parents or teachers call it bullying when kids are really just joking around.”
- Students who have experienced online conflict think that school rules are less effective than students who have not experienced conflict.

Effective Interventions

The findings support the need for more nuanced approaches that support both the general student population and those youth who may be most at risk. Additionally, our findings speak to the need for resources for the home so that parents can better help their children learn to treat others with respect and to handle online conflict.

- Since the harm of online meanness is not evenly distributed, one-size-fits-all solutions are unlikely to be effective. In addition to general initiatives designed to increase empathy and promote healthy relationships among students as a whole, we need targeted responses to protect the most vulnerable students from harm.
- Empathy-building – in particular, teaching students to handle “hot” emotional states and to recognize and avoid the aspects of digital communications that may inhibit empathy – is crucial to help young people develop healthier relationships with each other and more productive responses to anger and interpersonal conflict.
- Interventions also need to be broadened to reflect the different forms that online conflict takes, such as harassment, reciprocal conflict and online relationship abuse and incivility.
- While it is good news the majority of students of all ages actively intervene to help others being cyberbullied, education may still be needed to give young people the skills they need to navigate conflict in a safe, pro-social and respectful way.