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# What Parents Need to Know about Cyberbullying

Miriam Mohamed : 12-15 minutes

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Technology and youth seem destined for each other. They are both young, fast-paced, and ever-changing. In the last 20 years, there has been an explosion in new technology. This new technology has been eagerly embraced by young people and has led to expanding knowledge, social networks, and even new vocabulary, including trends, DMing (direct messaging), and internet slang that parents need to decipher. There are both benefits and risks, however, including cyberbullying.

New technology has many potential benefits for youth. With the help of new technology, young people can interact with others throughout the world on a regular basis. Social networking sites like Snapchat, Instagram, and TikTok also allow youth to develop new relationships with others, some of whom they have never even met in person. New technology also provides opportunities to make rewarding social connections for those youth who have difficulty developing friendships in traditional social settings or because of limited contact with same-aged peers. In addition, regular Internet access allows teens and pre-teens to quickly increase their knowledge on a wide variety of topics.

However, the recent explosion in technology does not come without risks. Youth can use electronic media to embarrass, harass, or threaten their peers. Increasing numbers of adolescents are becoming victims of this form of violence which is better known as cyberbullying. Research suggests that 9-35% of young people report being victims of this type of violence, and like traditional forms of youth violence, cyberbullying is often associated with emotional distress and problems at school.

## What is Cyberbullying?

Cyberbullying is defined as the willful and repeated harm inflicted through the use of computers, cell phones, and other electronic devices. The definition was developed because it is simple, concise, reasonably comprehensive, and captures the most critical elements. To fit the definition, online activity needs to include the following:

- Willful: The behavior has to be deliberate, not accidental.
- Repeated: Bullying reflects a pattern of behavior, not just one isolated incident.
- Cause Harm: The target must perceive that harm was inflicted.
- Inflicted through computers, cell phones, and other electronic devices: This, of course, is what differentiates cyberbullying from traditional bullying.

## Where Does Cyberbullying Occur?

Cyberbullying occurs across a variety of venues and mediums in cyberspace, and it shouldn't come as a surprise that it occurs most often where adolescents congregate online:

- on social media (such as Instagram, Snapchat, TikTok, and Twitter)

- in voice/text chat in popular games (Roblox, Call of Duty Black Ops, PUBG, Overwatch, Fortnite, God of War)
- and video-sharing, streaming, and community sites (such as YouTube, Discord, and Twitch)

Instances of cyberbullying are increasing in these environments—although their frequency, type, and context vary greatly.

## How To Help Prevent Cyberbullying

### 1. Talk to your kids about bullying

As we all know, technology is here to stay. No matter the online platform or how much or little kids or teens engage in social media, establishing an openness to talk about what they are doing online, who they are interacting with, and what sites and apps they are using is key to setting the tone for potentially more difficult conversations. Talk with your child about online behavior and social interaction. It is okay to express support for their technology use and acknowledge their interest in it. A good rule of thumb is that you should not say or do anything online that you would not say or do in “real life.” Online harassment is just as hurtful as real-life bullying, and neither is ever acceptable.

### 2. Develop rules about online safety.

Together with your child, develop rules about acceptable and safe behaviors for all electronic media. Set age-appropriate limits and discuss expectations. The rules should focus on ways to maximize the benefits of technology and decrease its risks. Allow them to negotiate and collaborate on an agreement. By doing this, they will be more likely to take ownership of their behavior and you will have a more solid foundation upon which to hold them accountable. Let them know that you, as their parents, reserve the right to look at their devices, if you feel there is a concern or if they demonstrate an inability to use technology safely. Connect expectations to your family’s Islamic values. Make sure to use language that reflects facts (something that was said or something you heard or observed), statements of consequence (certain actions are helpful or hurtful, effective or ineffective), or personal preferences (“I didn’t like seeing that”). Refrain from judgmental language (e.g., good/bad, stupid, nice, etc.). These kinds of evaluative words can heighten emotions and shut down open communication. Make plans for what they should do if they become a victim of electronic aggression or know someone who is being victimized.

### 3. Encourage empathy.

The relationship between empathy and healthy peer relationships has been studied at length over the years. Research suggests that building empathy can help reduce bullying and cyberbullying while simultaneously promoting tolerance, kindness, and peer respect in student interactions. Communicate with your children about how online behavior can inflict harm and cause pain in the real world. Work to cultivate empathy by role-playing situations where bullying occurs, pointing out how words can have a negative effect on one’s self-esteem, and by reminding them that Prophet Muhammed, peace and blessings be upon him said, “Kind words are charity,” this is in regards to verbal and written, and text.

### 4. Educate yourself.

Stay informed about the new devices and websites your child is using. Technology changes rapidly and many developers offer information to keep people aware of advances. Continually talk with your child about “where they are going” and explore the technology yourself. Technology is not going away, and forbidding young people to access electronic media may not be a good long-term solution. Together, parents and children can come up with ways to maximize the benefits of technology and decrease its risks.

## 5. Recognize the signs of cyberbullying.

With the amount of time young people are spending on the Internet or on their phones, it is crucial to be able to spot the signs of cyberbullying. Cyberbullying is frequently associated with psychological distress. Cyber victims tend to have increased rates of depression, anxiety, and insomnia, whereas cyberbullies are more likely to have problems with outward aggression, hyperactivity, and substance use. A major concern is the increased risk of suicide, considered stronger than in traditional bullying. Bully victims—individuals who are attacked and transition to become cyberbullies or vice versa—seem to have more accompanying symptoms and more behavioral problems than those who are only victims or only bullies. These can be organized into three categories: emotional, social/behavioral, and academic impacts.

### Emotional Symptoms

- Becomes withdrawn or shy
- Shows signs of depression
- Is extremely moody or agitated
- Is anxious or overly stressed out
- Shows signs of aggressive behavior

### Social/Behavioral Symptoms

- Suddenly stops using the computer
- Changes in eating or sleeping habits (e.g., nightmares)
- No longer wants to participate in activities once enjoyed
- Hurts self, attempts or threatens suicide
- Suddenly changes friends

### Academic Impact

- Doesn't want to go to school
- Gets into trouble at school
- Skips school
- Loses interest in school
- Drops in grades

The biggest red flag that a child may be being cyberbullied is a withdrawal from technology. Talk to the child if you notice a sudden change in computer or phone usage.

## 6. Help stop cyberbullying.

Parents need to be educated on the problem, how to discuss it with their children, how to work with schools or the parents of cyberbullies, and when to call the police.

## What to Do When

There are a number of considerations, dependent upon the relationship to the cyberbullying.

### If my child is the victim of cyberbullying:

First and foremost, youth should develop a relationship with a parent or trusted adult so they can talk about any experiences they have online (or off) that make them upset or uncomfortable. It is hard for parents to know the best way to react if their child is bullied, in either instance, online or offline. Though a teen may be being bullied, they may not know that help is available or may feel too embarrassed to speak up.

Youth should also use the account and privacy settings within each device, app, or network to control who can contact and interact with them, and who can read their online content. This can significantly reduce their victimization risk.

With the use of screenshots, screen recordings, chat or text logs, and date/time stamps, youth should take the time to report any harassment, threats, impersonation, or other problems they see or experience.

### If my child is the perpetrator of cyberbullying:

There are a few tell-tale signs that a teen may be cyberbullying others:

- Stops using the computer or turns off the screen when someone comes near
- Appears nervous or jumpy when using the computer or cell phone
- Is secretive about what they are doing on the computer
- Spends excessive amounts of time on the computer
- Becomes upset or angry when the computer or cell phone privileges are limited or taken away

Finding out that your child is inflicting harm on others can cause an array of emotions. Here are tips on how to respond:

- **Remain calm:** When addressing the issue it is necessary to discuss it in a level-headed manner. Do not demonize, disrespect, or judge your child. They are not the problem, the behavior is!
- **Acknowledge the issue:** Do not try to trivialize, minimize, rationalize, or ignore the problem!
- **Communicate:** Make sure your child knows they can always come to you when they have issues with their peers.
- **Teach:** Teach them by giving them the opportunity and skill set to resolve interpersonal issues in an appropriate manner.
- **STOP the Bullying:** Get the bullying to end and never happen again! Ensure that all instances of bullying are stopped immediately.

### If my child witnesses cyberbullying:

Those who witness cyberbullying often recognize that what they are seeing is wrong and should stop but might hesitate to get involved because of problems they fear it might bring upon them. By doing nothing, however, bystanders are doing something – they are passively encouraging the behavior. By actively standing up – at that moment or right afterward (by defending and/or encouraging the target, helping to block and report the harassment, saving digital evidence, and reaching out to an adult), they can make a big difference in improving the situation, as targets often feel helpless and hopeless and need someone to come to the rescue. Finally, they should never directly or indirectly contribute to the behavior – by forwarding hurtful messages, laughing at inappropriate private jokes or content, condoning the act just to “fit in,” or otherwise silently allowing it to continue.

Sometimes it is hard for one student alone to step up on behalf of others. However, it is a lot easier to do when the help and support of one or two other friends. Encourage youth to band together with others if they are nervous about intervening or responding by themselves.

In the past, what differentiated adults from children were the amount of knowledge we had access to. This has become reversed: youth now access more information, at a faster rate, than adults. Of concern is that they do not always have the maturity or problem-solving skills to manage information and online relationships. Indeed, “the future is friendly” only if we teach, model, and monitor technology use to ensure that it is used for good rather than harm.

For more information and many additional resources on all kinds of bullying, visit <https://www.stopbullying.gov/>.

*Miriam Mohamed is a mother to seven children and a granny to two cats! She loves trying new things and learning cool facts. She has taught in an Islamic school setting, has experience assisting children with special needs, and enjoys volunteering and being a part of the community. Miriam lives in Chicago with her beautiful flowering cherry tree and big family.*