



Cyberbullying: What it is and how to help

**Online harassment can have serious, lifelong health impacts.
It isn't a 'normal' part of growing up or something to be tolerated**

A form of aggression

Most children and teens who are cyberbullied are also bullied in person. But when bullying moves online, the original perpetrator is often joined by others who engage with and share content.

Because cyberbullying can happen in so many spaces, there is often [no relief](#) for the target. A person can be harassed privately (DMs/IMs/texts, voice/video calls) or publicly (on a social media platform). It can happen 24 hours a day, with multiple people involved.

Cyberbullying takes many forms, and includes engaging in this online behaviour:

- Sending mean messages
- Spreading rumors
- Posting/sharing fake/AI images
- Posting harmful content in a public forum: social media, message board, or chat room
- Excluding someone from an online group chat, posts, or tags
- Sharing personal information about someone
- Explicit threats of harm

A serious health issue

Being cyberbullied is scary and isolating. Victims often feel lonely, afraid, and even hopeless because they see no end to the harassment. When stress is constant, it can cause health problems.

Children and youth who are bullied often have poor mental health. And while any form of bullying can lead to thoughts of suicide, the risk is higher with online bullying. Bullying is also linked to chronic pain, sleep problems, and a weakened immune system due to chronic stress.

These harmful effects don't end when bullying stops. Bullying has lasting effects on a person's self-esteem, sense of self-worth, and how they see the world. Youth who have been bullied have higher rates of depression, anxiety, and suicidality as adults. They may also have trouble managing stress and more physical health problems.

HOW PARENTS CAN HELP

Keep track of your child's social media use and in-person peer relationships. Speak openly and often about the online world and be clear that you are there to support them as needed.

Also consider taking these steps:

- Develop a phone contract or family media plan to be clear about the rules for social media use.
- Use parental controls and device/privacy settings and check regularly to ensure they are active.
- Co-view online content and encourage your child to be mindful of what they share, and with who.
- Talk about safety, privacy and the impact of cyberbullying for both victims and bullies: for example, what is inappropriate or even criminal behaviour.
- Encourage youth to put away electronic devices at least an hour before bed and to not access them until the next day.

When you suspect your child is being bullied

Calmly speak with them. Your child may think that things will get worse if you are involved, but adult intervention typically makes things better.

- Urge them not to respond in person or online. Make a copy of all interactions, then block or delete the bully as a contact. Change contact details for all accounts and adjust privacy settings. Consider deleting access to social media, even temporarily. Later, help your child set up a new account that only certain people know about.
- If sexual content has been posted, contact the platform(s). Most have reporting processes and will prioritize cases affecting youth. Include the URL(s), identify your child as the person shown, and include their age when the photo/video was taken. State that your child did not post the content or provide consent for someone else to, and that they object to it being available online. For more help, visit [NeedHelpNow.ca](https://www.needhelpnow.ca).
- Create a caring atmosphere at home. When bullied children and teens have a nurturing family, they do better. Also encourage them to rely on genuine friends. Being with supportive peers, especially in real time and in person, can help them feel safer and more resilient.
- If you need to contact the school, or other organizations/parties, do so calmly. If your message seems hostile, change may not happen as quickly.
- If bullying has escalated to something illegal, notify police.

The flip side: If your child does the bullying

If school staff contact you to indicate your child is bullying someone, they are confident that it's happening. They recognize it will be a difficult conversation and don't want to make that accusation without cause. Try to stay objective. Understand that the school is trying to improve the environment and ensure the safety and well-being of all students.

How other people can help

- When peers speak up, bullying stops faster than when adults get involved. Ask your child to:
 - Not share or ignore content when someone is being bullied online. Instead, take screenshots and report it to a trusted adult.
 - Reassure anyone being bullied that they care and will support them.
- All provinces and territories have anti-bullying policies that require schools to intervene but sometimes the only intervention needed is the support of a caring adult at school. When a child or teen tells a trusted staff member, their social world tends to improve, sometimes right away.
- Trusted adults outside of school—coaches, therapists, or doctors—can also get involved and help create positive change.

