

Cyberbullying: In the Midst of the COVID-19 Crisis

Due to school closures being in effect for the unforeseeable future, children will be spending countless hours online. Not only will they be engaged with virtual learning throughout the day, they will have unlimited time to peruse their social media accounts play online games, participate in social media challenges and explore new online content. A cyberbullying expert from Florida Atlantic University, Dr. Sameer Hinduja, cautions that as a result of this there will be a possible increase in cyberbullying among youth. The *Cyberbullying Research Center* defines cyberbullying as the willful and repeated harm inflicted through the use of computers, cell phones, and other electronic devices. In their 2019 study of a nationally representative sample of approximately 5,000 middle and high-schoolers in the United States, 36.5% said they had been cyberbullied during their lifetime, while 17.4% said they had been cyberbullied within the previous 30 days.

The COVID-19 crisis has forced us all to adapt to a “new normal” way of life – quarantine. Quarantining has a variety of effects on children: they are struggling with acclimating to online learning, are adjusting to not being able to see their friends, can no longer participate in extra-curricular activities, are helping care for younger siblings/family members, they may not have access to proper nutrition and might be experiencing the financial burden of their parent/guardian losing their job. There is also the unfortunate reality of a potential rise in child abuse as a result of the COVID-19 quarantine.

In turn, these factors can affect a child’s emotional and mental well-being. Children who are experiencing stress and anxiety can unintentionally use hostility as a coping mechanism. This can be manifested with children during their online interactions through their posts, comments, pictures and videos. Cyberbullying is unique in the sense that it happens outside the view of adults, can be anonymous, can reach a large audience and is easier for the perpetrator since they are at a greater physical distance of their victim. **Adults in the household should be aware of the warning signs for cyberbullying.**

- Noticeable increases or decreases in device use, including texting
- A child exhibits emotional responses (laughter, anger, upset) to what is happening on their device
- A child hides their screen or device when others are near, and avoids discussion about what they are doing on their device
- Social media accounts are shut down or new ones appear
- A child starts to avoid social situations, even those that were enjoyed in the past
- A child becomes withdrawn or depressed, or loses interest in people and activities



How Parents Can Stop Cyberbullying

1. **Keep the computer in a common area of the home/Ensure children are visible when they are using their cellphones/tablets for long periods of time.** Monitor their usage.
2. **Learn how various social networking apps and sites work.** Become familiar with Instagram, Twitter, TikTok, Discord, Dubsmash, Snapchat, Whisper, Kik, etc. Ask your children if they will show you their profile pages.
3. **Talk regularly and specifically with your children about online issues.** Let them know they can come to you for help if anything is inappropriate, upsetting, or dangerous.
4. **Build trust with your children.** Set time limits, explain your reasons for them, and discuss rules for online safety and Internet use. Ask your children to contribute to establishing the rules; then they'll be more inclined to follow them.

How Kids Can Stop Cyberbullying

1. **Protect your accounts.** Don't share your passwords with anyone – even your closest friends - and password-protect your phone so no one can use it to impersonate you.
2. **Don't respond** to any emails, app messages, or text messages sent by cyberbullies.
3. **Don't be an accomplice** by forwarding any of the messages to others kids.
4. **Save, screenshot and print out all the messages** as proof and evidence.
5. If you are being bullied, **tell a trusted adult immediately** to get help.
6. Use the **account and privacy settings** within each device, app, or network to control who can contact and interact with you, and who can read your online content.
7. **Pause before you post.** Make wise decisions with what you are sending, sharing or posting online, considering the possibility that anyone and everyone may see it (including your parents).



If Cyberbullying is Occurring

- 1. Tell your children not to respond to any cyberbullying threats or comments online.** However, do not delete any of the messages. Instead, screenshot and save the messages. You will need the messages to verify and prove there is cyberbullying.
- 2. Don't overreact by blaming your children.** If they are being bullied, be supportive and understanding. Find out how long the bullying has been going on and ensure that you'll work together to find a solution. Let your children know they are not to blame.
- 3. Don't underreact by telling your children to "shrug it off"** or just deal with the bullying. The emotional pain of being bullied is very real and can have long-lasting effects. Don't tease them about it or respond with a "kids will be kids" attitude.
- 4. Don't threaten to take away your children's phone or computer** if they come to you with a problem. This only forces kids to be more secretive.
5. If possible, **contact your school's guidance counselors** for further guidance. Or refer to Broward County Public Schools resources:
 - Complete a "Bullying Complaint Form" [CLICK HERE](#)
 - Call Silence Hurts Tipline at (754) 321-0911
 - Text to CRIMES 274637 (message must begin with "SBBC")
 - Email to school911@browardschools.com
6. If it is occurring on a social network site with an unknown individual, **check the social networking site's Safety Page.** Report the cyberbullying to the social networking site. Block the person who is cyberbullying your child.
7. If there are threats of physical violence or the bullying continues to escalate, **get law enforcement involved.**

Sources: www.cyberbullying.org, www.stopbullying.gov, www.parents.com, www.pacer.org, www.cdc.org, www.connectsafely.org

Resources

- Broward County Public Schools, School Climate & Discipline: www.browardschools.com
- StopBullying.Gov: www.stopbullying.gov
- Cyberbullying Research Center: www.cyberbullying.org
- Pacer's National Bullying Prevention Center: www.pacer.org

