

Cyberbullying

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[Cyberbullying](#) is the use of the [Internet](#), smartphones, or other electronic communication devices to spread harmful or embarrassing information about another person. This information can be in the form of text, photos, or videos. Internet safety organizations make a distinction between cyberbullying and cyberharassment. The latter term refers to harassing behaviors targeted at adults. The term *cyberbullying* refers to the behavior when it is targeted at minors.

Cyberbullying can take many forms. It may include repeatedly sending e-mails to people who have said they do not want contact with the sender. It can also include sending threats, making sexual remarks, using offensive language or labels, or posting humiliating photos or videos, as well as spreading rumors or lies about the victim. Cyberbullies sometimes set up a website to make fun of a victim or forward private e-mails from the victim without permission. Cyberbullies also try to get others to join in the behavior; they urge chat room members, for example, to gang up on someone else by making fun of them or refusing to let them participate in discussions.

Victims and Bullies

Cyberbullying affects a large percentage of [children](#) and teenagers in the United States. In a February 2015 survey of [students](#) ages eleven to fifteen years administered by the Cyberbullying Research Center, 34.4 percent said they had been cyberbullied—received e-mail threats, had embarrassing photos or videos posted without their consent, had rumors spread about them online, or had their private e-mails or text messages forwarded to others without their consent—at some point in their lives. Among the same sample group, 14.6 percent of students reported engaging in cyberbullying behavior at least once.

Victims of cyberbullying, say researchers, have fewer friends than average and are more likely to feel lonely at school. Teenagers who share content online by creating [blogs](#) or websites or by posting information about themselves on social networking sites, such as MySpace or [Facebook](#), are more likely than others to experience cyberbullying. In addition, a percentage of those who have been cyberbullied have admitted to cyberbullying others.

Gender

Girls are more likely than boys to experience cyberbullying. According to the study by the Cyberbullying Research Center, as of February 2015, 40.6 percent of adolescent girls reported having been cyberbullied compared to 28.2 percent of boys. The both genders engage in cyberbullying behavior. About 14 percent of adolescent girls and 15.5 percent of adolescent boys surveyed said they had cyberbullied someone at least once. More girls (5.6 percent) than boys (2.4 percent) admitted to

spreading rumors about someone online; however, more boys (1.9 percent) than girls (1.4 percent) admitted to posting hurtful photos of others online without their permission.

Sexual Orientation

Members of the lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) communities are four times more likely to experience cyberbullying than their non-LGBT peers. A 2013 Gay, Lesbian, & Straight Education Network (GLSEN) study showed that 42 percent of LGBT [youth](#) have experienced cyberbullying. Of these, 27 percent reported that they did not feel safe from cyberbullying when they were online. One in five LGBT youth reported cyberbullying in the form of text messages.

Motives

Analysts offer various reasons for the pervasiveness of cyberbullying. Some see the behavior as an online version of the teasing and cruelty that commonly exist in schools. Others point out that the Internet offers anonymity to bullies, while simultaneously providing them with the opportunity to reach a huge audience. To bullies, posting photos or videos can seem like a way to achieve celebrity and status. In addition, by using electronic communications to demean their victims, cyberbullies are removed from the real consequences of their actions. They are not present to deal with their target's reaction or response.

The prevalence of social networking contributes to social conditions that make cyberbullying possible. Because adolescents spend so much time communicating with their peers online, they may be losing the social skills needed for real interactions with others. According to this view, the Internet makes friendships seem more like abstractions or commodities than real human relationships. In these circumstances, cyberbullies can regard their behavior as a casual thing without consequences in the real world.

Consequences

Many teens shrug off cyberbullying as merely annoying, or even funny—even though it can have serious consequences. Targets of cyberbullying can experience emotional distress, including anger, frustration, embarrassment, sadness, fear, and depression. It may interfere with their ability to perform schoolwork. In some cases, it may cause them to change schools. Cyberbullying also has been linked to delinquency and violence, substance abuse, possession of weapons on school grounds, and [suicide](#). Research has shown that LGBT teens are twice as likely to commit suicide due to cyberbullying as their non-LGBT peers.

A 2006 incident in which a parent in Missouri created a bogus MySpace profile to bully her daughter's classmate has become particularly notorious when discussing the link between cyberbullying and teen suicide. Megan Meier, who was thirteen at the time, received flirtatious messages via her MySpace account from a boy named Josh. After a few weeks, however, Josh turned against her and posted one message suggesting that “the world would be a better place” without her. Devastated, Megan

committed suicide. Her parents later learned that Lori Drew, the mother of a girl who had been Megan's friend, had created Josh as a fictional character to bully Megan.

Taking Action

Over the years, several campaigns have been mounted to educate teens on the dangers of cyberbullying. Some of these include StopBullying.gov, STOMPOutBullying.org, and Stopcyberbullying.org. Educational campaigns such as these emphasize ways to respond to cyberbullying and prevent it. They urge adolescents not to pass along cyberbullying images, texts, or e-mails and to speak up against it among their friends and classmates. These campaigns also encourage victims to report cyberbullying to a teacher, parent, or other trusted adult. In addition, adolescents who are the targets of cyberbullying are urged to ignore and block communication with the bullies. Seeking revenge against bullies or responding to them with more cyberbullying is not recommended.

Into the 2010s, efforts to legislate against cyberbullying has escalated. Lori Drew, the woman who had bullied Megan Meier, pleaded not guilty to conspiracy charges but was convicted of three misdemeanor charges relating to the violation of MySpace's terms of service; the conviction was overturned on appeal. This result, said legal analysts, points to the vagueness of existing laws on Internet usage and to the importance of enacting stronger legislation that, as an editorial in the *New York Times* suggested, would "give prosecutors tools to go after [bullying](#) of all kinds." In 2008, Missouri passed a bill outlawing [harassment](#) via computer, text messages, and other electronic devices. In 2009, US Representative Linda Sanchez of California reintroduced the Megan Meier Cyberbullying Prevention Act, which would have made it a federal [crime](#) to use electronic means to "coerce, intimidate, harass, or cause substantial emotional distress to a person" or to "support severe, repeated, and hostile behavior." While the bill was not passed, it sparked serious conversations about the legal consequences of cyberbullying.

Justin W. Patchin, coauthor of *Bullying Beyond the Schoolyard: Preventing and Responding to Cyberbullying*, is among those who oppose making cyberbullying a crime. "I think there is a role for both the federal and state governments in terms of educating local school districts about what cyberbullying is and what they can do about it, and providing resources to help them prevent and respond to online aggression," he states. "But criminalization doesn't seem to me to be the best approach."

As of mid-June 2016, no anti-bullying federal laws existed in the United States, but they had been proposed. According to the Cyberbullying Research Center, as of January 2016, all fifty states plus Washington, DC, had anti-bullying legislation; however, only twenty-four states included cyberbullying in these laws. Anti-bullying laws in forty-eight states plus Washington, DC, however, did include information about electronic harassment.

Many states that had anti-bullying laws required school districts to implement policies against cyberbullying. These included meeting with parents or guardians, or suspending or expelling students who commit this behavior. Although school efforts to stop cyberbullying had strong support, analysts pointed out that any actions against cyberbullies must take into account several circumstances, such

as students' First Amendment rights.

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