



How to Help Kids Deal With Cyberbullying

Empowering them with information and strategies to protect themselves

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Cyberbullying is the use of digital-communication tools (such as the Internet and cell phones) to make another person feel angry, sad, or scared, usually again and again. Examples of cyberbullying include sending hurtful texts or instant messages, posting embarrassing photos or video on social media, and spreading mean rumors online or with cell phones.

If you're trying to figure out whether your kid is being cyberbullied, think about whether the offender is being hurtful *intentionally* and *repeatedly*. If the answer is no, the offender might simply need to learn better online behavior. If the answer is yes, take it seriously.

What should I do if my kid is bullied online?

Finding out that your kid has been cyberbullied is emotional for parents. You or your kid might want to retaliate, but it's best to help your kid defuse the situation, protect himself, and make rational efforts to put a stop to the bullying. Here are the immediate steps we recommend for parents:

- Reassure your child that you love and support him or her.
- Help your child step away from the computer or device and take a break.
- If you can identify the bully, consider talking with the parents.
- Consider contacting your kid's school. If bullying is happening online, it might be happening offline, too.

- Empower your kid with specific steps he or she can take.

When should parents intervene in a cyberbullying situation?

Many kids don't tell their parents that they're being cyberbullied. Kids might feel embarrassed or ashamed to let you know they've been targeted. They also might be afraid your involvement will make things worse. But, if you find out your kid has been cyberbullied, it probably means the issue is major enough for you to get involved.

Try this: Collect more facts by talking the situation through with your kid. Work out a plan of action together. Make sure you and your kid agree on what the outcome should be. Ramp up your efforts as the situation demands.

Another reason not to rush to a solution: [Research indicates that peers sticking up for each other is a very effective defense against bullies](#). Bullies work by trying to isolate their victims. When kids rally around the target, it thwarts the bully. Encourage your kid to reach out to friends for support.

Of course, if there are any real threats to your child's safety, you should contact the authorities immediately.

What can I tell my kid to do if he or she is being cyberbullied?

Kids may not always recognize teasing as bullying. Some kids also may be too embarrassed or ashamed to talk to their parents about it. That's why it's important to talk about [online and digital behavior](#) before your child starts interacting with others online and with devices. To prepare your kid for going online or getting a cell phone, or, if you know he or she has been bullied online, offer these steps he or she can take immediately:

- **Sign off the computer.** Ignore the attacks and walk away from the cyberbully.
- **Don't respond or retaliate.** If you're angry or hurt, you might say things you'll regret later. Cyberbullies often want to get a reaction out of you, so don't let them know their plans have worked.
- **Block the bully.** If you get mean messages through IM or a social-networking site, take the person off your buddy or friends list. You also can delete messages from bullies without reading them.

- **Save and print out bullying messages.** If the harassment continues, save the evidence. This could be important proof to show parents or teachers if the bullying doesn't stop.
- **Talk to a friend.** When someone makes you feel bad, sometimes it can help to talk the situation over with a friend.
- **Tell a trusted adult.** A trusted adult is someone you believe will listen and who has the skills, desire, and authority to help you. Telling an adult isn't tattling — it's standing up for yourself. And, even if the bullying occurs online, your school probably has rules against it.

How do I report cyberbullying?

Social media sites such as [Facebook](#), [Instagram](#), and [Snapchat](#) have gotten serious about helping users who have been targeted by bullies.

If **your kid is bullied on a website or in an app**, go to the company's site and look for a section offering support, such as "Community Guidelines," "Safety Center," "Parent Info," "Safety Tips," or something similar. It may make recommendations such as blocking the bully or changing the setting for who can contact you.

If **your kid is bullied or harassed over text message**, call your mobile phone provider to report the number. You may be able to block it or change your phone number. Many carriers offer additional anti-bullying features for a fee.

If **the abuse continues**, you may need to **enlist the help of your community**: your kid's school, his or her coaches, or other parents. If **the communication contains threats**, you'll need to report it to law enforcement.

Empower kids to take positive action

Until recently, parents, teachers, and news accounts have focused on the relationship between a bully and his or her target. But experts say that there are usually more kids involved in a cyberbullying scenario, making it a much more complex organism than previously thought. In fact, one of the side effects of how public bullying has become is that potentially everyone in the bully's circle of friends — both online and off-line — may be involved.

Identifying the different roles in a cyberbullying situation can help you to help your kid develop self-awareness and a sense of empathy. These skills will go a long way toward cultivating an online culture of respect and responsibility.

First, there's the **cyberbully**, the aggressor who's using digital media tools (such as the Internet and cell phone) to deliberately upset or harass their **target** — the person who's being cyberbullied. Then there are the **bystanders**, the kids who are aware that something cruel is going on but who stay on the sidelines (either out of indifference or because they're afraid of being socially isolated or of becoming a target themselves). But there are also kids who act as **upstanders**. These are the kids who actively try to break the cycle, whether by sticking up for the target, addressing the bully directly, or notifying the appropriate authorities about what's going on.

Kids may play different roles at different times. Your advice to your child will differ depending on the situation and the specific role your child is playing in whatever bullying or drama is going on.

By making kids aware that a safe world is everyone's responsibility, we empower them to take positive actions — like reporting a bully, flagging a cruel online comment, or not forwarding a humiliating photo — that ultimately can put a stop to an escalating episode of cruelty.

For more information about safe use of digital media, go to commonsensemedia.org.

Related Online Reading (ctrl + click on the link)

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[How to Talk to Your Kids About Sexting](#)

[Talking to Kids About Alcohol and Drugs](#)

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How to Know if Your Child Is Being Bullied

What are the signs of bullying? When does the teasing become torment?

Jamie Howard, PhD

We are all aware that being bullied as a child is not a trivial thing. It not only causes acute suffering, it has been linked to long-term emotional problems, and children who lack strong parental support seem to encounter the most lasting damage.

But we also know that it's part of growing up to have painful or embarrassing social experiences, and that learning to rebound from these interactions is an important skill for kids to learn.

If our kids complain about bullying, we want to take their complaints very seriously, give them the support and tools to handle it, and intervene on their behalf when needed. But we don't want to teach them that every negative experience with their peers is a form of bullying.

Kids I'm working with will say, "I was being bullied." And when they describe what happened, sometimes it was really just teasing. Maybe someone was giving them a hard time and it was difficult to deal with. But not every incident of meanness, rejection or hostility is bullying.

When does teasing or harrassment become bullying?

- **When there's a power difference:** Bullying is done by someone in a position of power—it might be in the form of physical strength, or popularity—and it is directed at someone who is perceived as less powerful.
- **When there's intention to cause harm.** Bullying can take the form of a physical or verbal attack, making threats, spreading rumors, or excluding someone from a group on purpose. It's not inadvertent.
- **When it's repeated:** Bullying behavior is an ongoing pattern of hostile or abusive actions directed at the child who is the target.
- **When it does cause harm:** Behavior becomes bullying when it impairs the well-being or functioning of the child who's targeted.

If your child reports to you that she has been bullied, my advice is to take it very seriously, because, if nothing else, it really hurt her feelings and she's struggling with it. You want to listen and express empathy without treating her as if she's fragile. You want to model a confident *we-can-solve-this-problem* attitude.

What you don't want to do is express shock and anger and vow immediately to go to the school, or talk to the child's parents. Tempering your response encourages your child to open up.

Before giving bullying advice, collect the facts

Your first job is to try to get a detailed picture of what happened. It's hard when you're a parent because your stomach flips, your protective impulses kick in, and you just want to punish the kid that's hurt your child's feelings. But it's more effective to be like a reporter: "Okay, who was there? What was going on? What was said, exactly? What did you do? How did you feel?"

You're gathering all the data, the evidence of what happened. The details are important, not for the purpose of invalidating your child's feelings or minimizing what happened—"Well, that doesn't sound like it was really *that* bad"—but just so that you can tailor your strategies better.

Part of the goal of asking questions is to get a sense of the social hierarchy.

You might say, "Was it a big group of kids? Were lots of kids surrounding him when he said that to you? Is he a really popular kid? What were the other kids doing?" And it also gives you a sense of how embarrassing it might have been.

Strategies on how to handle bullying

Once you've asked your child exactly what happened, here's some [bullying advice](#) to consider:

- **Practice assertiveness.** That means showing confidence both verbally and nonverbally. Suggest that your child try standing tall and saying, "Don't talk to me like that!" It can help to script some things your child could say and role-play—you do it first, and then let your child try it out.
- **Find allies.** Suggest that your child talk to his friends about ways they might handle it and ways they've handled stuff that's similar. They may have some good ideas and it will make him feel less isolated.
- **Get involved.** Activities that your child is good at, that he enjoys, are very protective. Because if he's doing something he enjoys, and he's thriving, he's not going to care as much. The confidence he feels when he's in his element will carry over to environments in which he's less secure.
- **Enlist adults.** If your child needs an adult advocate, consider contacting a teacher or school administrator. First, try to get your child's permission, telling her, "I really want to call the teacher and ask him to keep an eye on it." If she's adamantly against it, I would keep the option open, saying, "I'm not going to now, and I will tell you before I do." So there's *some* perception of control. But you're also teaching her a lesson: "Listen, yes it might be embarrassing, but you need to stand up for yourself. And self-advocacy is more important."

- **Monitor incidents.** One incident isn't necessarily bullying, but you want to notice if it's becoming a pattern. Tell your child to let you know if it happens again. You might say, "I want to stay on top of this and make sure we solve it."
- **Be prepared.** It's important to talk about bullying even if it hasn't happened, so that if it does your child is better equipped to recognize it and more comfortable telling you about it.
- **Form a partnership with the teacher.** Let your child's teacher know that you hope she'll touch base with you whenever there's something concerning, and that you hope she doesn't mind if you do the same.

How to Arm Your Child Against Bullying

- And why are kids so mean to each other, anyway?
- Gail Saltz, MD
- Getting bullied is a traumatic experience for a child. It diminishes self-esteem, leaves kids feeling depressed and anxious, and can have long-lasting effects. And, of course, modern technology creates more opportunities for bullying than ever before.
- Why do kids torture each other this way? It's normal for children to have some aggression. The question is how much they have, what they do with it, what parents are teaching them at home about it, and what's being modeled for that child in terms of managing aggression. Kids who are bullied at home are far more likely to go out and bully other kids.
- But the number of [kids who bully others](#) because they truly have sociopathy brewing, or are oppositional defiant kids, who may in fact derive gratification from the pain of others, is a relatively small number compared to the amount of bullying that goes on.
- **Bullying as a power play**
- Others, and this is particularly true for girls, who may actually have a high social IQ and know how to work a system, will use bullying for power, to fortify their position. Here again, parents are influential. Are the parents expecting this child to be the powerful

one? Are they sending either overt or covert messages that they want their child to be important, to be popular, to be feared?

- Insecurity can also drive bullying — the feeling that unless you bully you will be the powerless one.
- Also, unfortunately, there are now many more opportunities for bullying. Certainly the Internet and cell phones and all the social networking technology have opened up this whole arena of ways to bully. In some ways cyberbullying is more insidious and scary, from the perspective of an adult, in that it's 24/7.
- A child who's being bullied at school at least comes home at some point and is safe with her family. With the computer that potentially never goes away: at any time you could turn it on and find that someone has written something to shame and humiliate you, and you might not even know who is doing that to you.
- Here are some tips on how to talk to kids about bullying:

- **1. Forewarn your child.**

Talk to your child about what bullying is, the signs of bullying, and whether or not it's going on. Make sure she knows that if something happens, in school or online, she should tell you, and you will support her and together figure out how to work it out. If something is happening online, it's especially important that she NOT respond before telling you about it. With bullying, it's critical to not engage, to not feed it by being exactly who the perpetrator is looking for — someone she can get a rise out of. And she should NOT erase the hurtful post before talking to you. It should be saved somewhere, because sometimes you need to collect evidence of what's been going on.

- **2. Fortify your child.**

Make it clear that bullying says less about the victim's personally than it does about the bully: This kid has a problem and others have to learn how to deflect and contain this problem, and not feed what's going on. Explain that the worst way to respond is a sort of mob mentality — other children who are afraid of being targets will join with the bully and abandon the victim. Teach your child to resist the herd effect, not to pile on when someone else is being bullied. If she has the strength to support her friends, they will find the nerve to support her.

- **3. Practice appropriate responses.**

If you've had conversations with your child before bullying starts, she'll be more likely to come to you if she becomes a target. That gives you a chance to have a dialogue and role-play with her at home. So-and-so said this; okay, what are a couple of lines she can say if

it happens again? When a child is insulted or humiliated, she is likely to be stunned, and you want to help make sure she doesn't react in a way that adds fuel to the fire. It helps to come up, in advance, with four lines she can say, that she feels comfortable with, to deflect what is going on. You can also think together about people or friends she can confide in, and hope for support from.

- **4. Find allies.**

Encourage your child to make a deal with his friends: If you stick up for me, I'll stick up for you. Data shows that the most effective way to combat bullying is for bystanders to step in and say, "Hey, that's my friend; don't do that."

- **5. Talk to your school.**

The most effective way to arm children against bullying is for schools to start educating kids about it, and many are. They start in first grade with bullying education: What is bullying? How do we support our peers? What is treating somebody with respect? What is empathy? You have them try empathy on for size, and sticking up for each other. The lesson is that if everybody wants to avoid being a target, they can only do that by hanging together.

. My Child Is a Bully: What Should I Do?

- How to find out what's behind the bullying behavior, and foster healthy friendship skills

- Brigit Katz

- Gina, the mother of a 12-year-old boy, got a disconcerting phone call from his school. A student had complained that her son was bullying him. After looking into the matter, the school staff concluded that her child had been tormenting a number of his classmates with name-calling, physical violence, and even sexual harassment. "Needless to say, we were mortified and ashamed," Gina remembers. "But not only that, we were heartbroken."

- No parent wants to hear that her child is a bully. It's painful to think of your child inflicting harm on other kids. But bullying is also a serious issue for the aggressor. [Kids' friendship](#) skills are an important indicator of their overall mental health. If your child is said to be engaging in bullying behaviors—whether physical or verbal—it might be a sign of serious distress. He might be experiencing anxiety or depression, and have difficulty regulating his emotions and behavior.