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## Bullying Goes High-Tech

### How parents can help kids cope in the age of cyberbullying

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Family Matters

Bullying has moved beyond the schoolyard to the digital playground. Cyberbullying, the use of technology to threaten, intimidate, harass, embarrass or target another person, has been a growing problem. About 21% of children ages 12 to 18 report being the victims of cyberbullying through a combination of text messages, social media apps and online gaming platforms, according to [StopBullying.gov](#), an educational website managed by the US Department of Health and Human Services. The consequences for victims can be both immediate and long-term, including decreased self-esteem, increased anxiety, depression, difficulty in school, self-harm and even suicide.

Unfortunately, most children who are cyberbullied do not tell their parents. According to the youth advocacy nonprofit DoSomething.org, just 1 in 10 children tell an adult if they're being cyberbullied.

Magnifying the situation is that many kids, bullies and victims alike, operate anonymously, using apps or accounts that mask their identities, says Julie Hertzog, director of PACER's National Bullying Prevention Center, an organization based in Minneapolis.

Instead of expending a ton of energy trying to stay ahead of the technology curve, Hertzog suggests that parents consider the following when educating their kids about cyberbullying.

## 1. Talk with your kids early about cyberbullying, and keep the conversation going.

Cyberbullying can start with simple texting. So before your child gets his or her first cellphone, discuss digital safety, Hertzog says. Establish how you will monitor your child's online safety. Explain privacy issues, and address cyberbullying directly. "It's important for kids to know that they have a right to be safe on their cellphone just like they have a right to be safe in school. It should be a good experience," Hertzog says.

## 2. Consider a "prevention through education" approach.

If your child is being targeted based on his or her bleeding disorder or any other medical condition, a little education can go a long way. "When kids don't understand someone else's differences, they're more likely to react to it, and sometimes in inappropriate ways," Hertzog says.

It's up to each child and family to decide what they feel comfortable sharing, but peer education can be a positive approach to developing empathy in other children, Hertzog says. "There are so many kids who want to do the right thing, but we have to help them know what the right thing is to do."

## 3. Don't dismiss it. Listen closely and be supportive.

Cyberbullying is an imbalance of power. It's not something your child can simply ignore, Hertzog says. The wrong thing to say: "Just stay off your cellphone or computer." Because so much of life is now online, including schoolwork, that's not realistic.

"What we hear universally from kids who are bullied is the statement 'I feel so alone,'" Hertzog says. "Have the conversation. Find out the details. You want to make sure the child feels supported. You want to make sure that they know you're there for them."

## 4. Involve your child in the solution.

"It's so important to listen to your child, because they know their culture, they know their social nuance," Hertzog says. "You're giving them some of the power back in this situation, and you're not going to do anything that makes them uncomfortable." To help families address cyberbullying incidents, PACER created a downloadable student action plan (see bottom of page for link).

## Recognize the signs and know what to do

An awareness of the signs of cyberbullying can help you notice if it may be happening to your child and start a conversation with him or her. If your child is being cyberbullied, it's important to know how to address it.

### Know the warning signs

Any type of bullying can cause changes in your child's personality. According to StopBullying.gov and KidsHealth.org, kids being cyberbullied may exhibit the following additional warning signs.

- Increases or decreases in the child's electronic device usage
- Being angry or upset during or after using their device
- Being nervous or jumpy when getting a text, email or instant message
- Hiding their screen or device when others are around
- No longer wanting to use their device
- Avoiding discussing what they're doing on their cellphone or online
- Opening or closing many social media accounts

### Steps you can take

Each cyberbullying case is different, and thus the solutions will be different. If you suspect cyberbullying, there are concrete steps you can take to become an effective advocate for your child.

- Keep a detailed record.**  
Take screenshots of harassing or threatening posts or other harmful content.
- Block the child doing the bullying.**  
Be sure to review your child's privacy settings to make sure only approved friends have access to him or her on social media.
- Report it to the proper authorities.**  
Most schools and social media platforms have anti-bullying policies. Report the incident to the police if your child receives physical threats or another potential crime or illegal behavior has occurred. The Cyberbullying Research Center has a list of bullying laws by state (see information below).

» Download the "Student Action Plan Against Bullying": [pacer.org/bullying](#)

» Learn about bullying laws in your state: [cyberbullying.org](#)

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