



Cyberbullying

What makes cyberbullying so toxic, invasive, and harmful? How do teens think about cyberbullying — and how can they help be part of the solution instead of part of the problem? Cyberbullying has been a major buzzword over the past several years, with a distressing number of headlines calling attention to every parent's worst nightmares: school expulsions, arrests, youth suicides. Thankfully, many schools and young people are now taking a stand against cyberbullying, and children are stepping forward to demonstrate empathy and kindness.

- **Build a support network for your children.**

It can be easy to think that you'll be the one to support your child in times of need. But kids often hesitate to reach out to parents in the toughest of times. Encourage your kids to turn to any trusted adult — teacher, coach, older sibling — if they are on the receiving end of hurtful online behavior. Remind your kids that you understand these situations are complicated, and that you do not want them to handle it alone. Share personal stories of when you needed someone else's support. Sometimes kids worry that parents will overreact, so it is helpful to explain that you'll think through the solution together. Try communicating your commitment to helping them find solutions that feel comfortable, safe, and supportive if and when these situations arise.

- **Encourage your kids to stand up to the bully — or at the very least to stand *with* the victim.**

In an ideal world, we hope our kids will stand up to bullies — and this is certainly a great message for your kids. If it feels safe, encourage your child to address the bully online or, better yet, offline. Still, it doesn't always feel safe, socially or otherwise, to stand up to cyberbullies. Urge your kids to at least stand *with* the victim by communicating (1) that they do not share the bully's perspective and (2) that they are there for support. For example, a kid might say, "Hey, I just wanted to let you know that I saw what is going on online and I just wanted to tell you that I'm really sorry this is happening to you. I don't feel that way about it and I think it is really mean that people are saying that. If you need to talk to someone or if there is anything I can do, let me know."

- **Be strategic in your support.**

If you feel that your child or someone you know is being cyberbullied "aka the target," know that there are concrete steps that you can take. First, listen to the victim and be a sympathetic ear. Show the victim how to block bullies online; many platforms have "blocking" features or have a way to report inappropriate use. Encourage the victim to take screenshots and/or print the evidence of the mean messaging. And last, find ways to encourage kindness at your kids' schools or within the community. How can you highlight the positive ways kids are using media and technology these days?



Digital Drama

When it comes to discussing social media, it's important that adults and kids speak the same language. What grown-ups think of "cyberbullying" might be explained away by kids as "digital drama." But it's not trivial. Digital drama brews in the offline world and simmers online when kids feel emboldened to say or do things that they wouldn't face-to-face. Checking in with kids and observing them as they interact with technology can ensure your conversations are productive and helpful.

- **Ask how they are ... then ask again.**

It may seem simple, but ask your kids how they are doing on a daily basis. Also, watch for telltale signs that they are suffering from digital drama — a change in mood or behavior — as your kids interact with their phone and other devices. They may be absorbing subtle social messages in not-so-healthy ways. Ask lots of questions to determine how your kids view media and interact with technology. What are their favorite tools? Why do they value technology? What are some benefits as well as pitfalls of our 24/7 world?

- **Hit the pause button.**

If your child is on the receiving end of someone else's hurtful online behavior, encourage him to "take it offline." It may be tempting to continue the conversation online; however, face-to-face can be more constructive. The lack of body language, facial expressions, and tone with online communication easily can lead to misunderstandings. Encourage kids to "walk in another's shoes" to make sure that they are considering all perspectives. At the very least, "taking it offline" will give your child time to process how to act — rather than just react.

- **Read between the lines.**

With the popularity of photo sharing, kids often receive evidence that they were not included ... which then leads to feelings of exclusion. Imagine your child seeing a photo of friends at dinner and realizing that she was not invited. While it is true that no one is included in everything, it is a hard rite of passage for kids to learn — and often they just need a sympathetic ear or an alternative social activity. Unfortunately, some kids use online photos to intentionally tag the kids who weren't invited — a not-so-subtle message of exclusion. In these cases, let your children know that they are supported, and talk about strategies to mend a rift or dispel a fight.