A family guide to recognising and challenging online bullying

Stay tech-savvy: how to support and protect your child from online bullying

Whether at work or home, technology features heavily in our lives. Especially for many children and young people where it plays a key role in maintaining their social networks. Some parents and carers view technology as a way to keep their child safe. But, like anything, there are associated risks to be aware of.

Recently, there have been a number of high-profile cases in the media, highlighting the consequences of online bullying. For some people it's a daily reality, so it's important that parents and carers know what online bullying is and how best to address the issue.

This guide looks at examples of online bullying, how to support your child if they are involved in online bullying, and positive steps that you can take to keep your child safe online.

What do we mean by online bullying?

Online bullying, also known as cyberbullying, is a form of bullying that uses an electronic device (e.g. mobile phone, tablet, computer). In many ways, online bullying is the same as face-to-face (or 'real world') bullying. Both types involve behaviour that intentionally hurts others, is repeated over time and involves an imbalance of power. Online bullying incorporates many of the acts associated with relational bullying, such as:

- name calling and threats
- spreading rumours
- disclosing personal or confidential information without the target's permission
- social isolation and exclusion.

Like 'real life' bullying, online bullying can also be direct or indirect.

- **Direct bullying** – occurs with the target's knowledge, involves the target and the perpetrator interacting in some way.

- **Indirect bullying** – may involve a third party, may occur without the target's knowledge, does not occur in the presence of the target.

However, there are significant differences between the two forms of bullying. For instance, an episode of face-to-face bullying is only observed by bystanders and is unlikely to be kept on record. On the other hand, an episode of online bullying can reach a worldwide audience and remain on record indefinitely.

Examples of online bullying

Online bullying can take many forms and, with the advancement of social media, is not limited to prank calls and abusive emails. You may find it helpful to familiarise yourself with the following examples.

- **Physical**
  e.g. purposeful gestures of intimidation, such as intentionally sending a virus-infected file
- **Verbal**
  e.g. taunting or humiliating someone by sending threatening or insulting messages or by intentionally isolating, such as exclusion from a group chat
- **Indirect**
  e.g. sly or behind the back actions, such as sharing, or re-sharing rumours
- **Relationship abuse**
  e.g. using any means to harm the target's relationships such as sending threatening or obscene pictures, creating and sharing fake content or ridiculing someones special needs, illnesses, or targeting their family's social status.
- **Sexual**
  e.g. unwanted sexual image-based abuse; sextortion, misuse of intimate images, up-skirting
- **Online hate speech**
  e.g. any online content targeting someone/a group based on protected characteristics with the intent or likely effect of inciting, spreading or promoting hatred or other forms of discrimination

How common is it?

Various factors, like reluctance to report it, make it hard for researchers to accurately measure the rate of online bullying. However, research conducted by Betts, Gkimitzoudis, Spenser and Baguley[1] suggests that up to two-thirds of 16 to 19 year-olds are involved in online bullying in the UK.

What are the implications of online bullying?

The Academic, C. L. Nixon, claims that online bullying is an *'emerging international public health concern, related to serious mental health concerns, with significant impact on adolescents' depression, anxiety, self-esteem, emotional distress, substance use, and*

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[1] Betts, L. R., Gkimitzoudis, T., Spenser, K. A., & Baguley, T. (2017). Examining the roles young people fulfil in five types of cyber bullying *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships, 34,* 1080 – 1098.

suicidal behaviour'. Indeed, a range of studies have suggested links between being a target of online bullying and reduced mental well-being.

What are the common signals that would suggest your child is involved in online bullying?

While no two cases are the same, children and young people involved in online bullying may demonstrate the following behaviours.

If they are the target of bullying they may:
- suddenly stop using their devices
- close screens when someone else enters the room
- appear anxious when receiving a message
- seem angry or depressed after using technology
- show a lack of interest or avoid going to school or going out in general
- be unwilling to discuss activities they have engaged in online
- withdraw from family life.

If they are the perpetrators of bullying they may:
- close screens when someone else enters the room
- use technology constantly
- display high levels of anxiety if they cannot access technology
- avoid talking about what they are doing
- use multiple accounts or a fake account.

How can you help your child if they are involved?

Whether your child is experiencing or engaging in online bullying, they are likely to be secretive and/or withdrawn. Knowing how to help your child could prove a challenge. You may find it helpful to take advice from the following guidelines.

If they are the ones experiencing online bullying:

- **make sure your child is (and feels) safe.** There are several reasons why they might not want to disclose experiences of online bullying, such as being afraid that disclosure could make the situation worse, or lead others to view them negatively.

- **talk with and listen to your child.** As a parent or carer, you should be mindful of how you react. Research suggests that some children and young people do not report online bullying out of fear that they will be barred from accessing digital

technology. To retain your child's confidence, do not alter their access to digital technology following a disclosure.

- **collect evidence.** Encourage your child to keep any evidence of online bullying to show content providers, schools and the police, if necessary. Be mindful, however, of how this evidence is collected and stored. Research shows that some young people revisit messages multiple times to punish themselves.

Next steps to take

- Work with your child's school.
- Refrain from contacting the parents or carers of the perpetrator.
- Contact the online content provider to tell them what's happening.
- If necessary, seek counselling or additional support for your child.
- Call the police if physical threats are involved.
- Take measures to prevent the problem from reoccurring
  e.g. blocking accounts of those doing the online bullying and changing privacy settings.

If it's your child doing the online bullying:

- **support your child.** Even if they are the one doing the online bullying themselves. It's important to provide a supportive and non-judgmental environment for your child

- **discuss with them how their behaviour online may be interpreted by others.** Research shows that many young people who engage in online bullying do not recognise that their behaviour could be seen as online bullying. For example, behaviours regarded as banter could cross the line and become online bullying.

- **encourage your child to be empathetic and put themselves in their target's shoes.** When interacting online, individuals can feel less constrained and more likely to engage in extreme forms of behaviour. This is called the disinhibition effect. You can counteract this by asking your child to consider the target's feelings and the potential distress they are causing.

What positive steps can you take?

While you can't control everything that your child does online, you can reduce the likelihood of your child becoming involved in online bullying.

- **Technology.** Install privacy settings and content blockers on your child's device. Develop a family agreement around technology outlining:
  - when your child can go online and what they can do
  - the amount of time allowed to spend online
  - what your child should do if they feel uncomfortable
  - how to stay safe, behave ethically, and be responsible.

- **Talking.** Talk with your child about what constitutes appropriate behaviour online and the consequences of actions. Encourage them to tell you their experiences of online bullying.

Have the conversation: five starter questions

As detailed above, a fundamental part of supporting your child is talking to them about online bullying. Here are some questions you may find helpful to get you started.

- How well do you know the people that you are 'friends' with on social media?
- What would you do if you witnessed online bullying?
- How do you think other people interpret your posts and behaviour online?
- Have you experienced anything on social media that has made you feel uncomfortable?
- Are you thinking about the information that you are sharing online?

For more resources and information visit:

Anti-Bullying Alliance

www.anti-bullyingalliance.org.uk/tools-information/advice-parents/interactive-anti-bullying-tool-parents

Cyberbullying: Identification, Prevention, and Response

cyberbullying.org/Cyberbullying-Identification-Prevention-Response-2019.pdf

SWGFL Online Safety Guidance for Parents

swgfl.org.uk/resources/online-safety-guidance-for-parents

Betts, L. R., *Cyberbullying: Approaches, Consequences and Interventions* (London: Palgrave, 2016)

Moore, M. O., *Understanding Cyberbullying: A Guide for Parents and Teachers* (Dublin: Veritas Publications, 2014)

Nixon, C. L., 'Current Perspectives: The Impact of Cyberbullying on Adolescent Health', in *Adolescent Health, Medicine and Therapeutics,* 5 (2014),143-158

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