



Recognize and Stop Virtual Bullies



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INSIGHTS FOR FAMILIES is provided by your child's school in recognition of your role as a partner in education. Insights is produced by Marcia Latta, communications consultant.

Distance has been a part of the school experience for a few years now because of the pandemic. Students were physically distant when schools offered online-only instruction, and later they were socially distant as normal school routines and activities resumed following COVID protocols.

A positive outcome of this difficult time is fewer cases of bullying, right? Unfortunately no. Cyberbullying has long been a concern and is on the rise. Many students have reported bullying behavior during online school.

“According to the LIght, an organization that tracks online harassment, there has been a 70% increase in cyberbullying in just a few months. Aside from the increase in technology use, there are other factors contributing to the rise:

- **Increased stress:** The pandemic has been highly stressful and confusing for everyone. When kids feel stressed or confused, it can lead to acting or lashing out at others, arguing among friends and risk-taking behaviors.
- **Isolation:** Mandatory stay-at-home orders can cause feelings of loneliness, which can lead to fragmented relationships. Some kids may have limited access to the internet, which can make them feel further isolated. In return, they may make mean or cruel comments in frustration, especially if they feel like they are out of the loop within their friend groups.
- **Decreased supervision online:** With many parents trying to balance working from home, helping with schoolwork and managing this new world, they aren't available to pay close attention to what their kids are doing online.
- **Boredom:** Kids sometimes engage in cyberbullying because they are bored, lonely or want attention. Because the pandemic worsens these issues, it can lead to mean behavior online. Some kids bully to relieve stress, but also because they are bored.

<https://bit.ly/3rdYfTL>

What is bullying? What is cyberbullying?

Bullying is intentional and repeated over time. When it occurs online, it is amplified in the messages and impact because of the wider reach of social sharing. In virtual classrooms, bullying can still occur in direct messaging, interactions missed by the teacher and on social media.

Parents should watch their children for changes in behavior, resistance to online activity, distancing from family or disinterest in normal routines and activities.

Tips for parents

Experts say the most important thing parents can do if their child is a victim of bullying is to reassure them that it is not their fault. If a child is bullied, it is difficult for parents to see them suffer, but it also provides a good opener for additional conversation. It may even be an opportunity to discuss empathy.

This may be difficult, but it is valuable to help children think about the motives behind the actions of the bullies. “Hurt people hurt people,” according to Think Kindness (www.thinkkindness.org), an organization that promotes measurable acts of kindness in schools through online content and virtual and in-person assemblies.

This realization doesn’t make bullying less painful or easier for victims, but it may help them understand that it is not necessarily about them. They may be the target for reasons that have nothing to do with them.

Parents can help minimize the distress from bullying, which affects both the bullied and the bully. The following tips are recommendations from children’s health experts at Blue Cross (<https://bit.ly/3rdYfTL>):

Parents who are working from home are with their children more than ever. They have the unique opportunity to be observant and mindful of what their kids are doing online and how their interactions on social media may be affecting them.

- **Create guidelines:** By limiting screen time, parents can curb cyberbullying. This is not an easy step, but it can be done. Allocate time for family, games and other offline activities.
- **Talk about what’s happening:** It is important to have honest conversations with kids about what they are going through, especially during the pandemic. Times are very stressful for everyone, kids included. Talk about what that feels like for them or how it can be addressed.
- **Urge connections:** Staying home and not seeing friends is especially difficult for children and teens, as they need those connections to grow and develop. Encourage them to use video chat platforms to stay connected with friends, provided it be in a healthy way.
- **Listen and reassure.** Kids who fear repercussions or loss of technology privileges will not share their concerns with parents. Be clear that it is safe to share their concerns with you. Most kids would rather endure bullying than lose their phone or computer, which is a link to social connections.

Be aware of the seriousness of cyberbullying. Virtual bullying has increased significantly during the pandemic, but parents may not know about it. Watch for signs that your child is struggling or suffering in silence. Ask questions and stay alert for signs of trouble.