

Help Kids Fight Cyberbullying and Other Mean Online Behavior

Most kids will encounter mean behavior at some point in their digital lives. For some kids, this experience is a blip that's easily forgotten, while for others it can have deep, long-lasting effects. For parents, the key is staying involved in kids' lives -- both online and off -- so they can step in and offer help if necessary. With guidance from parents and educators, kids can learn how to dodge the drama and stand up for others.

Check out these 6 tips

1

Define your terms.

Make sure kids understand what cyberbullying is: repeated and unwanted mean or hurtful words or behavior that occur online (through texts, social media posts, online chat, etc.).

2

Check in about online life.

Just like you'd ask your kid about their sleep, exercise, and eating, stay on top of their online life. Who are they chatting with? How do people treat each other in the games and on the sites they're using?

3

Role-play.

If kids feel like they might have trouble removing themselves from digital drama, experiment with some different ways they can make a graceful exit. Talk through words they can use, ways they can steer conversations in positive directions, etc.

4

Encourage upstanding.

Let kids know that supporting a friend or acquaintance who is being bullied can make a big difference. If they feel safe confronting the bully, they should. If not, a private message to the victim can be enough to help someone through a tough time. Speaking up against hate speech is important, too.



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5

Take breaks.

If you notice your kid getting pulled into digital drama, help them take a break. It's great if they can determine for themselves when they need to step back, but they might need some help setting limits. Putting devices to bed at a specific time, plus breaks for mealtimes and face-to-face connection, can help kids recharge.

6

Review worst-case steps.

Walk through what to do if your kid is being bullied online. First, step away. Ignoring a bully can be very effective. If the bullying continues, take screenshots or print out evidence. Then block the person. If it gets worse, report the behavior to a trusted adult. Talk about who those people are and make sure your kid has their contact information.



It's Not Cyberbullying, But ...

Though someone's mean online behavior might not fit the definition, it can still hurt. By [Christine Elgersma](#)

A student sees a group of girls coming toward her in the hallway. One has been her best friend since second grade, but she doesn't know the others very well. She says hi to them as they pass. They all ignore her or roll their eyes, including her friend. A few lockers down, they whisper to each other while they stare at her and laugh behind their hands.

While we can all agree the girls in this situation are being mean, can we call this bullying?

These "IRL" (in real life) scenarios happen all the time, and they often carry over into the online world. And though insults, exclusion, and even all-out aggression don't always meet the technical definition of **cyberbullying**—ongoing, targeted harassment via digital communication tools over a period of time—they still hurt.

The best remedy for all these issues is prevention and education: Teaching kids what it means to be kind and respectful and **a responsible digital citizen** can nip lots of trouble in the bud. But when and if problems start, it's good for parents to understand what's happening—and how to help.

So, other than straight-up cyberbullying, what are some other reasons our kids might be bummed by others' online behavior?

Ghosting. When friends cut off online contact and stop responding, they're ghosting. Refusing to answer someone's texts or Snaps is actually a way of communicating during a shift or upheaval among a group of friends. Often, instead of ever addressing the issue head-on, kids will just ignore the targeted person.

- **How to handle it.** Being ignored is tough. Instead of relying on the old parent standby, "If they're ignoring you, they're obviously not your real friends," try to **empathize** and validate your kid's feelings. If they're willing, encourage them to try a face-to-face conversation with the ghosters. If that feels too hard, suggest your kid stop trying to get replies; the ghosters may come around, but if not, your kid is free to move on.

Subtweeting. When you tweet or post something about a specific person but don't mention them by name or tag them, you're subtweeting. Usually, subtweets are critical or downright mean. Since the target isn't tagged or even named in most cases, they might not know it's happening until someone clues them in.

- **How to handle it.** If your kid finds out someone is subtweeting them, they have a few options depending on the perpetrator. If it's a friend who's suddenly turned on them, it's a good time to address it face-to-face. If it's someone they don't know well or have a conflict with, it's best to ignore it. Engaging in a **Twitter** war (or conflict on any other platform) usually escalates the problem.

Fake accounts. Sometimes kids will create fake accounts in someone else's name and use that account to stir up trouble or hurt that person. In most cases, there's no way to trace who created the account, and even if it's shut down, the person can just create another one.

- **How to handle it.** Dealing with fake accounts can feel like a game of whack-a-mole. But a kid who's targeted should actively defend themselves by blocking and reporting it. Kids should also let friends know what's happening to set the record straight—and take some of the fun out of it for the person creating the accounts.



Sharing embarrassing posts and pics. Taking selfies and group pics are a normal part of tween and teen life. But sometimes kids take pictures of each other that, while fun in the moment, are potentially embarrassing if widely shared or cruelly captioned. Often this is done by someone who thinks they're being funny or assumes everyone will get the joke. But pictures or compromising posts can make the rounds in a hot minute, so no matter the intentions, the shame can stick.

- **How to handle it.** It's best if kids get in the habit of asking each other for permission to share photos. But that won't always happen. Remind kids to think about the impact the photo will have on others before they post it. Kids can also ask their friends to take down embarrassing pictures as soon as they know they're public. If the image has already made the rounds, they may not be able to chase down every copy. But you can reassure kids that everyone will likely move on to the next piece of news and forget about it soon.

Rumors. **Social media** is a perfect venue for the rumor mill, so lies can go far and wide before the target even knows what's happening. And once the fake news is out there, it's pretty impossible to reel it back in.

- **How to handle it.** Your kid's response depends on the type of rumor. If it's something that involves other people—like a rumor that your kid stole someone's significant other and that has led to threats—you may need to get the school involved. If the rumor is embarrassing or hurtful but isn't likely to cause a fight, it's fine for your kid to post a response. Coach them to respond just once and ignore the comments. Otherwise, they can refute the rumor in person when it comes up and wait for everyone to move on.

Exclusion. A kid may be scrolling through their feed and stop cold at a picture of all their friends together—without them. Usually, these kinds of photos aren't intentional slights. But sometimes they are. And if the person who posted the picture knows your kid follows them, there's—at the very least—a lapse in judgment.

- **How to handle it.** Responding online probably won't get the best results. Encourage your kid to approach the original poster face-to-face and explain that the photos hurt their feelings. It's best if your kid can use "I" statements, like "I felt really hurt when I saw that picture ... " (not "I think you're a jerk"). If your kid can express their emotions honestly, they'll probably discover it was just a careless oversight. If it was a deliberate jab, then your kid should probably unfriend the OP (original poster).

Griefing. Remember those kids on the playground who always whipped the ball at other kids and called them names? Those kids play multiplayer video games, too. But instead of whipping a ball, they kill your character on purpose, steal your game loot, and harass you in chat. Online, that behavior is called "griefing." If your kid plays **multiplayer games with chat**, they're bound to run into it at some point.

- **How to handle it.** Before your kid starts playing a game with anonymous strangers, make sure they know how to report and block players who are being cruel on purpose. Tell your kid not to get into an argument over chat, since it probably won't resolve anything and could escalate the aggression. Certain games tend to have more toxic behavior than others, so encourage your kid to try a different game where the community is known to be respectful and the moderators don't tolerate trash-talking.

Hate speech. **Teens encounter hate speech even more than cyberbullying.** This kind of language is similar to cyberbullying, but it's targeted to hurt someone based on personal traits such as race, ethnicity, nationality, religion, disability, sexual orientation, gender identity, or belief system. And unlike the persistent cruelty of cyberbullying, it can be a one-time thing. Even if your kid isn't the object of the posts or comments, they may feel the impact if they're a part of the targeted group.

- **How to handle it.** If your kid encounters hate speech online, it's OK for them to post a matter-of-fact, one-time response refuting it. But they shouldn't get involved in a flame war. Check in with your kid about the kinds of attitudes they see expressed online. If they're seeing a lot of hurtful language, encourage them to seek out alternative feeds—especially ones from supportive online communities. And if it's something really painful or that makes your kid feel humiliated, offer strong counter-messages. If your kid knows the person who posted hate speech—such as another student at school—you can gauge whether to get others (administrators and other parents) involved. Hate speech can have very real consequences in the real world, depending on the context and whether threats are involved.