

## Cyberbullying

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Technology now allows people — often children — to bully online. Social messaging sites can open up the user to a variety of bullying techniques outside of the playground. How parents and other adults can help reduce bullying over the Internet is examined in this NebGuide.

Technology has opened the world to us. We read the daily news, search for information, communicate with each other, and shop online. We share our lives and instantly communicate through “smart” phones, personal digital assistants (PDAs) like Blackberries, text messaging, instant messaging, chat rooms, bulletin boards, blogs, social networking Web sites and interactive games. Computers with Web cameras allow instant face-to-face communication around the world with family, friends, and coworkers. We can check on our children with our computers and through nanny cameras.

Technology can be very positive and rewarding, but the opposite is also true. Scam artists, stalkers, and bullies use technology for fraud, intimidation, and harassment.

Bill Belsey, creator of [www.cyberbullying.org](http://www.cyberbullying.org) and the term *cyberbullying*, defines it as the use of technology for deliberate, repetitive, and hostile behavior toward an individual by another person or group to disgrace, embarrass, threaten or terrify an individual.

Information posted on Web sites or blogs, sent through mass emails and cell phones, group instant messaging, texting, chatting, and so forth can reach worldwide audiences in a very short time. Cyberbully Alert (<http://cyberbullyalert.com/blog/2008/08/top-5-technologies-used-to-cyberbully/>) also notes that anyone adept at using photo editing software can take a hidden photo of someone he or she wants to victimize, and change it so the person appears to be in a compromising position, or doing something illegal or immoral. The photo can then be spread instantly across the Internet.

Although we think of bullying as a schoolground activity, the home is no longer a safe refuge from the bully in today’s digital world. Cyberbullying has increased in direct relationship to the number of teenagers with access to technology.

Studies at the Kamaron Institute indicate that cyberbullying incidents have quadrupled in five years.

In a 2006 Harris Poll, 43 percent of all teens reported being cyberbullied. Fifteen-year-olds reported the highest incidences of bullying, with 54 percent reporting being victimized.

I-SAFE America Inc. found that 58 percent of youth had admitted that they had not shared with a parent that mean or hurtful things have been said to them online.

When does bullying begin? “Young children model the behavior of older children and adults,” according to John DeFraim, UNL Extension Specialist, Family and Community Development. “If they live in a world where people use verbal and physical violence to gain power over others, they are likely to pick up these behaviors at an early age. Fortunately, thoughtful and dedicated adults can create a more loving and caring environment where bullying is minimized.”

Bullying is a growing problem in many middle schools when children are trying to find acceptance, and continues through high school and beyond.

The cyberbully might be motivated by retaliation for actual physical bullying. In some cases, cyberbullying may be related to ethnicity, culture, religion, physical characteristics, or a backlash after the breakup of a personal relationship. Cyberbully victims can be boys, girls, teachers, parents, and other adults.

Nancy Willard, of the University of Oregon College of Education, states that technology can affect young people’s ethical behavior because they feel that they can’t be identified in an anonymous environment, nor will they have to endure feedback and the personal consequences of their behavior.

Because they don’t necessarily see the victim’s response, youngsters cannot connect what they have done with the harm they have caused, nor do they understand the long-term impact of their impulsive decisions.

When we think of boys who bully, we think of someone with more physical power over a victim. Online techniques used by boys often include one-to-one intimidation such as making threats, stealing passwords, and posting offensive pictures. The Media Awareness Network found that 60 percent of students pretended to be someone else while online; they use stolen passwords or another person’s screen name. Once identified for cyber crimes, these youth claim innocence and implicate the individual from whom they have stolen the password.

Girls were about twice as likely as boys to be victims and perpetrators of cyberbullying, according to Margaret Ross,

president of the Kamaron Institute and preemptive bullying expert. Motivation for cyberbullying may be anger, revenge, power, entertainment, or because the bully sees himself or herself as righting a wrong, according to Parry Aftab, Internet privacy and security lawyer.

Cyberbullying techniques might include:

- Flaming – posting online messages that are insulting and may use angry and vulgar language. It is often designed to provoke a digital *fight* on the Internet, message boards, chat rooms and so forth. The message is a *flame*, which may have been posted by a *flamer* or *troll* as *flamebait*, which deliberately seeks a response back.
- Online harassment – sending repeated rude messages through email, spamming or other online networks.
- Cyberstalking – using technology to stalk someone resulting in the person being afraid for his/her safety. Cyberstalking may lead to or be incorporated with actual physical stalking.
- Denigration or *dissing* (slang for disrespecting) someone online – sending or posting rumors online to damage someone’s reputation.
- Masquerading or *impersonation* – posing to be someone else to get the person into trouble or to make him or her look bad.
- Outing – telling someone else’s secrets online.
- Trickery – tricking someone to tell you his/her secrets and then spreading them online.
- Exclusion – intentionally excluding someone from communication by not allowing him/her to be on a *buddy list* or online group.

What can a parent do about cyberbullying? First, it’s important that parents and youth not reply or respond in any way to cyberbullies. Research indicates that being responsive may, in fact, escalate the activity. Instead, parents will need to think like a detective or lawyer.

Document the activity with dates and times and print out any offensive materials. Keep the original email or other digital information, which can help computer specialists find the digital source. Use this information to report the activity to appropriate authorities, such as the school, local police department, state patrol, Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI), your Internet service provider (ISP), and/or groups like WiredSafety.

Parents also should consider changing their family’s personal email addresses if cyberbullying is occurring online. If bullying gets out of hand through cell phones or text messages, consider getting a different mobile phone and giving the number only to close family or friends.

“Bullying isn’t just ‘teasing’ or ‘fun,’” DeFrain says. “It’s a nasty business and carries the seeds of even worse things to come. Many bullies are likely to grow up to be abusive spouses and abusive parents.”

Whenever bullying occurs, it’s important to stop the bullying before it escalates, for the immediate safety of youth and for their futures.

## Resources

- Cyberbullying Web site: [www.cyberbullying.org](http://www.cyberbullying.org)  
WiredSafety Web site: [www.wiredsafety.org](http://www.wiredsafety.org)  
Beware of the Cyber Bully, iSafe.org <http://www.isafe.org/imgs/pdf/education/CyberBullying.pdf>  
Cyberbully Alert, <http://www.stopcyberbullying.org/parents/howdoyouhandleacyberbully/>  
Educator’s Guide to Cyberbullying and Cyberthreats, N. Willard, <http://cyberbully.org/cyberbully/docs/cbcteducator.pdf>  
Internet Generation Gap: An Analysis of Student Assessments and Parent Surveys from an Active Internet Safety Environment. [http://internet.suite101.com/article.cfm/netiquette\\_guidelines](http://internet.suite101.com/article.cfm/netiquette_guidelines) or [http://www.isafse.org/imgs/pdf/internet\\_generation\\_gapef.pdf](http://www.isafse.org/imgs/pdf/internet_generation_gapef.pdf)  
Five Technologies Used to Cyberbully, <http://cyberbullyalert.com/blog/2008/08/top-5-technologies-used-to-cyberbully/>  
Stop Cyberbullying, Wired Kids, Inc. <http://www.stopcyberbullying.org>  
Top 10 Netiquette Guidelines, J. Shoemaker-Galloway. [http://internet.suite101.com/article.cfm/netiquette\\_guidelines](http://internet.suite101.com/article.cfm/netiquette_guidelines)  
Young Canadians in a Wired World—Phase II Overview, Media Awareness Network. <http://www.media-awareness.ca/english/research/YCWW/phaseII/index.cfm>

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