



Cyberbullying

Cyberbullying can be pervasive and incessant. Parents should be aware of what they can do to help.

What is ‘cyberbullying’?

Cyberbullying is when someone is repeatedly mean, nasty, horrible, harassing and/or threatening towards another person using any form of digital technology, including social media, mobile phones or online games.

Like any bullying, cyberbullying often occurs between people that know each other—students at the same school, members of a sporting club, people from the same social circle, ‘friends of a friend’. If someone is being cyberbullied, they are also likely to be bullied in person.

Cyberbullying is pervasive and incessant. It differs from face-to-face bullying in that the bully can ‘follow’ their victim home and into their house. This means that it can continue 24/7. Cyberbullies may take advantage of the perception of anonymity (e.g. using an account in a fake name, or a blocked number) but in many cases it is clear who is behind the bullying.

Cyberbullying can be particularly harmful as it is often very public. Usually, many people can see what is written or posted. Once something is published online, it is difficult if not impossible to remove all traces of it. This means the bullying can be ongoing.

Forms of cyberbullying

- sending nasty texts, posts, instant messages, pictures and/or emails. It can also be a humiliating video.
- repeated prank phone calls.
- setting up a fake account in someone else's name and using that to bully and harass.
- using a person’s password to access their account and then pretending to be them
- forwarding others’ private emails, messages, pictures or videos without permission.
- posting mean or nasty comments online.
- sending and/or forwarding sexually explicit images (see the Sexting advice sheet for more information).
- intentionally excluding others from an online group or chat.



Signs your child may be being cyberbullied

Psychological harm is often harder for parents to identify than the signs of face-to-face bullying, which may include physical injuries. There is no definitive list of signs that indicate cyberbullying but there are some things to look out for:

- **change in mood, demeanour and/or behaviour**: for example being upset, angry, teary or rebellious when not previously
- **change in friendship groups**: it can be normal to change friends during the school year but sudden changes should be explored.
- **spending more time with family instead of friends**: adolescence is generally a time where friends become very important and parents less so. Look out for a child who suddenly wants to be at home all the time.
- **lowering of marks**: often students who are being bullied show a distinct change in application to studies and a lowering of marks.
- **not wanting to go to places**: a dramatic change in enthusiasm for going to school or sport—this can manifest as non-specific illness (headaches, stomach-aches, generally ‘feeling sick.’)
- **distinct change in online behaviours**: being ‘jumpy’ when text messages arrive, not leaving their phone alone, wanting to be online all the time, or never wanting to be online.

Aren't these things normal?

Many of these behaviours may have different causes or may be stages of your child's development. In general, it is important to become the world's best expert on your own child, keep an eye on their behaviour patterns and if you feel something is amiss, explore and let them know that nothing is so bad they cannot tell you about it. Talk early and talk often. Ask them:

“Are you ok? Has something happened that is bothering you? Do you want to talk?”

If you are still concerned then enlist the help of your school wellbeing staff, GP, a counsellor or psychologist.



What can I do if my child is cyberbullied?

Praise them for coming to you

This is a big step as many young people may be frightened to tell a parent about cyberbullying. Even if you don't really understand, let them know that you will help them.

Do not be angry with your child

Remember that it is someone else who is doing the wrong thing. Do not threaten to take technology away from them because of what someone else has done.

Do not respond to the bullying

It is important not to respond to the abuse. This is usually what the bully wants, so ignore them. It is natural in many cases to want to 'fight back' but responding with abuse or a threat may get your child into trouble as well.

Inform your child's school

It is important that the school knows what is going on so they can provide support and monitor any issues that may spill onto the playground or classroom. If the bully is a student from the same school, the school will work through the situation as they would with any other bullying behaviours reported to them.

Save and store the content

Keep copies of all the abusive communications. Take a screen shot or print out for evidence—ask your child for help to do this if necessary.

Help your child to block and delete the bully from all contact lists

Most social networking sites allow the user to control who has the ability to communicate with them. Many people feel 'mean' blocking another person, even if that person has already been mean to them—you may want to sit and support your child as they do this.

Use the 'report abuse' button

Most social networking sites have a method to let the site administrators know that a particular user is behaving unacceptably. Never hesitate to report abuse to the site—they must act.

Have some 'down time' without technology

It is important for both mental and physical health that your child's life is balanced—so they are not constantly 'online' or spending hours on a mobile phone. This should not be used as punishment, rather as some peaceful time where they are not being bothered.

Use parental controls and restrictions to help manage

Use the parental controls and restrictions on the device to limit or prevent contact, for example, blocking a phone number. Third party apps can also be used. If you need to change a number due to abuse, contact your phone company.

The office of eSafety Commissioner

Serious cyberbullying involving an Australian citizen under the age of 18 years can be reported to the **eSafety Commissioner**. To learn more, visit www.esafety.gov.au.

Cyberbullying

If ongoing, report to police

Most cyberbullying between students is usually resolved at school level so ensure that the school is aware and investigating as per their Bullying and/or Student Engagement Policy. This is the first step.

If this is not successful in resolving the situation then you could consider making a report to local police.

There are three main reasons a police report may be necessary:

1. Despite the best efforts of the school, parents or any other responsible adults, the bullying does not stop
2. When it is not possible to know who is behind the bullying (e.g. fake accounts/blocked numbers); or
3. When threats have been made to your child's personal safety.

Cyberbullying is a criminal offence in Victoria as well as every other State and Territory of Australia. There are both State and Commonwealth Laws applicable to this behaviour and you do not have to put up with any form of online bullying.

What if my child is the bully?

It often comes as a shock to be told that your child has been bullying another student online. It is important that parents support schools in their handling of the situation. Don't try and play it down. Schools have policies and programs to deal with all parties (bully, target and witness), involved in bullying incidents.

Parents can help to prevent online bullying. Be involved, and aware of what your child is doing online. Once you are aware that your child has bullied someone else online, you can help them understand that their behaviour is both unacceptable and possibly criminal as well.

Steps to take

As a parent you could:

- discuss why it is not acceptable to be nasty or mean online and offline
- let them see there are consequences for poor behaviour both on and offline—don't bail them out
- acknowledge that they may be feeling guilty or awful about their behaviour, and discuss ways they can rectify the situation
- work together to improve the situation by offering an apology to the victim and removing posts etc.
- talk to them about their actions and try and find out why they behaved in this way and take steps to ensure it does not continue
- ask them to imagine they were the victim—how would they feel? (try to encourage your child to have empathy for the target)
- if the bullying is on an age restricted social media platform and they are under the specified minimum age of use, they should not have an account. Shut their account down immediately.
- develop a home-based Acceptable Use Agreement—set clear rules and boundaries about their online behaviour and your expectations and consequences for breaching this agreement.
- if the poor behaviour continues or your child cannot see the harms they are causing, enlist the help of your school wellbeing staff, GP, a counsellor or adolescent psychologist. to support both your child and yourself.