



## Cyberbullying

Cyberbullying is any form of bullying that takes place online, or via smartphone or tablets.

Bullying is aggressive behaviour that is intentional and that involves an imbalance of power. Most often, it is repeated over time. Increasingly, bullying and cyber-bullying occur hand-in-hand – for example, bullying within the school setting which carries on in the child’s digital world.

A key factor of cyberbullying is that the abuse is often visible to a wider witness audience – who are aware of the bullying even if they do not take part – than ‘real-world’ bullying, and the victim can often feel that there is nowhere to hide and no escape. This is exacerbated given the perceived sense of anonymity that the internet affords, meaning that some victims are unable to identify the perpetrators of the bullying behaviour.

### WHAT CYBERBULLYING MAY LOOK LIKE

Much like ‘real-world’ bullying, cyberbullying can manifest in different ways. Examples of cyberbullying include:

- Sending harassing messages or e-mails
- Posting somebody else’s private photos online
- Spreading rumours
- Making upsetting comments
- Creating a fake social media account to ridicule someone
- Being socially excluded – for example from an online group or forum

A person or people engaging in cyberbullying may be adult or child, and they may use features to appear anonymous.

### WHEN A CHILD MAKES CONTACT DIRECTLY

A young victim of cyberbullying may feel threatened and distressed. Commend the child for making contact and acknowledge their courage for speaking up about their concerns and feelings. Reassuring the young person that they have made the right decision and that you are there to listen and help them is vital. Equally important is making sure that you tell them that it is not their fault and they are not to blame in any way.

Be clear where your helpline stands on confidentiality so the child knows what may happen

with information they share. For example, explain that anything they tell you will be private unless they tell you something that makes you think they are in danger and you are able to get them help, in which case you would talk to them about what you are going to do.

Build a relationship and give the child the time and space to open up further and volunteer more information. Remember to acknowledge the emotional impact of what has happened, and take care not to make assumptions about the situation.

Be supportive. As well as gathering information about the nature of the bullying, try to understand how the child has been affected emotionally, so that you can support them in that and even escalate or safeguard if necessary. Questions should be clear and open-ended, for example:

- Can you tell us how long this has been going on for?
- Has anyone threatened to hurt you?

By listening to the child you will be able to better gauge potential risks (is there a current threat or not?) as well as the options available to the child to address the issue.

If a child is unwilling to talk about specifics during the contact, encourage them to call back – give them time and space, if necessary.

Discuss practical options (see below).

## WHEN A PARENT / CARER MAKES CONTACT

Commend the parent / carer for coming forward. It is likely that they will feel a range of emotions upon discovering that their child is being bullied. They may feel angry, confused, scared and may blame themselves for what has happened.

What is key, is that they understand that it is not their or their child's fault and they are not to blame for what has happened.

Encourage the parent to try to remain calm, to be non-judgmental and to avoid any panicky solutions. In particular, advise parents not to remove their child's internet access – the most likely consequence of such an action would be that the child would not discuss future problems with the parent for fear of being cut-off from their digital lives.

Offer reassurance, a listening ear and a safe space for the parent to define the issue. It can be helpful to ask the parent to name their worst fear – for example, a contact to talk about their child being cyberbullied might also be related to wider concerns for their child, such as self-harm or suicidal thoughts, which need further discussion.

Help the parent to understand likely linkages between 'real world' bullying within their child's school / social circle and cyberbullying. Discuss with the parent how they might seek support from the child's school.

Discuss practical advice (see below) with the parents and remind them that your helpline is available for their child to call for support - but do note that you won't be able to share the content of the call with the parent without the child's consent.

If the parent / carer is calling because they suspect their child is being bullied or cyberbullied, or they have found out this is going on from a source other than their child, there are a number of things that a parent can do in order to encourage their child to open up. You could suggest the following approaches:

- **Choose the moment carefully.** Do not make your child feel like they have been put on the spot.
- **Find a quiet place.** If your child has built up the courage to disclose a concern, the last thing that they want is to be disturbed.
- **Ask questions.** Try to be non-judgemental and allow your child the opportunity to answer. Try to keep the conversation flowing.

- **Reassure your child.** Tell your child that you believe them and that you are there to help them.

It is important that you discuss the potential emotional impact of bullying and cyberbullying on the child – this will help the parent be alert to signs to watch out for as well as take a supportive approach to their child. Ask the parent to talk about:

- Any changes they have noticed in their child's behaviour.
- Whether they have any concerns for the child's mental health currently or historically.

Gathering this information will help inform you if any subsequent referral to the support services may be required. You should also ensure the parent is looking out for any subsequent changes in their child's behaviour, even if there have been no visible changes reported by the parent to you at this stage.

### PRACTICAL ADVICE:

Take some time with the child to explore practical options that might help for the specific context that is being discussed.

Discuss technical options that the child might consider using – for example, adjusting security and privacy settings to prevent further harassment, and blocking the individual or individuals responsible for the harassment.

Discuss whether the child might report the bullying. Explore options - whether through the service provider's safety centre or to another appropriate authority, including the child's school. Encourage the child to retain any evidence – for example, taking screenshots and saving chat logs – to help with reporting.

Review the potential for creating a support network within their own environment – for example talking to a trusted teacher at school or a parent.

### RED FLAGS:

- The child is expressing suicidal thoughts, intentions to self-harm or emotional trauma.
- The child has been threatened or blackmailed.

In the case of red flag issues emerging during your conversation, follow your standard escalation processes for intervention by law enforcement, child protection services, and so on, as appropriate.

