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How to spot the signs of cyberbullying

Cyberbullying and children's safety online have become major concerns in recent years due to technological advances and the rapid pace at which social media has grown. It's really important parents and guardians are able to spot the signs of cyberbullying in how a child is behaving, and that they know what to do to offer support.

Trigger warning: this article contains discussion of self-harm and suicide.

What is cyberbullying?

Bullying is behaviour that harms someone else and is usually repeated over an extended period of time. It can include physical attacks and threats or verbal abuse, such as name-calling.

The National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children ([NSPCC](#)) defines cyberbullying as: "Bullying that takes place online. Unlike bullying offline, online bullying can follow the child wherever they go, via [social networks](#), gaming and mobile phones."

Types of cyberbullying

- Sending abusive messages.
- Sharing photos or videos to embarrass someone.
- Encouraging people to self-harm.
- Excluding children from online gaming.
- Setting up hate sites.
- Sending explicit messages (known as sexting).

- Pressuring children to send sexual images.
- Creating fake accounts to harass someone or spread hate using their name (known as cyberbullying by proxy).
- Trolling (sending menacing or upsetting messages).
- Voting against someone in an abusive poll.

Is cyberbullying a crime?

[Bullying and cyberbullying](#) are not officially covered by UK law. This can be frustrating when victims try to report cyberbullying after it has severely affected their [mental health](#). But, there is legislation that can be used to prosecute cyberbullies.

Protection from Harassment Act 1997

This Act was originally introduced to tackle stalking. It makes it a criminal offence to knowingly target a victim with multiple abusive emails with the intention of causing distress and alarm. If found guilty, the bully could be fined and spend up to six months in prison.

The Malicious Communications Act 1988

This Act makes it an offence to send someone communication that is "indecent or grossly offensive." If messages cause distress, the offender can receive a fine of up to £5,000, six months in prison or both.

The Communications Act 2003

The Communications Act criminalises sending "grossly offensive electronic communication" that is considered "indecent, obscene or menacing." If prosecuted, the perpetrator can be fined and/or receive six months in prison.

The Public Order Act 1986

This law comes in useful in cases of cyberbullying via smartphones with cameras since it covers threatening or insulting visual representations. The defendant can face jail for six months and/or a fine.

How can you tell if your child is being cyberbullied?

Ryan Lowe is a child and adolescent psychotherapist and spokesperson for the Association of Child Psychotherapists (ACP). She explains how your child's behaviour might change if they are being cyberbullied.

"Unfortunately, there isn't a standard set of behaviours in response to being bullied. You know your child best and what behaviour is outside the norm.

"However, what you might notice more are changes in timing. Your child might seem more upset, in whatever way they show that, after having been online. They may also be anxious at times when they would generally be about to go online."

Some signs to look out for are:

- Low mood.
- [Anxiety](#).
- [Sleep disturbances](#) - either sleeping too much or [insomnia](#).
- Reluctance to socialise.
- Reduced motivation.
- [Changes in eating patterns](#).
- A change in dress style to cover up.
- Quick to cry/long periods of crying.

How common is cyberbullying?

Advances in technology and the rapid growth of the internet mean cyberbullying can follow children through smartphones and [social media](#) platforms.

A study published at the end of 2020 found that in the last 12 months¹:

- 7 out of 10 children were emotionally affected after being bullied online.

- 7 out of 10 children who experienced cyberbullying said it was by someone at their school.
- Around 3 out of 10 children did not report their experiences to anyone.

The most common forms of cyberbullying were name-calling, being sworn at or insulted, and receiving nasty messages. These behaviours were experienced by 1 in 10 of all children aged 10-15 in the study.

The impact of the pandemic on cyberbullying

The Office for National Statistics Centre for Crime and Justice noted that 1 in 5 children aged 10-15 experienced some form of cyberbullying between 2019 and 2020¹, the most recent government data. This compares with 2 in 5 experiencing bullying in person.

There's a lack of data on how the COVID-19 pandemic affected cyberbullying in the UK, but experts believe that [children's isolation](#) at home and increased time spent on the internet during lockdowns is likely to have increased cyberbullying where school bullying wasn't possible².

One analysis of words related to cyberbullying – such as cyberbullying itself, cyberbully, and internet bullying – used on Twitter in the early months of the pandemic showed an increase in the frequency of these terms immediately following school closings and stay-at-home orders³.

What are the effects of cyberbullying?

Lowe says there is often pressure from peers for kids to copy behaviours such as [self-harming](#), [bingeing/purging](#), or [restricting eating](#). Concerningly, there appear to be some websites demonstrating how to do this.

When cyberbullying leads to children being excluded from chats, it can affect their [self-esteem](#) and lead to [anxiety](#).

Depression

Research has repeatedly shown that cyberbullying leads to higher levels of [depression](#) in children. One study found 93% of victims reported feelings of sadness, powerlessness, and hopelessness⁴.

Anger issues

Research indicates that [anger](#) is the most common response to cyberbullying. This might present itself in young people wanting to take revenge and retaliate.

Gastrointestinal issues

The stress of bullying can cause stomach conditions or worsen existing conditions. These conditions include abdominal pain, [stomach ulcers](#), [vomiting](#) or [diarrhoea](#).

Stress

Research shows that 32% of children who are cyberbullied experience at least one symptom of [stress](#). This stress can contribute to embarrassment and fear for both their offline and online safety.

Skipping meals

Children might try to [control their food intake](#) because cyberbullying feels beyond their control. This could lead to an eating disorder, particularly if bullies target their appearance⁵.

Academic issues

Bullied students often have higher rates of absence than those who are not bullied⁶. Cyberbullying can cause children to lose interest in school, especially if their abilities are targeted.

Self-harm

Being cyberbullied might cause a child to [harm themselves](#) out of anger, self-blame, or to express intense feelings⁷.

Suicidal thoughts

Cyberbullying increases the [risk of suicide](#). Young people who are tormented by peers through text messages, instant messaging, social media, or apps can feel the only way to end the pain is to take their life⁸.

Cyberbullying can lead to children using drugs or alcohol or carrying a weapon also.

Further reading

1. [Office for National Statistics: Online bullying in England and Wales: year ending March 2020.](#)

2. Sorrentino et al: Has the COVID-19 pandemic affected cyberbullying and cybervictimization prevalence among children and adolescents? A systematic review.
3. Karmakar and Das: Understanding the rise of Twitter-based cyberbullying due to COVID-19 through comprehensive statistical evaluation.
4. Nixon: Current perspectives: the impact of cyberbullying on adolescent health.
5. Marco and Tormo-Irun: Cyber victimization is associated with eating disorder psychopathology in adolescents.
6. Vaillancourt et al: Cyberbullying in children and youth: implications for health and clinical practice.
7. Karanikola et al: The association between deliberate self-harm and school bullying victimization and the mediating effect of depressive symptoms and self-stigma: a systematic review.
8. Alavi et al: Relationship between bullying and suicidal behaviour in youth presenting to the emergency department.

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Authored by:	Peer Reviewed by: Dr Krishna Vakharia, MRCP	
Originally Published: 24/02/2024	Next review date: 17/11/2023	Document ID: doc_31893

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