

# Advancing Bullying Awareness Parenting Strategies for Addressing Cyberbullying

► In this fifth of a five-part series, you will learn tactics to combat and take action against cyberbullying of your teen.

Youth today have a greater chance than ever of experiencing cyberbullying. Actions considered cyberbullying include posting hurtful words and images, pretending to be someone else online, sending hate mail, and stalking. The ability to instantly broadcast malicious photos and text to large numbers of people has hugely impacted rates of harassment. This is a concern for families.

In this article, you will learn several strategies that may help you and your teen handle cyberbullying and cyberstalking.

## Responding to Cyberbullying

Attempts to reduce cyberbullying and cyberstalking are complicated, because cyberbullies may be unknown and difficult for school administrators and parents to identify. While parents often feel powerless to help their children handle cyberbullying, there are several responses that may be effective.

**Make sure your child has support.** Studies have shown that youth find it helpful to talk about the cyberbullying to someone close to them (parent, sibling, relative, friend). You may want to consider having your child see a counselor. Do not ignore the issue.

**Keep the evidence.** Save as much of the evidence as you can and print it as a record. Information such as the person's screen name as well as the actual messages, photos, and texts are useful for reporting.

**Flag the message as inappropriate.** File a complaint with the website or service where the message was posted or shared. Almost all sites have rules designed to prevent harassment. You usually can find contact information on a site's home page. There is often an option to flag/tag a message, post, or photo as inappropriate. Following are examples:



- Facebook has “report this” tabs and commits to responding within 24 hours to complaints about nudity, pornography, or harassment of minors. The Facebook.com safety page has a link to an auditing firm to provide feedback on its responsiveness.
- Instagram and Twitter have a report form that you can fill out through their Help Center.
- YouTube’s “Abuse and Safety Center” tool includes a tab on its home page that leads users through a step-by-step reporting process.

**Delete the account.** Parents/guardians can delete an account after the evidence is printed. Staying off the computer or phone can be helpful. However, closing or deleting the account may create panic for some youth who are victims, because they will only know what is being posted about them from others.

**Take advantage of privacy settings.** With some social networking sites, parents/guardians may be able to make their teen's profile completely private simply by checking a box. With others, such as Facebook, privacy settings are more complex.



#### **Add security measures to social media accounts.**

Tell your teen to always use a strong, unique password for every social networking site. Implement a two-factor authentication for sites that your teen uses. You can find a list of these sites at <https://twofactorauth.org/>. When you enable the two-factor authentication, your teen's account will require him or her to provide a password or code that is linked to a specific device. That way, if someone gets your teen's password, that person will not be able to log in to the account without the specific code that the service sends to the device.

**Be aware of posts and photos made by family and friends.** Ask family and friends not to post personal information about your children, especially their contact information and location.

**Do not post photographs of your home that might let others know its location.** For example, do not post photos showing a house number in the background. While it is very popular to post information about current or future locations, this action could allow a stalker to know where you are at all times. Counsel your teen to use caution when connecting a cell phone to social networking accounts and providing live updates on locations or activities. Discuss the privacy settings on the phone and ask your teen to edit how his or her location is shared.

**Do not accept friend or follow requests from strangers.** Instruct your teen to verify offline if the person sending the request is the person he or she knows. Also avoid online polls or quizzes that ask for personal information. Teens need to use caution when joining online organizations, groups, or "fan" pages, and should never publicly RSVP to events shown online.

**Report the incident.** Cyberbullying can create a negative environment at school and is often related to in-person bullying. Cyberbullying can be reported to the school if it happens while students are in school. Cyberbullying also can be reported if it occurs after school and it rolls over into the school setting.

According to the Jamari Terrell Williams Student Bullying Act, the complaint must be written, not just verbally communicated. The complaint should be on a form authorized by the local school board, outlining the details of the harassment, and be submitted to the person designated by the local board to receive complaints at the school. The report should include evidence of harassment incidents.

Under the law, only the child and his or her parents/guardians can file a complaint, not a teacher or staff person on their behalf. Call your school district to see where to find the form for filing a formal complaint and where it should be sent. Encourage your child to help you complete the required reporting form. The act of reporting the bullying can make your child feel good. If your child is unable or unwilling to complete the form, do it for him/her.

Make sure you keep a copy of the complaint. While the policy about reporting has been required for school districts since July 1, 2010, there are school districts that do not follow the law; they allow verbal, rather than written, formal reports of harassment. Generally, if your school does not have a policy, cyberbullying, cyberstalking, and sexting issues are handled by the police department, not school officials.

## **Reporting Cyberbullying to Law Enforcement**

When cyberbullying involves the following activities, it is considered a crime and should be reported to law enforcement:

- threats of violence
- sending and receiving sexually explicit messages or photos of youth under the age of 17
- taking a photo or video of someone in a place where he or she would expect privacy
- stalking
- hate crimes



The US Department of Justice has issued recommendations for people who believe they are victims of cyberstalking. The first step should be to tell those who are harassing your child to stop all contact and harassment. In order to make a police report and prosecute a stalker and harasser, the parents/guardian of the child should do the following:

**Save all emails, messages, and other communications for evidence.** It is important that these are not changed in any way and that the electronic copies and printout are kept.

**Save all records of threats against your child's safety or life.** This includes any written or recorded threats with the date, time, and circumstances of the threats.

**Search for the IP address of those doing the cyberbullying.** Social media sites (Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, Snapchat, etc.) do not reveal IP addresses between users, but the site administrators have the IP address for everyone who comes to the site. If someone is harassing your child anonymously, try contacting the site administrators to find out the person's identity.

**Keep detailed records of contact with the internet service provider and law enforcement officials.** It is important to keep a log of all reports made to any social media site or provider, and to obtain copies of the official reports when available. Also get an official police report filed if you go to the police about cyberbullying, cyberstalking, or sexting.

**Hire a lawyer.** Severe harassment often requires a lawyer. A lawyer experienced in education law, civil rights law, or juvenile law may be able to help you analyze the wrongs committed and guide you as to what you can do in response.

## Conclusion

There are many actions that parents/guardians can take to help their children manage and address cyberbullying. Since each school board/district is responsible for creating bullying policies, parents/guardians must be aware of their school system's policy against harassment.

If your child experiences cyberbullying, cyberstalking, or sexting harassment, it is important to file a report and ask your school's administrators what they will do about the harassment. Keep lines of communication with the school open. If school officials cannot successfully end the bullying, explore your legal options to ensure the safety of your child.



Adrienne M. Duke, *Extension Specialist*, Assistant Professor, and Leigh Akins, *Regional Extension Agent*, both in Human Development and Family Studies, Auburn University

For more information, contact your county Extension office. Visit [www.aces.edu](http://www.aces.edu)/directory.

The Alabama Cooperative Extension System (Alabama A&M University and Auburn University) is an equal opportunity educator and employer. Everyone is welcome!

Revised November 2021, FCS-2269

© 2021 by the Alabama Cooperative Extension System. All rights reserved.

[www.aces.edu](http://www.aces.edu)