

# Comprehensive Guide: Protecting Children Against Cyberbullying

Cyberbullying has emerged as a serious issue that can have devastating effects on children, families, and communities. Parents, guardians, and teachers must be alert and knowledgeable about this growing threat, and more importantly, how to protect their children and students. This guide provides practical tips on how to educate children about cyberbullying and create a safe space for them if they ever become victims.

## Understanding Cyberbullying

Cyberbullying includes any form of harassment, intimidation, embarrassment or bullying online and digital devices. It can occur on social media platforms, chat rooms/forums, gaming platforms, gaming consoles, emails and even text messages. A key differentiator from traditional bully, which generally happens within school hours, cyberbullying can occur at any time, day or night, and reach a child even when they are alone.

## Signs of Cyberbullying

Below are signs of cyberbullying to watch out for. Share these with your child and encourage them to come to you if they ever experience these or if they have a friend who may be experiencing them.

- Receiving mean or threatening messages, comments or posts.
- Being purposely excluded from online groups, games or forums.
- Having rumors spread about them online.
- Finding embarrassing photos or videos shared publicly.
- Finding AI generated photos or videos of them in vulnerable or inappropriate situations\*.

*\*See our Sextortion guide for more about AI generated sextortion.*

## Preemptive Measures: How to Educate Children about Cyberbullying

Teaching children respectful online communication is crucial in this digital age. Parents, guardians, and teachers play an instrumental role in guiding New Mexico’s children to understand that behind every screen is a real person. The following steps offer an approach on how to initiate the conversation about cyberbullying, advocate for respectful communication.

- ***Initiating the conversation about Cyberbullying:***
  - **Choose the right time and place:**
    - Find a calm and comfortable environment where you won’t be interrupted. It could be at home or in a quiet classroom.
  - **Begin with general topics:**
    - Begin by talking about their day or what they enjoy doing online – maybe how far they are in their most recent video game. This opens the door to a broader conversation about their online experiences.
  - **Introduce the topic:**
    - Transition to the topic of cyberbullying. An example of what you may say could be, “I’ve heard about something called cyberbullying. Have you heard about it?”
  - **Explain what Cyberbullying is:**
    - Patiently and clearly define cyberbullying, its forms, and its potential effects. Use age-appropriate language to ensure they understand.

- **Encourage Questions:**
  - Pause to allow them to ask questions. This helps gauge their understanding and address misconceptions. It can also help to ask them questions to ensure they are active in the conversation.
- **Share Real-Life Examples:**
  - Discuss or show them news stories or articles that you feel are age appropriate. You can also discuss hypothetical scenarios to illustrate how cyberbullying occurs and its consequences.
- **Discuss strategies:**
  - Talk about what to do if they encounter cyberbullying. This includes not responding, reporting it to the platform, reporting it to their school, blocking the bully, and telling a trusted adult.
- **Remind them that they will not be in trouble if they report cyberbullying:**
  - A tactic bullies often use is intimidation, which can directly impact the victim's willingness to report the bullying or tell a trusted adult. They may be fearful of negative consequences or repercussions from the bully if they sought out help. Be sure to reaffirm often that the child will not be in trouble if they report cyberbullying or come to you. See below for tips on how to create a safe space for the child.

- ***Advocating Respectful Communication:***
  - **Lead by example:**
    - Demonstrate respectful online interactions in your own online behavior. Your actions can serve as a powerful model for children.
  - **Explain online etiquette:**
    - Share and discuss the basics of “netiquette”. For example, not typing in all capitalized letters because it can come across as yelling, respecting others’ opinions, and refraining from sharing inappropriate content.
  - **Highlight consequences:**
    - Make it clear that hurtful words or actions online have very real-world consequences. These consequences can impact both the person on the receiving end and for the one initiating it.
  - **Empathize with the person behind the screen:**
    - Encourage children to think about how they would feel if they were in the other person’s shoes. Remind them that behind every screen is a person with feelings, and that you never know what someone is going through.
  - **Monitor online activities:**
    - Regularly check the platforms or consoles your child uses to ensure they are interacting respectfully or that they have not fallen victim to cyberbullying. This is to ensure they are safe and responsible online.

- ***Privacy Matters:***
  - **Talk about privacy:**
    - Explain what privacy means in a real-world context and then relate it to the digital world. Ask questions to ensure the child understands.
  - **Show privacy settings:**
    - Walk them through the privacy settings on their favorite platforms. Explain how these settings can control who sees their personal information, posts, comments and photos. Go over the importance of certain settings, such as a private account, so they understand the “why” and don’t feel left in the dark.
  - **Set privacy settings together:**
    - We recommend assisting your child in setting their profiles to the highest level of privacy. This hands-on experience will help them understand the process better and open the door for them to ask questions.

## **Highlighting the Dangers of Oversharing**

- **Explain what oversharing is:**
  - Define oversharing to your child. Explain that it means giving out or providing too much personal information online. This may include sharing their location, address, full name, school name, family details, favorite hang-out spot, password, email address or phone number.

- **Cover potential risks:**
  - Discuss the risks of oversharing, such as stalking, cyberbullying, sextortion, and identity theft.
- **Role-play scenarios:**
  - Use hypothetical scenarios to help them identify what constitutes oversharing and ask how they would react in each situation.

## Self-Protection Strategies

- **Don't reply:**
  - Encourage for them to not reply to any messages from a bully as this can escalate the situation and urge the bully to increase their engagement.
- **Block the bully and report them:**
  - Teach your child how to block a bully and how to report the incident to the platform. Encourage your child to share these situations with you so you can be informed of how often this is occurring and if you need to take action.
- **Document everything:**
  - If they're being cyberbullied, either have them take screenshots or take photos of the bullying content yourself. Save these photos as evidence in the event you need them in the future.

## **Ways to Respond to Cyberbullying**

- **Monitor online activities:**
  - Be aware of your child's online behavior. Look for any odd changes that might indicate they're being cyberbullied, such as spending significantly more amount of time online or spending significantly less amount of time online without explanation.
- **Promote reporting:**
  - Ensure your child feels comfortable reporting any bullying incidents to you or another trusted adult. See Building Trust in a Safe Space.
- **Report and save evidence:**
  - If your child is a victim, report the incident to the relevant platform. Make sure to save all of the evidence.
- **Involve school:**
  - If the bullying involves schoolmates, bring it to the attention of school authorities right away.
- **Involving law enforcement:**
  - If the bullying involves threats to the child, such as physical violence that may result in bodily harm, sextortion, threats of death, contact your local authorities and save the evidence.

## **Building Trust in a Safe Space**

Protecting our children from cyberbullying is a collective responsibility. By providing a supportive environment, you can help children navigate the digital world more confidently and safely.

- **Encourage open communication:**
  - Let your child know they can talk to you about anything, especially their online experiences. Be non-judgmental and patient, and assure them that no topic is off-limits, including challenges they face online.
- **Be non-judgmental:**
  - Make it clear that you're there to listen and help, not to judge or criticize. If they come to you with a problem, react calmly and empathetically.
- **Show empathy:**
  - Try to put yourself in their shoes and validate their feelings. Statements like, "That sounds really tough," or "I can see why you're upset," can make them feel understood.
- **Assure confidentiality:**
  - Unless they are in danger, assure them that the conversations you have will remain confidential. This builds trust and makes them more likely to open up to you.
- **Provide guidance, not solutions:**
  - Instead of telling them what to do, which can often make the child feel like you're not listening to them, guide them towards finding their own solutions. This empowers them and helps them build their problem-solving skills.



- **Follow up:**
  - After your conversation, be sure to check in on them regularly. This shows that you care about their experiences and ongoing well-being. It also shows how well you listened and that their issues matter to you.
- **Keep up-to-date and stay informed:**
  - Check in on the latest trends and potential online threats. This can help you provide relevant advice and shows the child that you understand their digital world.



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