

Cyberbullying: What Parents Should Notice, Ask, and Do Early

Cyberbullying can happen through texts, social media, gaming platforms, group chats, email, or other digital spaces. Parents may not see the harmful content directly, so changes around device use and social behavior can be important clues. StopBullying.gov lists warning signs such as sudden increases or decreases in device use, strong emotional reactions to what happens on a device, hiding screens, shutting down or creating accounts, avoiding social situations, or becoming withdrawn.¹ A warning sign is not proof of cyberbullying, so begin with questions rather than accusations: “I’ve noticed you seem upset after checking your phone. Is something happening online?” If the child shares harmful messages or posts, stay calm enough to preserve communication. StopBullying.gov recommends documenting the behavior, saving screenshots or messages, blocking the person involved when appropriate, and reporting harmful content through the relevant platform or school processes.² The American Academy of Pediatrics similarly advises parents not to respond by immediately taking away the child’s device, because the child may experience that as punishment and become less willing to disclose future problems; it recommends documenting evidence, supporting the child, and reporting the behavior when needed.³ Do not forward humiliating material or encourage retaliation. Help the child tighten privacy settings and identify trusted adults at school. Threats of violence, stalking, sexual exploitation, or other potentially criminal behavior require a higher level of response and may need law-enforcement involvement. Keep monitoring the child’s functioning after the incident: sleep, school attendance, concentration, friendships, mood, and willingness to use devices. If the child becomes significantly withdrawn, distressed, or unsafe, involve appropriate health or mental-health support. The goal is to make it easier for the child to tell the truth early, preserve evidence, stop the harmful contact, and bring in the right adults before the situation grows.

Did You Know?

- ✓ StopBullying.gov lists changes in device use, emotional reactions to devices, screen hiding, social withdrawal, and account changes as possible warning signs.¹
- ✓ Federal guidance recommends documenting cyberbullying, saving screenshots or messages, blocking when appropriate, and reporting through platforms or schools.²
- ✓ AAP guidance advises supporting the child and preserving evidence rather than reflexively punishing the child by removing device access.³

Research Sources

1. U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, StopBullying.gov. “Prevent Cyberbullying.” Reviewed November 10, 2021.
2. U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, StopBullying.gov. “Report Cyberbullying.” Reviewed December 11, 2024.
3. American Academy of Pediatrics. “Cyberbullying: How to Help Prevent It.” HealthyChildren.org.

Ten-Minute Cyberbullying Early-Response Plan

Use this page for concerning online behavior. The goal is to listen, preserve evidence, and choose a safe next step.

Child's name: _____

Date: _____

Platform or app: _____

Account: _____

1. Notice Without Accusing - About 2 Minutes

Write the change you observed and ask one calm, open question.

I noticed: _____ I can ask: _____

2. Record What Happened - About 2 Minutes

Record the date, platform, people involved, and what was sent or posted.

Platform: _____ Date/time: _____

3. Preserve Evidence - About 2 Minutes

Save screenshots, messages, usernames, or links when safe to do so.

Evidence saved: _____

4. Choose the Reporting Path - About 2 Minutes

Choose the reporting path that matches what happened.

☐ School ☐ Platform/app ☐ Trusted adult ☐ Law enforcement if needed

5. Protect Connection - About 2 Minutes

End by making clear that reporting the problem was the right action.

What Parents Can Say: "Thank you for telling me. We will handle this together."