

Safeguarding children against cyberbullying in the age of COVID-19

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As screen time has increased during the pandemic, so has the risk of cyberbullying. What can you do to help protect your children from online bullying and harassment?

It's been almost a year since the World Health Organisation (WHO) declared the COVID-19 outbreak a pandemic. People everywhere have been doing their best to adhere to regional and national stay-in-place orders and social distancing rules in the hope that a sense of normality will return soon.

At one stage, entire families were stuck inside with most of their daily activities taking place from behind the screens of their devices. Fortunately, as we welcome Lockdown Level 1, children are finally getting back to school, but the new reality is that there will be a lot more digital reliance.

Many schools have moved homework to digital platforms and are allowing more digital means of interacting with parents and children. However, the result is extra screen time for children with [their day being dominated by the digital world](#). A few may [take the odd lesson online](#) still, and many will continue to interact with their friends online, consume copious amounts of media online and play games online.

[ESET](#) South Africa CEO, Carey van Vlaanderen, says: "One of the risks your children are opened up to is cyberbullying. It is natural that in the wake of the pandemic and social distancing rules, children are spending more time online, and the risk of cyberbullying has therefore increased. But there are ways to try to manage what your children are exposed to, and as parents, the responsibility lies with us to not only educate but also to be aware and check in with them."

How does cyberbullying manifest?

Contrary to popular belief, cyberbullying isn't just limited to social media, but is often present on various platforms and manifests in various ways.

With social media, cyberbullying could seemingly look innocent at first glance to casual observers. Certain perpetrators mask their actions by creating memes with inside jokes that are only known to them, the target of their attacks and others in a common social group such as classmates or other members of a sports team, social or church group, and so on.

Alternatively, cyberbullying could be hidden by taking place in private groups and chatrooms, with the materials being intentionally leaked to the victim. All of this makes the act hard to detect. However, often the bullies don't really care and will humiliate and attack their victims publicly for added shame.

Another hotbed of cyberbullying where kids are spending endless hours is online gaming. While most of the time the attacks manifest in the form of insults, ridiculing of gaming skills or more generally profanities being hurled by the truckload, it is by far not the only type of bullying that could be experienced in online battle arenas.

Often players will choose their victim and will then engage in making the time spent in the game as agonising as possible by either killing their online avatars over and over again, or by falsely reporting their behavior, getting them banned. This makes the game unplayable by the victim.

How to prevent and stop online harassment

Van Vlaanderen offers the following tips to parents. “First and foremost, adults should be aware of the [warning signs](#) that something is amiss. To protect themselves, kids may drastically reduce the use of their devices, they may become moody, or even delete their accounts and create new ones. It’s important that we watch for changes in behaviour.”

Cyberbullying shouldn’t just be addressed after the fact; parents should [have active discussions with their children](#) about cyberbullying and other pitfalls of the internet. “Kids should know that they can trust parents and teachers with their problems and confide in them. For good measure, parents can opt to [use parental controls](#) to monitor what their children do online, although some may consider it an infringement on their kids’ privacy. You need to work with what’s right for you as a family.”

Children should be made aware that nobody deserves to be bullied and if they see someone getting hurt, they shouldn’t remain silent, but speak up and tell a responsible adult. “It’s important to educate kids about how to report incidents and that they should keep screenshots and records of any instances of cyberbullying they’ve experienced firsthand or seen being perpetrated against someone else. Show them the various tools that social media and gaming platforms provide to report such behaviour so they know they have options.”

To learn more about the ways cyberbullying can affect children as well as about how technology can help, head over to the ESET [Safer Kids Online](#) platform.

ESET has compiled this list of websites that offer advice, contacts, and counseling for victims of bullying.

- [Cybersmile](#) (various countries)
- [Cyberbullying Research Center](#) (United States)
- [National Bullying Helpline](#) (United Kingdom)
- [Kidshelpline](#) (Australia)
- [Netsafe](#) (New Zealand)
- [Cyber B.A.A.P.](#) (India)
- [Bully-Free](#) (Singapore)

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