The changing face of cyberbullying – protecting your child

How cyberbullying has evolved

Cyberbullying is not new, but the tools, platforms and tactics have become more complex. Here are some key changes.

- Harms are occurring on unexpected platforms.
- Children are accessing devices earlier, often before they're emotionally ready.
- The coded language of emojis.
- Sexualised online abuse.
- The use of AI for fake images, impersonation, and viral harmful content.

New forms of online bullying

Technology makes bullying more public, persistent, and harder to escape. Evolving tactics include:

- coercion and extortion, involving intimate images and deepfakes
- surveillance using Snap Maps, 'last seen', and read receipts
- ghosting and exclusion from group chats
- group targeting – amplified by **platform algorithms**.

Emojis as a coded language

Emojis are used to mock, exclude, or threaten peers covertly. Examples include:

- repeated use of emojis to mimic or mock appearance or interests
- emojis used to isolate
- emojis used in usernames to signal inclusion/exclusion
- sarcastic emojis used to disguise harm as humour.

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Sexualised online abuse

Sexual harassment and **coercion** are rising online, often with gendered patterns. Examples include:

- unsolicited explicit messages or comments

- sexual shaming and outing through false rumours

- sexual extortion involving threats to share intimate content.

Gendered patterns:

- Girls are more likely to face image-based abuse and unwanted attention.

- Boys are often targeted through financial sexual extortion.

- Gender-diverse youth face more severe, identity-based abuse.

AI-driven cyberbullying

Generative AI has accelerated the evolution of cyberbullying tactics, making them harder to detect and more personal. Some examples include:

- AI-manipulated images/videos used for body shaming

- deepfakes depicting false sexual content

- voice cloning to impersonate peers with offensive or embarrassing audio

- AI-generated harassment material flooding victims with abuse.

The impacts of cyberbullying

Cyberbullying can have lasting emotional and psychological impacts, even when the behaviour appears mild. It's important to recognise the broad spectrum of cyberbullying and its underestimated effects.

Risk factors

Certain factors increase a young person's vulnerability to cyberbullying:

- disruptive behaviours and truancy

- disability, neurodiversity, LGBTQIA+ identity

- history of bullying, abuse, or maltreatment

- First Nations youth face online hate at 3x the national average.

Protective factors

Four key areas can help prevent and reduce the impact of cyberbullying:

1. Individual strengths

2. Positive school climate

3. Supportive families

4. Positive peer influence

Support, guide and protect

How you respond to cyberbullying can make all the difference.

Signs your child may be experiencing cyberbullying

Children and young people may not always speak up, but you can watch for subtle changes in three key areas:

- School and social life – avoiding school, activities, or friends.

- Emotions and behaviour – increased moodiness, anger, withdrawal, or negative self-talk. There may be changes in appearance, or increased sensitivity.

- Technology use – spending excessive time online, secrecy with devices, or frequently clearing browser history.

Recognising and responding – key challenges

- Adults rarely use the same platforms as young people, leading to a disconnect in understanding.

- Peers and bystanders of the young person may downplay cyberbullying as a joke.

- Anonymous platforms make it difficult to identify perpetrators.

- Fear of overreaction from parents and carers, such as losing access to devices, may make young people secretive.

Protecting and supporting young people

If your child is targeted:

- Reassure and listen: Stay calm and supportive. Let your child know they're not alone.

- **Collect evidence**: Save screenshots, messages, usernames, dates, and times.

- Report the abuse: Help your child report it to the platform. If unresolved, **report** to eSafety.

- Talk with the school: If other students are involved, contact the school to ensure support is in place.

- Update online settings: Together change passwords, tighten privacy settings, and review who can contact them.

- Keep communication open: Let them know they can come to you anytime.

- Seek professional help if needed: If your child is distressed or at risk, contact a mental health professional, school counsellor, GP, or **counselling and support services**.

Working with your child's school can make a real difference. Research shows that when parents and schools work together, outcomes are better. Gather evidence, communicate in writing and arrange a meeting. Ask about additional supports.

Strategies to strengthen safety online

- Use parental controls, where age appropriate.
- Set up privacy and safety controls together by using filter functions for words, phrases and emojis, or limit who can direct message. Consider turning off comments.

Recovery

How to help your child recover:

- Focus on skills. Help them to identify and regulate their emotions and encourage self-reflection.
- Reframe setbacks as learning moments. Try to build your child's confidence and help them make decisions for themselves, rather than telling them what to do.
- Check in regularly as healing takes time. Help your child identify tools they can use to work through the current situation, such as information that supports their mental health.

You know your child best, so keep in mind the strategies you know will work best for them.

What if my child is bullying?

- Talk to your child to understand the 'why'.
- Encourage honesty, responsibility and reflection.
- Support them to own their own actions and make amends.
- Discuss the outcomes of treating others unfairly.
- Praise steps they take to be kinder or more respectful.

Reporting to eSafety

Report cyberbullying

eSafety resources

eSafety Kids

eSafety Young People

eSafety Parents – includes cyberbullying video resources

Easy read guide – cyberbullying

Parent resources

Parent webinars

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