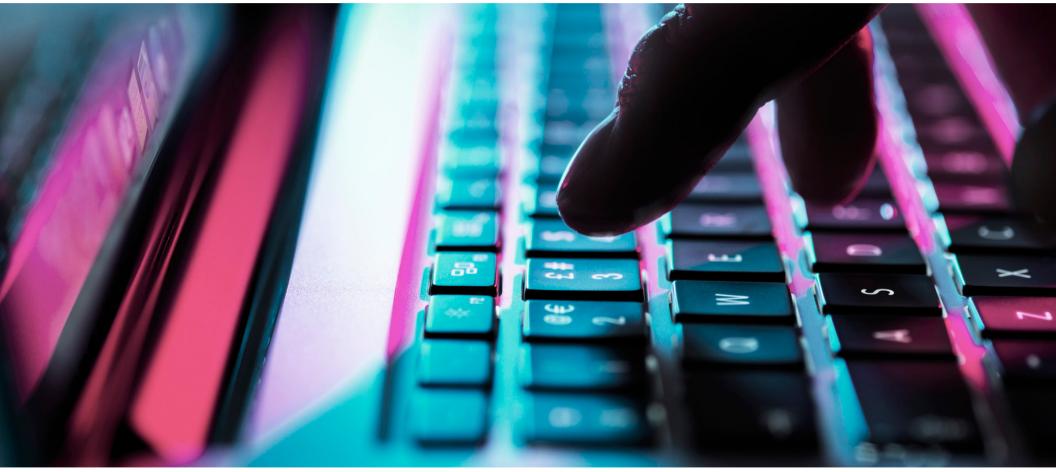# RESPONSIBLE DIGITAL BEHAVIOUR
CYBERBULLYING AND ONLINE HATE

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CHINOOK ARCH REGIONAL LIBRARY SYSTEM

CYBERBULLYING

Cyberbullying (or cyberharassment) is using technology to send threatening, intimidating, or otherwise hurtful messages to a target.

The prevalence of technology in our lives – especially smartphones, which we never seem to put down – means that cyberbullying can be an extension of in-person bullying, but it can also be contained to the digital world. Our connection to the Internet means you may never know who is actually harassing you, which can make the situation even more distressing. The presence of a multitude of silent witnesses can also make the situation even harder.

Cyberbullying and harassment can also come in the form of relationship violence and cyberstalking. There is usually a connection between online relationship violence and offline physical relationship violence.

It is important to understand that **cyberbullying is not normal nor expected in online spaces.** The last thing we want to do as society is normalize cyberbullying, since that will make it impossible to end. By taking steps to counter cyberbullying we can change the culture of online spaces, and ensure harassment and online hate are unable to spread and prosper.

Cyberbullying can be especially damaging to people because of this inability to escape it, and the number of ways the bullying can take place:

- Verbal and emotional abuse over text and Internet messages
- Social bullying through exclusion, gossip, and spreading rumours
- Doxing (making personal information public, like a home address)
- Creating a spoof account designed to trick the target, or acting as the target to collect abuse
- Taking and spreading sneak photos, or spreading sexts
- Tagging people in photos or comments, looping them in to conversations, but also making those posts visible to anyone if your privacy settings aren't set to exclude tagged posts

Cyberbullying is

Persistent
there is no escape without discarding technology

Permanent
the internet keeps a record both for targets and perpetrators

Hard to notice
might be no physical signs, or the target is good at hiding things

CYBERBULLYING

Targets are often told to ignore cyberbullying, or other kids and adults downplay it as "joking" or "drama" especially if it is perpetrated by a stranger or there are no physical attacks connected to it. Kids will refuse to label something as bullying because it they think it sounds juvenile, while "drama" sounds more adult – this refusal also clouds the power imbalance, and means a target of bullying avoids the label of victim. A lot of time, targets are unsure of how to report cyberbullying, or do not trust that "the system" will take them seriously because of the lack of physical scars or the anonymity of the perpetrator. There may also not be a clear process for reporting, whether it is an online platform like a gaming forum or a school. They may also be afraid to ask for help in online communities, because they do not know who might help and who might also be a bully.

Warning signs

- Low self-esteem
- Withdrawing from family and friends
- Reluctance to let other people near or look at their technology
- Reluctance to go to school or do homework
- A disappearance of friends and social exclusion
- Losing weight and other changes to appearance, sometimes to fit in
- Marks that may indicate self-harm, or unseasonal dressing to hide evidence
- Change in personality: sudden anger, depression, crying, acting withdrawn

WITNESSES

Cyberbullying often occurs in digitally public spaces, like social media or message boards, which means there are many witnesses. However, it can be hard for witnesses to come forward out of fear or not knowing what to do.

When it comes to being a witness, it is important to keep the target first in your mind: reach out to them and offer emotional support, even if you cannot directly intervene.

Witnesses can have both a positive and negative effect in situations of cyberbullying:

Positive
- Can end a situation
- Help a target
- Change the culture of online spaces

Negative
- Choose not to act
- Re-victimize the target by sharing videos or pictures

Why witnesses intervene:
- They believe they are doing the right thing
- They can do so anonymously
- They know something will be done
- They will be respected for it by their peers and adults (but not expecting praise or reward)

Why witnesses do not intervene:
- They don't want to become targets themselves
- They might lose social status (given the label of "snitch" and becoming socially isolated)
- They might make things worse, especially if attempts to defend or comfort the target, or stop the bullying, fail

The digital nature of cyberbullying also means witnesses often experience moral disengagement, meaning it is easier to excuse as a joke or drama, or believe the target deserves the attack, because they do not know the target personally and cannot see the reaction happening behind the screens. It is important to remember that someone is behind the computer or phone screen, experiencing trauma from being bullied. The way to counteract moral disengagement is to develop empathy and ethical thinking skills.

What you can do:
- Document the bullying
- Comfort the target, and offer to help privately
- Mediate between the target and perpetrator
- Confront the perpetrator

Bystander effect
We are less likely to intervene in cyberbullying if we are in a group or don't personally know the victim.

As we become more involved in digital spaces, it is important that we create a culture where respect for each other is the norm, which will help witnesses feel empowered to act.
(MediaSmarts, 2021)

RESPONSES

What you can do for yourself

1. Do not fight back – this can lead to an escalation in the bullying, even possibly an accusation against you for bullying.
2. Save the evidence – take screenshots or photos as a record, in case you do decide to report it.
3. Inform the website administration or use the report function.
4. Talk to someone you trust – whether that is a parent, friend, or teacher. Let them know if you are comfortable with them reporting the situation or not.
5. Block or ignore the perpetrator if you can.
6. Take a technology break if you can.
7. Remember that it is not your fault and you do not deserve this treatment.

What you can do for someone else

1. Reinforce the idea that it is not their fault.
2. Ensure they know help is available.
3. If you are a friend, encourage them to speak to a trusted adult.
4. Keep a record of bullying instances that you see through screenshots or photos.
5. Report the abuse to website administrators – but check with the target first.
6. Encourage the target to keep a diary to write down their feelings, especially if they do not feel comfortable telling an adult.
7. Give them praise for how they have been handling things.

ONLINE HATE

There is a very fine line between hateful speech – which is usually considered legal, free speech – and actual hate speech, which is illegal. In order for something to be considered hate speech, it often needs to move beyond the digital world into the physical and result in violence. Furthermore, countries have different levels of tolerance, but the Internet blurs these borders meaning a person can post hate speech in one country, where it might be legal, and it can still be read in a country where it might be considered illegal.

In the digital world, hate (or hateful) speech is often passed off as ironic, humorous, or full of misinformation, and is more likely to influence people. Young people are especially at risk of this as they may not understand why these views are dangerous and are still forming their identities.

Online hate has 3 major impacts:

1. Harm to targets through personal harassment or by creating hostile online environments.
2. The risk that those who encounter online hate may be radicalized by the beliefs, becoming sympathizers or even active participants.
3. It can influence the values and culture of online spaces.

While active participants in online hate movements (those who do the attacking) are very dangerous, the sympathizers can be even more so, since they are everywhere on the Internet and often facilitate the spread of hate speech and beliefs.

What you can do:
- Record and document the incident in case it is reported
- Be an ally to those being targeted by reaching out privately or publicly to offer your support
- Speak up against the hate without escalating the situation (if you can)

Some ways to speak up:
- Remind the speaker that they are causing harm, and refuse to allow them (or others) to minimize the situation as a joke
- Appeal to an aspect of shared identity or values may make the opposite side more responsive to what you say
- You can try deflecting the conversation to diffuse a situation temporarily
- Use humour to reduce the credibility of a group (though you should avoid minimizing the severity of the situation)

You may not be able to change the minds of those deeply committed to their hate, but you might be able to help foster an online environment where those views are unable to take root and grow.

Resources:
Kids Help Phone:
https://kidshelpphone.ca/ (you can report cyberbullying situations here)

PREVNet (Promoting Relationships and Eliminating Violence Network):
https://www.prevnet.ca/bullying/cyber-bullying

MediaSmarts:
https://mediasmarts.ca/