

SENATE



SÉNAT

CANADA

CYBERBULLYING HURTS: RESPECT FOR RIGHTS IN THE DIGITAL AGE

A Guide for Parents
December 2012



Cyberbullying Hurts: Respect for Rights in the Digital Age

A Guide for Parents

The [Standing Senate Committee on Human Rights](#)' report on cyberbullying, or electronic bullying, focuses on Canada's international human rights obligations under the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child. The [report](#) presents recommendations that demand a whole-of-community approach—one that engages young people, parents, schools, federal and provincial governments, and industry.

This guide for parents, guardians and caregivers summarizes some of the report's key findings. It explores ways that you can help your child to understand cyberbullying and to problem solve, and how you can work with the school and the community to encourage positive relationships and to promote inclusive cultures.

We've also prepared a [guide for your child](#) to read and discuss with you. We hope that these tools will help to empower you, your children, and their teachers to work together to prevent cyberbullying and to restore happiness and a sense of belonging for all young people.

Yours sincerely,

The Honourable Mobina S.B. Jaffer, Q.C., Senator
Chair
[Standing Senate Committee on Human Rights](#)
Senate of Canada

Ce document est également offert en français



Today's young generation has grown up with computers and the Internet. Many have personal telecommunication devices that they can carry with them everywhere. Email, text messaging and social media like Facebook and Twitter keep them in touch with each other 24/7.

They enjoy access to limitless amounts of communication, entertainment and information. They can discuss and debate the subjects and issues they care about, which can help prepare them for active participation in a democratic society.

But, as the comments above demonstrate, it can be all too easy to send or post material that is humiliating, abusive or threatening. This is the kind of behaviour that is generally called "cyberbullying".

CYBERBULLYING: A VIOLATION OF HUMAN RIGHTS

Children have human rights of their own which are recognized under our Constitution, federal and

WHAT KIDS SAY

"Some kids make Facebook groups or pages where the sole purpose is to make fun of or humiliate one of their peers. They actually send invites or something like that.

They send it out and they say, 'Yeah, join this group that is making fun of you and that is saying these awful things about you.' It is not nice, and it really hurts."

- Mariel Calvo, student, Springbank Middle School

"I have really close friends, and a family member, who went through cyberbullying. They got anonymous messages every day on Formspring, Tumblr, Twitter and everything. They were told that they were ugly and that they should just kill themselves.

They do not know who did it."

- Emily Dickey, student, Springbank Middle School

"Every day of my life ever since I joined this school they have come on MSN and have started making fun of me.

This all started when I was in grade 9. These girls would come online and start making fun of me. They would call me names say things like you're a fag, gay, stupid, loser, nigger, an asshole, ugly."

- A young witness in closed session



provincial human rights laws, and the United Nations' Convention on the Rights of the Child. Children are not simply objects of concern or of charity. If we treat them as individuals in their own right and with their own rights, they can come to understand their responsibilities in society.

The Convention on the Rights of the Child obliges us to protect children from physical and mental violence — including cyberbullying. Cyberbullying violates children's right to be treated equally and to be protected from discrimination, no matter who they are. When it creates a threatening atmosphere at school and affects children's peace of mind, it violates their right to an education. When it causes them mental or physical suffering, it violates their right to health.

The Senate Committee therefore examined cyberbullying as a violation of the human rights of children. We heard from educators, social scientists, lawyers and other experts in the field. And we made sure to hear from young people themselves – for it is their generation that will most significantly

shape how telecommunication devices are used in the future.

We hope that our report and these companion guides will be useful to you as parents in helping your children to know their rights and to learn to respect the rights of others.

A DIFFERENT KIND OF BULLYING

Most adults are familiar with the kind of bullying that can take place at school: the face-to-face physical or verbal aggression against children who may be seen as different or in some way inferior. However, you may be less familiar with cyberbullying, and with the ways it can be especially harmful:

- Cyberbullying is harder to escape. A child bullied in the schoolyard can at least go home to seek peace and safety. But online cruelty is out there 24/7 and the victim knows it. It is renewed every time another person views a post or adds a comment. And, it can be very difficult to have abusive messages removed from websites.
- The audience for cyberbullying is almost unlimited. Family, friends and classmates are not the only ones who can witness the abuse and humiliation — it's out there for thousands of strangers to see.
- Cyberbullies can remain anonymous or hide behind user names, with little risk of being identified or held personally responsible for their actions.
- Online bullies may feel that they can say anything, because they are not held back by the negative reactions they might get in a face-to-face encounter. A middle-school student told the Committee, "It is much easier to insult someone over texts or Facebook because you do not see that look of hurt and betrayal on their face."

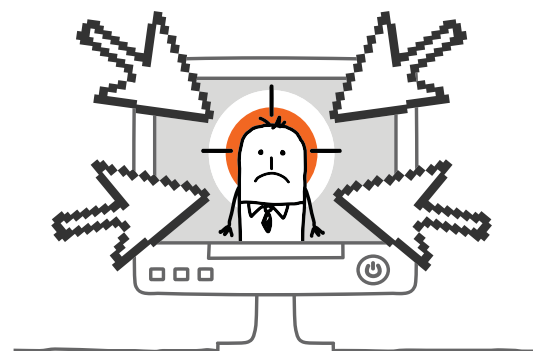




WHY DO SOME YOUNG PEOPLE CYBERBULLY?

The Committee heard that young people cyberbully for many reasons: "... to gain attention, to look cool and tough, to satisfy jealousy or to feel popular or powerful" (Prof. Faye Mishna). These may be strong motivations for adolescents, who are in a stage of development when they are trying to figure out who they are. Some risk factors for bullying in general are similar to those which may lead to delinquency: early aggressive behaviour, persistent negative attitudes, skipping school, delinquent peers and early substance use.

In some cases, though, those who are sending or posting insulting material may be doing it thoughtlessly, thinking it's only a joke. They may not realize how hurtful or harmful it can be, or that it may even be an offence under the Criminal Code.



*"I used to be a bully in grade 6 and the beginning of 7 (I am in grade 8 now). I've never physically harmed anyone, I just hurt them with words, and I did cyber bully a couple of times. So back then I was a loner and insecure, I had no sibs, friends or pets and hated my grades and image. I had to do something to stay happy. It became a habit."
- A youth witness in closed session*

WHO'S MOST LIKELY TO BE CYBERBULLIED?

*"When I was in grade nine there was a Facebook thing created. It was called 'kick a ginger day'. Kids with orange hair would get kicked on that day. I never went to school on that day, like grade 9 to grade 12 ... I do not think that is right. A lot of kids have been put in the hospital because of that day, too, not just been kicked but beat and put in the hospital, for having a hair colour." -
Young male witness,
in closed session*

As this story shows, bullying can target young people who are seen as being different. The Committee heard that it can be grounded in various forms of discrimination and ignorance; members of minority groups are especially at risk. These can include ethnic and religious minorities, young people who are lesbian, gay,



A young man with light-colored hair is sitting on a brick wall, leaning against it. He is wearing a green hooded sweatshirt with the word 'ESTADIO' printed in red on the front. He is looking down at a smartphone in his hands. The background is a weathered brick wall with some small plants growing in the cracks. The lighting is somewhat dim, suggesting an outdoor setting in the evening or at night.

**CHILDREN
WHO BULLIED
AT THE AGES 8-10 WERE
2.5 TIMES
MORE LIKELY TO HAVE
A CRIMINAL RECORD
BY THE AGE OF 18**

bisexual or transgender, those who are overweight, who have a disability or are of a different socioeconomic status.

Young people can also be vulnerable to bullying if they feel isolated, if they don't have a good social support network, if they feel anxious or fearful, or if they suffer from low self-esteem.

THE EFFECTS OF CYBERBULLYING

"[T]here is no conclusion to what children who are bullied live with. They take it home with them at night. It lives inside of them and eats away at them. It never ends, so neither should our struggle to end it."

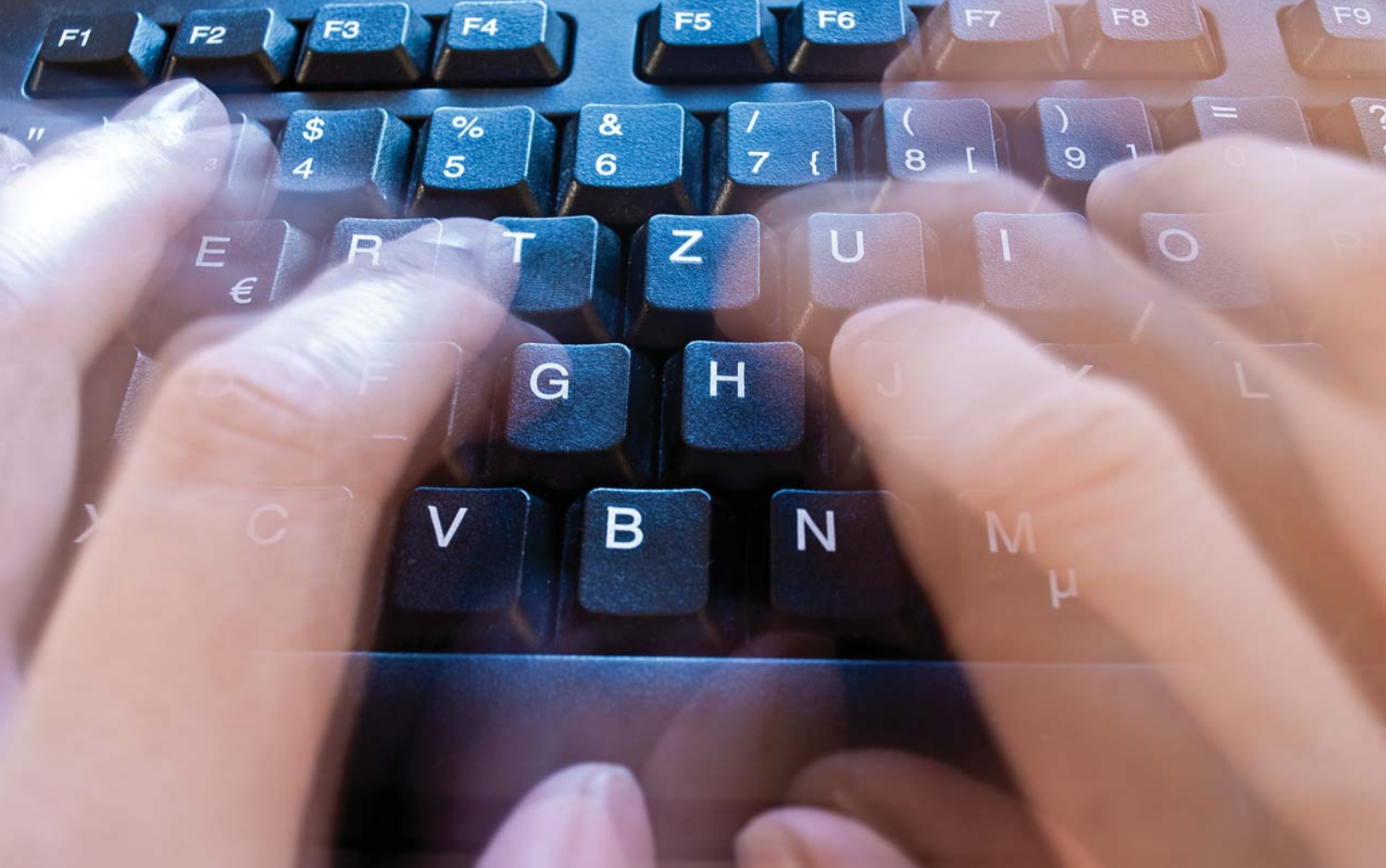
- Sarah, 17, quoted by Prof. Shelley Hymel

This 17-year-old has experienced repeated bullying, both in person and online, and knows the devastating effects it can have. The Committee heard that psychological or verbal abuse can be more damaging in the long run than isolated acts of physical aggression.

Bullying can undermine a child's academic success. It can lead to low grades and frequent absences from school. There may even be long-lasting changes to the brain that make it difficult for the child to concentrate, remember and learn.

Victims may feel increasingly isolated, unappreciated and disliked. Lowered self-esteem, nervousness, anxiety, fear and depression are often reported. The psychological damage can bring with it physical symptoms including headache, stomach ache, backache and dizziness. Students who are bullied and harassed repeatedly may be at increased risk of eating disorders, self-mutilation and thoughts of suicide.

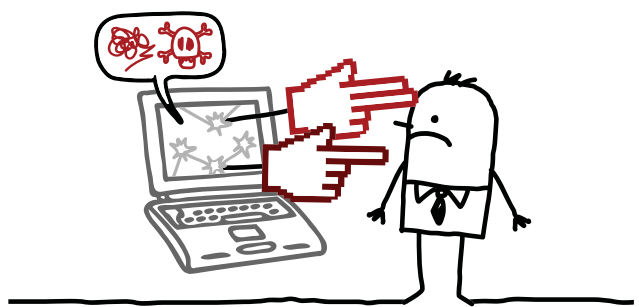




These experiences during the most formative years of life may have long-lasting effects.

Psychological harm can be done not only to the victims but also to the bystanders who witness the abuse, and to the bullies themselves. We heard evidence that bullying behaviour in childhood is closely associated with delinquent and criminal behaviour in adolescence and adulthood. That behaviour can reappear later as harassment, dating aggression, and sexual assault, especially among males. One study found that children who bullied at ages 8 to 10 were two and a half times more likely to have a criminal record by the age of 18.

So any reduction of bullying in schools can not only help now, but will also increase the chances that young people will be able to develop their full potential and take their place in society.



WHAT CAN WE DO ABOUT IT?

"I've tried different things like blocking emails and making new emails but somehow they keep finding me. I'm not sure how much more I can take, it's so awful. Help?"

- A youth, posting to Kids Help Phone.

So what can we do for the young person who posted this anonymous plea for help? The Committee agrees with a number of our expert witnesses who said that an approach based on the whole community is needed to confront the problem of cyberbullying and do something about it.

Young people looking for help are often frustrated in their attempts to find someone who is willing to listen and take action. Schools may not feel responsible for things that happen away from school or after school hours. Some students reported that principals and counsellors told them to accept that bad things can happen and just move on with their life. Police may say there is not enough evidence for them to lay charges. Parents may feel they don't know enough about the technology.

So the whole community has to get involved: the children themselves, parents and other adults, schools, volunteers, social service providers, corporations and businesses — especially the telecommunications and media companies and all levels of government. We heard evidence that this whole-community approach can have a positive effect in addressing the rates of bullying.





A wide range of programs to deal with cyberbullying have been developed for use in schools and in the community, including some designed to help LGBTQ youth cope with social pressures or to promote tolerant attitudes more widely.

Young people themselves have an important part to play. They are familiar with the technology and its challenges. Schools can encourage them to help develop codes of conduct, promote inclusion and tolerance and discourage bullying.

THE ROLE OF THE SCHOOLS

Patterns of cyberbullying can create an uncomfortable environment in a school not only for students but also for teachers and administrators, with a negative effect on the whole learning experience.

The schools have to create a climate in which cyberbullying is seen by everyone as unacceptable and as a violation of human rights. We were told that one-shot meetings have little lasting effect, while a continuing campaign for good digital citizenship does much better. One school tracked and monitored the amount of bullying and posted charts in the halls. This was highly motivating, and students were congratulated when reports of bullying dropped by 50% within the year.

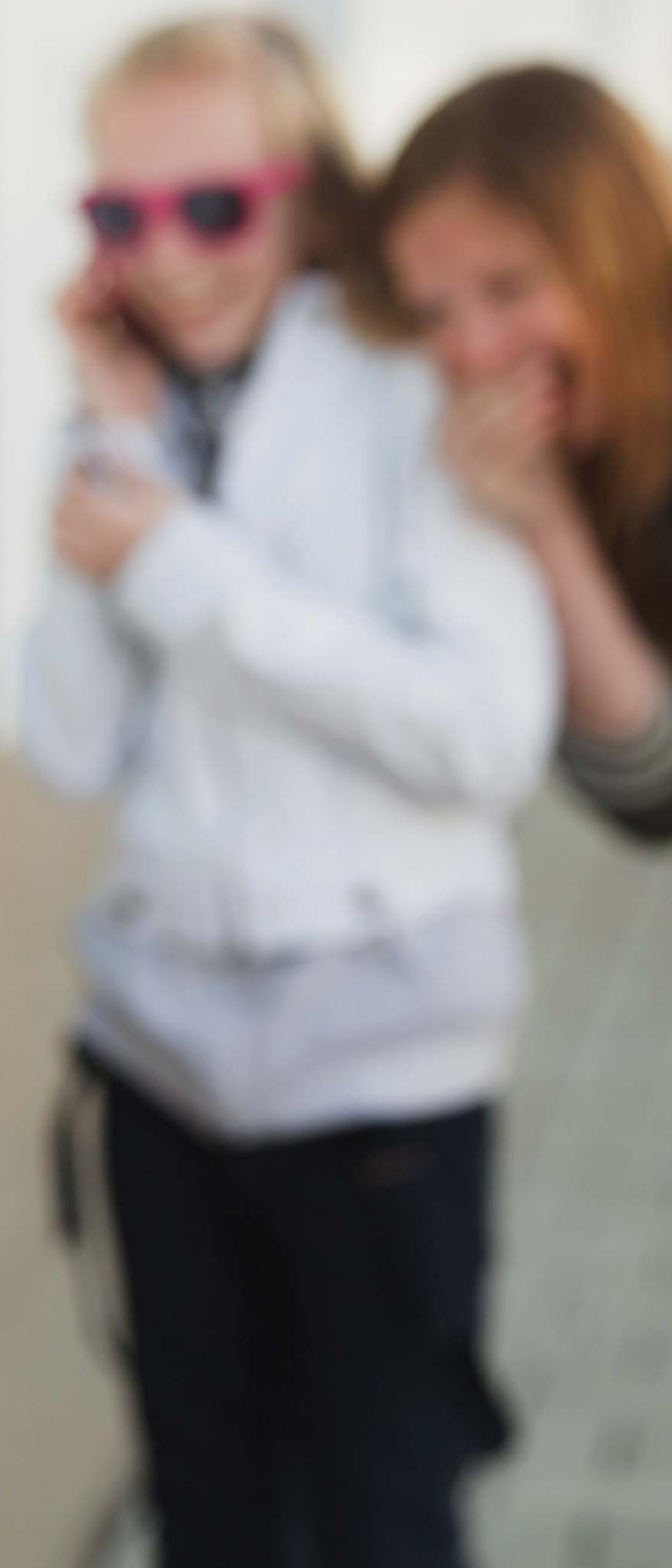
The Committee heard that school punishments like suspensions and expulsions are unlikely to produce much useful change in behaviour. Education of everyone about cyberbullying and the harm it can cause is much more effective. The concept of restorative justice was proposed as an approach that favours reconciliation and understanding among all the people involved.

YOUR PART AS PARENTS, GUARDIANS AND CAREGIVERS

You have a key part to play in helping your children have a safe and healthy digital life. As more than one witness noted, parents wouldn't buy their child a car and hand over the keys without making sure they'd had driver training first.

Unfortunately, many people will buy their child a smartphone without preparing them for the risks that come along with the opportunities. You may not have the same level of Internet knowledge and digital skills that your children have. But as many of our expert witnesses pointed out, one thing you can offer is open and honest communication with them, so that they can feel free to talk with you about what they're experiencing.





We heard that many children don't want to report cyberbullying to their parents because they're afraid of having their digital device taken away. Witnesses strongly discouraged parents from cutting youths off completely from this direct connection to their friends, their world, their fun and their education.

One witness advised parents to establish a curfew on cellphones at 10 or 11 o'clock at night, when the phones would be brought down to a central spot to be charged. Another suggested keeping the family computer in a location where parents could more easily keep an eye on how their children are using it.

We also heard that parents should seek out support and education programs. Schools or parent-teacher association could be useful sources for information on the technology and the Internet.

The experts stressed that the behaviour that your children see at home can be a model, for better or worse, for the life they lead online. If your home is an environment of respect for others, of self-respect, of tolerance and open communication, it's more likely that your child will have the tools to not be caught up in cyberbullying — either as victims, as bullies or as bystanders who watch it happen and do nothing about it.





THE COMMITTEE'S RECOMMENDATIONS

Our Committee has made a number of recommendations to the federal government for a coordinated national strategy on cyberbullying, involving other levels of government and stakeholders across the country. We have also recommended government support for research programs on the problem and on the effect of digital technologies on the social and emotional development of young people.

WANT TO LEARN MORE?

If you would like to know more about cyberbullying and what Canadians can do about it, you will find the full text of the Committee's report and copies of the guides at www.senate-senat.ca/ridr.asp. The Executive Summary at the beginning will give you a brief overview, and the rest of the report offers findings and ideas offered by our expert witnesses. It also reveals the experiences and feelings of young people who have been affected by cyberbullying, expressed in their own words.

More information and resources are available at www.sen.parl.gc.ca



