



DCU Anti-Bullying Centre

# Understanding Bullying and Cyberbullying

## A Guide on How to Support Your Child



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This evidence based guide has been developed by DCU Anti-Bullying Centre.

The Centre is a University designated research centre located in DCU's Institute of Education. It is home to scholars with a global reputation as leaders in the field in research and education on bullying and online safety and hosts the UNESCO Chair on Bullying and Cyberbullying.

We hope this guide will assist parents and/or caregivers in supporting children in tackling bullying and cyberbullying.

# Let's dismantle some myths!

**Bullying and cyberbullying are often explored and portrayed in movies, TV shows, and daily news. However, such depictions often portray stereotypes that do not align with evidence, hence perpetuating some myths.**

- 1. There is no typical child who is bullied or engages in bullying:**
  - Research has demonstrated that negative behaviours between young people are often predicated by their given context: a school culture might foster negative and/or positive behaviours towards specific profiles of students. For example, bullying that is based on race or ethnicity, is less likely to occur in schools that celebrate different student culture and backgrounds.
  - Negative behaviours can also be experienced within a group of friends: some of these behaviours become normalised and are reproduced without a real understanding of the negative impact they may have on the young people.
- 2. The digital world is a space where young people often feel safe and positive:**
  - In a national survey on online safety, undertaken by 765 Irish children aged 9-17, the majority reported positive perspectives on the use of the Internet and are confident in their skills to navigate it. They perceive it as a social tool to stay in touch with their friends and family as well as to entertain themselves by watching videos or listening to music.
  - In the same survey, 85% of young people reported feeling safe online. However, when they experienced or witnessed something that upsets them on the internet, only 19% reported telling their parent or caregiver about it.
- 3. Cyberbullying usually does not happen in isolation:**
  - Cyberbullying is less likely to happen as a stand-alone act. In general, offline forms of bullying, like school bullying, spill over to the online environment. This also means that if there is cyberbullying, there might also be offline forms of bullying, therefore it is important to discuss and understand your child's everyday experiences.
- 4. Restricting children from engaging in social interactions online to protect them from experiencing negative behaviours is not necessarily the right call:**
  - Recent research shows that restrictive actions tend to make the child feel more isolated, and limits their ability to manage their own emotions, thoughts, and behaviours in challenging situations.
  - Turning off the phone/computer is not a long-term solution: technology is an important part of children and young people's lives, forbidding them is to forbid their benefits too. It might also motivate children to not share their online experiences with their caregivers.
  - Conversations between caregivers and young people, which foster an understanding and critical thinking of the adequate use of the Internet, are more efficient in creating a safer online experience for young people.
- 5. Experiencing, witnessing or being involved in bullying/cyberbullying isn't normal and shouldn't be perceived as something that is part of growing up:**
  - Experiencing hurtful behaviours can have long lasting consequences on a young person's self worth, academic success and mental health.
  - Witnessing or being involved in negative behaviours can also negatively impact young children's mental health.

## Understanding the behaviours associated with bullying:

Bullying implies a succession of unwanted, hurtful, or nasty behaviours that can include:

- Mocking, teasing someone, offensive nicknames, spreading rumours,
- Physically hurting someone, stealing, and breaking their belongings,
- Socially excluding someone by making them feel like they do not belong in a given context and space (e.g., excluding someone from the class group chat)

Cyberbullying can bring new layers of successive hurtful behaviours by using - or threatening to use - content (written or voice messages, pictures, or videos) that can harm someone. In this respect, cyberbullying can happen in private chats, public online spaces and it can be done anonymously. In some cases, a single hurtful comment can be reshared continuously, potentially perpetuating a single negative action.

Children can also witness harmful behaviours and sometimes they might:

- try to stop hurtful acts and support those being targeted,
- indirectly or directly assist in the perpetuation of the acts - by delivering hurtful notes from another child or by laughing when a peer is mocking someone,
- remain silent when witnessing hurtful behaviour.
- In these last two scenarios, witnesses/ bystanders indirectly allow the perpetuation and retain the status quo of bullying and cyberbullying.
- Regardless of their reactions, recent research has found that witnessing such behaviours can also negatively impact the child's mental health, as they might become more anxious and self-conscious of their behaviours both at school and in online spaces.

## The effects of bullying and what to look out for:

- The child is highly withdrawn and/ or displays a lot of anger,
- Unexplained physical injuries like bruising or cuts,
- Low self-esteem,
- Avoids social gatherings and interactions,
- Does not socialise anymore with their previous group of friends,
- Feels often anxious, complains about stomach ache or headache,
- Sudden mood changes which may be particularly noticeable when returning to school after weekends or holidays,
- Changes in how the child usually performs in school, loss of interest in school,
- Does not want to go to class, and/or partake in extracurricular activities,
- Spontaneous out-of-character comments about peers or teachers
- Increased requests for money or stealing money
- Reluctance and/or refusal to explain what is troubling them,
- Sometimes, a child that is experiencing bullying and is not able to talk and process their experiences might turn their anger into aggressive behaviours too

If you are concerned about your child and wish to initiate an informal talk, make sure to focus on their everyday routine, specific experiences, and feelings (How's your friend doing? How was your lunch break? What did you and your classmates do during recess/physical education/lunch break? What do you enjoy doing the most online?). Young people might mention incidents or negative behaviours without necessarily mentioning the term "bullying".

## How to respond to signs of bullying:

- It is important not to ignore your child if they start a conversation about an incident that upsets them.
- Listen without blaming your child or yourself: guide your child to understand that being bullied is not their fault.
- Listen without trying to excuse the behaviour that distressed the child: it isn't always helpful to try to rationalise negative behaviours.
- It is important to not downplay the situation or the feelings of the child.
- Allow informal talk and avoid showing strong emotions: the way you respond can impact the way the child will not share their experiences.
- Try to share similar situations you went through and praise your child for sharing difficult experiences with you.
- Not every discussion requires an immediate action: young people might hesitate to share their experiences out of fear that adults might react in haste and directly confront the school or the other child's parents.
- Try to communicate and exchange with your child suggestions on what actions they would feel comfortable or uncomfortable exploring/taking.
- Encourage your child to express their feelings, to write or draw about it so that they can process their experiences and emotions.
- Avoid taking the child's devices and restricting them for their immediate protection as it can further physically and emotionally isolate them.
- When possible, communicate with school staff about the situation and ask for their help, even if the bullying is taking place online.
- There are third party institutions based in Ireland that can support you and your child: <https://tacklebullying.ie/additional-supports/> see useful contacts below.



## What to do if your child is involved in hurtful behaviours:

If you suspect your child of bullying, or the school/someone reported that your child was involved in bullying, try to first process your immediate emotions. However, it is important not to ignore the situation and initiate a conversation with your child.

- Avoid using labelling terms like “bully” as it can stick as an identity: the issue is the behaviour and actions of the child (name calling, emotionally or physically hurting someone etc.).
- Expect your child to deny or downplay their actions: try to explain to your child that there is a fine line between playful teasing and mocking someone.
- Reassure your child that you want to help them understand the root of their actions but make them aware that bullying is an unacceptable behaviour no matter what.
- Discuss the consequences such negative behaviour might involve for them and those harmed.
- Guide your child to think of ways to stop their behaviours.
- Try to be present and look for support if you feel overwhelmed by the situation.

More often, children might be witnesses of bullying or cyberbullying. As such, it is important to always allow open communication with your child about their daily life.

You can discuss with your child the different types of behaviours that are associated with bullying, guide them to understand and process what they witness on/offline and encourage them to have open discussions on bullying/cyberbullying with their friends. To be able to recognise when someone is being mistreated, allows young people to better understand the implications of such hurtful behaviours and to take a stand against them. A courageous yet simple “this is not ok” can go a long way in preventing further perpetuation of bullying and cyberbullying.

# Useful Contacts:

## Tusla

Child and Family Agency  
Brunel Building, Heuston South Quarter, Dublin 8

T: 01 771 8500

E: [info@tusla.ie](mailto:info@tusla.ie)

[tusla.ie](http://tusla.ie)

[usla.ie/parenting-24-seven](http://tusla.ie/parenting-24-seven)

## Childline

Tel: 1800 666 666

[childline.ie](http://childline.ie)

## Irish Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy

1st Floor, Marina House, 11-13 Clarence St, Dun Laoghaire, Dublin

T: (01) 230 3536

E: [iacp@irish-counselling.ie](mailto:iacp@irish-counselling.ie)

[irish-counselling.ie](http://irish-counselling.ie)

## Webwise

Free information, advice and resources to help parents, teachers and students, address internet safety issues.

[webwise.ie/](http://webwise.ie/)

## National Parents Council

Post Primary

[npcpp.ie](http://npcpp.ie)

### Safety Centres of Popular Social Media Apps:

#### Tiktok

[tiktok.com/safety/en/](https://tiktok.com/safety/en/)

#### Snapchat

[hvalues.snap.com/safety/safety-center](https://hvalues.snap.com/safety/safety-center)

#### Instagram

[about.instagram.com/safety](https://about.instagram.com/safety)



Visit **tacklebullying.ie** where you can find additional resources and support for young people, and adults supporting young people experiencing bullying behaviour or scan the QR code.



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