

## It's Not Cyberbullying, But ...

Though someone's mean online behavior might not fit the definition, it can still hurt. By **Christine Elgersma** 10/1/2018

*A student sees a group of girls coming toward her in the hallway. One has been her best friend since second grade, but she doesn't know the others very well. She says hi to them as they pass. They all ignore her or roll their eyes, including her friend. A few lockers down, they whisper to each other while they stare at her and laugh behind their hands.*



While we can all agree the girls in this situation are being mean, can we call this bullying?

These "IRL" (in real life) scenarios happen all the time, and they often carry over into the online world. And though insults, exclusion, and even all-out aggression don't always meet the technical definition of cyberbullying -- ongoing, targeted harassment via digital communication tools over a period of time -- they still hurt.

The best remedy for all these issues is prevention and education: Helping others learn what it means to be kind and respectful and a responsible digital citizen can nip lots of trouble in the bud. But when and if problems start, it's good to understand what's happening -- and how to help.

So, other than straight-up cyberbullying, what are some other reasons you might be bummed by others' online behavior?

**Ghosting.** When friends cut off online contact and stop responding, they're ghosting. Refusing to answer someone's texts or Snaps is actually a way of communicating during a shift or upheaval among a group of friends. Often, instead of ever addressing the issue head-on, kids will just ignore the targeted person.

- **How to handle it.** Being ignored is tough. Instead of relying on the old standby, "If they're ignoring you, they're obviously not your real friends," consider what it might be like to have a face-to-face conversation with the ghosters. If that feels too

hard, stop trying to get replies. The ghosters may come around, but if not, it might be time to move on.

**Subtweeting.** When you tweet or post something about a specific person but don't mention them by name or tag them, you're subtweeting. Usually, subtweets are critical or downright mean. Since the target isn't tagged or even named in most cases, they might not know it's happening until someone clues them in.

- **How to handle it.** If you find out someone is subtweeting you, you have a few options depending on the perpetrator. If it's a friend who's suddenly turned on you, it's a good time to address it face-to-face. If it's someone you don't know well or have a conflict with, it's best to ignore it. Engaging in a Twitter war (or conflict on any other platform) usually escalates the problem.

**Fake accounts.** Sometimes kids will create fake accounts in someone else's name and use that account to stir up trouble or hurt that person. In most cases, there's no way to trace who created the account, and even if it's shut down, the person can just create another one.

- **How to handle it.** Dealing with fake accounts can feel like a game of Whac-A-Mole. But if you're targeted, you should actively defend yourself by blocking and reporting it. You should also let friends know what's happening to set the record straight -- and to take some of the fun out of it for the person creating the accounts.

**Sharing embarrassing posts and pics.** Taking selfies and group pics are a normal part of tween and teen life. But sometimes kids take pictures of each other that, while fun in the moment, are potentially embarrassing if widely shared or cruelly captioned. Often this is done by someone who thinks they're being funny or assumes everyone will get the joke. But pictures or compromising posts can make the rounds in a hot minute, so no matter the intentions, the shame can stick.

- **How to handle it.** It's best to get in the habit of asking others for permission to share photos. But that won't always happen. Remind kids to think about the impact the photo will have on others before they post it. Kids can also ask their friends to take down embarrassing pictures as soon as they know they're public. If the image has already made the rounds, they may not be able to chase down every copy. But you can reassure kids that everyone will likely move on to the next piece of news and forget about it soon.

**Rumors.** Social media is a perfect venue for the rumor mill, so lies can go far and wide before the target even knows what's happening. And once the fake news is out there, it's pretty impossible to reel it back in.

- **How to handle it.** How you respond should depend on the type of rumor. If it's something that involves other people -- like a rumor that you stole someone's significant other and that has led to threats -- you may need to get the school involved. If the rumor is embarrassing or hurtful but isn't likely to cause a fight, it's fine to post a response. It's best to respond just once and ignore the comments. Otherwise, you can refute the rumor in person when it comes up and wait for everyone to move on.

**Exclusion.** A kid may be scrolling through their feed and stop cold at a picture of all their friends together -- without them. Usually, these kinds of photos aren't intentional slights. But sometimes they are. And if the person who posted the picture knows that the excluded kid follows them, there's -- at the very least -- a lapse in judgment.

- **How to handle it.** Responding online probably won't get the best results. Consider approaching the original poster face-to-face and explain that the photos hurt your feelings. It's best if you can use "I" statements, like "I felt really hurt when I saw that picture ..." (not "I think you're a jerk"). If you can express your emotions honestly, you'll probably discover it was just a careless oversight. If it was a deliberate jab, you should probably unfriend the OP (original poster).

**Griefing.** Remember those kids on the playground who always whipped the ball at other kids and called them names? Those kids play multiplayer video games, too. But instead of whipping a ball, they kill your character on purpose, steal your game loot, and harass you in chat. Online, that behavior is called "griefing." If you play multiplayer games with chat, you're bound to run into it at some point.

- **How to handle it.** Before you start playing a game with anonymous strangers, make sure you know how to report and block players who are being cruel on purpose. Don't get into an argument over chat, since it probably won't resolve anything and could escalate the aggression. Certain games tend to have more toxic behavior than others, so consider trying other games where the community is known to be respectful and the moderators don't tolerate trash-talking.

**Hate speech.** Teens encounter hate speech even more than cyberbullying. This kind of language is similar to cyberbullying, but it's targeted to hurt someone based on personal

traits such as race, ethnicity, nationality, religion, disability, sexual orientation, gender identity, or belief system. And unlike the persistent cruelty of cyberbullying, it can be a one-time thing. Even if your kid isn't the object of the posts or comments, they may feel the impact if they're a part of the targeted group.

- **How to handle it.** If you encounter hate speech online, it's OK to post a matter-of-fact, one-time response refuting it. But you shouldn't get involved in a flame war. Consider the kinds of attitudes you see expressed online. If you're seeing a lot of hurtful language, seek out alternative feeds -- especially ones from supportive online communities. And if it's something really painful or that makes you feel humiliated, offer a strong counter-message. If you know the person who posted hate speech -- such as another student at school -- you can gauge whether to get others (administrators and other parents) involved. Hate speech can have very real consequences in the real world, depending on the context and whether threats are involved.