



♥ For Patients and Families

- Make an Appointment
- Hospital Hours and Visiting Policy
- Maps & Directions
- Your Visit
- Visiting a Patient
- Amenities
- Family Support Services
- Family Advisory Council
- Talking to Your Child
- Family Health and Education
- International Patients
- Virtual Tour
- Patient Rights and Responsibilities
- Bill of Rights for Children
- Medical Records
- Insurance and Billing
- Connect With Us

You are here: [Home](#) > [For Patients and Families](#) > [Family Health & Education](#)

## Cyberbullying: What Parents, Providers Should Know

 Print This Page

Children and adolescents today risk encountering bullies not just in the schoolyard, but also across the Internet, a place where they also spend much of their time.

"Cyberbullying is when a child or a preteen or teen is tormented, intimidated, threatened, humiliated, embarrassed or basically targeted in any way by another child, preteen or teen, through the use of the Internet or any technology device, such as a cell phone," says MassGeneral Hospital for Children outpatient social worker [Shellie Leger, MSW, MBA](#).

Cyberbullying is more widespread than traditional bullying, Leger adds, "but because of the nature of technology, we don't always know who the bully is," a fact that makes it more traumatic and far-reaching. A bully may pretend to be someone else, team up with others and/or embarrass the victim in a public space. Those being victimized might feel that there is no escaping the bully, who can attack virtually from anywhere.

According to a recent study published in the American Academy of Pediatrics' journal *Pediatrics*, "cyberbullying is quite common, can occur to any young person online, and can cause profound psychosocial outcomes including depression, anxiety, severe isolation, and, tragically, suicide."

A 2007 study conducted by the National Crime Prevention Council found 43 percent of the teenagers surveyed reported they had experienced some form of cyberbullying in the past year.

"We should treat this like we treat any epidemic that is threatening our children and families," Leger says.

In a survey this year of 21,000 Massachusetts students, more than 90 percent of third graders were online. "I think the real bottom line here is to say that, whether to a child's parents or a child's pediatrician, this is a big part of their life and this isn't going to go away anytime soon," says Elizabeth Englander, PhD, clinical psychologist and founder and director of the [Massachusetts Aggression Reduction Center at Bridgewater State University](#), which conducted the survey.

Even so, Englander and Leger assure parents there are resources to combat and prevent cyberbullying.

### Addressing Cyberbullying

Parents should not assume that all fighting or meanness communicated electronically is cyberbullying, Dr. Englander says. Exchanges that move to the digital space often become exaggerated, but talking with children should help determine the severity of the problem.

"The biggest mistake is for parents to say, 'I'm going to take away your computer privileges,'" Leger says. "This is the main reason a child won't tell the parent he/she is being cyberbullied."

Leger advises parents to first assess their child's well-being. If the child is showing symptoms of cyberbullying, the parents should talk to the pediatrician, who can recommend additional psychological support.

Parents and children can also block and/or ignore people who are creating problems, which may require contacting the internet service provider. Englander suggests reporting the bully in the case of social games like Club Penguin. Leger also recommends printing evidence of cyberbullying.

### Professional Help

As a social worker at MassGeneral Hospital for Children (MGHfC), Leger receives referrals from pediatricians for young patients who are victims of cyberbullying. If she suspects cyberbullying, Leger begins by speaking with the patient alone and assessing the child's functioning and coping. Leger also provides education and resources about cyberbullying for both the patient and his/her parent(s). Lastly, Leger helps the patient and family understand and use the system and laws built to protect them.

"It's important to know that there is a law that says electronically communicated threats are a crime," Leger says, referring to a Massachusetts State Law that passed in May 2010 requiring schools to have plans in place to prevent bullying and cyberbullying, but also to properly address incidents of both. Many states have laws that address cyberbullying.

Once parents have sought out the pediatrician and received additional support from healthcare professionals, Leger recommends they turn to the school. "The literature suggests that when children are cyberbullied it is almost always by children at their school," Leger says. "Across the board it's an excellent idea to bring any incidence of cyberbullying to the attention of schools." Leger encourages schools to set up ways for students to anonymously report bullying taking place there. She says schools can also help educate students about cyberbullying.

#### Signs of Cyberbullying:

Leger says parents and healthcare providers can watch for the following signs of cyberbullying in children and adolescents:

- Unusually aggressive language, fighting words
- School phobia
- Depression
- Sleep, eating changes
- Lack of interest in things they usually enjoy
- Anxiety
- Loss of self esteem, confidence
- Lowered achievement
- Deterioration of physical health

As the symptoms of cyberbullying can also be attributed to other psychological conditions, Leger says parents and clinicians should be proactive and educate themselves about the issue.

Parents and healthcare professionals should not expect schools to solve the online situation, however, but to ensure a similar situation isn't also happening at school, Englander adds. The primary goal should be helping the targeted child before disciplining the cyberbully.

If the situation has reached a point of harassment, stalking, threats of violence or indications of identity theft, Leger says to involve the police. Many police officers are trained to ask specific questions that will determine the level of risk to cyberbullying victims and recommended action the family can take.

### Preventing Cyberbullying: Advice for Families

**Get involved:** Because so many kids today grow up using computers Leger encourages parents to become involved from the beginning and teach their children proper "cyber etiquette."

"The goal is to create a generation of good cyber citizens and to have technology we're not controlled by," Leger says.

- Set up email and chat accounts with children, making sure parents know their child's screen name and password.
- Tell children not to share passwords and not to put anything online that they wouldn't want their classmates to see.
- Advise children not to open emails from people they don't know or from known bullies.
- Encourage them not to retaliate against bullies.
- Create rules for usage and make clear to children that you will be monitoring their online activity.

"They have to understand that this is not an avenue of private conversation," Englander says. "Let them know that the world is watching you and so are mom and dad—that's the reality."

**Talk to your children:** Ask your children if they have seen cyberbullying or been the target of mean comments. Parents may feel like they don't know enough about technology to talk with their children about how to use it, Dr. Englander adds, but the issue at hand is related more to common sense rather than technical knowledge. "Children are better generally speaking about technical knowledge than they are about judging the impact of what they do online," Englander says, which is where parents, with valuable life experience, come in.

For more information about social work or cyberbullying resources at MGHfC, contact Shellie Leger at [slger@partners.org](mailto:slger@partners.org).

### Additional Resources

Cyberbullying information from the State of Massachusetts

<http://www.mass.gov/>

[pageID=cagoterminal&L=4&L0=Home&L1=Community+Safety&L2=Cyber+Crime+%26+Internet+Safety&L3=Keeping+Young+People](http://www.mass.gov/cagoterminal&L=4&L0=Home&L1=Community+Safety&L2=Cyber+Crime+%26+Internet+Safety&L3=Keeping+Young+People)

<http://www.lawlib.state.ma.us/subject/about/bullying.html>

Cyberbullying Research Center

<http://www.cyberbullying.us>

Massachusetts Aggression Reduction Center

<http://webhost.bridgew.edu/marc/>

<http://webhost.bridgew.edu/marc/marc%20cyberbullying.pdf>

National Crime Prevention Council

<http://www.ncpc.org>

State Cyberstalking, Cyberharassment and Cyberbullying Laws

<http://www.ncsl.org/default.aspx?tabid=13495>

Stop Cyberbullying

<http://www.stopcyberbullying.org>

Wired Safety

<http://www.wiredsafety.com>



[About Us](#) | [Intranet](#) | [Careers](#) | [Site Map](#) | [Privacy](#) | [Disclaimer](#)

MassGeneral Hospital for Children is a primary pediatric teaching site for the Harvard Medical School.  
© 2011 Massachusetts General Hospital : 55 Fruit Street : Boston, MA 02114 : 888-MGHfC4U (888-644-3248)