# LGBTQ Cyberbullying

## GUIDE FOR YOUTH, PARENTS & EDUCATORS

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# Top 5 Questions from Parents & Educators

**1. How can a parent or guardian of an LGBTQ student support their child or student being cyberbullied?**

As simple as this seems, just be supportive. Listen to them and find out what, if anything, they need from you. As a parent, you mostly just need to love, respect and honor your child and their choices.

**2. What can parents or educators do if they are personally or religiously opposed to homosexuality or gender nonconformity yet have an LGBTQ student or child?**

Be respectful and supportive. It's possible and even healthy to have attitudes, religious views and values different from your students' or children's. You can still respect people for their developing identities while maintaining your values. All major religions advocate treating others as one would want to be treated.

**3. What can students and friends do to support their LGBTQ peers?**
Like parents and guardians, students and friends can be open to listening compassionately to their LGBTQ peers and respect their needs without resistance or debate.

**4. Are there laws and precedent-setting court decisions that prevent discrimination against LGBTQ students or otherwise protect them?**
There are federal and state laws and precedent-setting court decisions that protect the rights of students on the basis of sex, sexual identity and gender identity and expression. Also, most online services have rules or terms of service that prohibit any type of hate speech directed at LGBTQ individuals and others.

**5. What are the pros and cons of connected technology for LGBTQ youth?**
For many LGBTQ youth, the internet, social media and messaging apps provide a lifeline for information, companionship and support. Online connections enable them to reach beyond the confines of their local school, family and community to interact with people in similar situations. They can learn from others and seek advice and support, especially when they're going through hard times. Still, being online has its risks, especially if you're subject to bullying or harassment. That's why it's so important for youth to know how to protect their privacy and identity (perhaps by remaining anonymous) and to have control over who sees their posts.

**All young people deserve to grow up in a world where they are accepted, loved and treated with compassion, but sadly, that's not the case for everyone. Some young people are vulnerable to bullying, discrimination and abuse. That's especially true for groups that are marginalized, including lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and questioning (LGBTQ) youth.**

The Anti Defamation League's latest study, "Online Hate and Harassment Report: The American Experience 2021," found that:

- 64% of LGBTQ+ respondents have been harassed online, at disproportionately higher rates of harassment than all other identity groups

- LGBTQ+ respondents are more likely to suffer severe forms of harassment, such as electronic distribution of humiliating photos, dissemination of false or private information, stalking, and physical threats.

Additional studies confirm these unfortunate statistics. In its most recent National School Climate Survey, the 2019 Gay, Lesbian, and Straight Education Network (GLSEN) found that 59.1% of LGBTQ students across the United States felt unsafe at school based on their sexual orientation, and 42.5% felt unsafe because of their gender expression. About one-third of LGBTQ students missed at least one full day of classes in the past month over safety concerns. GLSEN also found that LGBTQ youth were almost three times (42% vs. 15%) more likely to be bullied or harassed online than heterosexual students.

The report also found that "online victimization contributed to negative self-esteem and higher rates of depression. Youth who experienced bullying and harassment both in person as well as online or via text message reported lower grade-point averages, lower self-esteem, and higher levels of depression than youth who were bullied only in person, only online, or via text message, or not at all."

## How Is Cyberbullying Different from Offline Bullying?

While LGBTQ youth may be more vulnerable than others, cyberbullying affects everyone, even if they haven't been bullied themselves. Like "schoolyard bullying," cyberbullying involves deliberate and repeated aggressive and hostile behaviors by an individual or group intended to humiliate, harm, and control another individual of lesser power or social status. There is often a connection between cyberbullying and physical bullying; it frequently starts in school and continues online, or vice versa.

Still, there are some differences between bullying in person and cyberbullying. As ConnectSafely points out in A Parent's Guide to Cyberbullying, online repetition can be less personal but just as hurtful when shared widely, or even virally, by anonymous posters. And it can follow someone everywhere and pop up at almost any time. Anonymity is more of a factor in cyberbullying than in traditional bullying. Targets may believe that more people witness the abuse than actually are, which can compound their pain. And since online socializing can occur 24/7, home, weekends and vacation can't serve as welcome breaks from the abuse.

## Online Lifeline

While this guide focuses on overcoming some of the adverse effects of cyberbullying, it's important to remember that the internet is a vital and helpful lifeline for many LGBTQ youth. For many, connected apps and services are their only or primary means of seeking support and communicating with others like themselves. Online media can offer a virtual window on a world that's free from many of the restraints imposed upon them within their local communities. Online forums can be places for support, understanding, and compassion. That is one reason why adults should think very carefully before restricting online access for LGBTQ youth, even if they encounter harassment and threats.

**For more info, visit ConnectSafely.org/ LGBTQ**

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And while LGBTQ youth are targets of cyberbullying more often than their peers, they can also be less likely to reach out for support because of the fear that their parents or guardians might remove or severely restrict their online access. In addition, divulging the nature of cyberbullying instances can "out" LGBTQ youth before they are ready to inform people of their sexual or gender identities. For youth whose families or communities are sure to reject them, being "outed" could place them at greater peril.

Bullying and harassment are not simply youth problems. It is important to investigate how bullying trickles down from the larger society and is reproduced within the schools. Young people often learn bullying attitudes and behaviors from their social environment and the behavior of others, including, in some cases, famous people or people in positions of authority.

The repercussions for LGBTQ youth who come out to their parents with little or no family support can be devastating. LGBTQ youth often fear family rejection more than they fear victimization or harassment from peers. Some parents force LGBTQ youth to leave home once family members question their sexual or gender identity. There are other cases of parents telling their child to "keep it a secret," which perpetuates the impression that the child should be ashamed of their sexual identity. Accordingly, LGBTQ youth would often rather risk taunts and abuse by remaining online than lose their windows to the world by possibly divulging their sexual or gender identities when reporting incidents of cyberbullying to parents, guardians, school officials, or others.

## What Parents and Other Family Members Can Do

The most helpful thing family members can do for LGBTQ youth is to let them know they are safe, loved, and supported.

While most young people grow up in families that share some social identities—for example, ethnic and religious ones—very often, LGBTQ youth reside in families with few

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if any other LGBTQ members, making it more difficult for them to feel at home, even at home.

As in all families, channels of communication need to remain open, and unqualified love and support need to be assured. Youth who reside in environments with trust, openness, and support have better chances of gaining the confidence and self-respect they will need to navigate and remain resilient in a world that may not be as welcoming as it could be.

It's both common and OK for parents and teens to have somewhat different values. Parents might have trouble coming to grips with their child having a different sexual or gender identity from what they had expected. It could even challenge their deeply held beliefs. But it is possible to have differences while still being respectful. Although it may be hard, parents can be honest with themselves and their children while at the same time being supportive of their child and their differences. Sometimes families need a little help, which is why we list several support organizations and agencies on our resource page.

## Working Toward a Positive School Climate

*School climate* refers to factors such as the school's social organization, social relations among teachers and students, and the norms and values in the school. The school climate needs to be one of warmth and support for all students and one where there are high standards for student and teacher behavior toward one another.

Creating a comfortable and inclusive school environment is critical since children spend a significant percentage of their waking hours there. For most, it's their primary form of social contact, so what happens in school has an enormous impact on their lives. At school, it's up to everyone—educators, parents, and students—to do everything they can to make all students feel welcome.

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**For additional resources, visit ConnectSafely.org/lgbtq-resources.**

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Often what happens at school and what happens online are connected. It's very common for cyberbullying to start at school and carry over online or start online and have repercussions at school. And, contrary to what some believe, schools have both the authority and responsibility to take action when off-campus behavior negatively affects the learning environment.

The American Psychological Association passed a resolution (Bullying Among Children and Youth) calling on educational, governmental, business, and funding agencies to address issues of both face-to-face and cyberbullying. In the resolution, they addressed acts of harassment "about race, ethnicity, religion, disability, sexual and gender identities." In addition, the resolution emphasizes the high rate of bullying around issues of sexual and gender identities as well as disability.

## What Schools Can Do

Although what works well in one school might not in another, there are some basic things that all schools can try:

- **Take your school's temperature.** Hold public meetings, conduct interviews, and/or distribute research surveys in your school, community, and/or your state to assess the needs, concerns, and life experiences of LGBTQ youth, their families, and school staff. This can help assess the overall social climate of your school.

- **Review policies.** Develop policies that protect LGBTQ students from harassment, violence, and discrimination. Include sexual identity and gender identity and expression as protected categories in your anti-discrimination policies. Make sure that the benefits for LGBTQ employees are on par with those of heterosexually identified employees. Consult your state's Department of Education for specific policy suggestions.

For more info about kids & privacy, visit **ConnectSafely.org/ privacy**

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- **Offer personnel trainings.** Offer comprehensive training to all school personnel on violence prevention, suicide prevention, and specifically on the needs and issues faced by LGBTQ youth. Convene a meeting of school staff, including teachers, counselors, librarians, custodians, safety personnel, and administrators, to discuss how you can make your school welcoming for all.

- **Create peer trainings.** Schools can offer peer youth trainings to teach skills for transforming from a passive bystander of face-to-face bullying and cyberbullying to active upstanders who can intervene and help defuse the situation.

- **Participate in Safe Zone (or Safe Space or Brave Space) programs.** Following comprehensive training, faculty and staff participants are given a sticker for their classroom or office doors to identify their room as a safe zone for discussions related to sexual and gender identities. If students have any questions, they can come to the person who displays the sticker for resources and referrals.

- **Provide gender-inclusive or all-gender facilities.** Gender-inclusive facilities include single-user lockable restrooms and physical-education changing rooms.

- **Offer school- and community-based support groups for LGBTQ and heterosexual youth.** Thousands of schools across the United States and other countries have established these groups, generically called "Gay/Straight Alliances."

- **Provide affirming school- and community-based counseling** for LGBTQ youth and their families.

- **Expand library collections.** Develop and maintain up-to-date and age-appropriate collections of books, videos, CDs, DVDs, journals, magazines, posters, websites, and other information on LGBTQ topics.

**For more info about creating a positive school climate, visit ConnectSafely.org/eduguide.**

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- **Host educational forums.** Organize and sponsor community-wide forums to discuss issues related to sexual and gender identities and expressions.

- **Review curriculum and school programs.** Include accurate, honest, up-to-date, and age-appropriate information on LGBTQ topics at every grade level, across the curriculum in all subject areas, and in other school programs and assemblies. Also, announce LGBTQ topics and events in your school and local community newspapers.

- **Consider adult role models.** Select and hire LGBTQ faculty and staff who are publicly out to serve as supportive role models for all youth.

- **Implement teacher certification.** Include information and trainings on LGBTQ youth issues in college and university teacher-education programs.

- **Provide continuing education opportunities** for all who work with youth, including educators, law enforcement, clergy, parents, peers, and other community members.

- **Build community with dialogue, not debate.** Truly listen to and hear the voices of LGBTQ youth without becoming defensive or argumentative. Don't downplay or minimize their stories. These are their experiences, their perceptions, and the meanings they make, and, therefore, it is not up for debate.

In general, a holistic approach is the best approach. This means that all areas of the school and the local community need to come and work together to address the problem of bullying in all its forms, including online.

More information about building a positive school climate and reducing cyberbullying both in and out of school can be found in ConnectSafely's The Educator's Guide to Social Media.

**It's important to build community with dialogue, not debate.**

# Advice for LGBTQ Youth

The whole idea of social networking apps and sites is to enable people to express themselves, share thoughts and ask questions. That's mostly a good thing, but there are risks, especially for LGBTQ youth. Fortunately, the risks can be managed. Obviously, if you are not prepared to come out about your sexual or gender identity, you need to be extremely careful about what you post—especially if you can be identified personally. Even if you think you're only sharing with people you're comfortable sharing with, there is always the chance that the information could get out to others.

If you're not ready to come out yet, one solution is to use an app that supports anonymity. These apps allow you to post under an assumed screen name or, in some cases, no name at all. If you use such an app or service, be careful not to post anything that could reveal your true identity unless or until you're ready to share this information widely. Check out ConnectSafely's <u>Tips for Safe and Civil Use of Anonymous Apps</u>.

Here are some additional suggestions:

- Never share personal information or images with anyone that you don't want to share with a large number of people, both known and strangers. A handy rule of thumb is only to share what you would be comfortable seeing on a billboard in front of your school.

- Be careful when connecting online with people you don't know in real life. Not everyone is who they say they are online, and some may try to scam or victimize you.

- Don't believe everything you see online. Be especially skeptical of messages that ask you for something, including information or personal images you know you shouldn't be sharing.

**Be careful when connecting online with people you don't know in real life.**

**For more about safe use of anonymous apps, visit ConnectSafely.org.**

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- Be polite to others online, and don't react in anger. What you write could affect you later.

- Confide in a trusted peer or adult if you are being cyberbullied.

- Save or screenshot all harassing messages as evidence in case you need to report them later.

- If someone is cyberbullying or harassing you, know that it's not your fault. There are plenty of other wonderful young people who are in a situation similar to yours as well as many allies who would support you if they saw any negative posts about you. If someone is mean to you, or if someone cyberbullies you because of your identity, consider sharing that with trusted peers or adults as well as reporting it to the service you're using.

## Some Closing Thoughts

When it comes to taking care of children, it's all about love, compassion and respect, and the realization that everyone is a unique individual. Admittedly, it can sometimes be hard for parents, educators and others who care for youth to accept differences, but young people as well as adults are different in terms of who they are, how they act, and who, if anyone, they may someday love. Understanding, accepting and even embracing those differences will go a long way toward creating the type of world that makes every child feel accepted and welcome in our schools, our communities and our families.

Bullying is never OK, neither in person nor online. But it occurs, and when it does, it's everyone's responsibility to try to end it, provide compassion and support for the victims and—whenever possible—help the aggressors overcome their tendency to hurt others.

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**For more info about cyberbullying, visit ConnectSafely.org/ cyberbullying**

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Anyone can be the subject of bullying or mean behavior, but those who are marginalized—including LGBTQ youth —are more likely to be affected. Those who feel isolated within their own families, schools and communities are even more likely to use the internet and connected apps to reach out for information, companionship and support. For LGBTQ youth, the internet can be a lifeline. Pulling the plug on that access, however well-intentioned, can potentially have devastating effects.

All parents, regardless of their children's sexual or gender identity, should have thoughtful conversations with their kids about internet use, the apps they use and their experiences—both positive and negative. These conversations should never be lectures or interrogations.

When it comes to sexual and gender identities, parents and educators need to know that kids will come out if and when they're ready. They're most likely to feel ready if they're comfortable. It's the responsibility of caring adults to create an atmosphere of love, support and understanding for all children, so that they are as comfortable as possible, regardless of their sexual and gender identities or their willingness to discuss them.

As educators and parents, we must never underestimate the role of peers. Helping all youth learn to be compassionate allies goes a long way toward making everyone feel comfortable and welcome.

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**For more info about cyberbullying, visit ConnectSafely.org/ cyberbullying**

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## About ConnectSafely

*ConnectSafely is a Silicon Valley, California-based nonprofit organization dedicated to educating users of connected technology about safety, privacy and security. We publish research-based safety tips, parents' guidebooks, advice, news and commentary on all aspects of tech use and policy.*