

Who Can Help You When Your Child Is Being Cyberbullied?

Bullying has always been a *school* issue. So it's logical to turn to our child's school for help if our child is being cyberbullied. But is the school the right place to turn?

When a child is cyberbullying another child, most of the time, the cyberbullying originates from that child's home – not from school. The cyberbully may use text messaging or their parents' computer to post cruel or attacking statements, photos, or profiles online. Critically, the cyberbullying isn't actually happening in school; it's happening outside of school.

That fact has some big legal implications. In 1969, the United States Supreme Court restricted the reach of school discipline by ruling, in effect, that unless an out-of-school incident has a "substantial" impact upon the school, then school administrators cannot discipline an off-campus incident.¹

So does it make sense to go to your child's school, if your child is being cyberbullied? The answer, actually, is both yes *and* no.

First, there are steps you can take on your own. If your child is being cyberbullied, be certain to report the incident(s) to the website that's involved. This is usually done through clicking on an "abuse" or "report" button or link. If you can't find such a button or link (and they're not always easy to find), click the CONTACT US link. If even that isn't visible, send an email to abuse@whateverwebsite.com and that should accomplish the same thing.

Second, if the cyberbullying involves threats of violence, abuse, or blackmail, notify the police.

Third, even if you believe that your child is *only* being bullied in cyberspace and not in school, it makes good sense to let the school personnel know about the situation. In my research, we've found that most students tell us that bullying tends to happen in both places, rather than in one or the other (at least at the high school level). Also, if other students begin to talk about the cyberbullying, important information could be revealed. If the cyberbullying is known, school adults may be able to help educate them about engaging in risky online behaviors.

Finally, your child's school counselor, teacher, and/or principal can play a key role in supporting and helping your child get through the school day. Even if the online bullying hasn't "spilled over" into school, your child may feel uncomfortable at school and may wonder if others are watching him or her to gauge a reaction to the online abuse.

¹ Of course, I am not a lawyer and the issue is, predictably, a lot more complex than this.

Sometimes an educator's response will sound dismissive; they may remind you that they cannot discipline a cyberbully. Don't be discouraged; make it clear that you are seeking support for your child who is the target of the online bully's abuse.

Educators can be directed to the Guide to Cyberbullying For School Administrators, found on the Massachusetts Aggression Reduction Center website (<http://www.MARCcenter.org>). That publication has many useful tips.

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