

How to Decode Signs of Sexual Cyberbullying and Support Teens and Youth

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Introduction

How to Decode Signs of Sexual Cyberbullying and Support Teens and Youth explains how to identify, recognize, and support youth who may experience and/or engage in sexual cyberbullying.^{a,b} This primer from Activate* is meant for professionals who support young people who experience the child welfare and/or juvenile justice systems, homelessness, and/or disconnection from school and work (i.e., opportunity youth).

Sexual cyberbullying is a broad term used to describe any sexually aggressive or coercive behavior facilitated by technology to intentionally harm, embarrass, threaten, or intimidate another person.^c Youth can experience and/or engage in sexual cyberbullying.

Sexual cyberbullying is harmful to all youth, especially youth who have experienced trauma,^{1,2} unstable living arrangements,³ and/or a lack of supportive adults in their lives.^{4,5} Furthermore, some youth may rely on digital platforms to stay connected with family and friends from whom they have been separated and experience an increased risk for sexual cyberbullying.⁶⁻⁸

* Activate: The Center to Bring Adolescent Sexual and Reproductive Health Research to Youth-Supporting Professionals bridges the gap between research and practice in support of the Office of Population Affairs' aims to promote adolescent health and prevent unintended teen pregnancy. Activate translates research and creates research-based resources for use by professionals who support young people experiencing the child welfare and/or justice systems, homelessness, and/or disconnection from school and work (i.e., opportunity youth).

Decoding Sexual Cyberbullying Behaviors

What does sexual cyberbullying look like?

Sexual cyberbullying behaviors include:



Sextortion



Revenge porn



Online Sexual Harassment



Cyberstalking



Nonconsensual Sexting



Cyberdating Abuse

The chart on the next page describes sexual cyberbullying behaviors and examples of each sexual cyberbullying behavior.

^a The information provided in this resource is based on Activate's [summary of research on sexual cyberbullying](#).

^b We use "experience and/or engage in sexual cyberbullying" to refer to youth who experience sexual cyberbullying, engage in behaviors of sexual cyberbullying, or both. This language is purposeful and YSP should avoid labeling youth as victims or perpetrators in this work.

^c The term "cyber" may be outdated and not relevant to youth. However, it is still used in the literature. Youth-supporting professionals should consider using other terms such as online or electronic or ask young people what words they would use.

Sexual Cyberbullying Behaviors

WHAT IS THIS BEHAVIOR?

Non-physical way of forcing sexual favors by threatening to reveal evidence of someone's sexual activity.⁹

SEXTORTION



WHAT COULD IT LOOK LIKE?

Receiving or sending a message claiming that an explicit image (e.g., a nude) will be shared online unless one complies with the sender's requests.¹⁰

ONLINE SEXUAL HARASSMENT

Unwanted sexual behavior on any digital platform.¹¹ This can occur between anyone, including family, friends, acquaintances, or strangers.



Receiving or sending an unsolicited message on Instagram asking about what someone likes/is into sexually.

NONCONSENSUAL SEXTING

Nonconsensual texting of sexually explicit messages or photos.¹² This can occur between anyone, including family, friends, acquaintances, or strangers.



Receiving or sending a naked picture on Snapchat without consent.

REVENGE PORN

Revealing sexually explicit images or videos of a person on the internet without the consent of the subject to cause them distress or embarrassment.¹³



Distributing photographs or videos of an ex-partner, obtained via hacking or other methods. Finding an explicit image or video of oneself that an ex-partner posted without consent after a breakup.

CYBERSTALKING

Using technology to repeatedly threaten, harass, or intimidate another person, making the other person concerned about their safety.¹⁴ This can occur between anyone.



Receiving/sending messages through a social media platform saying that one is being watched. This includes watching someone's social media to learn where they are and arriving uninvited.¹⁵

CYBERDATING ABUSE

Using technology to spread negative information (e.g., spreading rumors, talking badly about their body) or to direct aggression or control toward an intimate partner or romantic interest.¹⁶



Spreading rumors about a partner or romantic interest's sexual identity/orientation on an online gaming chat room. Or, finding hurtful comments about one's body on a partner's Instagram post.

Where does sexual cyberbullying happen?

Sexual cyberbullying can occur through:	Sexual cyberbullying can occur on:
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Email • Instant messaging • Text messaging • Public posts and direct messages 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Social media applications (apps) • Online dating apps • Online gaming forums (e.g., video game chat rooms) • Blogs • Other websites

Although online platforms allow young people to communicate, and to easily and directly connect with peers, they can also be used to search for people or post information anonymously. Professionals should be aware of social media and dating apps young people frequently use, as well as their logos. A 2024 Pew Research Center publication—[Teens and Social Media Fact Sheet](#)—provides more information about how teens use online platforms.¹⁷ A recent literature review examined what is known about how sexual harassment is facilitated by dating apps.¹⁸

Social Media and Dating Apps



You can help youth protect themselves. Youth need to know how to use these settings for each app to protect their personal information and minimize their risk for experiencing sexual cyberbullying.^{19,20} Every app has its own privacy and location settings.^d For example, youth should know whether their posts on different apps are public or private, whether the app is tracking their location, and whether it sells their personal information to third parties.

^d At the time of publication, Senate bill 1409: Kids Online Safety Act passed the U.S. Senate with bipartisan support and will move to the House of Representatives. The bill aims to hold tech companies such as Facebook accountable for harmful online behavior such as bullying and sexual cyberbullying. The bill requires tech companies to use a “duty of care” and default settings as the safest possible.

Decoding Signs of Sexual Cyberbullying

What are the signs of sexual cyberbullying?

Some factors may put young people at higher risk of experiencing and/or engaging in sexual cyberbullying behaviors, while others may protect young people against experiencing or engaging in those behaviors. Not all young people who exhibit risk factors will experience and/or engage in sexual cyberbullying. However, youth-supporting professionals should be aware of these factors and be prepared to talk about sexual cyberbullying with youth who exhibit them.

Did you know that youth who experience sexual cyberbullying are more likely to...

- Use social media more²¹
- Be bullied in person,²²⁻²⁴ and have higher levels of stress and suicidal ideation²⁵ 😞
- I also read that people can both experience and engage in sexual cyberbullying
- Yes and a low sense of empathy³¹ and high anxiety³²

Wow..I heard youth who engage in sexual cyberbullying use drugs and alcohol more²⁶

And have lower grades²⁷ 😞

Yeah, having low self-control^{28,29} and self-esteem³⁰ are signs right?

I heard parental monitoring³³ and peer support³⁴ can help protect youth from experiencing or engaging in sexual cyberbullying!

What signs of sexual cyberbullying can you listen for?

Understanding how young people describe sexual cyberbullying can help youth-supporting professionals identify when sexual cyberbullying is occurring.

In addition to slang, emojis may also have sexual connotations. Be aware that youth may talk through emojis, and the meaning of emojis change frequently. Talk with youth to determine whether they are experiencing sexual cyberbullying and/or sexually cyberbullying others.

The quotes in the graphic below are examples and include vernacular terms/slang that young people and youth-supporting professionals report commonly hearing. However, slang changes over time and varies by geography and culture, among other factors. The slang used in these examples may not match the slang you hear from youth.



A youth who is experiencing sexual cyberbullying may say:

“My bf insists I always have my location on and then always shows up where I am even if I haven’t told him. He wants to check on me.”

“My partner insists on looking through my text messages. They don’t believe me when I tell them I am not flirting with other people.”

“Someone online won’t stop DMing me things that make me uncomfortable. I’ve asked them to stop.”

“My ex-partner is threatening to share my nude with their friends if I don’t continue to post pictures on social media with them.”

“Someone DMed me a nude, but I didn’t want the picture and we didn’t talk about it first.”

“A stranger online is asking me to send pictures and saying nasty things to me. It makes me uncomfortable.”

A youth who is sexually cyberbullying others may say:

“I always make my partner share their location so I can know where they are and find them if I want to.”

“I told him I’d share our sexts if he didn’t [insert any form of ultimatum here].”

“I made a finsta to DM a person I saw at school and ask for n00dz.”

“My friends loved the picture (e.g., n00dz, dirties) I sent them of my gf.”

Decoding How to Help Youth

- **Teach young people** how to use privacy and location settings to protect their personal information and minimize their risk for experiencing sexual cyberbullying.
- **Educate young people** on how to use technology safely and protect themselves against malicious behavior online by teaching them the signs of sexual cyberbullying.
- **Learn about sexual cyberbullying laws** within your state. There is variation from state to state in what is considered sexual cyberbullying,³¹ so make sure you know the laws within your state and have conversations with youth about those laws.
- **Have routine conversations with young people** to teach them about sexual cyberbullying, including what it looks like, why it is harmful, and whether to do anything/what to do if they are experiencing and/or engaging in sexual cyberbullying.
- **Discuss consent with young people** and ensure they know that photos of themselves or others should not be shared without permission.
- **Demonstrate support for young people** who have experienced sexual cyberbullying by asking them what they need.
- **Demonstrate support for youth who cyberbully others** by asking about their understanding of their behavior, explaining reasons why sexual cyberbullying is not acceptable, and connecting them to services to understand the root causes of their behavior, if needed.
- **Connect youth with local services** (e.g., counseling, digital safety courses, legal consultation) to support their mental health and legal needs after sexual cyberbullying occurs.

Prepare for conversations about sexual cyberbullying by reviewing these resources:	
<i>Privacy Settings for Social Media Apps</i>	A youth centered resource that shares links to privacy settings instructions for popular social media sites.
<i>Project iGuardian</i>	Program to keep teens and youth safe from online predators through education and awareness.
<i>National Sexual Violence Resource Center</i>	Center that provides information to prevent and respond to in-person and cyber sexual violence.
<i>The Cyberbullying Research Center</i>	Center that provides information to prevent, identify, and respond to instances of cyberbullying.
<i>Cyberbullying Laws</i>	Online tool that summarizes cyberbullying laws in each state.
<i>What Is Consent?</i>	Online resource to help people understand what consent looks like.
<i>Without My Consent</i>	Online resource that provides multiple tools to fight online harassment.
<i>Let's Talk Consent</i>	A flyer explaining consent with additional resources.

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