

Unintended consequence of COVID-19: cyberbullying could increase

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Coronavirus disease (COVID-19) has taken the world by storm and disrupted so many aspects of life in the United States and around the world. School districts across America are now providing K-12 education online, and an increasing number will not resume face-to-face classes until the fall. As a result, a cyberbullying expert from Florida

Atlantic University cautions that there will likely be some unintended consequences that merit attention and response from both educators and parents. Among these unintended consequences: a possible increase in cyberbullying among youth.

"When smartphones and [social media](#) became ubiquitous for students, cyberbullying rates went up. This makes sense, of course, because there was now an almost limitless number of potential targets and aggressors," said Sameer Hinduja, Ph.D., a professor in the School of Criminology and Criminal Justice within FAU's College for Design and Social Inquiry, and co-director of the Cyberbullying Research Center. "Well, during this unprecedented time when they're all stuck at home, those same students will be using apps even more than they already do with them being forced to use [online platforms](#) for learning, regardless of their level of comfort or proficiency. Teachers are delivering education not just in learning management systems like Canvas, Blackboard, and Moodle, but even on Roblox, Twitch, and YouTube, among others."

In the midst of major crises where everyone is already on edge, Hinduja says hostility toward others tends to escalate along with self-preserving and self-defensive behaviors. This may manifest even more so between students in their [online interactions](#)—their posts, comments, pictures and videos. Some of it will be mild, and some of it will be severe. Some of it will be what students are used to and will not bother them, but some of it will be brand new—and a jarring, wounding experience. This may be especially true for those who are not used to learning and interacting in online-only spaces (and may also disproportionately affect more vulnerable populations of youth).

Hinduja cautions that many cyberbullying targets will hesitate to get help from their parents. When it happens, they may suffer silently since there will not be any visual cues for educators to see or investigate because the [student](#) is not physically at school. In addition, with everyone now

receiving instruction online, students cannot readily stop by the guidance counselor's office, chat with a teacher after class, or let their coach know about what is troubling them and affecting their ability to play sports (since youth sports also are shut down). Those opportunities for meaningful, connective conversations and check-ins largely will not happen organically.

"It's also very possible that xenophobic/racist cyberbullying may go up. Some continue to call COVID-19 a 'foreign virus' and parents have complained that their children are being accused as carriers just because they are Asian," said Hinduja. "I'm Asian and have dealt with my share of bullying based on race/ethnicity, and so I am particularly sensitive to this issue and simply do not want to see it spiral out of control."

Hinduja provides a number of suggestions for educators:

- In your online learning platforms and environments, set expectations and standards immediately and clearly for respectful behavior among your students;
- Determine exactly what consequences you can implement for rule violations, and make sure they truly have a deterrent effect on your students;
- Keep close tabs on all online interactions and encourage your students to send you screenshots or screen recordings of any rule violations they see to help you investigate and facilitate takedowns of problematic or abusive content;
- Model and reinforce positive peer interactions in all venues where online interactions can take place;
- Keep in touch with all of your students on a regular basis, and remind them that you are there for them if they need help, support or advice;
- Most importantly, keep in touch with those few you know who need a deeper connection, encouraging words, and/or

accountability.

"Students also are going to struggle with feelings of isolation because they are not able to go to school and connect and interact with their peers in person," said Hinduja.

He also suggests that parents need to be creative to make sure that their children do not suffer from extremes of social isolation:

- Be patient with your children if they start to get irritable and frustrated. They are trying to reconcile this new reality just like you are. Moreover, they are probably not going to be as good at hiding their emotions or redirecting them like adults often can;
- Allow and support your children when it comes to Skyping and FaceTiming their friends, as well as livestreaming on their favorite apps (depending on their age, maturity, and your household rules, of course). Research has shown that socializing and connecting with their peers is essential for their continued healthy development and especially in the midst of chaos and uncertainty;
- Encourage [physical activity](#) without doing so in a group setting. Physical activity is necessary at all ages to calm the mind and support cognitive growth.

"With intentionality, graciousness, and good will, we don't have to just survive through this crisis. We can actually thrive, and our relationships with the youth we care for can be better off than they were before all of this even began," asserts Hinduja.

Additional information and tips can be found at the [Cyberbullying Research Center](#).

Provided by Florida Atlantic University

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