

Expert discusses social distancing and cyberbullying

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For many children and teenagers, social distancing during the

coronavirus pandemic means the only interaction they have with peers is through a cell phone or gaming device. This increase of social screen time prompted the question: Could there be a rise in cyberbullying as a result of social distancing?

UNC News brought that question, and a few others, to one of the world's leading academic authorities on bullying: UNC-Chapel Hill Professor Dorothy Espelage.

Question: Is there an increased risk of cyberbullying for children and teens as they practice social distancing?

Answer: There is reason to believe that children and teens will be interacting through social [media](#) and gaming spaces more while they are [social distancing](#) at home. And there are likely going to be times when they have conflicts. Those conflicts can lead to social aggression or rejection ultimately leading to isolation. But we can't say there will be a rise in cyberbullying, definitively, without data.

Q: Does limiting screen time lower the chances of my child being in this situation?

A: One surefire way to curb cyberbullying is limiting long periods of time when youth are gaming or using social media. One way to do this is allocating time each day when there are family projects. It could be playing games, doing arts and crafts, science projects or other social distancing activities in your own yard or neighborhood.

Q: I can't be everywhere my kids are online, so how do I know if my child is being bullied online?

A: There are telltale signs that can tip you off: Does your child seemingly get upset out of the blue? Does it happen while their engaged with technology? If so, consider asking if something was said or done in that space that prompted this feeling.

Q: Any tips on approaching this conversation with my child?

A: Be direct. Have an honest conversation with children and teenagers about the stress and anxiety that they're going through and explain this is a very stressful situation. Stress can lead to misunderstandings with friends and [peer groups](#) and there are bound to be conflicts and misunderstandings.

Also consider that some friend groups are fragmented now, depending on [children's](#) lives at home. For example: Imagine Allison, Katie and Catherine are a friend group, but Catherine's family has limited her time on social media because many people have to share the same Wi-Fi signal. Allison and Katie may be spending more [time](#) online during this social distancing, but Catherine is feeling ignored. That could lead Catherine to be more aggressive or even mean on social media because she feels left out and it's beyond her control.

A few other points you may want to try and get across:

- Don't give out [personal information](#) (location, age, etc.) on [social media](#) or on a game;
- Avoid talking or playing with strangers online;
- If something makes you uncomfortable in that digital space, talk with a parent or trusted adult about it.

Provided by University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill

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