

The Emotional Impact of Online Harassment on Kids

By the DSK Research Team · February 2026

When a child is bullied in the schoolyard, they can come home. The school day ends. The harassment, for a while at least, stops. Online harassment has no such boundary. It follows children into their bedrooms, onto their phones, into the private moments that used to be safe. Understanding the psychological impact of this constant exposure is the first step toward supporting a child who is experiencing it.

59%

of US teens have experienced some form of online harassment. Most never tell a parent.

Why Children Don't Tell Parents

Research consistently shows that the majority of children who experience online harassment do not tell a parent. Understanding why is essential to changing this.

- **Fear of losing access** — "If I tell them, they'll take my phone away"
- **Shame** — children often internalize the harassment and blame themselves
- **Fear of escalation** — "What if telling makes it worse?"
- **Belief parents won't understand** — digital social dynamics are often invisible to adults
- **Protecting the parent** — older children sometimes don't want to cause worry

What Online Harassment Actually Looks Like

Online harassment is broader than most parents realize. It includes public humiliation through posting embarrassing photos or videos without consent, deliberate exclusion from group chats or online spaces, impersonation through fake accounts, coordinated attacks where multiple people target a single child, private conversations shared publicly without consent, and being placed on lists judging physical appearance.

The Psychological Impact

The mental health research on cyberbullying is unambiguous and serious. Children who experience sustained online harassment show significantly elevated rates of anxiety, depression, and in severe cases, suicidal ideation compared to peers who have not experienced it. The always-on nature of digital harassment — the inability to escape it — is identified by researchers as the key factor that makes it more damaging than in-person bullying in many cases.

⚠ Warning signs to watch for:

Withdrawal from activities they used to enjoy. Avoiding school. Reluctance to discuss online activity. Sleeping more or less than usual. Unexplained changes in mood, particularly after being on their phone. Loss of interest in friendships.

How to Support a Child Who Has Been Harassed Online

Step 1: Listen First

Before doing anything practical, give your child space to be heard without interruption. Do not immediately jump to solutions. Ask open questions. Let them lead. Validate their feelings — "That sounds really painful. I'm glad you told me."

Step 2: Don't Minimize

Avoid responses like "just ignore it" or "it's just the internet." To a child, their online social world is as real and as important as their physical one. Minimizing the experience damages trust and makes it less likely they will come to you in the future.

Step 3: Document Before Acting

Before blocking or reporting, take screenshots of everything. Timestamps, usernames, and the content of messages may be needed for school administration or law enforcement. Once you block, you may lose access to the evidence.

Step 4: Take Practical Action Together

Include your child in the process of reporting and blocking — doing it for them without their involvement can make them feel more powerless. Let them be part of the solution. Report to the platform, to the school if the bully is a classmate, and to local law enforcement if there are threats of violence.

Step 5: Consider Professional Support

If your child shows persistent signs of anxiety, depression, or withdrawal following online harassment, professional counseling is not a last resort — it is an appropriate and important response. Look for a therapist with experience in adolescent mental health and technology-related trauma.

"The single most protective factor against the long-term psychological damage of online harassment is a child's belief that their parent will respond with support, not punishment, if they disclose what happened." — Child Psychology Research, 2025

✅ The most important thing you can do:

Say this to your child, clearly and regularly: "If anything ever happens to you online — anything at all — you can always come tell me. I will never be angry at you. I will always help you." Then mean it.

Resources

- **Crisis Text Line:** Text HOME to 741741 (free, 24/7)
- **StopBullying.gov** — reporting tools and parent resources
- **NCMEC:** 1-800-843-5678
- **DSK Emergency Help:** digitalsafetyknights.org