

Tips for DC Youth-Serving Agencies to Respond to Cyberbullying and Social Media Trends

This tipsheet defines cyberbullying, the degree to which cyberbullying is covered under the Youth Bullying Prevention Act, and how youth-serving agencies in the District of Columbia can respond to cyberbullying. Cyberbullying is bullying that takes place through technology. It includes, but is not limited to, bullying via computers, social media, cell phones, and gaming devices.



BULLYING is any severe, pervasive, or persistent act of conduct that can be reasonably predicted to:

- a. Place the youth [being bullied] in reasonable fear of physical harm to their person or property
- b. Cause a substantial detrimental effect on the youth's physical or mental health
- c. Substantially interfere with the youth's academic performance or attendance
- d. Substantially interfere with the youth's ability to participate in or benefit from the services, activities, or privileges provided by an agency, educational institution, or grantee

Defining Cyberbullying Under The Youth Bullying Prevention Act

The *Youth Bullying Prevention Act* of 2012 (YBPA; D.C. Official Code § 2-1535.01 *et seq*) and its accompanying regulations (4 DCMR § 1500 *et seq*) require all youth-serving agencies in the District of Columbia to adopt a bullying prevention policy that includes prohibitions on bullying, including cyberbullying, that occurs “on its property, including electronic communication on, or with, its property.”

The DC regulations further clarify that bullying prevention policies apply to cyberbullying that occurs on the youth-serving agency's property, on agency-sponsored transportation, or at agency-sponsored events—regardless of whether the communications device used to cyberbully is owned or lease by the covered entity. Additionally, the regulations specify that:

“Bullying which occurs on-site, but involves off-site activities, is prohibited if it creates a hostile environment at the covered entity for the target or witnesses of bullying or impedes or interferes with a youth's ability to participate at the covered entity.”

This specification means that schools, after-school programs, and other youth-serving agencies need to investigate and take action against cyberbullying that:

1. Occurs during hours in which youth are using the agency's services
2. Occurs while using agency property, including technology that students may use outside of the hours they are utilizing the agency's services (e.g., a school-issued laptop or tablet that a student uses at home)
3. Occurs outside the hours a youth is using an agency's services, and on personal or other technology—if the cyberbullying is affecting the youth's ability to utilize the agency's services. For instance, cyberbullying is covered under the YBPA if the youth is not participating in services to avoid contact with those engaging in the cyberbullying, or if discussion among other youth at the agency about the cyberbullying is affecting their ability to focus. If this type of cyberbullying does not substantially affect the youth's ability to engage in the agency's services, the agency is not required to handle the cyberbullying under this policy. However, this does not prevent the agency from addressing the cyberbullying outside the parameters of the policy.

Determining Whether Cyberbullying Is Covered Under The YBPA

For all reports of cyberbullying, youth-serving agencies should consider the following questions:

- 1. Can the conduct be reasonably predicted to lead to fear of physical harm, detrimental effects on mental or physical health, interference with academic performance or attendance, or ability to participate in or benefit from agency services?**
 - All bullying covered under the YBPA, including cyberbullying, must be reasonably tied to one of these outcomes.
 - If the youth is reporting the bullying (as opposed to other youth or adults reporting), this is often a clear indication that they are being affected.
 - If a third party reports the bullying, the agency should talk with the youth to determine whether and how they are being impacted.
- 2. Did the cyberbullying occur while the youth were participating in agency activities? Did the cyberbullying occur while using agency technology?**
 - Cyberbullying that occurs while youth are using agency services, even on personal technology, is covered under the policy. This includes cyberbullying that occurs during virtual instruction or services.
 - Cyberbullying that occurs while using agency technology, even outside agency hours and property, is covered under the policy.
- 3. Is the cyberbullying affecting youths' ability to participate in or benefit from agency services?**
 - Has the targeted youth changed their behavior or their use of the agency's services since the reported cyberbullying began? For instance, has their attendance, performance, or engagement changed?
 - Is the cyberbullying incident making it difficult for others to participate or has it changed the climate for youth at the agency?
- 4. Is the cyberbullying incident unique to your agency?**
 - Are all youth involved in the cyberbullying involved in your agency's services? Do the involved youth also participate together in other agencies' services?
 - If the youth involved are also together at other agencies, and the cyberbullying did not take place on or with your agency's property, it may make sense to coordinate a response with other agencies. For instance, if the cyberbullying is affecting both a youth's participation at school and at an after-school program, and the involved youth participate in both environments, the school and after-school program may want to work together to ensure that the situation is resolved.

If it is determined that the cyberbullying is covered under the agency's policy, follow the agency's investigation and documentation procedures. Remember to keep all evidence of the cyberbullying, including screenshots or printouts of the offensive behavior.

Cyberbullying During Virtual Instruction

The YBPA applies to all District of Columbia government agencies and/or grantees that "... provid[e] services, activities, or privileges directly or indirectly to youth," including those that sometimes or exclusively provide services virtually. During the COVID-19 pandemic, several schools and other youth-serving agencies switched to virtual provision of services and many continue to offer such services even as the pandemic abates. Initial research following the pandemic suggests that the transition to virtual services did not significantly increase rates of cyberbullying, but decreased the frequency of cases being reported to schools.¹ When services are primarily or exclusively provided virtually, agencies should:

- Ensure that bullying prevention policies are tailored for the virtual environment, as required by the YBPA. This includes establishing clear procedures for reporting bullying behavior and providing mechanisms for anonymous reporting.

¹ Martinez, M., & Temkin, D. (2021, October 27). *School bullying has decreased during the COVID-19 pandemic, but schools should prepare for its return*. Child Trends. <https://www.childtrends.org/blog/school-bullying-has-decreased-during-the-covid-19-pandemic-but-schools-must-be-prepared-for-its-return>

- Prevent exclusionary or harsh discipline for youth who bully others during virtual services. Exclusionary discipline includes muting or removing students from online classes. Research shows that restorative approaches to discipline help students improve positive behaviors and remain engaged in school, especially in online settings.²

If The Cyberbullying Is Not Covered Under The Policy:

Even if the cyberbullying is deemed to fall outside of what is covered by the YBPA, the agency can still take steps to prevent future incidents.

1. Use the opportunity to stress the importance of digital citizenship.

- Use free curriculum to help youth build skills while using technology. Avoid referring to the particular incident or naming the youth involved.

2. Use the incident to increase monitoring of the youth involved.

- Research demonstrates that the youth engaged in cyberbullying (both as aggressors and targets) often play the same roles in in-person bullying.³
- Reports of cyberbullying might indicate ongoing conflict and/or bullying between the youth involved that may fall under the YBPA.

Other Social Media Trends:

In addition to cyberbullying, social media trends and challenges represent an emerging risk for youth online. For example, the Benadryl challenge that went viral on TikTok in 2020 encouraged youth to take dangerously high doses of Benadryl. Hospitals, drug manufacturers, and the FDA issued warnings to highlight the fatal side effects of this challenge. Youth-serving agencies can help address the risk of these trends by doing the following:

1. Ensure that the agency is familiar with current and trending social media challenges.

- Download social media platforms and familiarize yourself with the platform and its algorithm to be up-to-date on trends popular with youth.
- Create strategies for monitoring social media challenges that may be harmful for youth mental and physical health.

2. Communicate with students and parents about the dangers and consequences of online trends and the occurrence of bullying on social media platforms.

- Incorporate lessons about social media challenges in social and emotional learning curricula.
- Discuss these trends, the negative and positive aspects of social media, and how to safely use social media platforms with students.
- Ensure that parents are aware of classroom discussions about social media trends and equip them with resources and tools to recognize signs of youth engagement in dangerous challenges.

3. Teach youth about the risks of social media and recommend steps to take if they see something wrong.

- Ensure that students and parents are aware of social media privacy settings. Encourage youth to set their social media platforms to “private” to prevent any unwanted and harmful messages. Make sure youth can recognize serious threats that may require school or police involvement
- Create a nonjudgmental and open environment for students to talk about their experiences on social media.

² Reyneke, R. P. (2019). A Restorative Approach to Address Cyber Bullying. In *Rethinking teacher education for the 21st Century: Trends, challenges and New Directions* (1st ed., pp. 340-354). Verlag Barbara Budrich. <https://doi.org/10.2307/1.ctvpb3xhh.26>

³ Peebles E. (2014). Cyberbullying: Hiding behind the screen. *Paediatrics & child health*, 19(10), 527-528. <https://doi.org/10.1093/pch/19.10.527>