

CREATING SAFE DIGITAL SPACES

Relevant for: Security Related Matters | Topic: Basics of Cyber Security and related matters

Recognising that school-related violence is an infringement of children's right to education and to health and well-being, UNESCO Member States have declared the first Thursday of November as the [International Day against Violence and Bullying at School](#), including cyberbullying. The aim is to raise awareness among students, parents, members of the school community, education authorities and others about the problem of online violence and cyberbullying.

In India, an estimated 71 million children aged 5-11 years access the Internet on the devices of their family members, constituting about 14% of the country's active Internet user base of over 500 million. It should also be noted that two-thirds of Internet users in India are in the age group of 12-29 years.

Be an active bystander

School closures as a response to the COVID-19 lockdowns have led to an unprecedented rise in unsupervised screen time for children and young people, which in turn exposed them to a greater risk of online violence. Various reports have indicated increased incidence of cyberbullying and online child sexual exploitation by adults.

In the same vein, there is growing scientific evidence which suggests that cyberbullying has negative consequences on the education, health and well-being of children and young people. Published in 2019 and drawing on data from 144 countries, UNESCO's report 'Behind the numbers: Ending school violence and bullying' highlighted the extent of the problem, with almost one in three students worldwide reporting being bullied at least once in the preceding month. Therefore, cyberbullying prevention interventions should aim at tackling all types of bullying and victimisation experiences at the same time, as opposed to each in silo.

Effective interventions also require gender-sensitive and targeted approaches that respond to needs of learners who are most likely to be the victims of online violence. A 2020 study by Plan International, involving 14,000 women aged 15-25 from across 22 countries, revealed that 58% of girls in the Asia-Pacific region reported online harassment. Globally, of the girls who were harassed, 14% who self-identified as having a disability and 37% who identified themselves as from an ethnic minority said they get harassed because of it.

Cyber bullying on the rise, but few want to report it, say officials

The impact of online sexual harassment could have long-term negative impacts on mental health and well-being. Data on school bullying demonstrates its harmful impacts on students' educational outcomes, mental health, and quality of life. Children who are frequently bullied are nearly three times more likely to feel left out at school than those who are not. They are also twice more likely to miss out on school and have a higher tendency to leave formal education after finishing secondary school.

Although online violence is not limited to school premises, the education system plays a crucial role in addressing online safety. Concerted efforts must be made to provide children and young people with the knowledge and skills to identify online violence so that they can protect themselves from its different forms, whether perpetrated by peers or adults. Teachers also play a critical role by teaching students about online safety, and thus supporting parental

involvement.

Safety first

For those looking to prevent and counter cyberbullying, the information booklet brought out by UNESCO in partnership with NCERT on Safe Online Learning in Times of COVID-19 can be a useful reference. It supports the creation of safe digital spaces and addresses the nuances of security. Similarly, to prevent the adverse effect of online gaming and the psycho-emotional stress that children could be undergoing, the Department of School Education and Literacy has circulated exhaustive guidelines to raise children and parental awareness.

At a time when COVID-19 lockdowns have resulted in online bullying, we must redouble our efforts to tackle this menace. Cyberbullying may take place in a virtual world, but it has a very real impact on children's health. The Union Ministry of Education and UNESCO are committed to ensuring access to safe, inclusive and health-promoting learning environments for all children.

Also read | [Celebrities are stepping it up with campaigns, vlogs and webinars to take on cyberbullies](#)

It is imperative that digital and social media platforms are free of cyberbullying, if learners have to access quality education. More importantly, confidential reporting and redress services must be established. We encourage students, parents, schools, education authorities, members of the education community and its partners to take part in preventing online violence and promoting the safety and well-being of young people.

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The ideological moorings of India's non-alignment faded along with Jawaharlal Nehru's idealism

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