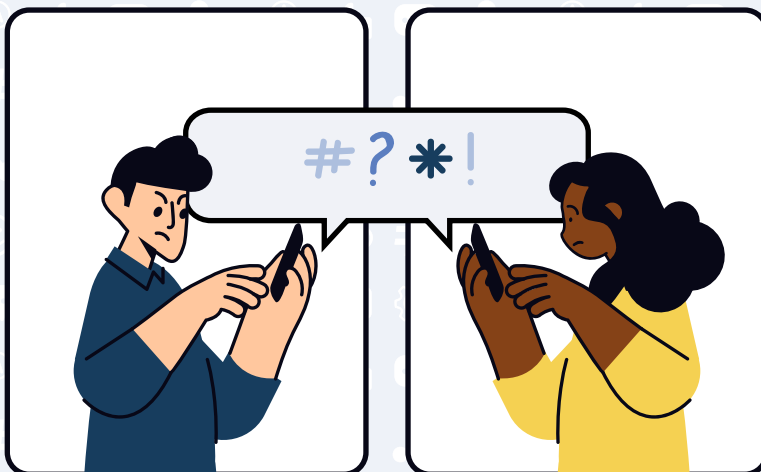




KidActions





## Policy Recommendations

This leaflet is intended to provide a set of practical recommendations that look at the multifaceted dimension of (cyber)bullying among children and adolescents. We hope that the ideas contained here will help civil society, NGOs, educational staff, social services, health and care professionals, policymakers, and other relevant stakeholders to create an enabling policy environment for a more effective prevention, detection, and response to (cyber)bullying.



Our recommendations are based upon the work carried out by the EC-funded [KID\\_ACTIONS](#) project. The KID\_ACTIONS project aims to create a range of evidence-based innovative tools to tackle cyberbullying among young people aged 11-19. They reflect the views of many stakeholders, experts and young people consulted at different stages of the project as well as our review of evidence and relevant international and EU policy guidelines in the field.



We sincerely hope that the ideas contained here will help to provide a sound basis to further the discussion at the EU and national level. Ultimately, we hope that they will contribute to inspire many stakeholders to continue exchanging expertise, good practices, and increasing collaboration so that together we continue fighting cyberbullying at school and beyond. These policy recommendations are available in English, Italian and French.



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Rue de Trèves, 61 - 1040 Brussels, Belgium

**Authors:** Verónica Donoso and Sophie Smit

**Design:** Mattia Gentile

**Illustrations:** Readaptations from Adobe Stock author [@PureSolution](#)



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## Despite the many efforts to combat it, cyberbullying incidence remains problematic in Europe and worldwide

Globally, more than a third of young people have reported being a victim of cyberbullying<sup>1</sup>. Despite existing initiatives to prevent and combat it, cyberbullying remains the most reported issue to the helplines, as part of the European network of Safer Internet Centres funded by the European Commission in the last decade<sup>2</sup>. Cyberbullying is a concerning problem, especially because of the negative consequences it can have on the victims. However, determining its incidence and severity is not straightforward. Research studies of cyberbullying usually suggest estimates of cyberbullying ranging from 10% to 40% depending on how cyberbullying is defined, and on the age of the victims<sup>3</sup>. In Europe, the EU Kids Online research found that cyberbullying had increased from 8–12% from 2010 to 2014 with girls seeming to be more affected as their rates had risen to 15%<sup>4</sup>. In 2020, EU Kids Online found that in most of the European countries included in the survey less than 10% of the children reported having been a victim of cyberbullying<sup>5</sup>.

### Even one case of cyberbullying is one too many

Cyberbullying can inflict serious psychological, emotional, or social harm<sup>6</sup>, and has also been associated with both victims' and bullies' psychosocial maladjustment. Moreover, there is a range of mental health and physical health problems resulting from cyberbullying which can have a profound effect on victims<sup>3</sup>. These include embarrassment, fear, and upset, avoidance of the Internet<sup>7</sup>; being subject to social isolation, social withdrawal, low self-esteem, anxiety, and depression<sup>8</sup> as well as school absence and lower grades<sup>9-10</sup>. Furthermore, the bullying conduct can impact the victims' academic performance, and lead to emotional trauma<sup>11</sup>.

A major concern for practitioners, parents and society is the impact that cyberbullying can have on self-harm and (attempted) suicide<sup>7</sup>. There is some evidence indicating that there is a relationship between being a victim of cyberbullying and these serious consequences<sup>12</sup>. However, situations of online risk do not always result in harm. Nevertheless, when harm arises, the impact on

some children and young people can be devastating especially because online incidents have the potential to reach bigger audiences than offline bullying and because the aggression can be perpetuated online, leaving victims with the impression that they cannot "escape" from it. Furthermore, the repercussions of cyberbullying can go far beyond. For instance, a severe incident can negatively affect a class, a school, but also families and communities.

## So, what needs to improve?

### A common understanding of cyberbullying

Although cyberbullying is regarded as a serious health and growing social problem and plenty of literature on cyberbullying exists, to date there exists no universally accepted definition<sup>13</sup>. Despite this, some definitions are commonly found in academic research. For instance, Hinduja and Patchin define cyberbullying as '*Intentional and repeated harm that others inflict via a digital device*'.<sup>14</sup>

Smith et al. refer to Cyberbullying as "an aggressive, intentional act carried out by a group or individual, using electronic forms of contact, repeatedly and over time against a victim who cannot easily defend him or herself"<sup>15</sup>.

The lack of a common understanding of cyberbullying is problematic because it makes comparison across studies, countries, and regions less reliable. If cyberbullying is defined in different ways, it is also measured differently. This can help explain the considerable differences in victimisation rates reported in different studies.



*"There is lots of media awareness on the topic of cyberbullying. So, it is not so much of a taboo topic as it was before. But there is also a disadvantage of this media thing because it became like a fashion to talk about bullying. Kids call each other victims as a swear word. If I am looking at you a bit strange, then you say, "Don't bully me!" [...] It's as if every conflict became cyberbullying or bullying [...] but if every conflict is called cyberbullying, then the real cyberbullying is not being seen anymore"*

Safer Internet Centre representative

Having a common understanding of cyberbullying is not only important for academics or policymakers. As a matter of fact, this is also important for children and young people themselves, as well as for those directly working with them, for instance educators, [Safer Internet Centres](#), media outlets and all types of stakeholders actively involved in helping raise awareness and combat cyberbullying. If we want to be more successful in combating cyberbullying, a clear stance is needed with regards to what cyberbullying is and what it is not. This implies adopting a comprehensive definition of cyberbullying, revised in dialogue with relevant organisations and experts, as well as by children and young people themselves.

### Future-proof policies and increased accountability from the ICT sector are needed

Cyberbullying can take many forms including harassment, denigration, impersonation, flaming, outing and trickery, exclusion, and cyberstalking<sup>16</sup>. Notably, cyberbullying takes place on different platforms including SMS apps, photo messaging, videos, and online games, as well as a wider range of social media platforms<sup>17</sup>. Looking ahead, it is vital to timely anticipate emerging online risks as well as new manifestations of existing ones, such as cyberbullying, that may result from the next stages in the development of the Internet, such as the metaverse. By considering risks such as cyberbullying from the outset, stakeholders will be in a better position to collaborate and have the needed dialogue to build effective and future-proof responses to cyberbullying and other online risks.

*"It's the augmented reality and the virtual reality. we're very concerned because we are thinking about virtual reality and how it is going to feel like if you are harassed there; If you are in the virtual reality and you feel like it's happening to you, how is this going to impact their lives and well-being? We don't know, and we are talking about bullying that can be very severe, and with virtual reality it can be even more (...). I think this is how bullying is going to evolve in the virtual reality world and this is something we are very concerned about."*

*Digital industry representative*

### We can't combat cyberbullying without tackling offline bullying and other forms of (peer-to-peer) aggression

Although evidence suggests that (offline) bullying and cyberbullying are not separate phenomena, there are a number of features that distinguish online from offline bullying<sup>18</sup>, such as the fact that cyberbullying can potentially reach a larger audience, and cyberbullies can be "anonymous" and physically "distant" from their victims making perpetrators less aware of the potential damage inflicted on victims. The possibility to "hide behind a screen" (whether anonymous or not) can encourage the bully to go further in their aggression than they might in person. Moreover, because the (cyber) bully is not present to see and witness the reactions of the victim first-hand<sup>19</sup>, they usually lack physical and social cues which are necessary to induce empathy. This "invisibility" may make others less able to intervene and curtail cyberbullying, and thus the aggressor may manage to escape accountability for their actions.

...

*"I have heard a lot of stories of people being anonymously bullied on this kind of [platforms] because you can get away with it because your name is not on the comment"*

*Teenager, Ireland*

...

*"I think that on the Internet you can say what you want to say without filters, you can say bad things without consequences"*

*Teenager, Spain*





Despite the differences in offline and online bullying, the experts, educators, practitioners, and young people consulted throughout the KID\_ACTIONS project agreed that online bullying cannot be successfully tackled unless other forms of aggression, including offline, are also dealt with.

*“Bullying is not a new problem. It’s an age-old problem that goes back decades and decades and decades. It’s just the methods that children use to target each other have evolved and changed over time. But, actually, that kind of behaviour and its consequences have certainly been problematic for a very long time.”*

*Academic researcher, UK*

### **We need targeted responses for children in vulnerable situations and with diverse needs**

Some groups of children and young people are more likely to become victims of cyberbullying than others. For example, those with disabilities<sup>20</sup>, those with behavioural and emotional mental health conditions, and those from lower socio-economic indices<sup>21</sup>. Furthermore, the impact that cyberbullying can have at a personal level depends on many factors, such as individual characteristics (e.g., personality traits of bullies and victims, the capacity of the victim to cope with the incident), or contextual factors (e.g., the media employed to inflict harm)<sup>22 15</sup>. The (social) support available for victims (e.g., at home, school, through their peers or through trusted persons in their environment) is also crucial. Therefore, cyberbullying can impact different children in different ways depending on the mechanisms and support they have (or do not have) at their disposal and their coping strategies. Unfortunately, many children in vulnerable situations lack support networks. This negatively impacts their ability to build long-term resilience. It is, thus, vital, to provide them with additional, but also tailored support and resources to help them thrive.

*“Children who are unsupported, who don’t have a good network, looked-after children are particularly problematic because they’re in the care of the States, they often don’t have a good relationship with their foster parent or the children’s home that they are in. They tend not to make good relationships with peers, so they don’t have that support. They tend to distrust authorities, so they won’t go to the social worker or the teacher. And it means they’re very isolated in terms of support, which means they can’t build the resilience needed, systemic or individual, to cope with the bullying behaviour, and therefore the impact on them is much greater than the impact on someone who’s from a loving family”*

*Academic researcher, UK*

### **Cyberbullying is a multi-stakeholder responsibility. More cooperation and coordination across sectors are needed**

Not only schools and families have a role to play in preventing, detecting, and responding to cyberbullying. Stakeholders such as the industry, civil society, governments and children and young people also have a responsibility in helping tackle the problem. Acknowledging that cyberbullying is a societal problem that cannot be solved by schools alone is important to raise awareness about the issue and to **encourage different partners to take on responsibility and to act upon it.**

*“I think part of the problem is if schools feel targeted and blamed and responsible for these things, then they’re going to bury it, they’re going to pretend it’s not happening, they’re going to try to present to the community a better picture than the reality [...]. I think we need a much more transparent and open culture where schools can say: We have a problem with cyberbullying. We need to address it without feeling that they’re going to be kind of blamed for that, because it’s not really schools’ fault, and without the government kind of judging them against that”*

*Academic researcher, UK*

# Key Recommendations



## Educators

Cyberbullying is a widespread problem in schools and remains a high priority in the education policy agenda. Empowering all children from a young age including victims, bystanders, but also perpetrators in combating bullying is vital. **This requires a curriculum that pays enough attention to fostering emotional, psychological, and social skills of from an early age.**

*"The girl next door has TikTok [...] There is a video of her on TikTok, actually a video about her made by classmates in which she was really laughed at and that's really a different form of bullying with younger children who are really still in primary school and, yes, that wasn't really the case before."*

*Teenager, Belgium*

Education should concentrate more on fostering positive social skills as a crucial foundation for respectful interaction both on- and offline. Hence, **education at school should also aim to equip children with more empathy, tolerance, and self-confidence and to teach them to accept differences.** Supporting children to become more 'self-regulatory' as a class group in combating both online and offline bullying is also key. This should happen within broader prevention strategies to improve school climate and combat any forms of school violence, such as improving group dynamics, instead of focussing solely on digital skills.

*"If young people learn about accepting everyone and tolerance and inclusivity from a young age from elementary school, senior, junior, infants, in a playful or interactive way, I think they grow up with a more accepting mind set and they won't be prone to cyberbully online"*

*Young person, Ireland*



*"[students] need to be told that it is okay to be themselves; [...] [that] your happiness is more important than the way you look, the way you dress. You need to be yourself"*

*Teenager, Ireland*

Considering the seriousness of cyberbullying and the negative impact it can have not only on its victims but also on the class and the whole school community, it is vital that schools invest more efforts in long-term, participatory, whole-school policies to effectively prevent and cope with (cyber) bullying. **Ad-hoc reactive responses which are only triggered when serious incidents happen at school do not contribute to eradicating cyberbullying nor other forms of school peer-to-peer violence from the roots.**

More attention should be given to structural solutions as well as to prevention and the early identification of incidents so that they do not escalate beyond control. **Child-friendly, clear, and well-communicated protocols are necessary so that school personnel, children, but also families and carers know how to react when incidents take place.** School policies should not just be a "written paper" to tick the box. Instead, they should be living, child-friendly documents, ideally co-created with children and young people, their families and carers, and the school personnel.

Schools have a key role to play in the prevention, detection, and response to cyberbullying, but many times school personnel are overwhelmed with work and other responsibilities and many lack the knowledge, institutional support, or effective protocols to handle these types of incidents. Therefore, initial teacher training as well as permanent **teacher training on these issues are key so that school personnel can adequately prevent, detect, and respond to cyberbullying incidents,** even when these do not happen at school. School personnel should also be aware of applicable policy and legal framework and intervention options.



*"I think the huge challenge is that you can give a teacher a half day workshop on cyber bullying or a half day workshop on mental health, but then, they're not then going to be an expert in those areas. And they're also not necessarily going to be confident in dealing with those concerns. And, again, in our research, when we talk to teachers, they often felt that it wasn't actually their job to deal with a lot of these things. And they felt that the government were just passing the buck, so to speak, it was, you know, it was the government's tick box exercise to make them look good"*

*Academic researcher, UK*

It is vital to put children at the centre of any solutions developed to tackle cyberbullying. **Peer-to-peer based approaches can be promising strategies to raise awareness and to prevent incidents from happening** in the first place, as well as to foster a caring (school) environment.

*"I think we need kids involved. They know what they're likely to respond to, and what kinds of messages, what kinds of tools they would use. And I think we, as adults, have a tendency to decide what we think they need. And maybe we are right about what they need. But if they don't respond, then what's the point?"*

*Academic researcher, USA*

Creating spaces that are safe to share sensitive experiences and to learn to cope with them is vital. Research, however, shows that when it comes to reporting incidents such as cyberbullying, kids are less likely to tell their teachers. **It remains, therefore, crucial to strengthen teachers' abilities and strategies to react and to offer adequate support to children and young people when disclosing sensitive or harmful experiences.**

*"The biggest barrier to success with these schemes is children's trust in speaking out and reporting. You know, if they don't think anything will change, or if they don't trust their teachers or the students, if there isn't a culture of it being okay to speak out, then you can't do much to resolve bullying. [...] Because you have to do a lot of work to convince children that it's safe to speak out. And then if they do, it will be treated sensitively by staff."*

*Civil society representative, UK*

**Providing schools with concrete guidance on how to design their own anti-bullying policies is crucial.** However, incentives must also be created to support the development of these strategies at school. Research shows that when policies to combat cyberbullying are available at school, they are usually developed by the school management team without (much) involvement from teachers, pupils or parents<sup>23</sup>.

**Schools must make efforts to involve the whole school community in the development of their policies to increase their effectiveness.** A whole-school approach requires considerable time and effort, but it substantially increases the effectiveness of these policies because they are tailored to the specific needs of each school.

*"The whole school approach sees the school as part of a community rather than just being an educational institution and it does strive to involve parents who are so important to any problems, but also work with communities and work with school governors, head teachers and kind of integrate policies so that they work on a local level. The challenge with the whole school approach is that it is quite an expensive approach to implement to do it properly, not just financially expensive, but resource intensive in terms of the time and resources required to do it properly."*

*Academic researcher, UK*

## Box 1: Tips to set up a participatory anti-bullying policy at school

As outlined by Donoso & Verdoodt (2014), below are some tips to help schools develop participatory, school-based policies to combat cyberbullying:



### Fit to purpose

Policies should respond to the specific needs of schools taking into account the characteristics of the school population, for instance pupils' age, gender, socio-economic status, and the specific bullying incidents they may be confronted with (Farrington and Ttofi, 2009).



### Cyberbullying policies should be coherently embedded in a wider (antibullying) school policy

While determining their own anti-bullying policies, schools should ensure that specific policies governing cyberbullying are coherent and in line with the wider school policy.



### Encourage a positive school climate

A positive social climate within schools can act as a protective factor against bullying. School-based initiatives to reduce bullying behaviour should incorporate interventions designed to promote positive social interactions between students and teachers, and between all members of the school community (Richard, Schneider and Mallet, 2011).



### Guarantee the active participation of all relevant stakeholders

In order to secure the participation of the whole school community in the policy-making process, applying participatory approaches to the policy-making process is essential. In particular, participatory design methods can be useful in this respect.



### Work with experts

Designing an anti-cyberbullying policy requires lots of knowledge about the programs, strategies and interventions that should be implemented. This demands cooperation with experts who may be in a better position to recommend specific interventions for specific schools. Indeed, there is evidence that cooperative group work among experts significantly relates to the reduction of both bullying and victimisation. Therefore, such cooperation should be encouraged.



### Support from governments and creating the right incentives

Many school communities may not be equipped to deal with the challenge of developing an effective anti-bullying policy. This is why support from governments and guidance from experts is required, but also creating the right incentives, for instance, the stipulation of specific legal requirements and the provision of concrete guidelines to delimit the minimum content of the policy, while also allowing enough freedom for individual schools to devise policies that respond to their specific needs.

## Polymakers

A key question for polymakers is **what needs to be done to effectively combat cyberbullying and support children and young people to build the necessary resilience?** In times of constant technical and digital evolution and in a field where key players do not always work together, **it is vital to develop long-term, sustainable, and meaningful cyberbullying policies** which are tailored to the local context, but which are also fine-tuned with relevant policies and initiatives such those aimed at improving children's welfare, digital literacy and school climate.



*"After [an awareness raising] campaign that's when the work starts to address the issue, not only during the campaign. After the campaign, it requires a lot of specific work that is very tailored to the national and local levels. The reasons, or the topics or the grounds for cyberbullying are different from country to country but also within a country. So, you always have to really tailor the approaches to fit."*

*Polymaker, EU*

**A successful strategy to combat cyberbullying requires high-quality tools and resources, initial and continuous professional development for teachers and other professionals working with children outside of school, in-depth research** to remain up to date on trends and emerging (online) risks and **a bigger effort to assess the effectiveness of interventions** to combat cyberbullying.

The way we perceive and define cyberbullying shapes the policy decisions made. **Cyberbullying should not be viewed as primarily about technology, but about (digital) citizenship in a broad sense, about social relationships and ultimately about society.** We believe that any efforts to tackle cyberbullying should encompass broader themes like children and human rights, values, ethics, sustainability, social inclusion, and civic competence.



*"I think it is a mistake to consider cyberbullying as an individual isolated issue, it has to be understood as part of a broader system in which we live in [...]. It needs a more global strategy."*

*You cannot separate the online sphere from what is happening in society overall. So, of course, one of the strategies is teaching people how to use social media. But I think the issue is that although they would know how to use it well, unless you solve the racism, sexism, homophobia, etcetera, etcetera, that is behind that, the issue will not disappear"*

*Youth worker, Belgium*

The development of strategic actions to combat cyberbullying can take different directions because of competing priorities within the many actors involved (e.g., children and their families, educators, ICT companies, civil society, public sector bodies, etc.) **It is important, therefore, that policies are guided by a common vision and shared priorities.** This requires better strategic alignment of local, national, and European policies and efficient coordination of the many actors and organisations working to fight cyberbullying.



*"If we really want to make a difference, we also have to work on all these different levels, you know. This means the political level, the micro level, but also industry, social organizations and so on. We all have to cooperate to create a society that really conforms to our ideas, our values, our basic values and have an influence on young people."*

*Educator, Belgium*

Children should be at the core of any policies aimed at combatting cyberbullying and any other issues that directly affect them. This means increasing the opportunities for children and young people to actively engage in policy creation processes, as well as in the development of intervention programmes and educational materials.

It is important to permanently assess the impact of strategic decisions and monitor their implementation considering key research, ongoing technological changes but also changes in media, culture, and society. For this reason, **investing in research in this area remains a top priority.**

## Youth work/non-formal education

Many children and young people spend an important part of their time attending youth organisations, sports clubs, camps and other hobbies and activities organised outside school. Bullying and cyberbullying and other instances of peer aggression or hostility can also happen in these contexts. **It is therefore important to train youth workers to be able to prevent, detect, and adequately respond to potentially problematic or sensitive situations such as cyberbullying.** This involves learning to identify early signs of bullying and cyberbullying, and to intervene properly.

Given the young age of many youth workers, they can feel closer to children and young people's everyday lives. **If trained properly, youth workers can be key in supporting children and young people build online resilience, also because they themselves may be users of the same online platforms or may have experienced similar online experiences.** Openly talking about these issues with other young people can help children and young people strengthen their emotional, psychological, and social skills, crucial to build (online) resilience.

Working with children and young people outside school in informal circumstances, using outreach youth work and other artistic, creative or sports activities can **help provide younger generations with a safe environment where they can express themselves and their emotions without the fear of being judged (by adults).**

**Children and adolescents need to be encouraged to disclose when incidents such as cyberbullying happen.**

They need to feel empowered, but above all, they need to trust that disclosing such hurtful incidents will help. This requires the creation of both offline and online spaces (literal and figuratively) that are safe and free of judgement for discussion and sharing.

Youth workers, if trained properly, can be key players in offering safe opportunities to disclose, to offer support and to find solutions together.

Healthy relationships based on trust and respect are a backbone of healthy groups, communities, and societies. Supporting healthy relationships on various levels is key to preventing antisocial and harmful behaviour and any opportunity to work towards healthy relationships should be utilised. **Youth workers are important role models to promote prosocial, ethical behaviour and community values, key to combat online and offline forms of bullying.**





## Civil Society

**Community involvement for the prevention and response to cyberbullying is key.** Civil society including community groups, non-governmental organisations [NGOs], and other professional associations and foundations such as the EC-funded Safer Internet Centres have an important role to play in helping raise awareness, educating children, school staff and families, and in providing contact points to report cyberbullying incidents and to offer counselling and/or support to those directly or indirectly involved in cyberbullying or other online incidents.

**Young people who are victims of cyberbullying and bystanders, need to feel comfortable to share their experience and make adults aware of the cyberbullying they face or know of.** For this reason, it is important to provide and improve existing channels through which young people can share their experiences about cyberbullying and other online risks. These can include helplines and other online and offline platforms. By putting these mechanisms in place, ensuring that they are well known among the young people, and educating young people about how these channels work, the chance of early reporting and, therefore quick, efficient response to cyberbullying may increase.

*"This is something a bit different than just reporting the situation – "I have been abused, I have received the malicious content or abusive information or images"; and so on and so forth, it's a different thing to ask for support from someone that you feel comfortable with"*

*Civil society representative, Belgium*

In the EU, the 116 111 number is specially reserved for child helplines. Cyberbullying and other online problems can be addressed via this number, or directly by the EU co-funded Safer Internet Centre (SIC) helplines. We welcome the [European strategy for a better internet for kids \(BIK+\)](#) to make the support offered by SICs more visible through enhanced cooperation around 116 111 and related online services (e.g., helpline apps).

Young people are not a homogenous group. Their needs may vary depending on their personal traits, gender, socio-economic background, religion, sexual orientation, etc. Consequently, **civil society organisations should increase their efforts to provide more tailored-made resources and targeted awareness-raising campaigns to learn about and cope with cyberbullying** which address these differences. Young people in vulnerable situations can more likely become victims of cyberbullying. Thus, they should be specifically targeted in preventive efforts via tools aimed at them, their families, and their caregivers.

The involvement of young people in the development of educational resources and awareness-raising materials that target them is essential to increase the effectiveness of any policy, strategy, or digital tools to combat cyberbullying. **Resources developed for children and young people must be age-appropriate, engaging, and they should, as much as possible, involve children and young people in their design and assessment.**

**Whenever resources, materials or tools are designed to combat cyberbullying aimed at children and young people, it is important to ensure that the information provided is free and easily accessible both online and offline.** This is important to ensure that every Teenager feels comfortable to use these resources independently of their level of knowledge, education, or socio-economic status. **Offer content in different languages.** If young people come from minority groups or are of a younger age, they might not feel comfortable accessing resources which are only available in English or other majority languages, therefore it is vital to ensure that the content is provided in national languages, but also that translation is available.

**Awareness-raising campaigns that include the right people and message can have a greater impact on a younger audience.** For instance, awareness-raising activities and campaigns that involve sports personalities, influencers, social media personalities, gamers, YouTubers, etc. can help raise awareness and prevent cyberbullying. These are people that young people consider trustworthy and authority figures, but also still peers.

Civil society organisations should provide enough opportunities for their staff to be up to date on online trends and issues such as emerging online risks and on effective ways to tackle them.

Civil society organisations should incorporate recent research findings to inform strategic decisions as well as to guide the development of awareness-raising campaigns, educational resources, and interventions. **The impact and effectiveness of these tools should be monitored and assessed.**

### The media industry

**The media industry is also important because they have the responsibility of educating the public.** The media sector can take on a more active role in informing in a balanced way and educating all citizens on both the positive and negative consequences of digital technologies, **including phenomena such as cyberbullying and other online risks.**

When it comes to raising awareness about phenomena such as cyberbullying, positive role models can be impactful, especially among young people. **Increased cooperation with the media industry and public broadcasters can help involve celebrities, influencers, and other children and youth's positive role models in awareness-raising campaigns to combat cyberbullying and other types of peer-to-peer aggression.**

**Finally, media outlets and journalists should provide more balanced coverage on digital technologies such as social media or gaming platforms.** While it is highly important to inform the public about potential online risks, much media coverage concentrates on reporting their negative consequences without paying much attention to also showcasing the potential opportunities and positive outcomes that digital technologies offer.

### Academic community

**Research is fundamental to inform evidence-based policies.** The quick proliferation of online apps, services and platforms demand good quality research as well as adequate benchmarking to keep track of emerging trends and be able to anticipate potential risks and effective ways to detect and respond to them. Measuring progress requires robust quantitative and qualitative data that can capture the full magnitude, incidence, and evolution of cyberbullying and other forms of online violence against children.

**Research is needed to increase the effectiveness of interventions and resources to combat cyberbullying and other online risks.** Enhanced tools and methodologies, as well as sound assessments of interventions to combat cyberbullying are fundamental to improve existing programmes and to design new ones. **Research can contribute to a common understanding of cyberbullying** by revising and improving existing definitions and theoretical models that help us better understand its incidence, root causes and consequences. **Having a common understanding of cyberbullying will help align the work of different partners and sectors.** By sharing a common vision, the effectiveness of initiatives, educational resources, and interventions to combat cyberbullying can be enhanced.

**The research community should increase their efforts to make their findings accessible to a wide audience beyond academia.** For instance, educators, policymakers, and other practitioners working with children would benefit from having access to evidence-based recommendations and accessible, user-friendly scientific information about children's digital engagement with digital technologies and the consequences of their use. This would help them to make better informed decisions which would positively impact children's lives.



## The ICT sector

The KID\_ACTIONS project stresses the need for increased accountability from the ICT sector. In particular, we welcome the [European strategy for a better internet for kids \(BIK+\)](#)'s recommendations targeted at the industry, namely:

to consistently assess and address specific risks to children emerging from the use of their products and services

cooperate with trusted flaggers to swiftly assess and take down illegal content and act on notification of harmful content

allow academic researchers access to relevant data and information on opportunities and risks for children in full compliance with data protection rules.

In addition, many digital services are not designed to be used by children; however, they are still used by many. Moreover, although most of these services are not deliberately designed to put children at risk, research shows that the risks they pose are not accidental. "These are not "bugs" but features".

What happens is that these online platforms are designed "to maximise engagement, activity and followers – the three drivers of revenue, not to keep children safe<sup>24</sup>". **The ICT sector must design more effective, free, and age-appropriate services that promote children and young people's positive and safe engagement with digital technologies.**

*"Private companies [...] could really promote a different culture of relationships online or of interacting online, which is something they are not doing at the moment because their algorithms prioritise more likes, more comments, and so on. So even if the reactions are angry because it's a racist post and there are many comments stating that it's a racist post, [the post] is going to get more visibility and not the other way around. So, [they need to] rethink the algorithms and how visibility happens."*

*Youth worker, Belgium*

**The ICT industry must make it easier for children to protect themselves from cyberbullying and other harmful online practices.** These should include robust mechanisms to detect and respond to cyberbullying and other forms of abuse and misuse in the platforms they run, even if these services are not primarily intended for younger age groups.

*"There are children now they join Instagram when they are 10 or 11. It has become much more normalised to have a phone quicker and go on social media quicker and they are exposed to things that are not appropriate for their age. And that sort of blends into cyberbullying."*

*Young person, Ireland*

**The ICT industry can cooperate more closely with the educational sector and with civil society.** However, these partnerships should not be patronising and should take place within an ethical framework which respects children's rights, and which ensures their realisation through safe, age-appropriate solutions by design.

Because **cyberbullying and other forms of cyber aggression can occur simultaneously across different online services such as social media and gaming platforms**, it is vital that online platforms cooperate with each to devise robust, age-appropriate, cross-platform mechanisms to combat cyber aggression on the services they run.



## Families and caregivers

Digital technologies are already deeply embedded in the everyday life of children and young people. While they expose children to certain risks, digital tools also offer vast opportunities. **It is important that parents show interest in the digital activities of their children, communicate openly about potential risks and benefits of these technologies and offer guidance and support as well as regulate the usage of these tools where necessary.**<sup>25</sup>

**Parents, older siblings, and other significant adults are role models for children, also when using digital technologies.** Therefore, they should reflect on their own usage patterns and potential problematic aspects that could negatively impact children's engagement with digital technologies.

“Adults on Twitter, for instance. Or yeah indeed, the case of Trump was of course an excellent case of how somebody in power can actually also demonstrate cyber bullying behaviour and how this also has an impact on what people start to consider as normal. And indeed, also what impact does it have on his followers who are actually starting to do the same thing?”

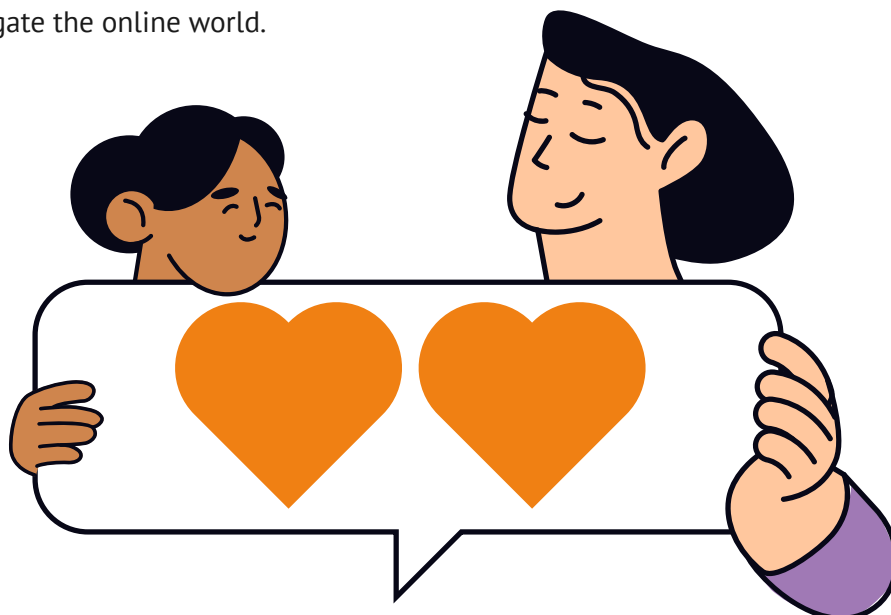
*Academic researcher, Belgium*

Parents and caregivers **must offer adequate guidance and support to children and young people, however at the same time, they need to be offered enough guidance and support, too.** It is crucial to provide information and advice to parents, and other adults dealing with children, about how children perceive, interact with, and navigate the online world.

An open and supportive dialogue between parents and children that addresses the diverse aspects of their online behaviour is vital. However, **many parents and adults do not feel prepared to have such conversations and adequately mediate their children's online experiences.** For this reason, parents' education remains key.

Particularly in families living in more precarious situations, facing various forms of vulnerability or from a socioeconomically disadvantaged background, **parents often struggle with digital skills.** In these families, the roles are sometimes reversed: children help their parents to use digital technologies. Therefore, it is important that parents receive tailored support to be able to accompany and guide their children's engagement with digital technologies. **In the case of parents from a migrant background, still unable to speak the local language, the provision of resources in additional languages is also necessary.**

Finally, **adequate outreaching strategies to successfully engage with harder-to-reach target groups are fundamental.** Providing resources via online platforms or offering school lessons after school hours may not be enough to reach all. **It is, therefore, important to promote the cooperation among organisations with different, but complementary expertise.** For instance, an organisation working to advance digital literacy can cooperate with an organisation offering support to refugee families and together offer a tailored digital literacy offer for their specific target groups.



## Children and young people

We would like to finalise this set of recommendations with those addressing children and young people themselves. As stated in the United Nations' Annual report of the Special Representative of the Secretary-General on Violence against Children, it is crucial to engage and empower children themselves. "Children need to develop their own capacities as digital citizens and learn solid values and life skills, including being responsible in their actions towards others"<sup>26</sup>. Therefore, we encourage children and young people to: **take the time to reflect on their online interactions and their possible consequences for themselves and others.**

*"I think it's important that you don't use social media as a platform to express a negative opinion about a person. So, if you have a fight with a person, you don't use social media to solve it because you can get a lot of miscommunication and people have a much faster tendency to be very hard with a person [online] and say things that they wouldn't dare to say face-to-face. That's something I think is important, that you don't abuse that."*

*Teenager, Belgium*

*"I also think that the concept of these screenshots is not very good either, in terms of communication. I think everyone here is guilty of taking screenshots of conversations and forwarding them. But you realise later that that is actually wrong. I think that that's something, that that's something you don't do. A conversation you have with someone, that is private. You shouldn't share it with other people who have nothing to do with it."*

*Teenager, Belgium*

Be aware of what bullying is and take appropriate action.

...

*"Young people need to be much more aware of what constitutes bullying and what's, you know, it can be a fine line for some children between a bit of tormenting and teasing, and, you know, kind of peer group banter"*

*Academic researcher, UK*

**Children and young people need the skills to weigh up the nature and extent of the problematic situation they may be facing online.** They must be taught to assess if the situation they are facing is a genuine problem that can impact them seriously or if the incident they are facing is something that is going to pass in a couple of days. They also then need the skills to be able to decide when it is appropriate to disclose and/or report the incident and to decide when to tell somebody else, and when to seek adult intervention.

...

*"I don't think that Instagram should be therapy or anything like that. You have to solve your problem. There are just places where you have to talk with professional people as well. Yes, Instagram just isn't a place for that."*

*Teenager, Belgium*

**Children should be taught and put in place practical coping strategies for when something that happens online upsets them.**

...

*"Learning some skills to protect their own mental wellbeing so recognising that this is making me feel bad, but I can do this to make myself feel better. Now I can go for a walk, or I can listen to my favourite song, or I can watch my favourite YouTube video, I can go and play with my best friend [...] Even turning off the phone is a bit of a skill that they you know, recognising when I should put my phone on silent, put it on the side, leave it and go back to it later"*

*Academic researcher, UK*

## Children and young people

Children must be encouraged to use the reporting tools when they see cyberbullying happening online. Also, when they are not directly involved but witness cyberbullying behaviour of others.

**Children should take on an active role in their own online safety education.**

The basis for this should be created in schools where children should be offered enough opportunities to actively participate in their school community and whenever possible to share their knowledge and personal experiences about cyberbullying and how to cope with it with peers and younger pupils. Children should also have a more active role in the development of school policies and interventions to combat cyberbullying and other forms of peer-to-peer violence both online and offline. This will help increase the uptake and effectiveness of those policies.

# Conclusions

In order to prevent, detect, and successfully respond to cyberbullying it is crucial to pay attention to the following:

Continue educating and working with school personnel so that they can adequately prevent, detect, and respond to cyberbullying incidents, even when these do not happen at school.

Children and young people need to be taught to disclose when incidents happen, but they also need to feel that disclosing such hurtful incidents will help. Therefore, educating adults and providing useful, practical resources and tools to foster a supportive relationship of trust can have a positive impact in tackling cyberbullying and helping children build resilience.

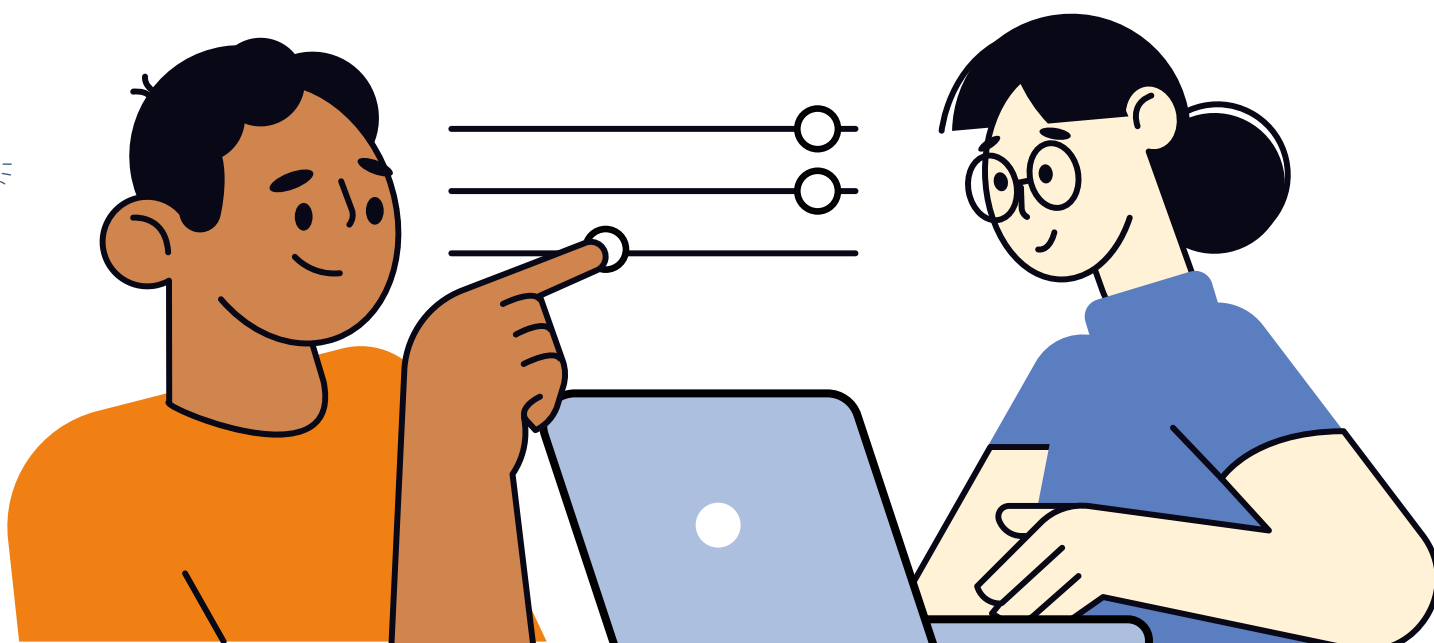
Vulnerable children require additional, tailored support because they usually encounter difficult environments, tend to be isolated and they usually lack support networks. This negatively affects their capacity to build the necessary resilience to tackle problematic situations such as cyberbullying.

Prevention efforts should start from a young age. Moreover, children must be taught to deal with adversity, to cope with their emotions and to develop self-regulation and empathy. This should happen without limiting their autonomy and ability to develop their own mechanisms to build resilience.

Peer-to-peer based- approaches to raise awareness and to foster a caring school environment should be promoted. This will help prevent incidents from happening or from escalating beyond control.

Better policies and regulation as well as increased accountability from the ICT sector remain crucial.

To date, little is known about the effectiveness of programmes and interventions to reduce (cyber) bullying. It remains fundamental to monitor and assess the effectiveness of these programmes and strategies.





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