

Cyberbullying in Plain Sight

A McAfee Connected Family Report



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Summary

In May of 2022, McAfee published its first global Connected Family Study, which revealed the online habits of adults and children. One finding leapt out from the study—the prevalence of cyberbullying. The study also called out several distinct gaps between parents and children, particularly around awareness of the problem.

As an ally of connected families, McAfee set out to answer the questions parents have about cyberbullying, such as where it occurs, the forms it takes, and whether their children are the perpetrators of cyberbullying through a detailed 10-country survey.

“McAfee’s Cyberbullying Report furthers our commitment to keeping families safe in a connected world, through understanding, education, and empowerment. As part of a ten-country survey, we spoke with parents and their children to discover what kinds of cyberbullying they’ve witnessed and what cyberbullying they’ve experienced themselves.”

Globally, families expressed their concerns about cyberbullying, especially given the way cyberbullying can lead to emotional and even physical harm.

- 60% of children said they were more worried this year about cyberbullying compared to last year.
- 74% of parents are more worried this year about their child being cyberbullied than last.

From there, we uncovered further trending topics and issues that affect families, along with several follow-on findings within each:

- **Topic One**—Cyberbullies aim racist attacks at children as young as ten.
- **Topic Two**—Despite its efforts, Meta’s social media and messaging platforms have the highest rates of cyberbullying.
- **Topic Three**—It’s who you know: Most cyberbullying comes from someone familiar.
- **Topic Four**—Who’s the cyberbully? It may be your child.
- **Global Overview**—Nuances in cyberbullying around the world.

What is cyberbullying?

Because cyberbullying can take on many meanings and dimensions, particularly as we view it globally across regions and cultures, we'll use the following definition of cyberbullying from [StopBullying.gov](https://www.stopbullying.gov) as a basis:

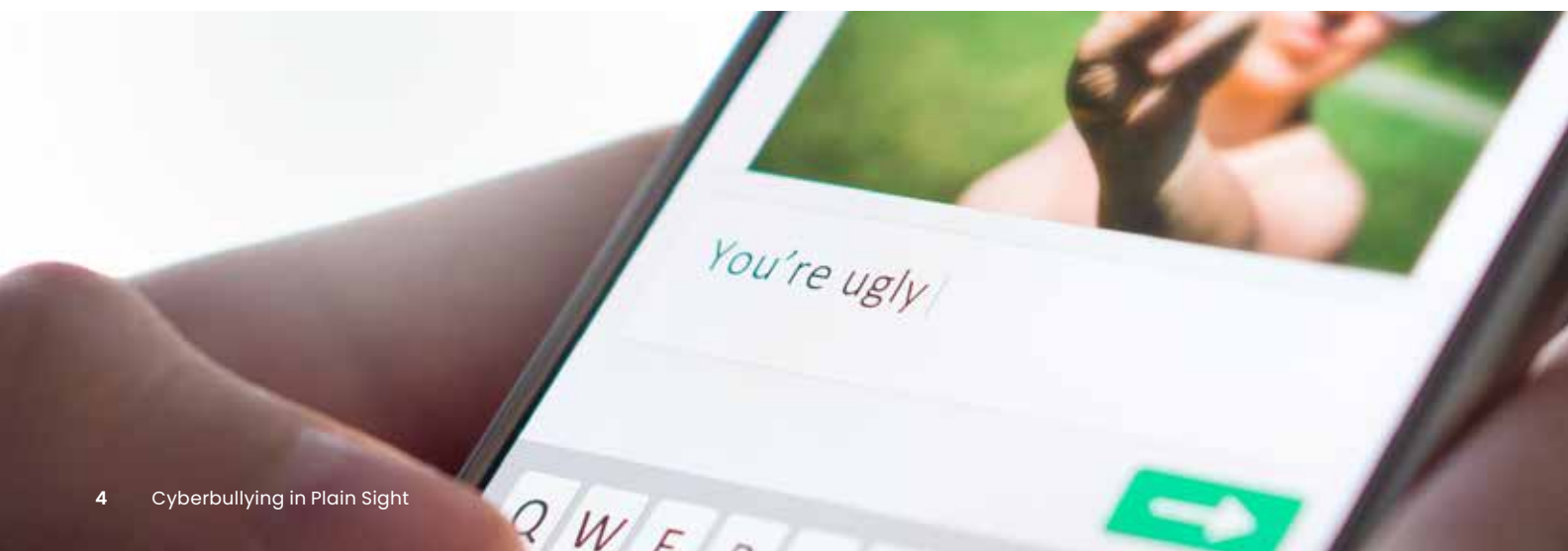
Cyberbullying is bullying that takes place over digital devices like cell phones, computers, and tablets. Cyberbullying can occur through SMS, Text, and apps, or online in social media, forums, or gaming where people can view, participate in, or share content. Cyberbullying includes sending, posting, or sharing negative, harmful, false, or mean content about someone else. It can include sharing personal or private information about someone else causing embarrassment or humiliation. Some cyberbullying crosses the line into unlawful or criminal behavior.

Our global definition expands to include specific acts of cyberbullying, such as:

- **Flaming** – Online arguments that can include personal attacks
- **Outing** – Disclosing someone's sexual orientation without their consent
- **Trolling** – Intentionally trying to instigate a conflict through antagonistic messages
- **Doxing** – Publishing private or identifying information without someone's consent

Along with other acts, including:

- Name Calling
- Spreading False Rumors
- Sending Explicit Images or Messages
- Cyberstalking, Harassment, and Physical Threats
- Exclusion from Group Chats and Conversations





Topic One

Cyberbullies aim racist attacks at children as young as ten.



Cyberbullies aim racist attacks at children as young as ten.

While a traditional view of cyberbullying may have focused on name calling and being excluded from conversations, children today are being exposed to far more serious online abuse.

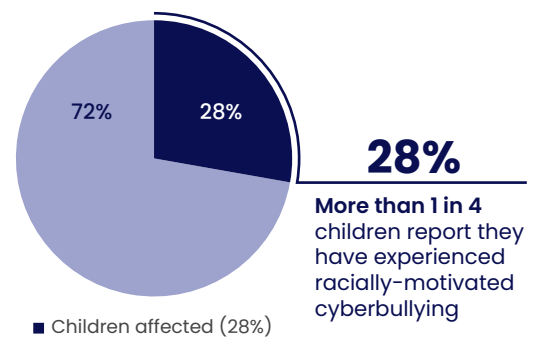
Racist cyberbullying hits high rates in the U.S. and India

Cyberbullying attacks that include name calling and the spreading of rumors remain high as ever, yet parents now report racially motivated attacks at an increasingly high rate.

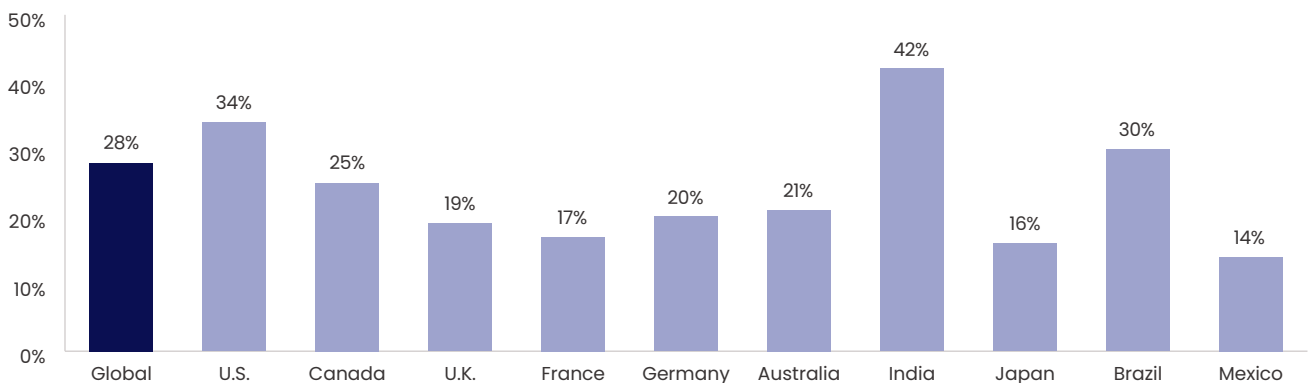
Our survey found that more than 1 in 4 (28%) children worldwide have suffered racially motivated cyberbullying, according to their parents.

This threat presents itself most prominently in the U.S. and India, with the reported rate of racially motivated cyberbullying at 34% in the U.S. and 42% in India. Meanwhile, nations such as the U.K. (19%), France (17%), Japan (16%), and Mexico (14%) report rates well below the average.

Racially-motivated cyberbullying Worldwide



Percentage of parents reporting racially-motivated cyberbullying



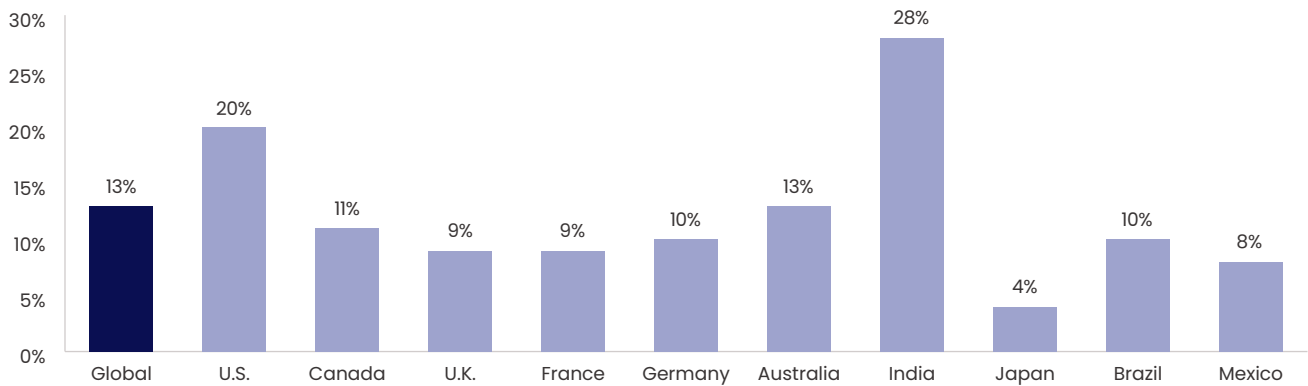
Twenty-two percent of children as young as 10 years old report being the victim of racially motivated cyberbullying. According to parents, 45% of boys aged 10 to 14 and 41% of girls 10 to 14 in India found themselves the victim of such cyberbullying. Other vulnerable groups of children include girls aged 17 to 18 (42%) in the U.S., boys 15 to 16 in Germany (33%), and boys 17 to 18 (42%) in Brazil. Of concern, Canadian children aged 10 to 14 are twice as likely to report online racism than their older counterparts.

Children report high rates of cyberbullying in its most severe forms

Cyberbullying can often include threats of real-world violence. Children say they often experience threats of physical harm, sexual harassment, and stalking online—among the most extreme forms of cyberbullying.

For 1 in every 8 children globally, cyberbullying can take the form of physical threats. This number is most elevated in the U.S. and India, where 1 child in 5 reported receiving physical threats online.

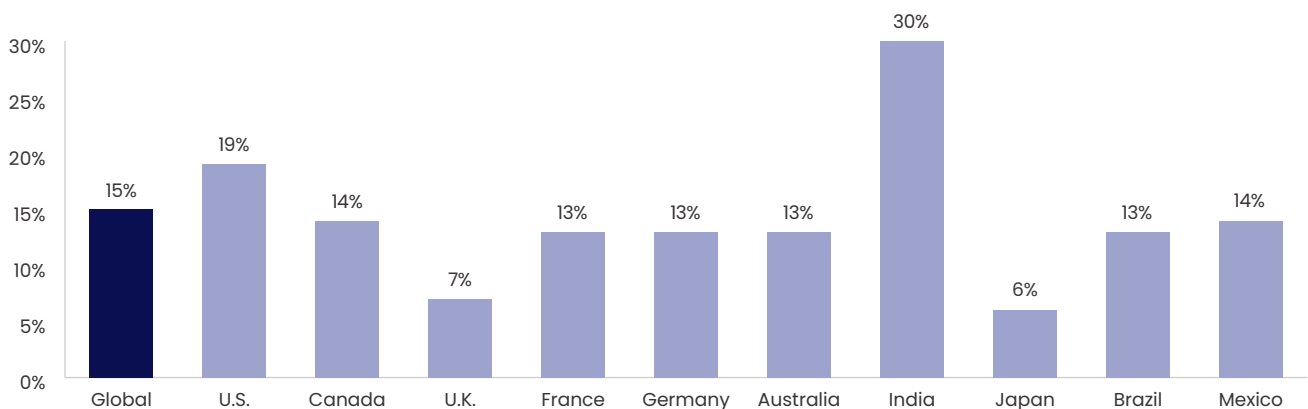
Percentage of children reporting stalking, harassment, and physical threats online



Children who reported the highest rates of receiving physical threats were boys 10 to 14 in India (30%), boys 17 to 18 in the U.S. (28%), and girls 15 to 16 in Australia (21%). Meanwhile, young boys and girls aged 10 to 14 in the U.K., France, Germany, Japan, Brazil, and Mexico reported being safest—all with percentages in the single digits.

Another severe form of cyberbullying involves sexual harassment with 1 in every 6 children reporting that they received explicit images or messages. The nations with the top rates of sexual harassment include India at 30% and the U.S. at 19%, with both Canada and Mexico at 14%.

Percentage of children reporting sexual harassment



Looking at the figures across age groups and genders, we found:

- Young girls in India see some of the highest rates internationally, with girls 10 to 14 at 32% and girls 15 to 16 at 34%. However, this figure drops significantly at ages 17 to 18, down to 21%.
- In the U.S. the primary victims are girls aged 15 to 16 at 24% and girls aged 17 to 18, also at 24%.
- In Germany, boys 15 to 16 at 22% account for the highest rate.
- Across genders and age groups in Mexico, numbers are relatively low at an average of 12%, yet that figure spikes to 25% for girls aged 17 to 18.
- Japan has the lowest rate of reported sexual harassment, with all reported figures in the low single digits.

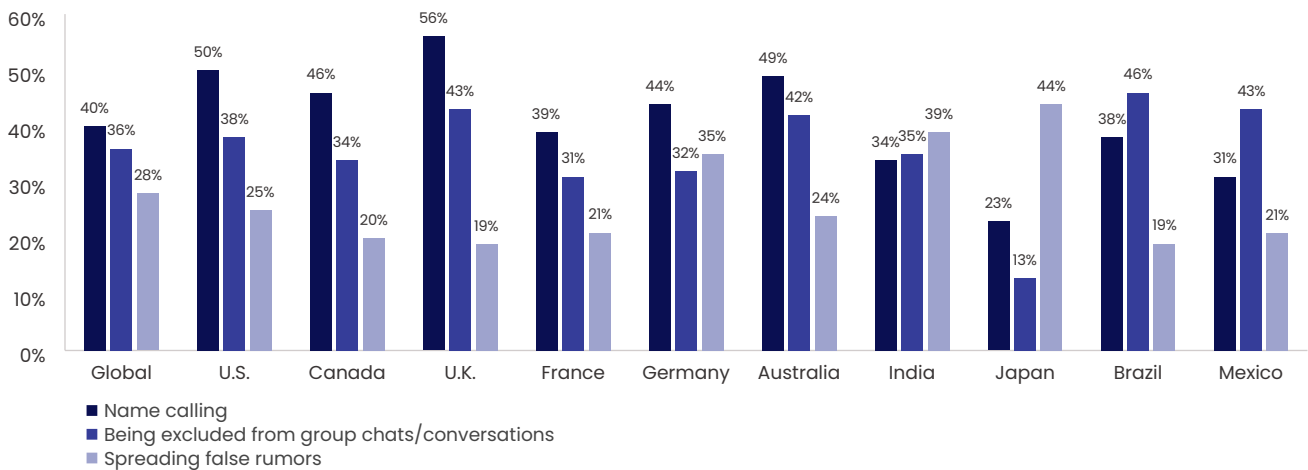
The top three forms of cyberbullying: Name calling, exclusion, and false rumors

If there's one constant in global cyberbullying, it's name calling. Name calling leads the way among all forms of cyberbullying reported by children at 40% worldwide, with 56% of children in the U.K. and 50% of children in the U.S. experiencing it online. This figure is high across all nations, including Japan (23%), which has otherwise shown low reported rates of cyberbullying.

However, the *absence of communication* is the second-highest form, where exclusion from group chats and conversations comes in at 36% globally and reaching as high as 49% in Australia and 43% in the U.K. and Mexico. With all nations registering a rate of at least 30%, Japan once again stands as the outlier at 13%.

The spreading of false rumors rounds out the top three forms, which was reported by 28% of children globally. Here, Japan stands out as the leader in this reported form of cyberbullying at 44%, followed by Germany at 35% and India at 39%.

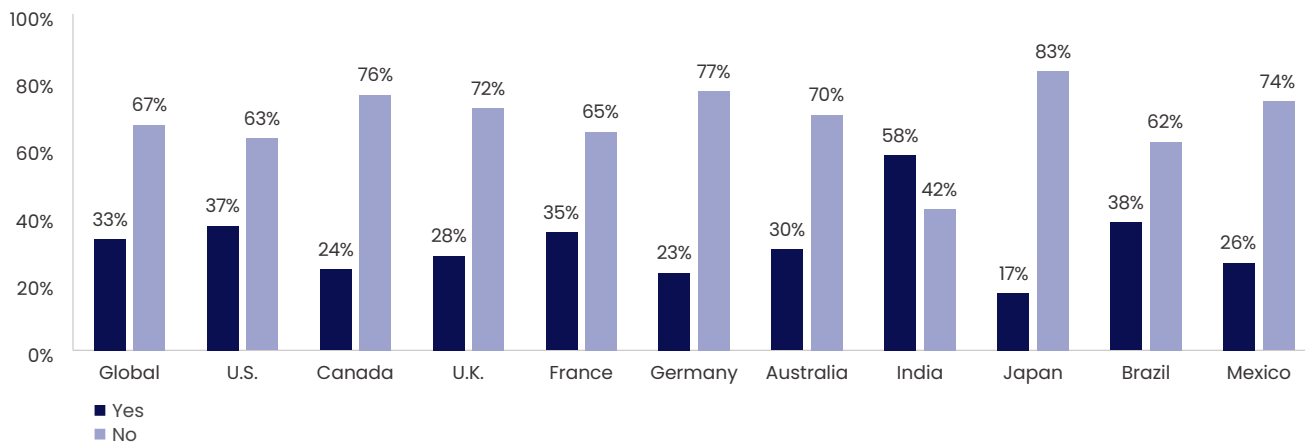
Cyberbullying activities



Millions of children delete their social media accounts to avoid cyberbullying

Faced with serious threats online from a young age, more than one in three children (34%) worldwide say that they have deleted an account to avoid bullying. At the high end of that range is India at 58%, followed by Brazil at 38%, and the U.S. at 37%. Falling below the average in noteworthy fashion are Mexico at 26%, Canada at 24%, Germany at 23%, and Japan at 17%.

Children who say they have deleted a social media account to avoid cyberbullying



Cyberbullying can often include threats of real-world violence.





Topic Two

Despite its efforts, Meta's social media and messaging platforms have the highest rates of cyberbullying.



Despite its efforts, Meta’s social media and messaging platforms have the highest rates of cyberbullying.

The world’s largest social media platforms continue to face some of the largest challenges combatting cyberbullying.

Reported cyberbullying on Meta’s platforms leads all others in their category

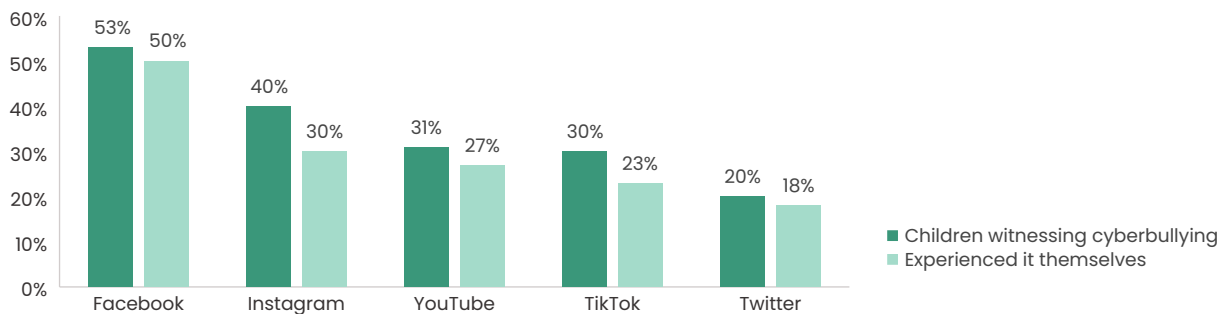
Though Meta has put together comprehensive resources for family safety on [Instagram](#), [Facebook](#), [WhatsApp](#), and Facebook Messenger and taken steps to put additional protections and features in place, cyberbullying persists on Meta properties at the highest rates.

Specifically, children say cyberbullying occurs more than twice as often when comparing social media platforms like Meta’s Facebook to Twitter—and more than four times the rate when comparing Meta’s messaging app WhatsApp to Discord.

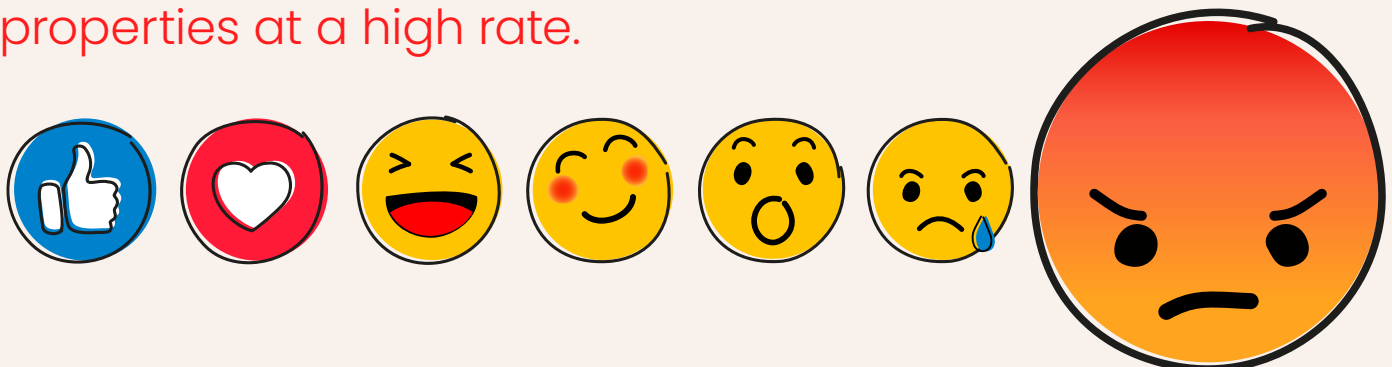
Facebook has the highest rate of reported cyberbullying activity

Facebook leads the way with the highest rate of children both witnessing (53%) and experiencing (50%) cyberbullying worldwide, with Instagram coming in second where children report witnessing cyberbullying at 40% and experiencing cyberbullying at 30%.

Cyberbullying on social media platforms



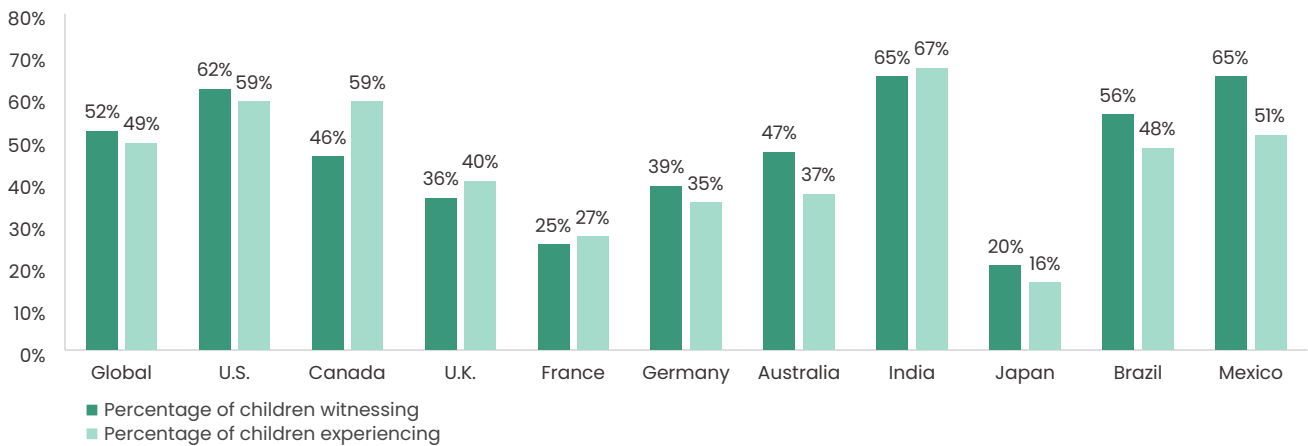
Cyberbullying persists on Meta properties at a high rate.



When viewed on a nation-by-nation basis, India holds the highest reported rates of witnessing (65%) and experiencing (67%) cyberbullying on Facebook. It is worth noting that this is one nation where TikTok remains banned due to security concerns, perhaps driving more children to Facebook and possibly influencing these outsized rates.

The U.S. and Mexico were not far behind, with children in the U.S. reporting high rates of witnessing (62%) and experiencing (59%) cyberbullying on Facebook, and Mexico at 65% and 51%. Germany and the U.K. fell just below the global average, while trending far lower were France and Japan in both witnessing and experiencing cyberbullying.

Cyberbullying on Facebook, nation-by-nation

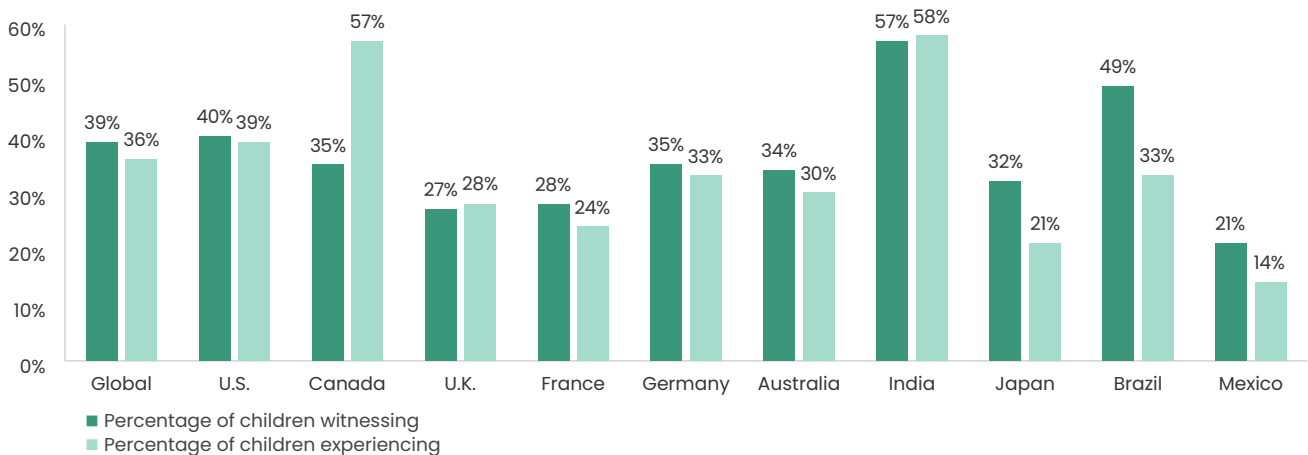


With cyberbullying on Instagram, looks are everything

With regards to Instagram, figures from India and Brazil drive the global average upwards with the highest rates of reported cyberbullying on that platform. Additionally, these countries both report a high incidence of cyberbullying based on physical appearance (52% Brazil) and race (42% India), which could contribute to their high rate of cyberbullying on this image and video-based platform.

Likewise, the high rates of cyberbullying based on clothing and attire in India (41%) and Brazil (38%) could contribute to these rates on Instagram.

Cyberbullying on Instagram, nation-by-nation

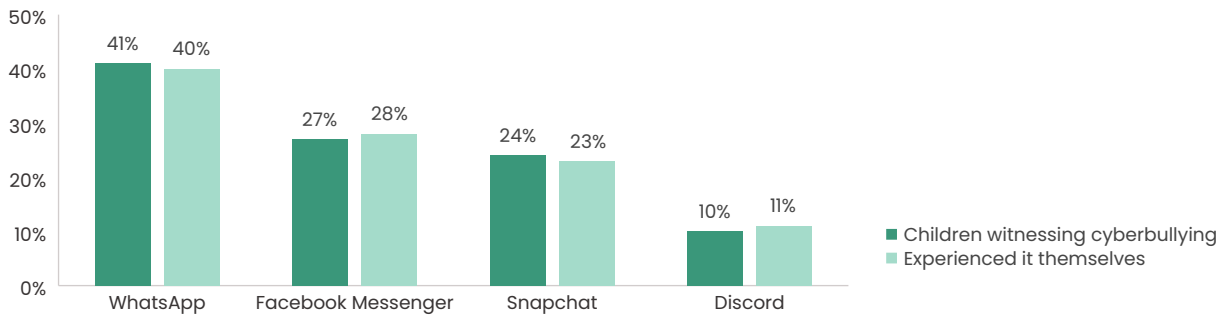


Reported cyberbullying on Meta’s messaging platforms also lead all others

Meta’s messaging platforms—WhatsApp and Facebook Messenger—far outpace other messaging platforms in reported cyberbullying.

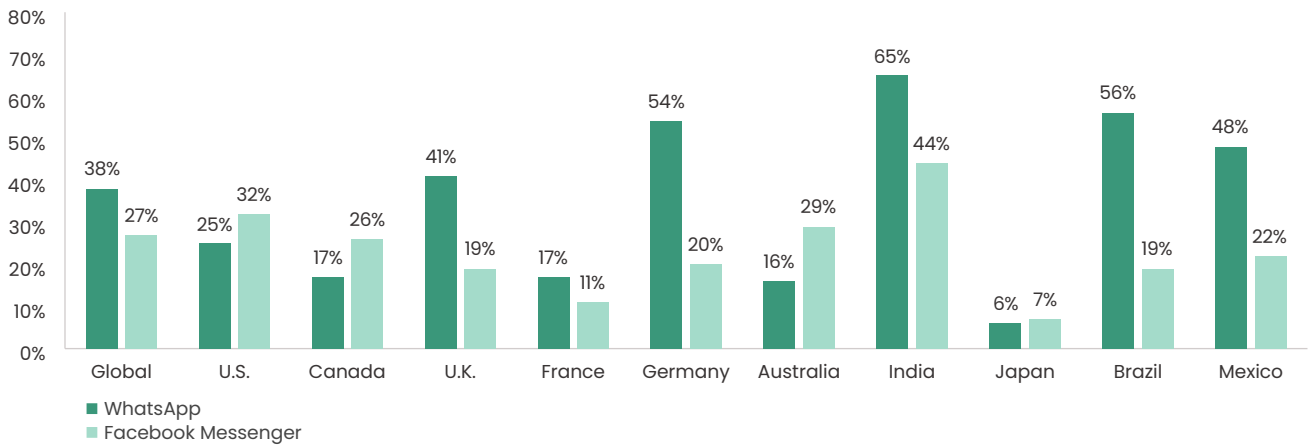
Whether witnessed or experienced themselves, children indicate that cyberbullying can occur at up to four times the rate on WhatsApp than other messaging platforms, such as Discord, a popular chat and voice app for gamers and online communities.

Cyberbullying on messaging platforms



WhatsApp leads all other messaging platforms in reported cyberbullying. However, there are exceptions to this global trend such as in the U.S. and Japan where children say they witness more cyberbullying on Facebook Messenger than on WhatsApp.

Cyberbullying witnessed on Meta’s messenger apps (WhatsApp and Facebook Messenger)





Topic Three

It's who you know: Most cyberbullying comes from someone familiar.



It's who you know: Most cyberbullying comes from someone familiar.

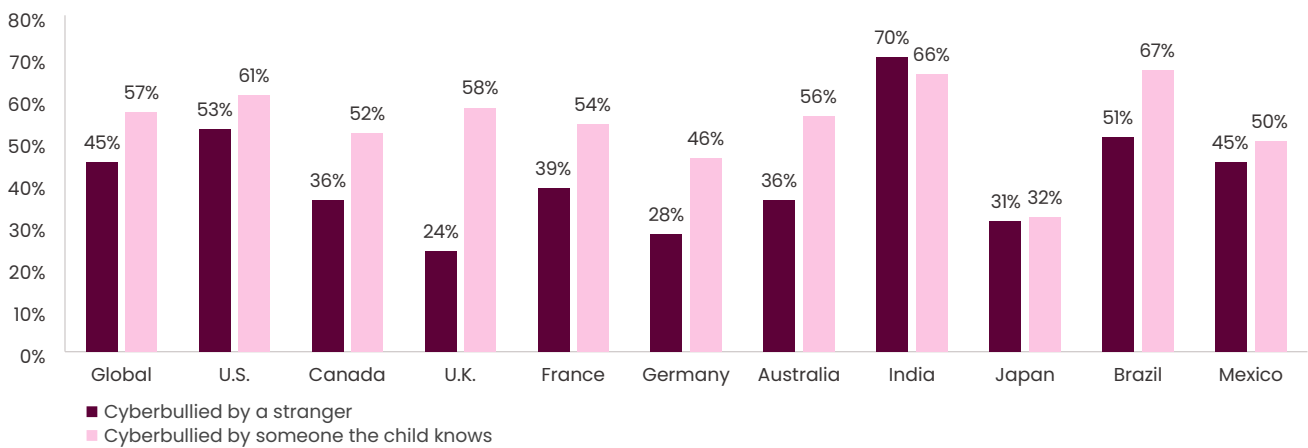
Most cyberbullying comes from someone the victim knows, and who often knows personal details including their name, where they live and where they go to school.

Cyberbullying by a known attacker: Most likely in Australia and European nations

Worldwide, 57% of children said they have been cyberbullied by a person they know, compared to 45% of people they identified as strangers, a 12% difference. Brazil leads the way with 67% of cyberbullying from someone the victim knows, closely followed by India at 66%.

The gap between being cyberbullied by a person a child knows versus a stranger was most pronounced in nations like the U.K. where the difference was 34%, along with Germany (28%), and Australia (20%). The U.S. (8%) and Mexico (5%) reported far narrower margins.

Cyberbullying by strangers and by people the victim knows



Only one nation, India, reported more cyberbullying at the hands of strangers (70%) than by someone the child knows (66%). Additionally, only Japan reported rates that were nearly equal—an almost even split at 31% and 32%, respectively.

Your child's cyberbully may have a secret identity

Globally, 46% of children say that they were bullied by a stranger—a term which begs definition before we explore it further.

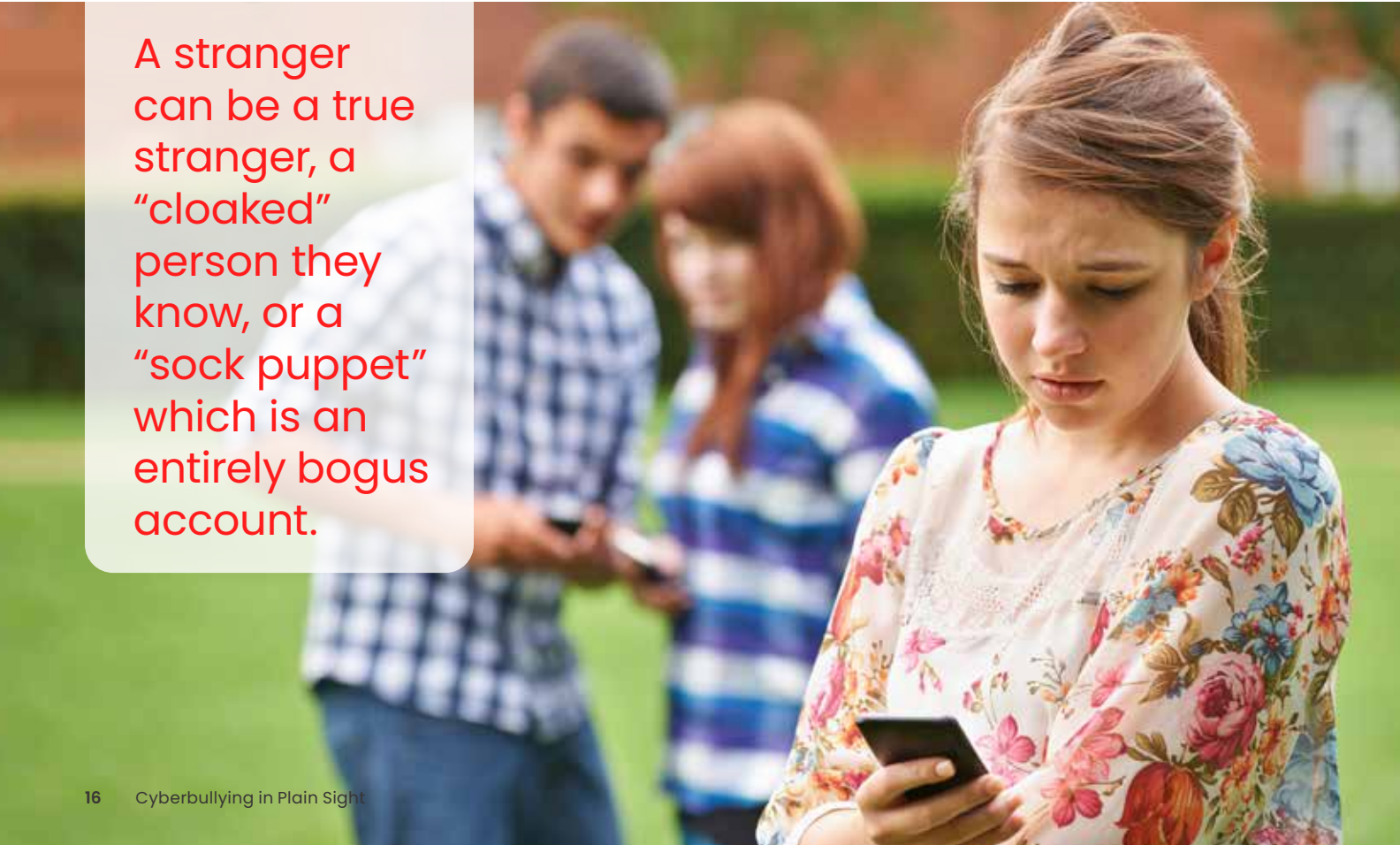
Given the way social media, messaging apps, and online forums work, not all platforms require users to use a verified real name in their profile. For example, both Instagram and Discord allow users to create screen names.

Likewise, a savvy WhatsApp user can create accounts with spoofed phone numbers or numbers associated with so-called temporary “burner phones.” And many online discussion groups similarly allow users to create accounts with a screen name that may not reflect their real name.

As a result, a “stranger” online can take on several forms. A stranger can be a:

- **True stranger**, such as a person using a real name and real profile on Facebook that is unknown to the victim.
- **“Cloaked”** person they already know, hiding behind a screen name that does not identify them on a service like Discord or an online gaming service like the PlayStation Network or Xbox Live.
- **“Sock puppet,”** meaning an entirely bogus account that a cyberbully uses to harass their victim. Cyberbullies also may use several sock puppets to harass a victim, making the victim think several people are attacking them, when in fact just one person orchestrates all the bullying.

In all, a “stranger” may be exactly that—yet it may also be someone the victim knows, except that they are hiding behind a screen name or bogus account.



A stranger can be a true stranger, a “cloaked” person they know, or a “sock puppet” which is an entirely bogus account.

Where children encounter strangers and known cyberbullies alike

With that definition in mind, we can then consider a few scenarios where children might encounter cyberbullying from strangers and people they know online:

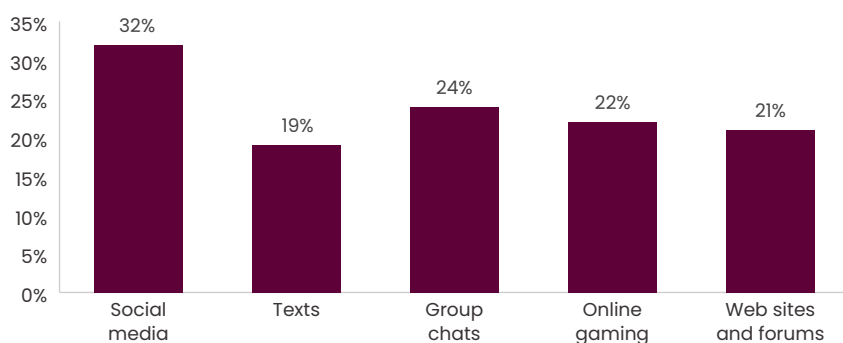
- People they know on social media, along with others they know by name via text, instant messaging, and group chats.
- True strangers on social media, such as a Facebook group dedicated to a favorite sports team, pastime, or interest.
- Cloaked people on Discord servers or website forums where gamers gather. Similarly, this could also occur during in-game chats in multiplayer online games.
- Sock puppets in a website forum that the victim frequents, or sock puppets created on a social media platform.

Given the way accounts are set up and structured across social media, texting, and other online accounts, some additional broader observations can be made:

- Social media and texts largely expose children to people they know (known profiles and cellphone numbers).
- Group chats on WhatsApp and Discord can include a mix of known people and strangers (known cellphone numbers and people using screen names).
- Online games, along with websites and forums, expose children to more strangers and people hidden behind screen names.

Understanding this mix of strangers and people children know puts cyberbullying into further context, particularly when looking at the places where children say it occurs.

Where children say they're cyberbullied



Taken together, this data illustrates where children said they're getting cyberbullied while also providing some higher-level insights into who is doing it to them—whether that's a person they know or a stranger—depending on the platform where it occurs.



Topic Four

Who's the cyberbully?
It may be your child.



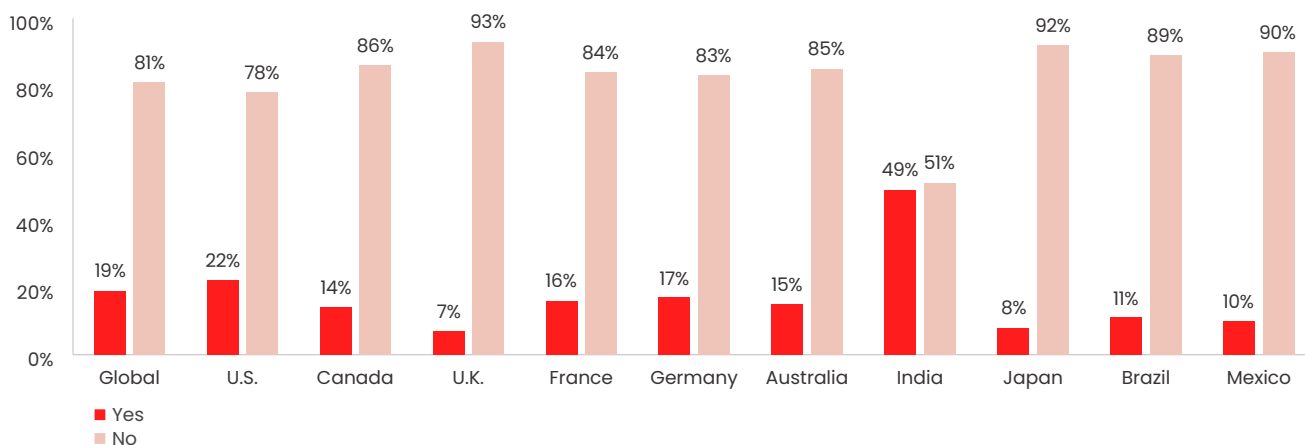
Who's the cyberbully? It may be your child.

We saw how roughly 3 in every 4 parents are more concerned about cyberbullying this year than last. More than that, nearly 6 in 10 are worried that their children could be cyberbullies themselves. Based on the responses of children, some of these parental worries may have merit.

Parental concern ranks highest in India, Japan, Brazil, and Mexico—yet in the U.S. and Europe, parents remain more concerned that their children could be victims of cyberbullying rather than the perpetrators.

For starters, children by and large said that they have not cyberbullied someone else, with the international average at 81%. Children in the U.K. said they were the least likely to have cyberbullied someone at 93%, followed by Japan at 92%, Mexico at 90%, and Brazil at 89%.

"Have you ever cyberbullied anyone?"



Only two nations checked in below the 81% international average—the U.S. slightly lower at 78% and India markedly lower at 51%.



More than half of children worldwide (53%) admitted to committing one or more of acts of cyberbullying.

More than half of children have cyberbullied, yet don't realize it

When asked for specifics, more than half of children worldwide (53%) admitted to committing one or more of acts of cyberbullying—perhaps indicating that their definition of cyberbullying differs from the clinically accepted definition, which we outlined earlier in this report.

Top acts that children reported include:

- Making a joke at someone else's expense, 22%
- Name calling, 18%
- Excluding someone from a chat or conversation, 15%
- "Burned" or teased someone, 12%

Of note, while not occurring at a high rate, children also reported taking part in some of the more severe forms of cyberbullying, including:

- Creating accounts ("sock puppets") to interact with someone as a stranger, 9%
- Knowingly spread false information about others, 8%
- Shared information about someone that you knew was private or secret, 8%
- Threatened someone online, 5%

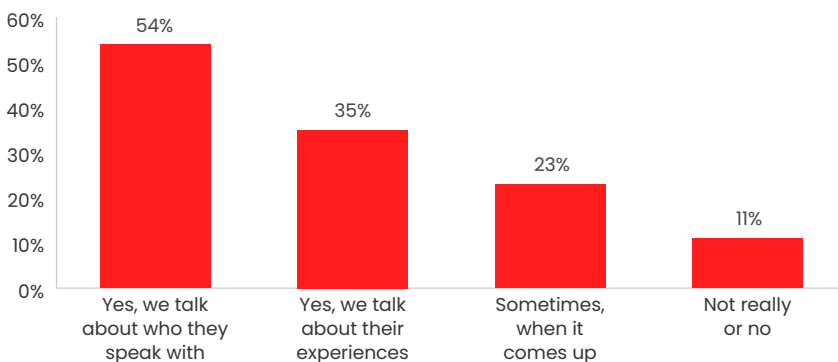
Parents seek to educate themselves about cyberbullying, but fail to pass it on

A full 80% of parents said they are educating themselves about cyberbullying, which strongly aligns with their increased level of concern about cyberbullying we mentioned earlier at 74%.

From there, our survey asked parents if they hold ongoing conversations about cyberbullying with their children. These figures fell far short of the 80% rate that parents said they are educating themselves—indicating that this information doesn't always reach their children, perhaps because parents simply haven't educated themselves on the topic or are even aware of it

"Do you talk with your children about cyberbullying on an ongoing basis?"

Percentage of parents, worldwide



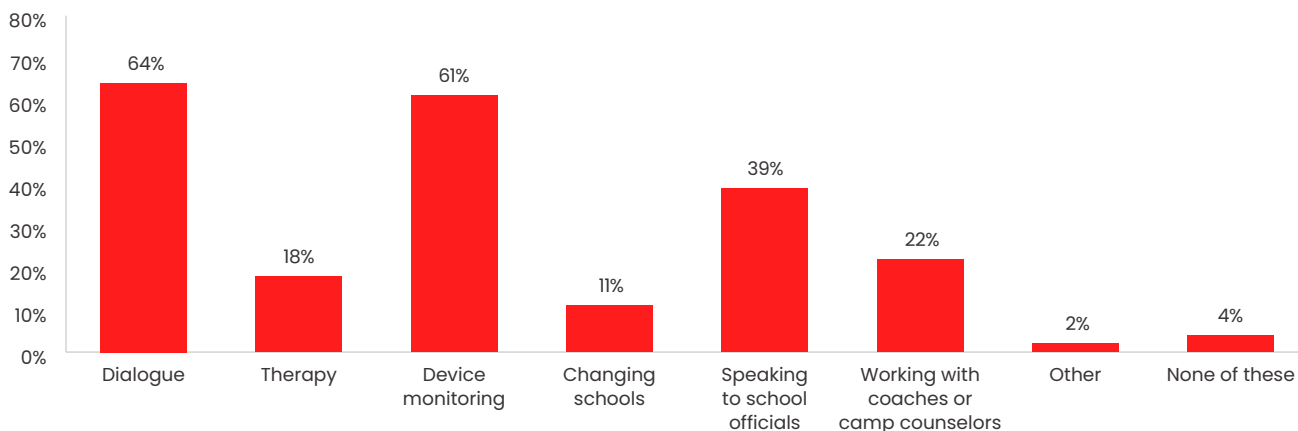
Dialogue remains a top form of support, however, some parents turn to therapy

Our survey uncovered an encouraging figure where 64% of parents worldwide say that they use dialogue as a primary form of support. Close behind, 61% of parents said they monitor their children’s devices to help spot and address cyberbullying. Parents in Brazil (89%) and Mexico (85%) make the most use of dialogue—and make the most use of device monitoring at 70% and 86%, respectively.

Less frequently, parents will reach out to school officials (39%) and camp counsellors (22%). In countries like the U.S. (29%) and India (31%), parents will take advantage of therapy to support their children.

Another encouraging sign—only 4% of parents said they take no measures to educate and support their children.

"How do you support your child?"





Global Overview

Nuances in cyberbullying around the world.



Nuances in cyberbullying around the world.

The face of cyberbullying appears one way here, and another way there. Regional and cultural backdrops give it a distinctive feel when viewed across nations, where polarized politics, racial relations, and different traditions in parent-child relationships shape and re-shape the forms of cyberbullying that children see.

Looking beyond global trends, further insights show how the same problem can look quite differently to parents and children in different parts of the world.



Cyberbullying manifests differently across the globe, as it reflects the regional and cultural contexts in the nations where it occurs.



United States

Despite some of the most engaged parents, children in the U.S. experience among the highest rates of cyberbullying in its most extreme forms, such as sexual harassment, compromised privacy, and personal attacks.



India

Cyberbullying reaches alarming highs as more than 1 in 3 children face cyber racism, sexual harassment, and threats of physical harm as early as at the age of 10—making India the #1 nation for reported cyberbullying in the world.



United Kingdom, France, Germany

Parents in Europe educate themselves about cyberbullying at a lower rate than other parents and follow up on it at lower rates as well. Meanwhile, European children have a poor understanding of what cyberbullying truly is, while they report outsized rates of cyberbullying on platforms like Snapchat and WhatsApp.



Canada

Canadian children experience cyberbullying largely on par with global rates—yet their parents act on it less often than other parents, and Canadian children are the least likely to seek help when it happens to them.



Australia

Australian cyberbullying rates dropped significantly since our last report, yet Snapchat stands out as a primary platform for cyberbullying, more than anywhere else in the world. Meanwhile, Australian parents want technology companies to do more to protect their children.



Japan

Despite the world's lowest rates of reported cyberbullying, Japanese children remain highly concerned that it can happen to them—while of all the platforms they use, Twitter proves the most problematic.



Brazil

Concerns about cyberbullying are among the highest in Brazil. And while Brazilian parents rely heavily on dialogue to educate and support their children, these conversations appear largely one-sided as nearly 1/3 of children say that they have hidden cyberbullying from their parents at some time or other.



Mexico

Parents and children in Mexico express some of the world's greatest concern about cyberbullying, yet children in Mexico experience it at some of the lowest rates worldwide—although group bullying and attacks on a child's appearance remain high.



Conclusion

The facts confirm your feelings.



Conclusion: The facts confirm your feelings.

Our findings reflect the concerns of parents and children alike—cyberbullying remains a pervasive and potentially harmful fact of life online, particularly as racism and other severe forms of cyberbullying take rise.

We've seen how cyberbullying has pressured children into deleting their social media accounts, how the top platforms continue to provide the top avenues for cyberbullies, and how cyberbullying has become increasingly anonymous on several platforms. Moreover, we also uncovered the startling fact that many children take part in cyberbullying, often without realizing their behavior for what it is. Meanwhile, many parents struggle to keep up with it all.

While online platforms continue to roll out improved anti-bullying measures and families have access to educational resources that can help prevent cyberbullying, the problem persists. Without question, cyberbullying endures as a persistent growing pain that the still relatively young internet has yet to shake.

The solution is arguably just as complex as the factors that give cyberbullying its shape—cultural, regional, technological, societal, even governmental. Addressing one factor alone won't curb it. Significantly curtailing cyberbullying for an internet that's far safer than it is today requires addressing those factors in concert.

While we recognize that tall order for what it is, and as a leader in online protection, we remain committed to it.

With these findings, and continued research to come, our aim is to further an understanding of cyberbullying for all—whether that's educators, technology innovators, policymakers, and of course parents. With this understanding, programs, platforms, and legislation can put protections in place that still allow for companies to innovate and create platforms that people love to use. Safely and securely.

In that same spirit, our blog offers parents and families a terrific resource when they have questions, in addition to further resources about online protection and ways you can keep your children safe. Our aim is to help you get thinking about what's best for your family and the steps you can take to see it through so that you can make everyone's time online safer and more enjoyable.

Visit us any time!

<https://www.mcafee.com/blogs/>



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Survey methodology

In July 2022 McAfee LLC conducted a survey to more deeply understand the experiences connected families have had with cyberbullying—as individuals and as a family. This entailed a global survey of parents and children, with children answering alongside their parents.

Parents and their children of ages 10 to 18 were surveyed together, with parents answering first and then bringing their children in to consent and answer.

These findings represent connected families not collections of individuals.

The research was conducted between June 15–July 5, 2022 by MSI-ACI via an online questionnaire to 11,687 parents and their children from 10 countries.

About McAfee

McAfee is a worldwide leader in online protection. We're focused on protecting people, not devices. Our solutions adapt to our customers' needs and empower them to confidently experience life online through integrated, easy-to-use solutions.



For more information about
online protection, visit us at
mcafee.com/blogs