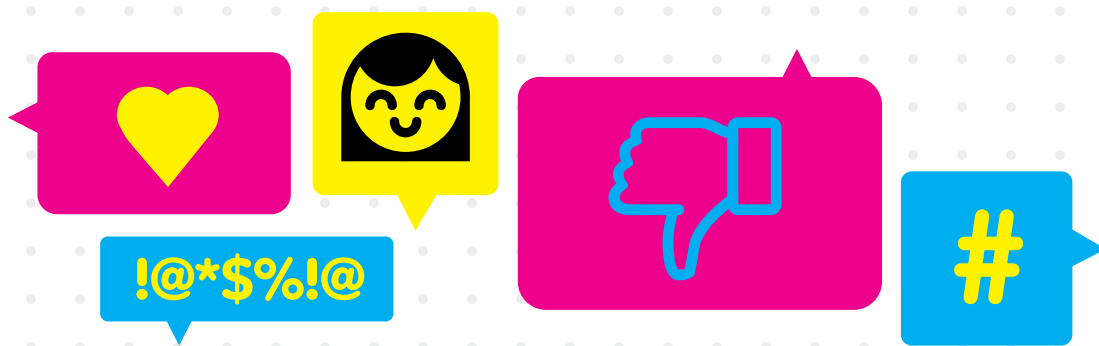


# TWEEN CYBERBULLYING IN 2020

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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**CYBERBULLYING**  
RESEARCH CENTER



[cyberbullying.org](http://cyberbullying.org)

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In recent years, cyberbullying has become an all-too familiar social problem that many families, communities, schools, and other youth-serving organizations have had to face head-on.

Defined as “willful and repeated harm inflicted through the use of computers, cell phones, and other electronic devices,” cyberbullying often appears as hurtful social media posts, mean statements made while gaming, hate accounts created to embarrass, threaten, or abuse, or similar forms of cruelty and meanness online. Over the last fifteen years, research on teens (typically middle and high schoolers) has shown that those who have been cyberbullied – as well as those who cyberbully others – are more likely to struggle academically, emotionally, psychologically, and even behaviorally.

With all of the progress that has been made to better understand cyberbullying among *teens*, very little is known about the behaviors as they occur among *tweens*: that momentous developmental stage that occurs roughly between the ages of 9 and 12 years old. To our knowledge, no previous research has explored cyberbullying among tweens across the United States. We do know that young children’s access to and ownership of mobile devices is on the increase, and the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 may have elevated these numbers even more because of stay-at-home orders and online learning across the United States. It stands to reason, then, that cyberbullying is likely occurring among tweens, and obtaining an accurate picture of its scope can help move us toward more informed responses.

The current study explored bullying and cyberbullying behaviors among a probability-based representative national sample of 1,034 tweens in the United States.

## KEY FINDINGS

- 1. One in five tweens has been cyberbullied, cyberbullied others, or seen cyberbullying.**
- 2. Cyberbullying affects tweens in a variety of ways.**
- 3. Tweens use a variety of strategies to stop cyberbullying.**
- 4. Nine out of ten tweens use social media and gaming apps.**
- 5. Many tweens have also experienced bullying at school.**
- 6. Tweens are helpers.**

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## MAIN TAKEAWAYS

**The study confirmed what we already suspected: too many tweens are experiencing bullying at school and online.**

Among the 1,034 tweens who responded to our survey, 816 (nearly 80%) had some exposure to bullying in all its forms: as a target, aggressor, or witness. Fifty-seven percent had been targeted in one environment or another. Half of tweens said they had been bullied at school while 15% had been cyberbullied. This latter finding is important since no previous study that we are aware of has collected national data on the cyberbullying experiences of tweens. Of note, more than two-thirds of tweens who had been cyberbullied said it negatively impacted their feelings about themselves. Almost one-third said it affected their friendships. Finally, 13.1% said it affected their physical health, while 6.5% shared it influenced their schoolwork. It is reassuring to observe that most tweens who had been cyberbullied implemented various strategies to get it stopped. Some of those were technical (blocking or reporting the aggressor) while others were social (telling a parent or reporting it to their school).

Tweens were also likely to help others when they saw bullying at school or online. When it comes to cyberbullying, nearly two-thirds of tweens said they tried to help someone who was being mistreated online (30% said they had done that many times). That said, some tweens were reluctant to intervene, most often because they didn't want to make it worse or didn't know what to say. About a quarter of the time they didn't know how to report the cyberbullying to the site, app, or game. Many tweens reported acts of kindness towards others online, including giving gifts to strangers in online games or providing assistance to new players. Overall, results from this research show

that most tweens are kind and willing to help when they see abuse online, if they know what to do and how to do it.

Finally, the majority of tweens have devices of their own and nine out of ten (90%) have used one or more of the most popular social media and gaming apps in the last year. Smartphone ownership explodes in the tween years. About twenty-one percent of nine-year-olds have their own smartphone compared to 68% of 12-year-olds. Two-thirds of tweens have used YouTube in the last year, while almost half have played Minecraft and Roblox.

In short, tweens are online and many are experiencing cyberbullying. Parents have a role to play in helping their children navigate these difficult situations. The most important step for parents to take when their child is cyberbullied is to make sure they are safe, and to convey unconditional support. Parents must demonstrate to their children through words and actions that they both desire the same end result: that the cyberbullying stop and that life does not become even more difficult. This can be accomplished by working together to arrive at a mutually agreed upon course of action. Youth are often afraid that parents will only make matters worse (by calling the parent of the aggressor or setting up a meeting with the school principal). It is so critical to validate their voice and perspective, instead of being dismissive of their concerns. Targets of cyberbullying (and those who observe it) must know for sure that the adults they tell will intervene rationally and logically, and—most importantly—not make the situation worse.

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Furthermore, it is on the shoulders of adults rather than children to seek to cultivate and maintain open, candid lines of communication. This will not happen overnight; it will take time, patience, and much intentionality. However, within such an environment, youth will realize that the parents are there to assist them should they ever experience anything upsetting in their interactions or relationships online or at school. Here, adults can also strategically share strategies and general wisdom to help children navigate their increasingly complex connected world.

While the results discussed here are an important step in the right direction in terms of illuminating some of the school and online experiences of tweens, more research is warranted. There are multiple rigorous studies conducted every few years on the bullying

and cyberbullying experiences of older adolescents across the United States, but none that we are aware of on tweens outside of the work that Cartoon Network did in 2017 in consultation with the Making Caring Common project (MCC) at the Harvard Graduate School of Education, and designed by VJR Consulting, and the work done in 2020 (featured in this report). Middle school samples, which may include some 11- or 12-year-olds, have been studied in specific schools in various regions of the United States, but there has been no systematic effort to study the experiences and behaviors of tweens as a distinct group using a national sample. Cartoon Network is doing its part to illuminate and understand the experiences of this vastly understudied population, but much more work must be done.