

# Bullying can leave an indelible mark on children

Recently, I visited friends of mine whose 15-year-old son had suddenly refused to return to school and with all the probing, would not give a reason why. He had gone silent and was visibly anxious and terrified to go to school. When I probed gently, surprisingly, he asked for my phone and showed me a fake Instagram account with his real name and an altered image of him.

This account had been created by a student from his school, and it was used to post hurtful, humiliating comments and spread malicious rumours about several students. The bully relentlessly and anonymously continued to send posts. The boy had been attacked by some students

report shows that among these young users, 20 percent have suffered cyberbullying, 33 percent cyberstalking, and 11 percent harassment. While digital access offers opportunity, it also exposes children to real vulnerability.

Children are not simply visiting the online world; they are growing up in it. For many, it is the space where they learn, explore interests, and build friendships. This means harm inflicted on them travels with them to school, home, and everywhere in between. The emotional toll can be profound, affecting confidence, school performance, and mental well-being long after the device is switched off.

Uganda's Computer Misuse (Amendment) Act, 2022 offers stronger protections by criminalising the unauthorised sharing of a child's images or data and addressing malicious communication and impersonation. These legal measures are critical, but they are only one part of the solution. Many children hesitate to report abuse, fearing they will be blamed or told to "log off." But disconnecting can feel like losing their social community. This silence allows harm to deepen.

Creating a safer online world requires shared responsibility. Telecom companies, government agencies, schools, civil society, parents, and communities must all play a role. Digital literacy for parents and caregivers is essential so that they understand the platforms children use and can guide them with empathy. Reporting systems also need to be more accessible, ensuring online harassment is treated with the same seriousness as offline abuse.

Schools can support children by integrating online safety into their programmes, creating spaces for open dialogue, and strengthening counselling services. The private sector must continue investing in child-protection tools, safety-by-design solutions, and awareness campaigns.

As World Children's Month comes to a close, we are reminded that true protection means safeguarding every environment children occupy including digital ones. When we work together, we can build an online world where children feel valued, stay curious, and form healthy connections free from fear.

When we work together, we can build an online world where children feel valued...



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for "his" posts and lost many of his friends. I could feel the boy's sense of violation and helplessness and his parents' pain and fury, watching their child struggle with a cruelty that hides behind screens and thrives in silence.

Cyberbullying has become one of the fastest-growing threats to children today. As more young people move their learning, friendships, and hobbies online, the risks follow. In Uganda, where smartphone access among adolescents is rising, the danger is immediate.

Research underscores the urgency. A 2021 Disrupting Harm study by Unicef, ECPAT, and Interpol found that 40 percent of Ugandan children aged 12–17 are Internet users, and more than half go online daily. A 2022 CIPESA