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The Bully in the Backpack: There’s no limit to the cruelty of online bullies. Here’s what you can do.

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Madi W. knows what it’s like to be hounded by death threats, nasty phone calls, and racist jibes. Four years ago, kids from her middle school in suburban Maryland started attacking her by cellphone, text messages, and on social media sites.

Then last fall, the assaults followed her to high school. Someone sent a text calling her the N-word and attached an image of a stick figure getting whipped. Over Thanksgiving break, a bunch of girls left a string of cruel phone messages and texts, calling her a “half-rican” and a “whore” and telling her to kill herself. In January, a former friend accused her of spreading rumors—and vowed all over her Facebook wall that she’d beat up Madi.

“Kids have always been jerks to each other since the beginning of time, and technology does embolden them,” says Sameer Hinduja, an assistant professor at Florida Atlantic University (FAU) who helps run the Cyberbullying Research Center.

Whether it’s through instant messaging, gaming devices, virtual worlds, chat rooms, or blogs, between 25 and 85 percent of today’s kids say they’ve been harassed online by their peers. Their tormentors’ top three methods of choice? Social networking sites, emails, and texts.

It’s not surprising, considering that kids’ use of technology amounts to a full-time job. Teens spend on average more than 53 hours a week—or seven hours and 38 minutes a day—on their computers, cellphones, iPods, and video games, says a recent Kaiser Family Foundation study of 8- to 18-year-olds. When it comes to social networking, a whopping 73 percent of 12- to 17-year-olds use Facebook and Myspace, says another study by the Pew Research Center’s Internet & American Life Project. Meanwhile, a 2010 Nielsen report finds that teens on average swap 3,339 texts a month. That’s more than six messages per waking hour. Combine these stats with the ease with which kids can hide behind a computer screen and hurl insults and you have the ideal breeding ground for some serious digital damage.

“We’re seeing it younger and younger, and we’re also seeing it older and older,” says WiredSafety.org founder and cybercrime expert Parry Aftab about the widespread digital abuse being committed by young people. “Without question, it has reached epidemic proportions, and it’s growing fast.”

While no one can deny the emotional and physical scars schoolyard bullies leave behind, many agree the constant pounding that takes place in cyberspace can be even more damaging to
children, especially the collective bullying experience that digital mobs often create on social networking sites. “Technology makes it a lot easier to isolate an individual very quickly and to have them experience a kind of pile-on effect that can go vastly beyond the actual confines of their community,” says Eliza Byard, executive director of the Gay, Lesbian, and Straight Education Network (GLSEN), an organization that seeks to end discrimination and bullying in schools.

In fact, a study by the National Institutes of Health says that compared to traditional bullying victims, students targeted by cyberbullies (who may not identify themselves) feel more hopeless and depressed, as well as isolated, dehumanized, and helpless at the time of an attack. “It’s like you’re drowning,” says Debbie Johnston, whose 15-year-old son, Jeffrey, hanged himself in 2005, after being taunted for two years by a serial bully. “And you’re doing everything you can just to breathe and save yourself.”

Shielded by avatars, alter egos, and various other online identities, cyberspace lets teens be whomever and whatever they want to be. And without face-to-face contact to temper things, there’s no limit to the cruelty and aggression an online bully can let loose. “The target can’t go home to his or her safe place because the cyber situation follows you in your pocket, backpack, or laptop,” explains Seattle-based online safety expert Mike Donlin, who works with the Washington State School Safety Center.

To make matters worse, the incidents can go viral with incredible speed, magnifying the pain and vicious insults for the entire world to see. And since the Internet keeps a permanent record of everything, the temptation to revisit the scene of the crime can be hard to resist. The vicious posts that contributed to Jeffrey Johnston’s death are still up six years later, serving as a constant reminder to his family of the torment he endured—and the fact that his persecutor continues to go unpunished. “I know I could have just not looked at them, but you can’t,” says his mother, Debbie, of the messages. “It’s like rubbing a sore place or picking at a scab. It hurts, but it’s just irresistible.”

Cyberbullying is a fluid term that describes the willful and repeated harm inflicted through the use of computers, cellphones, and other electronic devices. And since some experts include all forms of aggression—like insults, minor fights, and the backlash from breakups—in their definitions, there’s no real consensus on how widespread the phenomenon is. Based on a review of 30 different studies published in peer-reviewed journals, FAU’s Hinduja estimates that one in four 11- to 18-year-olds has experienced online harassment. A December 2009 poll by MTV and the Associated Press says that 50 percent of 14- to 24-year-olds have been targeted by some form of digital abuse. And Aftab, who says there’s a clear disconnect between the work of ivory tower researchers and what’s happening in the real world, insists that the number of middle schoolers who’ve been bullied online over the past year is closer to 85 percent.

She should know. Aftab meets with roughly 10,000 teens each month during the school year to keep her finger on the pulse of the problem—and she’s enlisted the award-winning Teenangels, approximately 600 13- to 18-year-old volunteers who earn their wings after two years of cyber-safety training before heading out to speak to their peers. Is cyberbullying an epidemic, as Aftab sees it, or just media hype? It might be a little bit of both. Certainly, the tragic, high-profile
cyber-bullying of Tyler Clementi, Megan Meier, and Phoebe Prince have put a national spotlight on the devastating effects of online abuse. But the hysteria that cyberbullying is driving kids everywhere to kill themselves simply isn’t true—especially since teenage suicide rates have remained relatively unchanged since 1998, according to the American Association of Suicidology.

“Knowing what we know about suicide, and saying that cyberbullying is the cause is impossible,” says Donlin, explaining that there are almost always other underlying factors. “It may be the final straw, but it’s never the only thing happening in the life of a young person thinking of and acting on suicide.”

John Halligan, for example, says his son, Ryan, showed signs of depression, but he and his wife mistook them for typical teenage angst—until the 13-year-old killed himself in October 2003, after being bullied by classmates online and in person. “I thought he needed a pep talk and a hug, but he really needed to be taken to the emergency room for an in-depth evaluation,” says Halligan, who spearheaded passage of the 2004 Vermont Bully Prevention bill and a 2006 law requiring mandatory suicide-prevention education in state schools.

Although social networking can help kids feel like part of the pack, it can be a double-edged sword, particularly for many isolated young lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) teens. “If you live somewhere where you don’t have access to resources, life online can sometimes provide you with a new source of hope,” says GLSEN’s Byard.

But that hope can come at a cost. It’s a fact that LGBT middle school and high school kids are targeted by bullies more often than their straight peers, both in school and in cyberspace. GLSEN’s National School Climate Survey shows that 90 percent of LGBT students experience physical, verbal, or sexual harassment at school, and 53 percent say they’ve been cyberbullied during the previous year.

Conrad Honicker was attacked from the moment he entered Tennessee’s West High School as a freshman in 2006 until the day he graduated in 2010. “People would send me Myspace messages from fake accounts calling me a faggot, a cocksucker, and some said I should just die, or that I was going to hell,” says the 20-year-old, who came out with his partner during their first year of high school in Knoxville.

The cyber attacks started almost immediately. A group of boys posted his picture on Facebook and, he says, “proceeded to tear me apart,” and a classmate updated his Facebook status to say, “Stupid gay people and their pink shirts,” after Honicker had worn one to class. Then, while looking at a friend’s Facebook page, Honicker uncovered a group of 125 schoolmates called WASP (We Are Straight People), which was dedicated to “straight pride” and creating “straight only” spaces. “In the forums section, a kid I had class with talked about the need to assassinate me, about how I needed to be shot, and how everything was turning gay because of me,” he says.

Luckily for Honicker, his school had zero tolerance for such behavior and the bully was banned from ever again stepping foot on Knox County School property. “As someone who was bullied
literally every day of high school, whether by being thrown into lockers or having rocks thrown at me, it does get better,” says Honicker, now a sophomore at Emory University.

While things may have worked out for Honicker, there’s no one-size-fits-all solution where cyberbullying is concerned, and there’s no way of knowing who’ll be the next victim. Hinduja calls it the “equal opportunity offense,” where anyone motivated by anger, jealousy, revenge, or frustration can be an intimidator—and just about everyone is a potential target. “It’s a great equalizer,” says Johnston, the grieving-mother-turned-crusader who took a 12-month leave of absence from work and spent three years fighting for passage of the Jeffrey Johnston Stand Up for All Students Act, which requires Florida’s schools to adopt policies that discourage online and offline bullying or risk losing state funding. “The 49-pound geek has the same power as the 120-pound, already-shaving fifth grader who’s president of the class,” adds Johnston.

While online abuse takes place in elementary and high schools, it’s not nearly as prevalent as the full-fledged cyber war that’s being waged in middle schools, experts say. Although primary grade kids are more apt to sneak into their friends’ Webkinz or McJunior accounts and steal points, they’re more focused on making friends and adjusting to school. And high schoolers, on the other hand, have a stronger sense of self, better defense mechanisms, and are beginning to understand that the problem lies with the aggressor rather than themselves, says Michelle Boykins of the National Crime Prevention Council (NCPC), which recently launched the Circle of Respect program to change the commonly held belief that bullying is a rite of passage. It’s middle school—when kids are suddenly vulnerable to fluctuating hormones, erupting skin, and the need to fit in, coupled with a relaxing of parental Internet supervision—that creates the perfect storm where cyber attacks become much more pervasive and can inflict the deepest wounds.

It’s not that kids are getting meaner. They’re just walking around with technology that responds almost instantly to their whims, plus online bullying is incredibly easy to do. “The planning part that has to take place in real-life bullying doesn’t exist in cyberspace,” Aftab explains. “It’s really easy to set up a fake account, and seconds later you’re out doing damage.” Earlier this year, Long Island, NY, police shut down a Facebook page called “Nasasu’s Nasty List,” which detailed the alleged sexual activities of high school girls. And two Florida teens were arrested on felony cyberbullying charges for posting doctored nude photos of a fellow student on a fake Facebook page.

The good news is that splashy headlines have motivated the Obama administration and a number of politicians to take action. The U.S. Department of Education held its second annual Federal Partners in Bullying Prevention Summit in Washington, DC, last month. That follows a letter the department sent to school districts last October warning that certain forms of bullying could trigger federal antidiscrimination laws. So far, 46 states have bullying laws, with 34 of those including some mention of electronic forms of harassment. And New Jersey’s Anti-Bullying Bill of Rights, which went into effect September 1, is considered the nation’s toughest legislation against bullying.

Still, there’s a long way to go. According to the Cyberbullying Research Center, only eight states have laws that specifically address online bullying. And although almost all cyberbullying laws
require that schools set up bullying and harassment policies, the problem is many laws don’t define cyberbullying or offer any guidelines for what should be included and when schools should act. And since the bulk of cyberbullying takes place on weekends and in the evening, many school officials don’t know what authority they have when it comes to home computers, student cellphones, and off-campus speech.

“Very few school districts at this point in time are handling these situations effectively,” says Nancy Willard, executive director of the Center for Safe and Responsible Internet Use and the author of Cyber Savvy (Corwin Press, Nov. 2011). “We need to help principals know how to effectively deal with these situations, because until they can handle them effectively, young people aren’t going to report them.”

Obviously, urging kids to get unplugged isn’t the answer—not to mention that it’s unrealistic in this digital day and age. And criminalizing cyberbullying doesn’t fully work either, say experts, who think redirecting bad behavior into a positive learning experience is a wiser option. “You can’t solve cyberbullying without a comprehensive bullying prevention and intervention program,” insists Willard, and that includes reinforcing students’ emotional intelligence through programs such as the Committee for Children’s Second Step for those in kindergarten through grades eight, as well as setting policies and procedures that teachers, school officials, and parents can follow and enforce.

Parents, in particular, need to become much more tech savvy, “because you can’t monitor your kids when they’re online or sexting or all the other things that are going on unless you know how to operate these devices,” says Thomas Jacobs, a retired judge and author of Teen Cyberbullying Investigated (Free Spirit, 2010). “You’ve got to know the basics.” Only then, he says, can parents responsibly teach kids proper netiquette—and start doing so at an early age.

Teens, for the most part, see their parents as technophobes, which partly explains why 80 percent don’t tell mom and dad if they’re being attacked online. Other reasons include fear that their parents will overreact and make the situation worse or—heaven forbid—take away cellphones and shut down Facebook pages. As a result, Johnston says, there’s a conspiracy of silence among those involved.

Indeed, developing cyberbullying policies isn’t easy because of the need to balance students’ online safety with their First Amendment rights. Charles Leitch, a lawyer who advises schools and last November presented at the Seventh Annual Conference of the International Bullying Prevention Association in Seattle, points to the 1969 Supreme Court case Tinker v. Des Moines Independent Community School District, which is used by courts to determine whether a public school’s disciplinary actions violate students’ free speech. In Tinker, the United States Supreme Court overturned a school suspension of students for wearing black armbands to protest the Vietnam War, but said educational institutions could impose discipline if students’ actions “materially and substantially” disrupt the work and discipline of the school. The Supreme Court has yet to address online student speech, so “we’re scaling Tinker up to talk about something that is far different, which is technology,” Leitch explains.
To further complicate matters, there’s no consensus among the courts on this issue. In Pennsylvania, for example, two students from different parts of the state committed similar off-campus cyber offenses, but the cases resulted in seemingly contradictory rulings on the same day. One judge ruled that school officials had overstepped their bounds when punishing high school senior Justin Layshock for creating a fake Myspace page to mock his principal. But another judge upheld a 10-day suspension of eighth-grader Jill Snyder, who created a similar Myspace profile. This past June, the Third Circuit Court of Appeals ruled for both Layshock and Snyder, saying that the two cases failed to meet the Tinker rule. Such mixed messages explain why “principals are scared, lawyers don’t understand it, and judges don’t have a lot of guidance on it,” Leitch says.

Ideally, new cyberbullying legislation will guide school districts on what actions they can and must take, as well as under what circumstances, says Justin Patchin, who along with Hinduja coauthored Bullying Beyond the Schoolyard (Corwin, 2008). Until then, Leitch says, schools have a right to regulate and discipline kids for off-campus conduct when there’s substantial, or foreseeable substantial, disruption to the educational environment. That includes violent altercations between students, physical threats, and significant interference in the delivery of instruction or the ability of a student to participate in school activities—but it’s not an exact science, cautions Leitch. “Most off-campus acts by students don’t rise to the required substantial level for schools,” he says. “Where discipline is pursued, the [connection] between the off-campus or personal conduct and school must be significant.”

Educators say it takes more than suspending or punishing attackers to curb bad behavior. It’s essential to set up firm policies and create programs to help identify, prevent, respond to, and investigate cases of online abuse. “Laws hardly deter adults, let alone teenagers,” says Hinduja. “It’s all about education, and there are creative ways to get those messages across.”

That’s the tack MTV has taken. For its “A Thin Line” initiative, which aims to end digital abuse, the network enlisted psychologists, cybercrime experts, and youth activists, and partnered with the Anti-Defamation League, ConnectSafely, Facebook, Myspace, Wired Safety, and others to craft a comprehensive website, on-air programming, and a digital responsibility curriculum.

Tapping into the power of celebrities, the channel invited actresses Rosario Dawson and Aubrey Plaza, playwright Eve Ensler, and Jersey Shore’s Vinny Guadagnino to lend their voices to a series of thought-provoking PSAs—and there’s also a set of interactive online quizzes hosted by Gossip Girl’s Michelle Trachtenberg and rapper Asher Roth on its website. Some 2,800 users have downloaded the MTV iPhone and iPad app “Over the Line,” which acts like a “digital morality meter” to help teens understand the difference between digital use and abuse by asking them to rate real-life stories about sexting, sextortion, textual harassment, digital dating abuse, and other forms of online hostility.

“These are issues no generation has grown up with before,” says Jason Rzepka, MTV’s vice president of public affairs. “But young people want to figure this out. And if we can give them the space to come with their own conclusions, I think it can be really effective.”
So far, it seems to be working. Since the campaign rolled out in 2009, more than one million teens have taken action to stop the spread of digital abuse by reaching out for help or supporting their peers, and more than 115,000 kids have joined the discussion on MTV’s Twitter, Facebook, and My Yearbook sites. That makes perfect sense, says Willard, because studies show that the majority of young people generally make good choices online, and they don’t like to see harm done to others or engage in harm themselves.

Still, one issue that stood out in MTV’s campaign was dating abuse 21st-century style, where young people receive up to 300 texts a day from their partners or constant phone calls checking up on them. Some teens reported that their companions had forced them to unfriend people on Facebook or demanded their passwords so they could check their messages, Rzepka says. Upward of 60 percent of teens who were sexting or sending nude photos said they were pressured to do so—and oftentimes those images ended up getting forwarded. “There’s a lot of young people who are mortified that a photo given to express affection has gone around, and all of a sudden that young woman is the town slut or is the school whore,” Rzepka adds.

Kim Davidson knows all too well about the power a partner can exert using a cellphone. Her daughter Kari’s boyfriend basically stalked her throughout their eight-month relationship with as many as 30 texts an hour. When Kari, then 18, ended the relationship in July 2008, he took it badly. And ironically, it was Kari’s cellphone that ended her life when she went back to his home to retrieve her charger the morning after the breakup. “He must have tried to get her to not break up with him, and when she said no, he pulled out the shotgun and shot her in the back of the head,” says Davidson.

With some 75 percent of 12- to 17-year-olds now walking around with cellphones, parents are “inadvertently putting a weapon of sorts in the hands of a potential abuser,” says Jane Randel, director of Liz Claiborne’s “Love Is Not Abuse” program, which helps identify the red flags in digital dating abuse and tells kids where to seek help. The program comes with a literature-based curriculum geared to kids in grades 8 to 10—whether they’re cyberbullying victims, abusers, or bystanders. And for parents, there’s now a free iPhone app that allows them to “experience” digital dating abuse. “It’s really understanding what is healthy and unhealthy, and how to get a handle on it before it becomes dangerous,” Randel says.

Davidson is convinced that Kari’s murder could have been avoided if she—and her parents—had known about the warning signs, which included the boyfriend’s frequent bouts of depression and the fact that the most dangerous time for kids is when they end a bad relationship. That’s why she’s continuing to fight for passage of the Kari Ann Gorman Law, which would mandate a teen dating violence curriculum in New York for students in grades 7 to 12. At least 20 states, including Nebraska, Ohio, Rhode Island, and Texas already have similar laws in place. In the meantime, Davidson hopes to use her daughter’s tragedy to build awareness through the website Kari’s Candle of Hope.

She’s certainly on the right track. Experts say that witnesses can be one of the most effective ways to stop bullies, especially since the attention of an audience is what often fans the flames. “We need to address not only the bully, but the bystanders, too, by holding them accountable,” says Halligan, who’s spoken at more 550 schools across the country about Ryan’s story. “If we
chip away at the audience, we will chip away at the problem.” Willard calls it the “power of three,” and says it involves gathering a few like-minded friends who all agree to speak up together. “If you have three students who collaborate and go on a profile and say, ‘Hey, this is not OK. It needs to stop,’ I think you’re going to tip that situation almost immediately,” she says.

Bystanders can also defuse an ugly situation by refusing to pass along harmful messages or take part in the bullying, blocking online aggressors, reporting any hurtful messages to moderators, and supporting the victim. “We’ve got to focus on the broad issue of trying to help young people engage in more civility with each other,” says Willard.

To tip the scales in that direction, it’s crucial to create a digital code of ethics, says MTV’s Rzepka, and librarians and other educators have an important role to play in teaching kids morals and desirable behaviors, such as the importance of empathy and pausing for a moment to think about the consequences of one’s actions before clicking send.

That’s exactly what’s beginning to happen around the country. Knowing that media specialists, with their tech expertise, are the perfect go-to people to tackle cyberbullying, the Baltimore County Public Schools have introduced a library media curriculum for all 107 elementary schools that integrates cybersafety and digital citizenship, says Della Curtis, the district’s coordinator of library information services. There’s also a website about the new curriculum, which includes a virtual video tour, explaining how it’s aligned with core content in science, social studies, math, and language arts. And the district has purchased a collection of books on the topic for each of its elementary, middle, and high school libraries.

Although Connecticut’s New Milford School District doesn’t have a school policy that addresses cyberbullying, Schaghticoke Middle School was quick to respond when a student took to Facebook last fall and threatened to kill the vice principal—and another kid suggested that he bomb the school. (The two were eventually expelled.) Media specialist David Bilmes gladly accepted Principal Dana Ford’s offer to develop a cyberbullying curriculum, and Bilmes invited school counselors to collaborate with him on a PowerPoint presentation that includes a cyberbullying self-assessment so kids can evaluate whether they’re engaging in digital abuse but aren’t aware of it. The school’s website also has a link for those who might feel uncomfortable reporting online attacks to an adult, which acts like an anonymous tip box to help administrators and school staff who may want to take swift action to stop cyberbullying.

Individual schools like Odessa Middle School in Odessa, MO, understand the value of taking preemptive measures before the problem spreads. Two years ago, when Assistant Principal Rob Waibel approached media specialist Evelyn Morgan to take the lead, she enlisted the help of computer teacher Susan Lefman to develop an online safety course that covers elements of harassment. Now each month, the two co-teach kids in grades six to eight about personal online safety, cyber predator identification, intellectual property, and digital literacy, with a focus on appropriate online behavior, cyberbullying, and social networking. “This way, we can try to keep our students safe and smart online since the Internet and laws regarding Internet safety are always changing,” Morgan says.
For Sandra Jones of Augusta High School in Augusta, AR, teaching the ethical use of technology goes beyond her students. As a librarian in a small school district, she considers herself the building caretaker of all things tech-related—and that includes handing out cyberbullying resources, buying more books on tolerance, devoting class time to the issue, and offering teacher training on the nature and extent of the problem—and how best to prevent it. Equally crucial is ensuring parental involvement, which Jones says is a key to being the link between her school and the community. “As the school media specialist, I felt I should inform them about how we’re addressing the problem,” she says.

Sue Lay, the librarian at Derby Middle School in Birmingham, MI, tapped into an invaluable local resource—the city’s Oakland County prosecutor, Jessica Cooper, who regularly speaks to kids and their parents about the importance of having open lines of communication, laying down specific guidelines when handing a cellphone to a minor, and a parent’s right to check their kids’ Facebook pages or any other electronic communication.

With October now designated as National Bullying Prevention Month, it’s the perfect time to start raising awareness and educating students about this serious problem. How can librarians deter cyberbullying? For starters, they can help students understand how easy it is to impersonate someone online through the use of digital technologies, as well as the basics, like don’t share passwords, choose one that’s hard to guess and easy to remember, and always log off from a computer. “The better students understand what technologies can do and allow other students to do, the less likely they are to be caught by student cyberbullying scams, and cyberbullying-by-proxy campaigns, and be manipulated by others,” Aftab explains. “Librarians help students open their eyes and see the world and the cyberworld differently, with better critical-thinking and problem-solving skills.”

Another way to bully-proof students is by letting them know that their most vicious enemy is often their frenemy, or former best friend. Although nearly half of cyberbullying victims say they didn’t know who was attacking them, the truth is 70 percent of the time the bully is one person removed from a best friend, says Aftab.

“Since teenagers are constantly falling in and out of friendships, that person who was your best friend has your deepest, darkest secrets,” says Johnston. “And the first thing that kid can think of now is, ‘Let me put it all out there to totally humiliate them for the world to see.’”

Teens also need to know that there’s no privacy when it comes to the Internet—and everyone leaves a digital footprint. “They don’t realize that nothing’s anonymous,” adds Johnston, explaining that any dubious online activity can always come back to haunt them when, say, a college admissions officer or potential employer does a quick Google search.

The fact that bullying is recorded in electronic form is a plus, says Anne Collier, editor of NetFamilyNews.org and codirector of ConnectSafely.org. Sara W., a recent high school graduate from Minnesota, had a hard time proving to school officials that one of her closest friends had threatened to kill her on Facebook—and eventually locked her in a room and punched her so hard that she ended up with six stitches above her right eye. That’s until Sara’s sister told her to print out the evidence and hand it to school officials. “There are aspects of this technology that
make it better,” says Willard. “The digital evidence gets rid of the ‘he said, she said’ arguments.” Or the fact that some parents don’t believe their kids could be guilty of cyberbullying.

Librarians also need to know the right things to say and the appropriate steps to take once a student confides in them. “When you hear of a kid in crisis, the first thing you need to do is to make sure that you’re getting the kid help,” says Leitch, the lawyer. “You’re working with parents, law enforcement, social services, and other entities in the community to get assistance to that person.”

Signs that a student is being cyberbullied may include a sudden change in behavior or their relationship with technology. There might be a drop in grades, a withdrawal from family and friends, and a reluctance to attend school or other activities, says Boykins. They may also seem stressed, upset, or fearful when receiving emails, texts, or instant messages, or cut down on using technology or avoid using it altogether.

It’s essential to tell victims of online abuse that it wasn’t their fault, experts say. Then make sure they don’t retaliate or get confrontational with the attacker because the situation could explode. Depending on the severity of the harassment, report the cyberbullying to the school or proper authorities. Also, help save and print the evidence. Then assist the child in making plans for how to deal with the social and relational fallout from the incident.

If the abuse involved a cellphone, show students how to block the person. If it took place over instant messaging or a social networking site, help set up filters, block unwanted messages, or remove the person from their buddy list, says Susan Limber, national director of the schoolwide Olweus Bullying Prevention Program, which is designed for use in elementary, middle, and high schools.

An easy way to remember it is: stop, block, and tell, says Aftab. “Stop, don’t answer back. You never feed the troll in technology. You never, ever give them what they want. Cyberbullies always want your attention. Never let them know they’ve got it. Block the person or the message, and then you tell a trusted adult.”

Taking five minutes to disengage from technology is important to regain perspective. “Drop your mouse and walk away from the computer, and no one’s going to get hurt,” Aftab explains. “Then do something you love to do—eat a cookie, take a bath, take a nap, dance, talk to your best friend, play with your dog, whatever it is.”

If the attack doesn’t make sense or comes from a trusted person, tell the student to meet face-to-face because it could end up being a miscommunication or joke. “Probably 40 percent of these problems would go away if the kids would take it offline,” Aftab adds.

Tell parents to always take their children’s complaints seriously and to report the cyberbullying to school officials—even if it didn’t take place at school. How do you know when it crosses over into criminal activity, and it’s time to call the police? When it involves a threat of physical harm, sexual harassment, the posting of nude or compromising photos, and extortion, Limber says.
Research shows that the most effective bullying prevention programs—like Olweus and the Committee for Children’s Steps to Respect program—have no trouble getting buy-in from the entire school. And who better than librarians to help draft uniform policies, procedures, and language, as well as ways to coach and support both victims and their attackers? “Be the source of information for the school to guide them, because you understand these things better,” says Aftab about librarians’ unique role. “When it comes to cyberbullying, cyber responsible use, and digital literacy, librarians hold the keys to the kingdom.”