

Digital Defenders Presents

2026

ANNUAL YOUTH RISK REPORT

EXAMINING THE EVOLVING
DIGITAL RISKS FACING TODAY'S
YOUTH



Letter From The Founder

The digital world has become an integral part of how young people learn, communicate, express themselves, and build relationships. While technology has created countless opportunities for connection and growth, it has also produced new challenges that previous generations never encountered.

At Digital Defenders, we believe that every young person deserves the opportunity to learn how to navigate the digital world confidently and safely. That belief is at the heart of our mission, and is why we're proud to present the first Annual Youth Risk Report.

This report seeks to provide a clear understanding of the digital risks facing today's youth by examining challenges, identifying trends, and providing solutions to real-world problems. We hope to give youth, parents, educators, policymakers, and youth-focused organizations the information they need to take meaningful action and make informed decisions.

This work would not be possible without the students, educators, volunteers, and supporters who contribute to Digital Defenders' mission. I'm extremely grateful to those who participated in the research, and to our two fellows, Sayna Kaushik and Ahria Ilyas, for helping put this report together.

As Digital Defenders continues to grow, we remain committed to empowering the next generation of cyber superheroes to confidently embark on their digital journeys. Thank you for taking the time to read this report, and for joining us in this important work.

Marcus Pierre
Founder & Executive Director
Digital Defenders Inc.



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About this Report

The Digital Defenders Annual Youth Risk Report was developed by Digital Defenders Inc. to better understand the digital risks, experiences, and behaviors facing the younger generation today. Understanding how youth experience the digital world is essential in developing effective online safety initiatives and cybersecurity education.

This survey, conducted over a two-week period in July 2026, examines responses from 51 participants who completed an anonymous Digital Defenders survey. Participants were broken up into 7 categories, ranging from children under 13 years old to adults 55 years old and up. The results are intended to contribute to broader conversations surrounding internet safety, but should only be viewed as one source of insight rather than a comprehensive representation of everyone's digital experiences.

Digital Literacy

Introduction

Digital literacy has become one of the most important skills for navigating the modern world. As technology continues to shape how individuals communicate, learn, work, and participate in society, the ability to responsibly use digital technologies has become essential. While many young people are often referred to as “digital natives” because they have grown up surrounded by technology, frequent use of digital devices does not necessarily translate into digital literacy. True digital literacy requires individuals to critically evaluate online information, protect their privacy, recognize misinformation, communicate responsibly, and understand the ethical implications of technology use.

According to the UNESCO Global Framework of Reference on Digital Literacy Skills, digital literacy consists of the competencies needed to “access, manage, understand, integrate, communicate, evaluate, and create information safely and appropriately through digital technologies.” This definition highlights that digital literacy extends far beyond technical skills and includes responsible participation in digital society. The National Association for Media Literacy Education emphasizes that media literacy equips individuals to “access, analyze, evaluate, create, act, and reflect” when engaging with media. These competencies encourage individuals to question the credibility of information rather than accepting online content at face value.

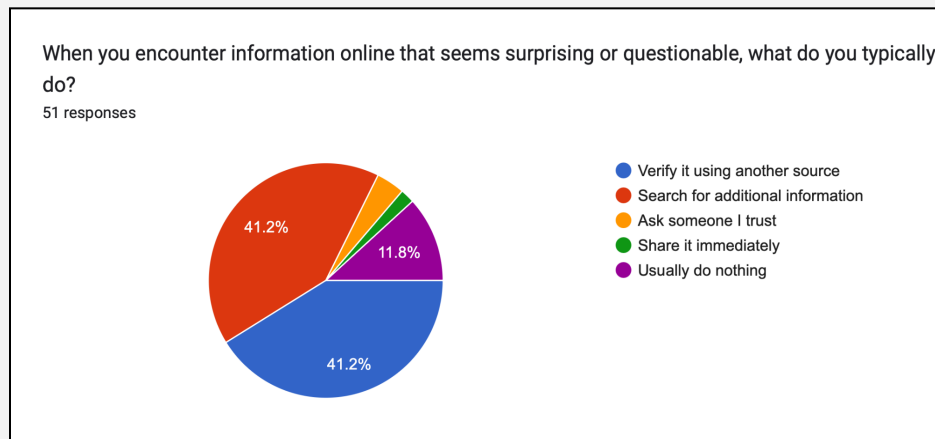
For today's youth, digital literacy extends beyond academic success. It directly influences personal safety, mental health, financial security, career readiness, and civic engagement. Young people regularly interact with digital technologies for school assignments, employment applications, healthcare information, financial transactions, entertainment, and social relationships. Without the ability to navigate these digital spaces responsibly, they become increasingly vulnerable to misinformation, cybercrime, online manipulation, and privacy violations.

The rapid growth of artificial intelligence, social media platforms, and algorithm-driven content has made digital literacy more important than ever before. Rather than simply teaching students how to use technology, educators must prepare them to critically analyze the information they encounter, understand how digital platforms shape online experiences, and make informed decisions while engaging with digital content.

To better understand why digital literacy has become an essential twenty-first-century competency, this section first examines today's digital landscape before exploring the benefits of digital literacy, the risks associated with limited digital literacy skills, findings from the Digital Defenders 2026 Online Safety Survey, and recommendations for strengthening digital literacy education among young people.

The Current Digital Landscape

Technology has become deeply integrated into nearly every aspect of daily life. According to Pew Research Center's Teens, Social Media and Technology 2024, nearly all teenagers report using at least one social media platform regularly, making digital spaces one of the primary ways youth access news, entertainment, and educational



content. Rather than seeking information through traditional newspapers or television broadcasts, many young people now discover current events through social media feeds that are curated by recommendation

algorithms. This shift has dramatically changed how information is consumed and shared, making it increasingly important for youth to evaluate the credibility of online sources before accepting information as accurate.

In addition to social media, educational environments have undergone significant digital transformation. Schools increasingly rely on online learning management systems, cloud-based collaboration tools, virtual classrooms, digital textbooks, and educational applications to deliver instruction. Common examples include Canvas and Blackboard for managing coursework and assignments, PowerSchool for tracking grades and student information, Google Classroom and Google Workspace for Education for collaboration, and Zoom or Microsoft Teams for virtual instruction and communication. Students are expected to conduct research online, collaborate through digital platforms, submit assignments electronically, and communicate with teachers using educational technology. While these developments have expanded educational opportunities and increased access to information, they have also created new challenges related to information quality, cybersecurity, and digital responsibility.

The findings from the Digital Defenders 2026 Online Safety Survey closely mirror these national trends. One respondent summarized current technology use by explaining that youth “commonly spend either three to six hours, or more than six hours daily using social media or playing video games.” This response reflects the broader survey findings, which suggest that digital technologies have become central to young people's educational and social experiences.

Benefits of Digital Literacy

Developing strong digital literacy skills provides significant educational, personal, and societal benefits. Individuals who possess strong digital literacy are better equipped to evaluate information critically and participate responsibly in digital communities, improving academic performance and preparing young people for future careers and lifelong civic participation.

One of the most significant benefits of digital literacy is the development of critical-thinking skills. Every day, young people encounter enormous amounts of online information through websites, social media platforms, search engines, and artificial intelligence systems. Not all of this information is accurate, objective, or trustworthy. Digital literacy teaches individuals to question sources, examine evidence, recognize bias, compare multiple perspectives, and verify information before accepting it as factual. UNESCO reinforces the importance of these skills, stating that digital literacy enables individuals to “evaluate information critically and participate responsibly in digital society.” These critical evaluation skills are essential for preventing the spread of misinformation and helping individuals make informed decisions, demonstrating that digital literacy involves not simply accessing information but developing the judgment necessary to determine whether that information can be trusted.

Digital literacy also improves online safety. Individuals who understand cybersecurity principles are more likely to recognize phishing attempts, create secure passwords, enable multi-factor authentication, and protect their personal information. As cybercrime continues to become more sophisticated, these preventative skills become increasingly valuable. Young people who understand online privacy settings and digital security practices are less likely to become victims of identity theft, financial scams, or unauthorized data collection.

Risks of Poor Digital Literacy

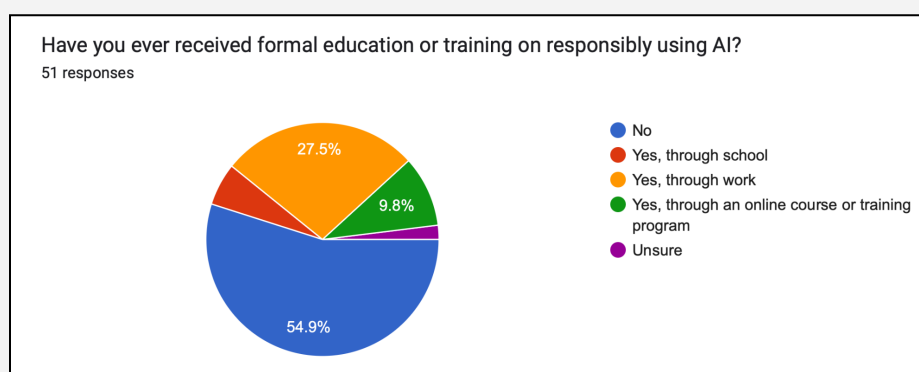
While technology provides tremendous opportunities for learning, communication, and innovation, inadequate digital literacy can expose young people to significant risks. The increasing volume of online information, combined with the rapid growth of social media and artificial intelligence, makes it more difficult than ever to distinguish credible information from misleading or harmful content. Without strong digital literacy skills, young people may unknowingly place themselves at greater risk of misinformation, cybercrime, privacy violations, and other online threats.

One of the most significant challenges is the spread of misinformation and fake news. Social media platforms allow information to circulate rapidly, regardless of whether it is accurate. Recommendation algorithms often prioritize content that generates engagement rather than content that is factual, increasing the likelihood that misleading information will reach large audiences. As a result, individuals who lack critical evaluation skills may accept false claims as truth or unknowingly share inaccurate information with others. UNESCO emphasizes that media literacy is

essential for helping individuals critically evaluate online content and reduce the spread of misinformation.

The Digital Defenders Online Safety Survey reinforces these concerns. When participants were asked to identify the greatest online threats facing young people, misinformation and AI-generated misinformation were consistently selected as major concerns across parents, educators, and young adults. These findings suggest that misinformation is no longer viewed as an isolated issue but rather as one of the defining challenges of today's digital environment.

These concerns surrounding AI-generated misinformation are particularly important given the survey's findings regarding AI education. Only 43.1% of respondents reported having received some form of AI training. This suggests that while artificial



intelligence is becoming increasingly integrated into young people's educational and digital experiences, many individuals may not have received adequate instruction on how to use or evaluate

these technologies responsibly. The gap between widespread exposure to AI and limited formal training further demonstrates the need for digital literacy education that specifically addresses artificial intelligence, including how to identify AI-generated content, verify information, recognize potential bias, and use AI tools ethically.

Another growing concern is online scams and fraud. Cybercriminals continue developing increasingly sophisticated phishing attacks, fraudulent websites, fake investment opportunities, and identity theft schemes. Young people often share personal information online without fully understanding how it may be exploited. Developing digital literacy skills allows individuals to recognize suspicious emails, verify website legitimacy, and understand basic cybersecurity practices before becoming victims of fraud.

Privacy and personal data protection also remain major concerns. Many digital platforms collect large amounts of user information through cookies, location services, browsing history, and personalized advertising. Although privacy settings are available on many platforms, users often do not understand how to configure them or the extent to which their information is being collected. Digital literacy helps individuals make informed decisions about what personal information should be shared online and how to better protect their digital identities.

Cyberbullying continues to be another serious issue affecting young people. Unlike traditional bullying, online harassment can occur at any time and reach individuals regardless of location. Negative comments, harassment, threats, and the rapid spread of harmful content can significantly impact mental health, self-esteem, and academic performance. Digital literacy education encourages respectful online communication while helping students recognize appropriate ways to respond to cyberbullying.

Social Media

Introduction

Social media has evolved from a communication tool into one of the primary environments in which adolescents develop identities, establish social status, access information, and maintain relationships. Popular platforms such as TikTok, Instagram, Snapchat, YouTube, and Discord are among the most frequented by youth between the ages of 10-19, and increasingly emerging platforms such as Threads and Lemon8 have become integral components of many adolescents' daily lives, serving not only as spaces for entertainment but also for education, self-expression, commerce, and community engagement. According to the U.S. Surgeon General, up to 95% of youth ages 13 to 17 report using at least one social media platform, and more than one-third report using social media "almost constantly" (U.S. Surgeon General, 2023). For many young people, online interaction is no longer separate from "real-life" social experiences but instead represents an extension of school, friendships, extracurricular activities, and community engagement. This distinction is particularly significant because adolescence is characterized by rapid neurological, emotional, and social development, making young people uniquely responsive to peer influence, social comparison, and external validation.

The growing concern surrounding social media is therefore not rooted in the existence of digital communication itself but in the interaction between adolescent development and platform architecture. Unlike traditional media such as television or newspapers, social media platforms actively adapt to user behavior through algorithms designed to maximize engagement and increase time spent on the platform. Recommendation systems determine what content users encounter, engagement metrics quantify social approval through likes and views, and notification systems encourage repeated interaction throughout the day. This is normally determined by how long a user watches content, what they like, and which creators they follow. As a result, young users are not simply consuming content but participating in environments intentionally designed to shape attention and behavior.

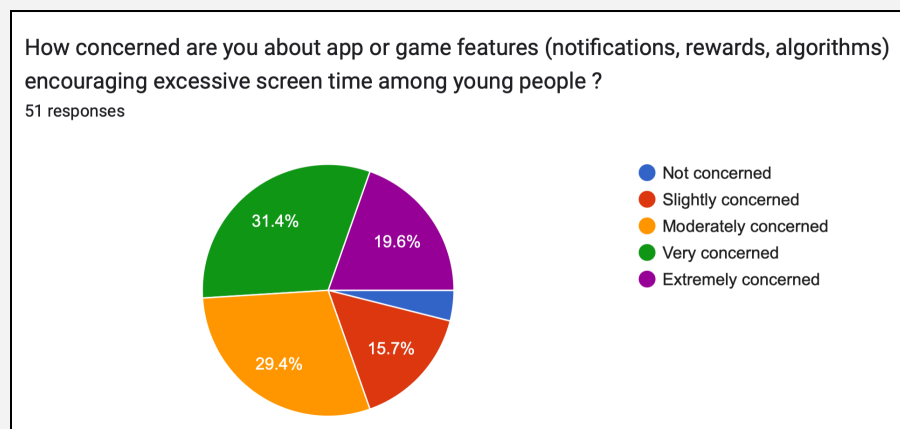
This shift has fundamentally changed how researchers and policymakers understand responsibility. Rather than viewing excessive social media use solely as a matter of individual discipline or parental supervision, legislators and regulatory agencies have increasingly questioned whether platform design itself contributes to foreseeable harms. Features such as infinite scrolling, autoplay videos, personalized recommendation algorithms, read receipts, push notifications, and engagement metrics are intentionally designed to maximize user retention by leveraging behavioral psychology principles. Consequently, policymakers have begun asking whether these design features should be regulated similarly to other consumer products marketed toward children, particularly when companies possess extensive data demonstrating how adolescents interact with their platforms.

The issue carries significant generational implications because previous generations experienced

periods of separation from peers during evenings, weekends, and school vacations. Social media has largely eliminated these boundaries by creating environments

where peer interactions continue twenty-four hours a day through messaging, stories, livestreams, comments, and notifications. Consequently, adolescents may experience persistent social comparison, reputational pressure, fear of missing out (FOMO), and increased exposure to cyberbullying beyond traditional school settings. Unlike face-to-face bullying, online harassment can be anonymous, widely disseminated, and permanently documented, amplifying its psychological impact. These concerns were also reflected in our survey findings. Among 51 respondents, 80.4% reported being at least moderately concerned that app and game features, such as notifications, rewards, and recommendation algorithms, encourage excessive screen time among young people, while over half (51.0%) indicated they were either very or extremely concerned. These findings reinforce growing public concern that platform design itself, rather than screen time alone, may contribute to unhealthy patterns of digital engagement.

Researchers cannot yet fully measure the long-term consequences of this transformation because society is effectively observing the first generation raised



within algorithmically mediated social environments. Questions surrounding attention spans, emotional resilience, interpersonal communication, and identity formation remain largely unanswered. Nevertheless, policymakers have begun responding to these concerns through legislation and litigation. In the United States, several states, including Utah, Arkansas, Florida, and Louisiana, have considered or enacted laws requiring parental consent for minors to create social media accounts, limiting overnight access, or imposing age-verification requirements. Internationally, Australia has announced plans to prohibit children under sixteen from maintaining social media accounts, while the United Kingdom's Age Appropriate Design Code requires technology companies to prioritize children's privacy and safety when designing online services. Although many of these measures face ongoing constitutional challenges involving free speech, privacy, and parental rights, they demonstrate an emerging consensus that protecting children online may require responsibilities extending beyond individual families. The challenge facing policymakers is therefore not whether regulation should occur, but how to balance child protection with technological innovation and constitutional freedoms.

Mental Health, Social Comparison, and Algorithmic Influence

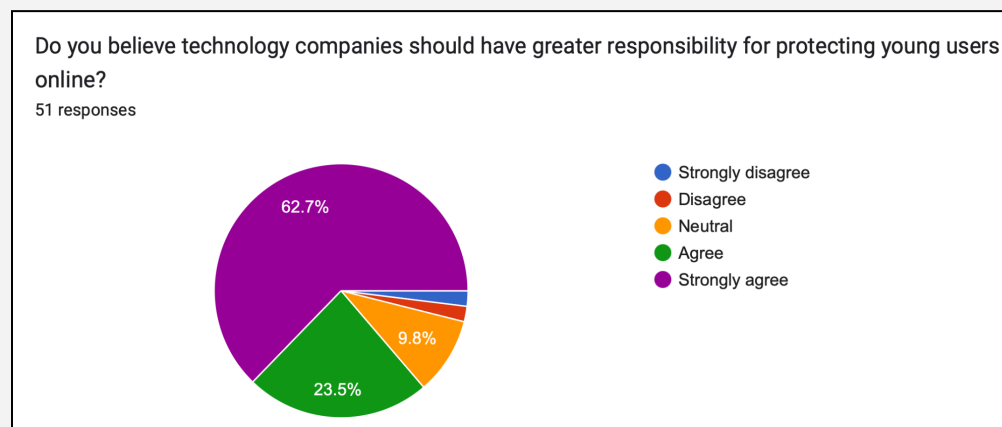
Recommendation algorithms contribute to these concerns because they continuously learn from users' viewing habits, search histories, interactions, and engagement patterns to deliver increasingly personalized content. For example, an adolescent who watches several videos discussing dieting, cosmetic procedures, or fitness transformations may quickly receive a feed dominated by similar content. Likewise, prolonged engagement with videos discussing anxiety, loneliness, or appearance may result in repeated exposure to emotionally distressing material. Although personalization can improve user experience, it may also reinforce unrealistic expectations, create "echo chambers," and intensify existing insecurities during critical periods of adolescent development.

Unlike previous generations who compared themselves primarily to classmates, neighbors, or local peer groups, adolescents today may compare themselves to carefully curated representations of thousands or even millions of individuals simultaneously. For example, an adolescent scrolling through TikTok or Instagram may encounter influencers promoting luxury lifestyles, highly edited photographs, expensive beauty routines, cosmetic enhancements, or unrealistic fitness transformations within only a few minutes. Because many of these images are professionally produced, filtered, or digitally altered, they often portray unattainable standards rather than authentic daily life. Algorithms frequently prioritize content

that generates high engagement, meaning aspirational or emotionally provocative posts are more likely to appear repeatedly, reinforcing unrealistic expectations surrounding appearance, wealth, relationships, and personal success.

The significance of this issue extends beyond temporary emotional discomfort. Persistent exposure to unrealistic expectations during formative developmental years may influence self-esteem, body image, interpersonal relationships, and emotional resilience well into adulthood. Research increasingly supports this relationship. The American Psychological Association notes that adolescents are particularly vulnerable to appearance-based social comparison because identity formation and self-concept are still developing. Similarly, the U.S. Surgeon General reported that frequent social media use has been associated with increased symptoms of anxiety, depression, poor sleep quality, and body dissatisfaction among adolescents. One longitudinal study published in JAMA Pediatrics found that adolescents engaging in higher levels of social media use reported significantly lower self-esteem and greater body image concerns over time compared with peers who used social media less frequently. Although researchers continue to debate causation, the consistency of these findings suggests that prolonged exposure to idealized online content may meaningfully influence adolescent psychological well-being.

Our survey findings similarly demonstrate substantial public support for this evolving perspective.



Among 51 respondents, 86.2% agreed or strongly agreed that technology companies should bear greater responsibility for protecting

young users online, while only 3.9% disagreed or strongly disagreed. These findings suggest that participants increasingly recognize that youth digital well-being is influenced not only by individual choices but also by the design decisions intentionally incorporated into modern digital platforms.

Collectively, the existing research, current policy developments, and survey findings support a broader shift in how society understands online safety. Rather than framing digital risks exclusively as failures of self-control or parenting, evidence increasingly

suggests that platform architecture, including recommendation algorithms, engagement-based rewards, personalized content feeds, and persuasive design techniques, plays a meaningful role in shaping adolescent behavior. Future public policy will therefore likely require a balanced approach that combines digital literacy education, parental engagement, stronger privacy protections, greater platform transparency, and age-appropriate design standards. Such an approach recognizes that social media itself is neither inherently beneficial nor harmful; rather, its impact depends on how these technologies are designed, regulated, and experienced by young people during one of the most developmentally significant periods of their lives.

Cyberbullying

Introduction

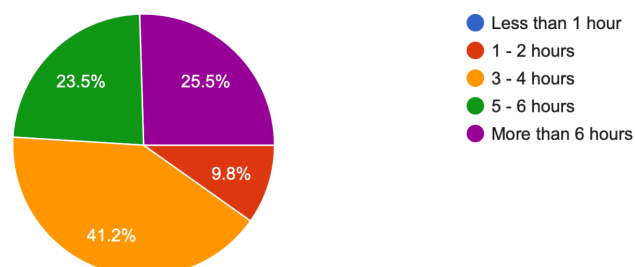
Cyberbullying is the use of technology and online platforms to intentionally and repeatedly hurt, threaten, harass, or embarrass someone. It can occur through several online platforms, including social media, online games, text messages, and other digital applications, potentially causing severe mental and emotional consequences. Cyberbullying can take on several different forms - from sending hateful messages in a group chat, spreading false rumors online, creating and sharing images without permission, or even excluding individuals from online groups. Unfortunately, as technology continues to evolve, new ways of cyberbullying are being created at a rapid pace and can happen at all hours of the day, and often anonymously.

Although cyberbullying can affect people of all ages, children, teens, and young adults are typically among the most impacted. In today's increasingly digital age, young people spend a significant amount of time online using digital platforms for education, communication, and entertainment. Due to this, online experiences can have a heavy influence on their relationships, self-esteem, mental health, and overall well-being.

It comes
as no
surprise
that
today's
youth are

On average, how much time do you believe young people spend on social media and/or video games each day?

51 responses



more connected online than any generation before them. The Digital Defenders 2026 Youth Risk Survey found that 23% of respondents believe teens spend 5-6 hours online each day, creating extended windows for harmful behavior to occur. The consistent access to smartphones, social media platforms, and gaming consoles, which were originally intended to foster relationship building and creativity, have also provided a space for negative behavior.

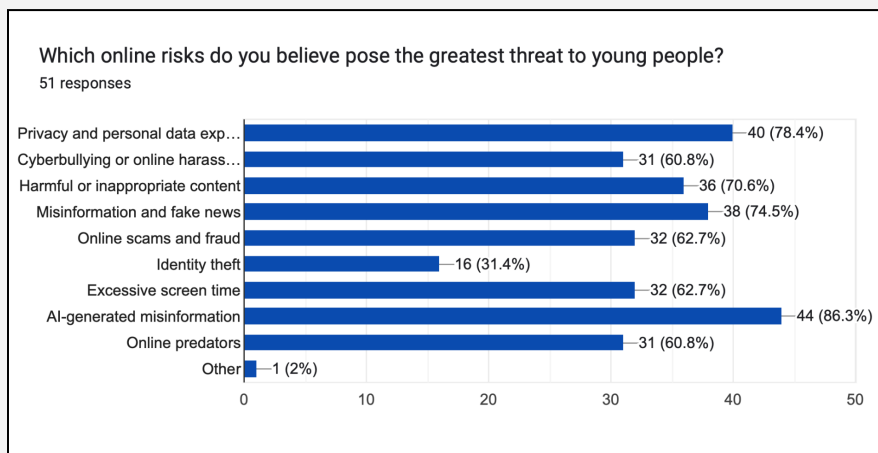
How Cyberbullying Differs From Traditional Bullying

Cyberbullying and traditional bullying share many commonalities; however, cyberbullying creates unique challenges due to the way technology changes how the bullying happens. First, traditional bullying can only happen at specific physical locations, like a school, neighborhood playground, or shared social setting. A student who may experience bullying at school or in class can have a break when they leave for the day, but cyberbullying can continue at home, during the weekends, day or night. Cyberbullying can happen at any point, any time, and anywhere a person has access to the internet.

Another major difference is the fact that cyberbullying can involve greater anonymity and larger audiences. Typical online offenders can hide behind fake accounts and generic usernames, and share their messages with hundreds of people within minutes. A single photo, video, or comment can be shared beyond the original audience, while traditional bullying is only observed by a small group of people who are present at the time of the actions. Because online content can be screenshotted, copied, saved, and redistributed, cyberbullying can have lasting effects on a young person's mental health, relationships, and confidence. Understanding the differences between the two types of bullying is imperative for parents, teachers, and communities as they work to prevent and respond to online harassment.

Current Landscape

Cyberbullying continues to affect millions of people every year and remains one of the most common online risks facing today's younger generation, supported by the fact that 60% of Digital



Defenders survey respondents believe it is one of the greatest threats against young people . Researchers have found that cyberbullying is becoming more complex as new technologies and online communities continue to grow across social media platforms, livestreaming services, and digital learning platforms. In a study conducted by PEW Research Center released in April 2026, a survey found that 19% of teen Instagram users reported experiencing at least one form of online harassment on the platform. Additionally, 18% of teen users reported similar findings on TikTok, emphasizing that cyberbullying transcends singular platforms and can follow someone across the internet.

As technology advances, so do the means by which people attack one another online. Artificial Intelligence has made it simple to produce realistic fake photos and videos that could be used to embarrass, threaten, or share false information about someone. Though still somewhat rare among young people, deepfake technology, which is a fake photo, video, or voice created by AI to trick people into thinking something is real, is becoming more accessible and could quickly become more of a problem in the future. Additionally, online gaming platforms have grown to become another field where cyberbullying happens regularly. Many multiplayer games today allow players to talk to each other in real time and although these tools enable people to work together and connect, they can also be used to insult, threaten, reject, or continuously target other players. In these circumstances, victims may feel overburdened and outnumbered. This kind of organized harassment can have even more emotional effects.

The United States does not currently have a federal statute that specifically outlaws cyberbullying because schools, laws, and public safety issues are typically controlled by a state. However, depending on the situation, major offenses could fall under already established federal laws relating to harassment, stalking, threats, or civil rights infractions. Normally, federal agencies such as the U.S. Department of Justice and the U.S. Department of Education advise learning institutions and school districts to take responsibility when cyberbullying is observed and noticeably influences a child's capacity to safely learn and engage at school.

Although their definition of cyberbullying may differ, all 50 states have passed anti-bullying legislation at the state level. Many states demand that schools create anti-bullying rules, look into reported occurrences, give students channels to report bullying, set up disciplinary actions, and inform parents as needed. While some states include cyberbullying under wider definitions of bullying, others especially reference cyberbullying in their legislation. Notably, Massachusetts has one of the more comprehensive anti-bullying laws in the country, requiring public schools to address

both traditional bullying and cyberbullying by developing bullying prevention and intervention plans, training staff, investigating serious incidents, and protecting students from retaliation after reporting bullying. The Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education also provides schools with guidance, training materials, and additional resources to help prevent and respond to bullying. While these laws have strengthened protections for students, experts continue to debate whether current policies are keeping pace with rapidly changing technology and emerging forms of online harassment.

Impact on Youth

A young person's emotional wellbeing, and academic performance can be seriously and permanently impacted by cyberbullying. Every person experiences things differently, but studies have indicated that persistent online bullying can impact almost every aspect of a young person's life. Even if a post is taken down, victims may still worry about who saw it, whether the content is still online somewhere else, or if it might be shared again in the future even after the harassment stops.

In more extreme circumstances, especially among young people already battling with other mental health challenges, prolonged cyberbullying has been connected to a greater risk of self-harm and suicidal thoughts. Though cyberbullying alone does not necessarily cause these actions, studies routinely demonstrate that cyberbullying might cause a great deal of emotional pain and raise the risk for vulnerable kids.

The results of cyberbullying can also go beyond a student's mental state and start affecting their academic performance. Students who are being cyberbullied could struggle to focus in class, finish homework, or stay motivated. Fearing more humiliation or judgment from their classmates, some start to reduce participation in things like group projects or classroom conversations where they typically shine.

Some may begin to isolate themselves from social activities, sports teams, clubs, or family gatherings since they are no longer at ease around others. Some people may grow more alone even while still using social media or online games, while others may choose to spend less time online to help to avoid abuse. This withdrawal can make it more challenging for trusted adults to see that a youngster is suffering. Ultimately, cyberbullying can take a toll on every aspect of a child's life.

Risk Factors & Warning Signs

It's important to note that no one victim is ever accountable for another person's hurtful behavior, and there is no one cause for someone to become the target of

cyberbullying. But, knowing common red flags and online behaviors connected with more exposure will enable parents, teachers, and other trusted adults to see when a youngster could need help.

Often among the first to see changes at home are parents and guardians. A child who is being cyberbullied could become unhappy after using their phone or other devices, stop discussing their online activities, or lose interest in hanging out with pals. Some kids could start avoiding social activities, have changes in eating or sleeping patterns, unexpectedly erase social media profiles, or even ask to switch schools since they no longer feel safe or at ease among their friends. Regular, encouraging discussions about online experiences can help kids feel more at ease seeking assistance.

Teachers and school counselors see less obvious changes than parents who are at home with the child, but students who are being cyberbullied may miss class more often, skip school frequently, seem socially isolated, or exhibit indications of mental strain such as depression, anxiety, or annoyance. Teachers might also see frequent problems among students that start online but show up in the classroom or other school events. Understanding these patterns early might enable institutions to offer assistance before the condition gets more severe.

While no internet behavior ever justifies cyberbullying, certain behaviors may increase the risk of harmful interactions. Publicly releasing significant volumes of personal data, engaging with strangers online, participating in public conflicts on social media, using anonymous platforms, sharing real-time location data, or frequently joining unmoderated online groups could raise the chances of experiencing harassment. Learning to apply privacy settings, critically evaluate before uploading, and identify dangerous internet scenarios will help lower these hazards.

Cyberbullying doesn't always start with major threats or harassment. Sometimes it begins with small internet fights, subtle public insults, spreading lies, or excluding people from online groups. If they're not careful, these actions might soon turn into cyberbullying if they persist or inspire others to join in. Educating kids about digital citizenship, empathy, and polite online communication will help avoid disputes from escalating into more dangerous circumstances. Students who are encouraged to think before they post, respect others online, and report inappropriate behavior when they notice it help to build a digital environment that is better for everyone.

Best Practices & Future Outlook

Stopping cyberbullying calls on communities to work together. Although no plan can totally eradicate cyberbullying, being ready helps to lower risk, inspire reporting, and provide safer online settings.

If possible, students should avoid reacting to cyberbullying since this may worsen the problem. Rather, they should block abusive users, report inappropriate material, save screenshots as proof, and inform a reliable adult. They should also go over their privacy settings, think deliberately before releasing personal data online, and keep in mind that anything put online could be duplicated or distributed.

Parents, guardians, teachers, and caregivers are equally vital. Open communication reassures young people that they can report cyberbullying free of consequences. Adults should learn the digital tools kids use, pay attention and helpfully react when problems arise, and set an example of polite online behavior. By embodying digital citizenship, pushing empathy, urging students to report offensive behavior, and keeping unambiguous policies for reacting to cyberbullying, schools can help to support these initiatives. Preventing cyberbullying and assisting students when incidents happen depend on close cooperation between homes and institutions.

To help curb this growing danger, policymakers must look to improve online protections around young people as technology develops. More uniform reporting standards across states should be included in future conversations, as well as greater resources for school counselors and mental health specialists, more digital literacy education in classrooms, better reporting mechanisms on social media platforms, more transparency from tech companies on how harmful material is handled, and more defenses against AI-generated harassment. Any future policy changes should properly balance constitutional rights including freedom of expression and privacy with attempts to safeguard youngsters.

Social media companies also play a large role in helping to reduce the opportunities and effects of cyberbullying. By implementing age restrictions on user accounts, removing harmful content, and providing easily accessible reporting tools within the platform, safer spaces will begin to be created.

Young people's relationships, learning, and communication will keep changing thanks in part to technology. New chances for cyberbullying may also arise as artificial intelligence solutions, digital technologies, and other developing platforms become more prevalent. Concurrent with this, these technologies could offer fresh methods for spotting bad material, improving reporting systems, and helping victims. Keeping

ahead of these developments will call for ongoing communication among families, teachers, tech companies, scientists, and decision makers.

Artificial Intelligence

Introduction

Artificial intelligence (AI) has rapidly evolved from a specialized area of computer science into one of the most influential technologies shaping modern society. According to the National Institute of Standards and Technology (NIST), artificial intelligence (AI) refers to software and systems that perform functions normally associated with human intelligence, including learning, reasoning, language understanding, problem-solving, and decision-making. As AI technologies continue to evolve, they have become integrated into education, healthcare, finance, transportation, entertainment, and everyday digital interactions.

Although artificial intelligence has been developing for decades, generative AI entered mainstream public awareness particularly rapidly following the public release of ChatGPT in November 2022. Within months, ChatGPT reached approximately 100 million monthly active users, demonstrating how quickly generative AI moved from a developing technology into a tool used by the general public. The rapid adoption of generative AI also sparked broader conversations about how these technologies could transform education, employment, communication, and everyday life.

Unlike earlier technologies that required users to seek them out actively, AI is increasingly embedded within the digital platforms young people already use every day. Search engines provide AI-generated summaries, streaming services recommend personalized content, social media platforms use recommendation algorithms to curate news feeds, and virtual assistants respond to voice commands using natural language processing. Educational tools powered by generative AI now assist students with brainstorming ideas, explaining difficult concepts, translating languages, writing code, and summarizing research.

The Stanford AI Index Report 2025 found that global AI adoption has continued to increase across education, business, healthcare, and government sectors, making AI literacy an increasingly valuable workforce competency. The report concludes that AI has shifted from an emerging technology to an essential component of modern society. As AI becomes more integrated into daily life, young people must develop not only the ability to use AI effectively but also the critical-thinking skills necessary to evaluate AI-generated information and recognize its limitations.

The Growing Presence of Artificial Intelligence

The widespread adoption of AI has fundamentally changed how information is created, distributed, and consumed. Unlike traditional software, modern AI systems continuously analyze large datasets to generate personalized recommendations, automate routine tasks, and provide users with real-time information. As AI capabilities continue to improve, many individuals now interact with AI technologies multiple times each day, often without realizing it.

Educational settings provide one of the clearest examples of this transformation. Students increasingly rely on AI-powered learning platforms that adapt instructional materials based on individual progress and performance. According to UNESCO's Guidance for Generative AI in Education and Research, AI can personalize learning experiences and increase educational accessibility, but only when students are taught to critically evaluate AI-generated information rather than accept responses without verification. This recommendation highlights that AI literacy extends beyond learning how to use AI—it also requires understanding when AI-generated information should be questioned or verified.

Outside the classroom, AI has become deeply integrated into social media platforms. Recommendation algorithms determine which videos appear on TikTok, which posts are displayed on Instagram, and which content is prioritized on YouTube. These algorithms personalize user experiences by analyzing previous interactions, viewing habits, and engagement patterns. While personalization can improve user experiences, it also influences the information individuals encounter, reinforcing the importance of critical evaluation skills.

AI has similarly transformed online search. Rather than simply displaying lists of websites, many search engines now generate AI-produced summaries that answer questions directly. Because large language models generate responses by predicting likely sequences of text rather than independently verifying facts, AI-generated summaries should be viewed as starting points for research rather than authoritative sources.

How Youth Interact with Artificial Intelligence

Young people engage with AI across numerous aspects of their daily lives, including educational purposes. One of the fastest-growing educational uses of AI involves homework assistance and tutoring. Students increasingly use AI to explain complex concepts, summarize lengthy readings, generate study guides, practice foreign languages, assist with programming assignments, and brainstorm writing ideas.

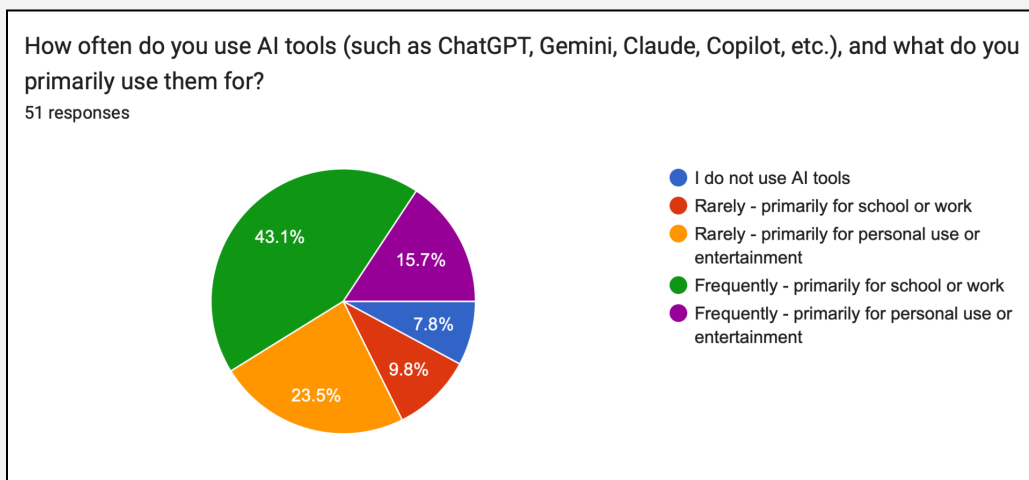
Students can also use AI to revisit topics they did not fully understand during class by asking for a concept to be explained in simpler language, requesting additional examples, or working through a problem step by step. When used responsibly, these tools can supplement classroom instruction by providing immediate feedback and individualized learning support.

AI also plays a significant role in online research. Many students now rely on AI-powered search engines to answer questions quickly rather than manually reviewing multiple websites. Although this convenience improves efficiency, it also increases the importance of teaching students how to verify AI-generated information using credible sources before relying on it for academic or personal decisions. NIST (2023) recommends verifying AI-generated information with multiple authoritative sources because AI systems cannot independently determine whether generated content is factually correct.

The findings from the Digital Defenders 2026 Online Safety Survey reflect this widespread adoption. Many participants reported using AI tools frequently, particularly for school or work-related purposes. Others indicated that they primarily use AI for

personal tasks, while a smaller number reported rarely using AI or not using it at all. These responses demonstrate that AI has already become a routine part of daily life for

many individuals across multiple age groups. The survey responses show frequent use of AI for both school/work and personal purposes across participants.



Risks of Artificial Intelligence

One of the most significant concerns is AI-generated misinformation. AI systems can sometimes generate inaccurate or fabricated information while presenting it confidently. Because these responses often appear highly convincing, users who fail to verify information may unknowingly spread misinformation or make decisions based on false information. Because AI systems generate responses based on patterns in

training data rather than true understanding, they may confidently provide incorrect information if users fail to verify their answers using credible sources.

In addition to AI-generated misinformation, privacy remains one of the most significant concerns surrounding artificial intelligence. Many AI systems collect and analyze large amounts of user data to personalize responses and improve performance. This information may include browsing history, search queries, location data, voice recordings, uploaded documents, and other personal information. While these systems often provide convenience and personalization, many users are unaware of how much information they are sharing or how it may be stored and used. Young people, in particular, may unintentionally provide sensitive information without fully understanding the long-term implications. As AI technologies continue to expand, digital literacy must include a stronger understanding of data privacy, informed consent, and responsible information sharing.

Another challenge involves algorithmic bias. Artificial intelligence systems learn by analyzing enormous datasets created by humans. Because these datasets may contain historical biases or incomplete information, AI systems can unintentionally reproduce or even amplify unfair outcomes. Biased AI systems may produce inaccurate recommendations, reinforce stereotypes, or disproportionately affect certain communities. The National Institute of Standards and Technology (NIST) emphasizes that organizations developing AI systems should actively manage these risks by promoting transparency, fairness, accountability, and continuous evaluation. Responsible AI development requires recognizing that AI systems are not inherently objective simply because they are powered by technology. This recommendation demonstrates that organizations increasingly recognize AI fairness and transparency as essential requirements rather than optional ethical considerations.

Academic integrity has also become a growing concern as generative AI becomes more accessible. Students can now generate essays, solve mathematical problems, write computer code, summarize readings, and answer homework questions within seconds. While these capabilities can support learning when used responsibly, they also create opportunities for plagiarism, overreliance on AI-generated content, and reduced development of independent problem-solving skills. Educational institutions continue to develop policies that encourage students to use AI as a learning tool rather than a replacement for critical thinking and original work.

Another emerging issue involves excessive dependence on AI systems. As AI becomes increasingly capable of answering questions and completing complex tasks, users may begin relying on AI without questioning the accuracy of its responses. Overreliance on AI can reduce independent reasoning, research skills, and decision-making abilities.

The gap between widespread AI use and formal education strengthens the need to teach users how to question, verify, and responsibly use AI-generated information. Young people should understand that AI is designed to assist human thinking—not replace it. Maintaining healthy skepticism and verifying important information remain essential skills in an AI-driven world.

Responsible Artificial Intelligence Use

As AI technologies continue to become more integrated into education and everyday life, promoting responsible AI use should become a central component of digital education. Responsible AI use requires individuals to understand not only how AI systems function but also when they should rely on them and when independent verification is necessary.

One of the most important practices is verifying AI-generated information using multiple credible sources. Although AI systems often produce helpful responses, they may also generate inaccurate or outdated information. Users should compare AI-generated answers with trusted academic publications, government websites, or other authoritative sources before making important decisions.

Protecting personal information represents another essential responsibility. Users should avoid entering sensitive financial information, passwords, medical records, or personally identifying information into AI systems unless they fully understand how the information will be stored and used. Practicing responsible data sharing helps reduce privacy risks while promoting safer interactions with AI technologies.

Understanding AI limitations is equally important. Artificial intelligence does not possess human judgment, emotions, or lived experiences. Instead, it predicts responses based on statistical patterns within its training data. Recognizing these limitations helps users avoid placing excessive trust in AI-generated recommendations while encouraging independent critical thinking.

Ethical considerations should also guide AI use. Students, educators, researchers, and professionals should use AI to enhance creativity, improve productivity, and support learning rather than replacing original work or engaging in dishonest behavior. Responsible AI use requires transparency, accountability, and thoughtful decision-making.

Cybercrime

Introduction

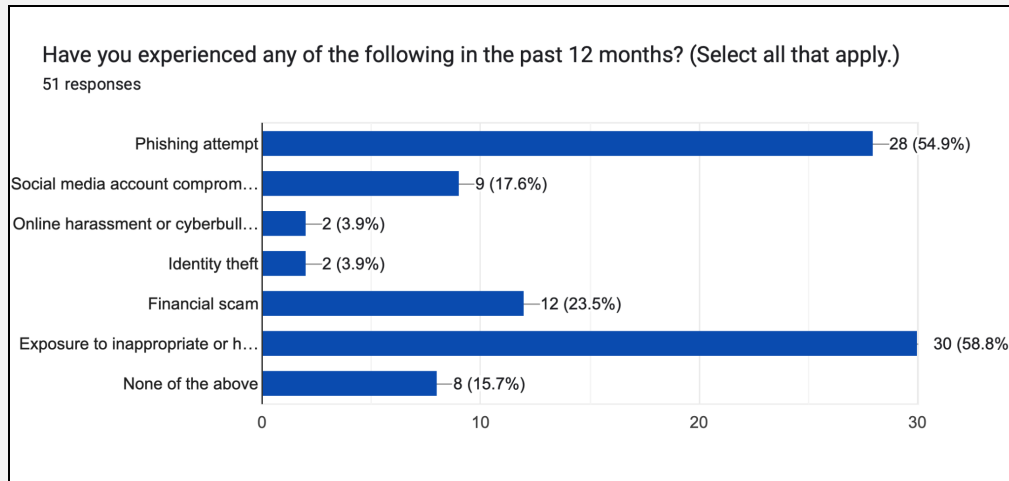
In 2025, the FBI's Internet Crime Complaint Center (IC3) received over 31,000 complaints from victims under the age of 20, over 11,000 more than they received the previous year. As technology gets more intertwined with daily life, cybercrimes have become one of the fastest growing types of crime across the world. Cybercrime can be defined as any crime involving a computer, smartphone, internet-connected device, or digital network, where criminals intend to steal money or identities and trick victims into disclosing sensitive information or acting in the attacker's best interests.

A common misconception around youth and cybercrime is that young people are too young to be targets since they have little to no money. However, cybercriminals typically seek personal data like names, birthdays, passwords, email addresses, phone numbers, and account credentials that they can use in future attacks, and young people are the perfect target since they are online more frequently than adults.

The quick development of artificial intelligence has also altered the scene of cybercrime. Criminals may now produce lifelike fake images, videos, emails, and voice recordings using AI tools to make fraud look more authentic than ever. In 2025 alone, the FBI's IC3 received over 22,000 complaints involving AI-related cybercrime, with total losses reaching more than \$890 million. As these technologies become more readily available, it's becoming more crucial for kids to question unanticipated messages and check information before responding or sharing personal data.

Common Cyber Threats Affecting Youth

Internet scams are one of the most well-known types of cybercrimes. Threat actors commonly impersonate trusted organizations like Apple, Microsoft, Amazon, or major banks to make scams feel more legitimate and entice young people to give away their information. They'll promise everything from gift cards, scholarships, and jobs to a once-in-a-lifetime offer in an effort to encourage you to give out your name, Social Security number, birthday, address, or other personal information. Often they include messages like "This is urgent!" or "This is your only chance!" in an attempt to get people to move quickly before thinking.



Phishing, one of the oldest and most common forms of internet fraud, involves using messages to trick someone into revealing personal and financial

information. Even with the substantial push to increase awareness around the danger, phishing scams were still the most commonly reported form of cybercrime among all ages in the FBI's IC3 report, totaling hundreds of thousands of submissions.

Furthermore, the Digital Defenders 2026 Online Risk Survey found that 54% of respondents had experienced a phishing attempt in the past year, highlighting the prevalent trend of threat actors using it as one of their primary methods of attack. Cybercriminals also target victims through other communication avenues such as text messages, commonly known as "smishing", QR codes, referred to as "quishing", and the internet in a variety of new formats. QR codes have become increasingly popular over the past several years, from menus in restaurants to flyers and ads in schools and public transportation, making young people tempted to scan them without considering any risks involved.

However, contrary to popular belief, not all cybercrimes are skilled hackers breaking into computer systems. Often, rather than depending on technical skill, cybercriminals utilize basic dishonesty. They could send persuasive messages, make fake social media profiles, impersonate reliable companies, or even trick victims into voluntarily giving personal information. Often referred to as social engineering, these attacks exploit human behavior instead of technical flaws.

The most concerning variation is when cyberbullies threaten to release sensitive photos of young people on the internet unless the individual gives them money. Sometimes referred to as sextortion, this tactic typically requires the perpetrator to have taken possession of an intimate image that the victim shared online; other times the offender may pose as if to possess such an image or may acquire it by exploiting an unknown security vulnerability.

How Youth Encounter Cybercrime

Social media is one of the most frequent avenues where young people encounter cybercrime. Whether it's Facebook, Snapchat, Instagram, or any other app, kids share photos and videos, connect with friends, and engage with interesting content. Unfortunately, many of these popular apps are hotbeds for scams related to false giveaways or requests for personal data to "confirm your account." In a 2024 study by the Humanities and Social Sciences Communications, young adults were significantly more willing to interact with a social media message from a perceived known sender compared to unknown senders.

Scammers take advantage of and exploit popular trends, viral trends or popular individuals on social platforms, trying to get their scam messages to look authentic by being in sync with contemporary online interests and trending content. Usually the process begins in a nonthreatening tone, such as "Hey what's up? Can you help me out with something?" After they build initial trust, the attacker starts to make his moves to get personal details, money or photos.

In multiplayer games where young people play with or against one another, it's very easy for a gamer to try and build rapport, in an attempt to steal game account credentials and trick kids into fake giveaways, selling or exchanging fraudulent game merchandise, or even leading young users to malware download sites. The many social features in many online video games mean that there are lots of ways for players to communicate and it is an unfortunate consequence that the same tools can be leveraged by crooks. Email or Text Messages If you have ever received an email or text message indicating a failed delivery of a package you never ordered, an attempt to hack your online account or that you've won a cash prize or scholarship, you're one of millions of young and adult people who have been targeted by cybercriminals via email, text messages, or QR codes.

Risks & Impact

The impact of cybercrime can have ripples well beyond financial loss. One scam, fake message, or stolen online account could negatively affect the well-being of a child, damage their reputation and relationships, lasting long after the actual incident has been dealt with. Victims of scams often feel embarrassed, anxious, angry, and guilty when they realize they've been fooled. Some young people feel ashamed for falling for a scam, and may be scared to use technology again. They can lose the confidence they have in identifying online dangers and avoid online activities they used to enjoy. When young people are victims of exploitation or blackmail, they can also feel isolated, anxious, afraid and depressed, especially if they are afraid to tell

anyone about their experience. Online attacks can damage a young person's online reputation.

When personal details, photos or videos are posted without consent they are often widely shared across social media and messaging apps. Cybercriminals can also use impersonations, fake accounts or fake information about an individual which could impact friendships, the school environment, and opportunities for study or work. As online content can be copied and distributed instantly, it may be very difficult to undo reputational damage once the content is out there. Even if the content gets deleted or removed from the platform, it can still remain searchable in many cases.

Through the use of online scams, fake online shopping sites, fraudulent investments, and the unlawful use of their bank account, victims may lose significant sums of money. In some cases, cyber criminals may target a parent's bank accounts and credit card information through their child's compromised devices and accounts. Identity theft may also result in significant financial problems in the longer term if identity information is used to commit financial fraud or open new credit accounts.

It's imperative that young people are aware that every account created on the internet stores personal information, such as names, addresses, phone numbers, birthdates, passwords, locations and photos. If this data falls into the hands of cyber criminals, young people often have little control over where it is going or what it will be used for. Sometimes seemingly innocent data can be pieced together with other personal information available to form an online profile that will help to fuel further scamming activities and identity theft. Beyond individuals, cybercrime affects the community around young people. Parents and guardians can experience financial and emotional losses while trying to regain compromised accounts, replace payment cards, or restore lost identity details.

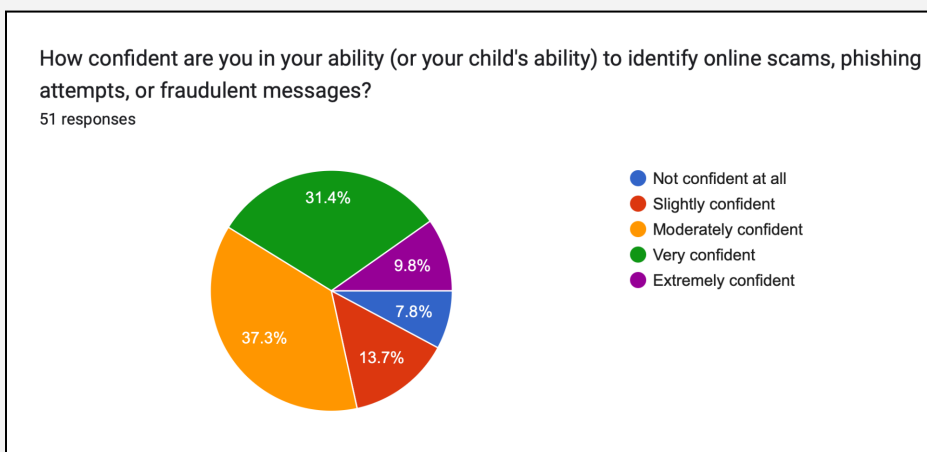
Schools can also be impacted if a student is attacked via a school device, the school's internal online system, or if an online incident negatively influences the overall student population and learning environment, such as a ransomware attack. Given the growing dependence on digital technologies in every facet of our lives, protecting against cybercrime is not just an individual problem, but the shared responsibility of communities, parents, children, and companies involved in providing technology solutions.

Digital Safety Practices

Parents and guardians serve as an important line of defense in kids' safety online. Encouraging honest and open conversations about the technology kids use can

promote engagement where children may feel comfortable asking questions, reporting something suspicious, or asking for help if something just doesn't feel right. Rather than solely focusing on restricting content, parents can develop an increased awareness of the risks of the internet with young people by talking about the various threats that they might encounter, establishing reasonable expectations about the use of technology, and encouraging young people to think before sharing any personal information and before responding to strangers online. Staying aware of what apps, games and social networks that kids engage with can also assist in recognizing risks before it's too late.

Schools and community organizations also have a critical role to play in ensuring that young people have the knowledge to use the internet effectively in today's world. Instruction in digital safety should accompany traditional cyber safety courses and classes. Young people should be informed about phishing, scams, identity theft, privacy online, artificial intelligence and social media safety so they can recognize scams before becoming victims. Libraries, nonprofit agencies, Youth programs, community organizations should complement the instruction that the school provides with additional resources, workshops for students, parents, and teachers that specifically target cybercrime trends and tips to remain safe online.



Following basic cybersecurity practices is among the simplest yet most effective measures one can take to safeguard private data online. Young people ought to

use complex, distinctive passwords for every website that they frequent online, and they shouldn't be used for multiple online accounts. Wherever possible, they should also allow for two factor authentication on all websites, which require an additional level of approval for access to the website beyond just a password. It is imperative to keep applications as well as hardware updated in order to benefit from security fixes that protect against previously discovered bugs in programming, too.

Both youth and adults should learn about and how to react when any unusual or potentially suspicious activity takes place online. Once an unknown email or text message is observed, users should avoid clicking on links or downloading any

attachments until finding out the sender's identity. In the event an account gets hacked, the victim should immediately report the incident through the appropriate channels, including the particular website or platform, a parent, school administration, or law enforcement if required. Quick and accurate reporting will assist in account recovery procedures and prevent others from falling prey to similar incidents.

Simple physical and device security practices also constitute digital safety. Laptops should be locked or closed whenever they are out of use and they ought not be left unattended when in a public space. When logging into a protected account from any public pc or whenever accessing personal data (such as a bank account) from a pc not located in your home it's recommended to use caution when working on a public Wi-Fi network, avoid transacting funds online if you must use it, or try finding a safe/secure Wi-Fi connection that uses encryption if possible.

Ultimately, effective cybersecurity relies on education. As our technology continues to change, criminals continue to find new ways to target unsuspecting users. Education about identifying threats and critical thinking will allow individuals to make safer choices on the internet and prevent crime.

Video Games

Defining Video Games and Their Evolving Role in Youth Development

Video games are interactive digital environments that allow users to participate in structured play through electronic devices, including consoles, computers, mobile applications, and virtual reality systems. Unlike traditional forms of entertainment that involve passive consumption, video games require active participation, strategic decision-making, collaboration, and increasingly, social interaction. Over the past several decades, gaming has evolved from primarily single-player recreational experiences into complex digital ecosystems that integrate communication, competition, education, creativity, and commerce, becoming one of the most common recreational activities among youth. According to the Entertainment Software Association (ESA), about 190.6 million Americans, roughly two-thirds of the United States' population, play video games for at least one hour each week. Among adolescents, participating in gaming is even more widespread, with national surveys consistently finding that a substantial majority of teenagers report playing video games consistently. These statistics illustrate that youth development can no longer exclude the discussion of gaming as a peripheral activity. Rather, it has become a

central environment where youth socialize, learn, and spend significant time in leisure.

For many young people, video games represent far more than entertainment. Multiplayer platforms allow adolescents to build friendships, collaborate with peers across geographic boundaries, participate in competitive communities, and develop problem-solving and leadership skills. Educational games, such as Duolingo, have similarly demonstrated value in promoting critical thinking, creativity, spatial reasoning, and cognitive flexibility.

During periods of social isolation, especially throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, online gaming environments also served as important spaces for maintaining interpersonal relationships and reducing feelings of loneliness among many youth. As schools began transitioning to remote learning and opportunities for in-person interactions diminished, multiplayer games were essential for maintaining relationships, fostering social interaction, and reducing feelings of loneliness. The World Health Organization (WHO) estimated that the pandemic significantly increased overall screen time among youth, while multiple studies identified corresponding increases in gaming participation as youth sought social connection through digital environments. Although the increased engagement was helpful to youth during unprecedented public health crises, researchers were also cautious. They noted that prolonged gaming, reduced physical activity, disrupted sleep schedules, and increased sedentary behavior posed new challenges that persisted even after pandemic restrictions were lifted. As a result, the pandemic demonstrated a combination of social benefits and potential developmental risks associated with prolonged gaming.

The contemporary policy debate has consequently shifted away from questioning whether young people should engage with video games and toward examining how modern gaming environments influence behavior, consumer decision-making, online safety, and adolescent development. Current debates have extended beyond gameplay itself and increasingly focus on issues such as loot boxes and randomized reward systems. These features can directly impact youth's data privacy, their vulnerability to online harassment, and disturb the effectiveness of parental controls. Governmental legislatures in the United States continue to debate whether certain monetization tools resemble gaming mechanics and whether additional consumer protections should be implemented for youth under the age of majority. Simultaneously, courts have verbalized concerns regarding youth's First Amendment rights and freedom of expression. This is particularly evident in the Supreme Court's decision in *Brown v. Entertainment Merchants Association*, which acknowledged video games as forms of protected expressive work. As gaming continues to evolve,

lawmakers face increasing challenges in protecting vulnerable young people without unnecessarily restricting innovation or constitutionally protected forms of expression.

Gaming Disorder, Excessive Engagement, and Adolescent Development

Gaming disorder is defined by the World Health Organization as a pattern of gaming behavior characterized by impaired control over gaming, increasing priority given to gaming over other interests and responsibilities, and continuation or escalation of gaming despite significant negative consequences. Importantly, the *WHO* recognizes gaming disorder as a diagnosable behavioral condition while simultaneously emphasizing that it affects only a relatively small percentage of individuals who play video games. This distinction is critical because excessive engagement should not automatically be equated with addiction or clinical impairment.

Despite its relatively limited prevalence, identifying warning signs is essential because early intervention can substantially improve outcomes. Common warning signs include a consistent inability to limit gaming time throughout the day, a decline in academic performance, withdrawal from loved ones, neglect of personal hygiene, and continued gaming despite significant consequences. These behaviors indicate concern when they persist for at least 12 months and begin to interfere with the youth's ability to function in everyday life. Most importantly, isolated periods of heavy gaming, such as during school vacations or after the release of a highly anticipated game, do not alone indicate gaming disorder. Rather, clinicians evaluate whether gaming consistently impairs an individual's functioning across multiple aspects of life.

Understanding this distinction requires recognizing the developmental realities of adolescence. The neurological regions responsible for executive functioning, impulse control, emotional regulation, and long-term decision-making continue developing well into early adulthood. Consequently, adolescents may be more likely than adults to engage in prolonged gaming sessions, respond impulsively to reward systems, or struggle to regulate screen time when external structures are absent. However, these developmental characteristics alone do not establish that gaming causes psychological harm. Adolescents are therefore uniquely vulnerable not because gaming inevitably leads to harm, but due to the neurological systems governing executive functioning and self-regulation. Excessive gaming may contribute to chronic sleep deprivation, reduced academic engagement, decreased physical activity, increased social withdrawal, and diminished participation in extracurricular activities when left unaddressed. Research also suggests that prolonged late-night gaming could interfere with healthy sleep architecture, which is particularly important during adolescence. This is because adequate sleep supports memory consolidation, emotional regulation, and brain development. These outcomes reinforce the importance of distinguishing

between healthy recreational gaming and patterns of behavior that produce measurable functional impairment.

Instead, policymakers and researchers increasingly distinguish between healthy enthusiasm and functional impairment. A teenager who spends several hours gaming while maintaining healthy relationships, academic performance, physical activity, and emotional well-being presents a fundamentally different circumstance than an individual whose gaming consistently interferes with education, employment, sleep, or interpersonal functioning. The legal and public health challenge, therefore, lies in identifying harmful behaviors without stigmatizing an activity that provides meaningful benefits for millions of young people.

Researchers and policymakers continue to debate whether gaming disorder should be understood primarily as an individual behavioral condition or as a condition in which certain game designs intentionally increase the likelihood of problematic engagement. Critics argue that features such as variable reward schedules, daily login incentives, and personalized engagement algorithms encourage prolonged play by exploiting normal psychological processes, particularly among youth. Others caution against attributing excessive gaming solely to game design, emphasizing that family dynamics, existing mental health conditions, and environmental stressors frequently contribute to problematic gaming behaviors. This ongoing debate has significant implications for future regulation, as it shapes whether responsibility should rest primarily with individuals, parents, healthcare providers, or game developers.

The broader implication extends beyond individual diagnoses. As gaming continues to become embedded within everyday social life, educational environments, and professional industries, society must avoid adopting regulatory approaches based upon moral panic rather than empirical evidence. Instead, early intervention should emphasize recognizing behavioral warning signs before significant impairment develops. Parents and educators should be encouraged to monitor changes in sleep patterns, academic performance, emotional regulation, social withdrawal, and physical activity rather than focusing exclusively on the number of hours spent gaming. Schools can support healthy gaming habits through digital literacy education and access to school counselors, while healthcare providers should routinely screen adolescents for problematic gaming behaviors during wellness visits when concerns arise. Mental health interventions such as cognitive behavioral therapy, family-based counseling, psychoeducation, and behavioral self-regulation strategies have demonstrated promise in addressing problematic gaming behaviors without stigmatizing gaming itself.

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