

Girls Inc. is committed to advancing the rights and opportunities of girls and young women, with a particular focus on the needs of girls from low-income communities and girls who face multiple, intersectional challenges. Informed by the voices of girls themselves, we advocate to break through the barriers girls face and to reform systems that impede their success.

BULLYING

Bullying is not a harmless rite of passage or an inevitable part of growing up; it should be understood as a public health problem faced by one third of all kids.¹ Bullying and harassment - either in person or electronically - negatively impacts girls' physical and mental health, as well as their ability to do well in school. Unwelcome conduct, including bullying, that is severe or pervasive and that is based on sex, gender identity, race, disability, or other protected categories is discriminatory harassment. Schools that fail to properly address cases of severe or pervasive harassment may violate federal civil rights laws.²

SEXUAL AND GENDER-BASED HARASSMENT

Sexual harassment is unwelcome conduct of a sexual nature.³ Examples include sexual advances, requests for sexual favors, sexual touching, sexual comments, jokes, gestures, and graffiti. Gender-based harassment is unwelcome conduct based on a student's failure to conform to gender stereotypes—for example, harassing a girl because she does not act the way her peers think girls should act. About 56% of girls and 40% of boys in middle and high schools experience sexual harassment.⁴ It does not matter whether the harasser intends to cause harm or not, and harassment does not necessarily require repeated incidents.



CYBERBULLYING OR CYBERHARASSMENT

Cyberbullying or cyberharassment, which takes place through the use of electronic technology, is a serious and widespread problem. Like traditional bullying or harassment, cyberbullying and cyberharassment can take a variety of forms, including spreading rumors online, posting mean comments, or making threats against others. Girls are more likely to experience this type of harassment (36.7%) than boys (30.5%), and girls are more likely to have rumors spread about them online.⁵ Cyberharassment that is based on sex or gender is prohibited by Title IX, and schools that fail to address these instances of cyberharassment may be in violation of federal anti-discrimination law.

While cyberbullying and traditional bullying share many similarities, cyberbullying is distinct for three reasons:

- Cyberbullying can happen anytime and anywhere. Unlike in classroom or on a soccer field, the victim is always vulnerable, even when they are alone.
- Online comments or messages can sometimes be anonymously posted, making them difficult to track and easy to spread.
- Even if a bully stops sending hurtful comments or messages, it may be difficult to delete all traces of the incident.

WHY IT MATTERS

Research shows that those who are bullied or harassed are more likely to experience depression, anxiety and low self-esteem.⁶ Some may even contemplate or commit suicide. Kids who experience cyberbullying have a higher likelihood of using alcohol and drugs and experiencing health problems.⁷

Bullying can also affect girls' success in school. Girls who are bullied are more likely to have lower GPAs and standardized test scores than kids who are not bullied and they are more likely to miss, skip, or drop out of school.⁸ According to a 2017 survey conducted by the National Women's Law Center, 14% of girls ages 14-18 reported missing school because they felt unsafe, either at school or on their way to school.⁹

DID YOU KNOW?

The federal civil rights law called Title IX prohibits all forms of sex-based harassment, which can include cyberharassment, in schools that receive federal funding. Title IX requires that schools do something about severe or pervasive sex-based harassment that they know or reasonably should know about. They must investigate the matter in a prompt, thorough, and fair manner. If a school determines that sex-based harassment has occurred, it must take effective steps to end it and prevent it from recurring.¹⁰

Some schools question whether they can get involved in cyberbullying that is done “off campus,” from home computers, cell phones, or elsewhere, because of concerns about students’ rights to free speech. However, Title IX requires schools to respond to hostile environments in their education programs caused by sexual harassment, regardless of where—or in what form—the conduct occurs.¹¹

WHAT WE CAN DO

- Urge the Department of Education to maintain guidance on schools’ legal obligations under Title IX, continue strong enforcement of the law, and continue to make public the list of schools under investigation.
- Reach out to your school district to learn about local policies designed to address bullying and harassment when it occurs.
- Look up your local school’s Title IX Coordinator and educate students and families about Title IX, which protects a student’s right to an education free from sex-based harassment and sexual violence.
- Train teachers to identify the signs of trauma that might be the result of a kid being bullied or the reason a kid is bullying others; instead of opting for zero-tolerance policies in response to bullying, schools should help young people get the mental health resources they need to heal.
- Create an environment in which kids feel comfortable reporting incidents and have the training they need to be “active bystanders” in their communities.



END NOTES

1. Stopbullying.gov. Retrieved from <https://www.stopbullying.gov/media/facts/index.html#listing>.
2. Ali, Russlynn. (2011). *Dear Colleague Letter*. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Education, Office for Civil Rights. Retrieved from <https://www2.ed.gov/about/offices/list/ocr/letters/colleague-201104.pdf>.
3. Ibid, see 2.
4. Hill, Catherine, & Kearl, Holly. (2011). *Crossing the Line: Sexual Harassment at School*. Washington, DC: American Association of University Women. Retrieved from <http://www.aauw.org/research/crossing-the-line/>.
5. Ibid, see 4.
6. Ibid, see 2.
7. National Women’s Law Center. (2017). *Title IX Protections From Bullying & Harassment in School: FAQs for Students*. Retrieved from <https://nwl.org/resources/title-ix-protections-bullying-harassment-school-faqs-students/>.
8. Ibid, see 1.
9. Stopbullying.gov. (2012). *What is Cyberbullying*. U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. Retrieved from <https://www.stopbullying.gov/cyberbullying/what-is-it/index.html>.
10. National Women’s Law Center. (2017). *Let Her Learn: Stopping School Pushout for Girls Who Have Suffered Harassment and Sexual Violence*. Retrieved from <https://nwl.org/resources/stopping-school-pushout-overview-and-key-findings/>.
11. Ibid, see 10.