

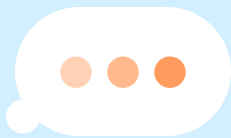
A parent's guide to cyberbullying

UPDATED 2026 EDITION

hey, you've been quiet lately

Are you
okay?

Delivered



How to spot cyberbullying, start the conversation, and help your child through it

Kirk Smalley
Founder, Stand for the Silent

Based on the original guide by
Karen S. Goldberg, LCSW-C

*Stand
for the
Silent*

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About this edition: This updated 2026 edition builds on the original guide by Karen S. Goldberg, LCSW-C. Stand for the Silent updated it with current research and statistics, and added a new chapter on AI.

Worried about safety right now?

Go straight to When not to wait, page 17.

Your free online toolkit

Templates, checklists, conversation cards.
standforthesilent.org/areyouokay/toolkit

A note from Kirk.

Kirk Smalley has shared his son Ty's story with millions of students across the country. When he speaks, a gym or auditorium full of kids goes completely quiet, and afterward, many of them write to him.



Kirk Smalley, founder of Stand for the Silent

“You can bully somebody 24 hours a day, seven days a week, right there in their own bedroom.”

My name is Kirk Smalley, and I'm Ty's dad.

In 2010, Laura and I lost our 11-year-old son, Ty, after he'd been bullied for more than two years. We couldn't live in a world like that, so when a group of high school students started Stand for the Silent in Ty's name, we made it our life's work. Laura and I carried Ty's story into schools together for years, and I've kept carrying it since we lost her. More than 195,000 kids and parents have written to me along the way. I've learned an awful lot, and there are some things you really ought to know.

Kids that are being bullied, they learn to hide it real well. They get to where they even quit telling people about it, because it just seems like it makes the bullying get worse. And nowadays, you can bully somebody 24 hours a day, seven days a week, right there in their own bedroom.

And we can't see it happening. They're not going to bring it to us, so we have to go to them. That's why we got to start communicating with our kids again. We got to start listening. No matter how happy or healthy they seem, we got to learn to talk to them again, and let them know they don't have to act out that pain by hurting themselves or anybody else. We can talk it out.

This guide shows you how to see something, say something, and do something. It's built on the work of Karen Goldberg. Karen spent 45 years as a therapist working with kids, teenagers, and whole families, and her original guide taught me a lot about these conversations.

You don't have to read it all at once, and you don't have to get it perfect. You just have to start.

ImL,

ImL is the “I love you” hand sign, written out. To us, it means I love you, I support you, and I've got your back.

Why this matters now.

— Social media and cyberbullying

Social media gives kids a way to share what matters to them, stay close to friends, and find people who understand them. It also has a dark side. Cyberbullying does real harm to young people, and its effects can follow them for years.

Bullying is bullying, whether it happens in a hallway or on a phone. What makes cyberbullying different is where it finds your child: at night, in their room, when no one else is around. It can reach them at any hour, it can spread to an entire school in minutes, and it often leaves no outward signs at all. Many kids feel too ashamed or embarrassed to tell an adult, so they carry it alone.

— Why we can't wait

The data is staggering, and the toll on young lives cannot be measured in statistics.

58%

of U.S. teens ages 13 to 17 say they've been cyberbullied at some point, and about 1 in 3 in just the past month.

Cyberbullying Research Center, 2025

Behind each of those numbers is a kid who may be dreading the next notification on their phone.

Introduction

If you're a parent, you probably have questions like these:

What can I do to keep my child safe?

What do I need to know?

How do I begin a conversation?

How do I get others involved?

Those are the right questions, and this guide is built to answer them.

How this guide can help

Are You Okay? gives you practical steps to recognize cyberbullying, talk with your child about it, act when it's happening, and help them heal if harm has already been done. Teachers, counselors, school administrators, and after-school leaders will find it useful, too.

We say “parent” throughout, but we mean anyone raising a child: grandparents, foster parents, guardians, and other caregivers. You don't need to be an expert in technology to use this guide.

If you work with kids: The conversation advice in this guide works in any role. Follow your organization's procedures for student safety, confidentiality, and reporting, including any reporting your role requires, and involve the child's parents or caregivers when it's appropriate and safe for the child. You'll find tools for educators at standforthesilent.org/areyouokay/toolkit.

**Kids don't need parents who know every app.
They need parents who notice, who stay
calm, and who keep the door open.**

The pages ahead will help you do that, one step at a time.

How to use this guide.

This guide is built on three simple steps. Each one builds on the last, and together they give you a way to help your child through cyberbullying, and a model they can lean on for the other hard things they'll face. The fourth part applies all three to AI.

1

See something

Notice when your child may be struggling.

Changes in mood and behavior are often the first sign that something is wrong. This part helps you recognize the signs of cyberbullying, understand why so many kids stay silent, and know what's at stake.

+ The signs to watch for + Why kids stay quiet + What's at stake

2

Say something

Open the door, gently.

The urge to fix it and rescue them is strong. This part helps you hold off, listen without judging, and use questions that invite your child to talk instead of overwhelming them.

+ Climb the ladder + Questions that invite + When they tell you

3

Do something

Take action, together.

Once you know what's happening, you'll make a plan with your child, work with the school, know when to bring in more help, and bring your community into the effort.

+ Make a plan together + Work with the school + Bring others in

4

AI and your child

When the one they talk to isn't a person.

Many kids now talk to chatbots, programs run by artificial intelligence (AI) that write back like a person, and some confide in them instead of people. This part shows you what's happening, what researchers have found, and how to see, say, and do something about it.

+ What's happening + What parents should know + Make a plan

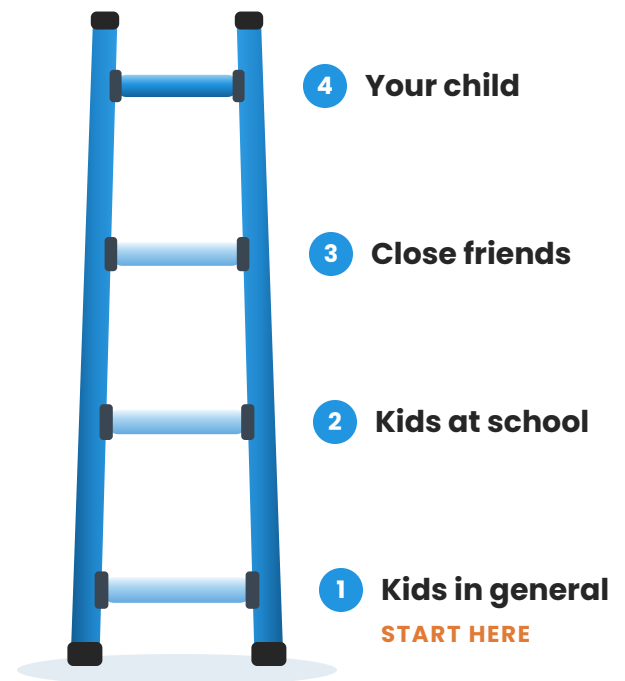
Start from afar.

You may be surprised how far you can get just by looking, listening, and asking questions that invite instead of overwhelm.

Many kids won't answer "Are you being bullied?" But many find it easier to talk about what's happening to other kids. That's the idea at the heart of this guide.

Picture a ladder. You start on the bottom rung, talking about kids in general, and climb toward your child only as far as they let you. Along the way, you're helping them make sense of what they're going through, and showing them there are trustworthy adults they can turn to.

You'll learn how in **Say something**.



A few things to know

- **Read it in order, or start where you need to.** If you're worried about your child's safety right now, go to page 17. If you already know what's happening, start with Do something on page 21.
- **Look for the toolkit.** Free templates, checklists, and conversation cards are waiting at standforthesilent.org/areyouokay/toolkit.
- **Help is always close.** Crisis lines are on page 39, and anywhere in the guide where they matter most.
- **One calm conversation is a real start.** You can always come back to it.

See something.

This part helps you notice what your child may not be saying: what cyberbullying looks like, the signs to watch for, and why so many kids stay quiet.



*“When you connect, you might be all alone...
What do you do when you think that
nobody’s on your side?”*

Nick, cyberbullying survivor

See something

p. 9

What it looks like

See something

p. 10

Know the signs

See something

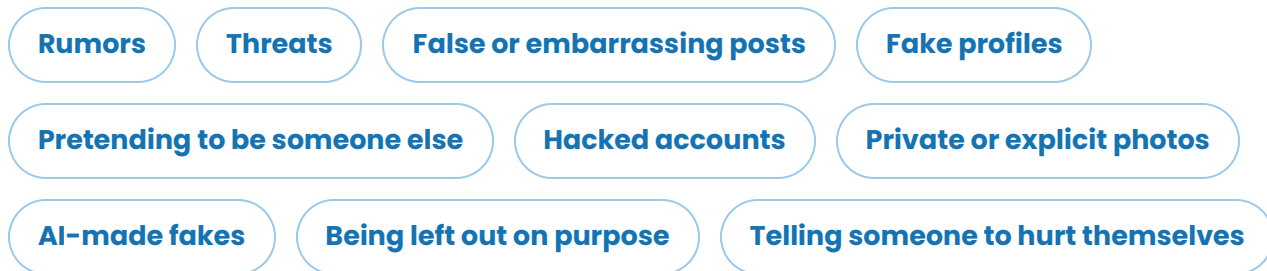
p. 11

Understand the silence

What it looks like.

Cyberbullying takes many forms, but they all have one thing in common: they use technology to humiliate, hurt, or control someone.

— The forms it takes



Some of it is loud, like a threat or a cruel post that spreads through a school. Much of it is quiet: a group chat that goes silent when your child joins, a rumor passed from phone to phone, or a photo they never agreed to share.

Not every hurtful moment is bullying. Friendships change, and kids get left out sometimes. It becomes bullying when someone is targeted on purpose by kids with more power or status, and it happens more than once or could easily happen again. Either way, if your child is hurting, it deserves your attention, and one serious incident is enough to act.

Newer forms are harder to spot. With free AI apps, kids can make fake photos, videos, and even voices of real classmates, including fake nudes. A fake can hurt just as much as a real one. If you come across a sexual image of anyone under 18, real or fake, don't screenshot, download, or forward it, even as proof. Page 23 explains what to do, and page 30 has more on AI.

— Where it happens

Anywhere kids connect: texts, social apps, video and photo sharing, and online games. It rarely stays in one place. What starts in a game can move to a group chat that night and follow your child into school the next morning.

Know the signs.

Changes in mood and behavior are often the first sign that a child is facing something they aren't ready to handle.

Noticing early is your chance to step in before things get worse, and knowing what to look for will help you stay calm when you talk.

— Watch for a child who

- Stops using their phone or computer, even though they used to enjoy it
- Gets secretive about being online or about their phone
- Turns off or changes the screen when you walk by
- Seems nervous or jumpy when a message comes in
- Hints at, or talks vaguely about, someone being mean online
- Avoids school, practice, or usual activities, often saying they feel sick
- Seems sad, angry, or withdrawn after being online
- Sleeps, eats, or does schoolwork differently than usual
- Spends hours talking to AI, especially late at night (see page 34)

One sign isn't the story

Any one of these can be ordinary kid behavior. Look for something new, something that lasts, or several signs together.

When not to wait

If your child talks about wanting to die or hurt themselves, says they feel hopeless or trapped, looks up ways to die, or starts giving away things that matter to them, stay with them and call or text **988**. If there's immediate danger, call **911**.

"I began having severe meltdowns and my mom couldn't figure out why."

A student, writing to Kirk

Understand the silence.

Kids stay quiet for many reasons, and silence doesn't always mean they don't trust you. They may be trying to push away the pain, feel ashamed, or worry about how others will react.

— Why kids don't tell

- **They don't recognize it as wrong**, or don't know how to handle it.
- **They're trying to figure it out on their own** before they decide what to do.
- **They're afraid telling will make it worse.**
- **They don't want to be seen as a snitch**, or they doubt adults can help.
- **They're afraid of losing their phone** or their time online.

"People never know because I always have a smile on my face but they don't know what really goes on."

A student, writing to Kirk

Cyberbullying can stir up powerlessness, shame, anger, guilt, and isolation. When those feelings go on for a long time, or a child faces them alone, they can contribute to anxiety, depression, trouble at school, and self-harm. Kids are still building the coping skills adults rely on, which is why a steady adult matters so much.

Staying quiet with you doesn't always mean telling no one. Some kids now take it to an AI chatbot before they tell anyone in their life. Part 4, starting on page 30, explains what that means for you.

WHAT'S AT STAKE

Cyberbullying goes straight to a child's self-respect and self-esteem. Support from the adults around them can help them heal, and it's never too late to start.

— **Next:** once you've seen something, **Say something** shows you how to start the conversation.

Say something.

This part walks you through the conversation itself: how to set the stage, what to ask, and what to say when your child finally opens up.

“The littler kids in society now, they don’t come up and say, mom, I had a hard day, I need to talk. Instead, they say, will you play with me? You know, when your child comes up and says, mom, will you play with me? You know what I would give for my son to come back up to me and say, will you play with me, dad? Lay your phone down. Quit scrolling through Facebook. Get rid of Snapchat for a while. You know, talk to your kid. Spend every second that you can spend with them.”

Kirk Smalley, Ty’s dad

Say something p. 13

Lay a foundation

Say something p. 14

Climb the ladder

Say something p. 16

When they tell you

Say something p. 17

When not to wait

Say something p. 18

What would you do?

Say something p. 20

If they stay silent

Lay a foundation.

Before any big conversation, set the stage. How you show up matters as much as what you say.

Speaking calmly and sharing what you've noticed tells your child something important: what they're going through isn't invisible, it isn't being ignored, and it isn't too painful for you to hear.

Kids cope better when they feel believed and supported, and knowing you've noticed is part of that support.

How to show up

- **Stay calm.** Your face, your tone, and the way you sit say as much as your words. Kids open up more easily when they don't see alarm.
- **Describe, don't interpret.** "You've seemed quiet after school this week" invites them in. "Something's wrong with you" closes the door.
- **Ask, then really listen.** Use open-ended questions, check that you understood, and ask them to tell you more.
- **Hold off on fixing it.** The urge to fix and rescue is strong. For now, your job is to understand, unless you're worried about their safety. Then see the box on the next page.
- **Adjust for age.** Younger kids need you closer: shorter talks, more direct questions, and an adult who checks in. Teens need more privacy and a real say in what happens next.

Pick a side-by-side moment

Hard talks are easier when you're not face to face.



In the car



On a walk



Cooking together



Late at night

Watch for the invitation

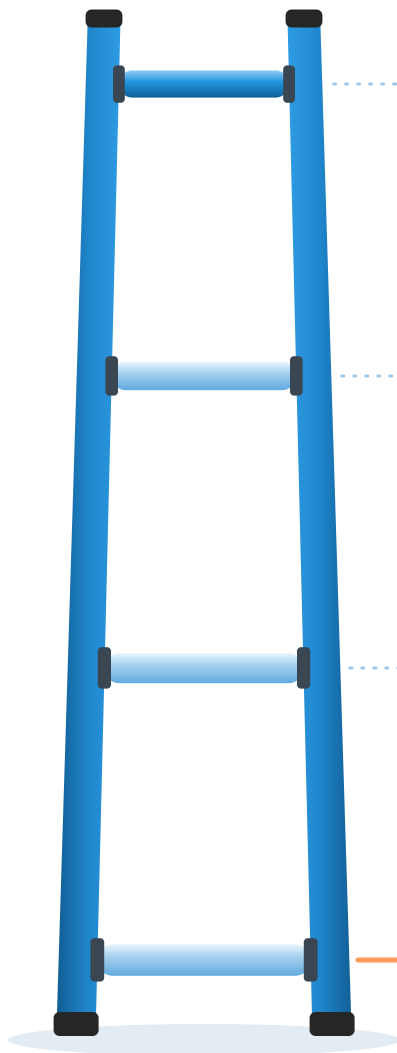
Kids rarely say "I need to talk." Older kids ask, "Can you drive me to practice?" or linger in the kitchen after everyone else has gone to bed. That's the invitation. Put the phone down and say yes.

It may take more than one talk

If things stall or your child seems worn out, say so gently and suggest picking it up another time. Then make sure you do.

Climb the ladder.

The ladder is a way to ask about bullying without putting your child on the spot. Start at the bottom with kids in general, and climb toward your own child only as far as they let you. Most talks won't reach the top, and that's okay. The goal is to keep them talking.



4 Your child

Only when they're ready

"Has anything like this ever happened to you?"

"Is anyone being mean to you?"

"Are you okay?"

3 Close friends

The people closest to them

"Do you know people who have been through this? How did they feel?"

"Has anyone ever asked you for advice about it?"

2 Kids at school

What they see and hear at school

"Does stuff like that happen at your school?"

"What makes someone start picking on another kid?"

"Why do you think some kids do it?"

1 Kids in general

↑ **START HERE**

A story in the news, a show, a trend

"Do you think this really happens? What makes you say that?"

"I read that some kids are making fake photos of classmates with AI. Is that real, or just the news?"

Worried about their safety? Don't wait to climb. If you think your child may be considering suicide, ask directly: "Are you thinking about killing yourself?" Asking won't put the idea in their head. Stay with them. If they're in immediate danger, call **911**. Otherwise, turn to page 17 for what to do next.

As you climb.

A few things make the climb easier, especially once the conversation starts getting real.

Use their words.

Many kids don't call it bullying. They say "drama," "messaging around," or "it's nothing." Use the words they use, and they'll feel understood instead of labeled.

Watch what their body says.

Avoiding your eyes, tearing up, hunching over. Take it as a cue to slow down. Don't guess.

Normalize, but don't minimize.

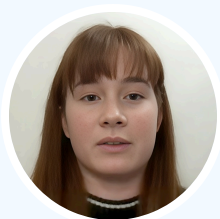
"A lot of kids go through this" helps them feel less alone. "Kids will be kids" tells them to stop talking.

If it's about "a friend," stay with the friend.

Kids often test the water by talking about someone else. You don't need a confession. Answer as if it's about the friend, and let them come back to it.

Don't punish them for telling.

Some kids keep quiet because they're afraid of losing their phone or getting in trouble. Tell them, before they even ask, that telling you will never get them punished. If staying safe means changing a setting or taking a break from an app, you'll decide that together.



"Parents definitely need to ask their kids, are you okay? Ask them how they're feeling, ask them, are people being mean to you?"

— **Caleigh** Cyberbullying survivor

When they tell you.

If your child opens up, your first words matter. Kids watch your reaction closely, and if you panic, get angry, or rush to fix it, they may decide telling you was a mistake. Your first job is to make them glad they told you.

— Say this first

“Thank you for telling me.”

It took courage to tell you.

“It’s not your fault.”

Kids often blame themselves.

**“You’re not in trouble
for telling me.”**

Many kids keep quiet for fear of trouble.

“We’ll figure this out together.”

They don’t have to handle it alone.

— Then

- **Let them tell it their way.** Listen without interrupting.
- **Ask what they want to happen.** It gives them back some control.
- **Be honest about secrets.** You won’t share more than you need to, but you can’t keep a secret if someone’s in danger.
- **Help them hold back.** Fighting back online can make things worse, and it can get them in trouble, too.
- **If you reacted badly, go back.** Say so: “I was upset when you told me, and I’m sorry. I’m listening now.”

If it’s serious, don’t wait. For danger right now, talk of suicide or self-harm, or a sexual image, turn to page 17.

— **Ready to act now?** Skip ahead to **Do something** on page 21.

When not to wait.

Most of what happens online can be handled calmly, over a few days. These situations can't wait. Each has its own kind of help, and more than one may apply.

911 Someone is in danger right now

If anyone needs police, fire, or an ambulance right now, call **911**. That includes a threat of violence that could happen soon, someone who has been hurt, or a child who may act on thoughts of suicide.

988 Thoughts of suicide or self-harm

If your child talks about wanting to die or hurt themselves, stay with them and call or text **988**, or chat at 988lifeline.org. You can also text HOME to **741741**. If you're worried and not sure what to do, you can call 988 on your own. Ask directly (see page 14), and when it's safe to, put medicines, weapons, and anything else they could use to hurt themselves out of reach.

NCMEC Someone wants, or threatens to share, a sexual image

- **If someone is demanding money or more images**, don't pay, and stop replying.
- Don't screenshot, download, or forward the image, and don't delete your child's messages or account.
- **Report it** to the CyberTipline run by the National Center for Missing & Exploited Children (NCMEC) at report.cybertip.org or 1-800-843-5678.

The full steps are on pages 23 and 24.

Threats that aren't immediate belong with the app or website where they happened, the school, and your local police non-emergency line (page 26). **Whatever happened, it's not your child's fault.**

What would you do?

Sometimes the easiest way in is a situation that isn't about anyone real. Read one together, then ask: What would most kids do? What would you do? What would make it hard?

1 The poll

"A poll in your grade's group chat is voting on the 'most annoying' kid."

For you: Listen for whether they'd laugh along, stay quiet, or speak up. Page 38 has what a kid who sees it can do.

2 The chat you're not in

"Your friends post photos from a sleepover you weren't invited to, and you find out they have a group chat without you."

For you: Being left out can hurt, even when it isn't bullying. Listen for whether it's happening on purpose.

3 The edited photo

"An edited photo of a boy in your class is going around, and people say AI made it."

For you: Take a fake sexual image as seriously as a real one. Don't share it or make copies, even as proof. See page 23.

4 The new friend in the game

"Someone you met in an online game wants to move to a private app and asks for a photo."

For you: Talk about why someone would want to move somewhere private.

5 The threat

"Someone you've been chatting with says they'll share a photo you sent unless you pay them."

For you: Make sure they know three things: don't pay, stop replying, and tell you right away. They won't be in trouble. See page 24.

6 The comment you regret

"You posted something about another kid as a joke, and now they haven't been at school for two days."

For you: If your child sees themselves here, turn to page 27.

More scenarios, including one about AI, are on the free conversation cards at standforthesilent.org/areyouokay/toolkit.

The first message.

For a lot of kids, a text is easier than a talk.

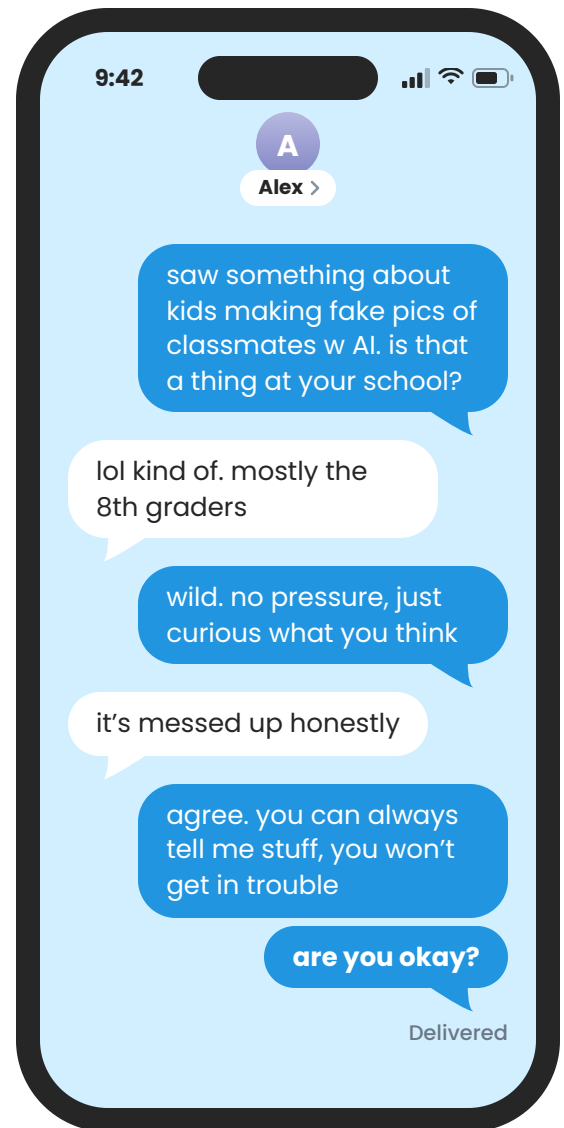
A meme at 11 p.m. or a “can I ask you something” text may be your teen’s version of “will you play with me?” Answer it. And sometimes, send the first one yourself.

Openers to borrow

- **From afar:** “random q: is that AI fake photo thing real or just the news?”
- **Checking in:** “you seemed off after school today. want to grab food later?”
- **More direct:** “hey, is anyone giving you a hard time? you can tell me anything.”
- **If they tell you:** “thank you for telling me. you’re not in trouble. we’ll figure it out.”

A few tips

- **Keep it short.** One line beats a paragraph.
- **Don’t expect an instant answer.** A late reply is still a reply.
- **Match their style.** Lowercase and emoji are fine.



A conversation that starts from afar and stays light.

If they stay silent.

If your child won't talk and you've seen warning signs, trust your instincts. An uncomfortable conversation is a small risk next to the chance to prevent harm.

Don't expect this conversation to go smoothly. Kids may stay silent because they're trying to protect themselves, or you. Your goal is to show them you won't stop caring about their safety, and to stay calm and respectful while you do.

- 1 Remind them why you're asking.** Part of being a parent is keeping them safe, and helping them learn to keep themselves safe.
- 2 Don't force them to talk, but ask them to listen.** Tell them they don't have to say anything yet. Ask only that they hear you out, and that they think about letting someone help them carry this.
- 3 Name what you've noticed.** Describe the specific signs you've seen, and explain that they're signs of stress that kids, and adults, go through.
- 4 Ask what makes talking hard.** Invite them to share their worries about talking to you, even if they can't share the rest yet.
- 5 Be honest about what comes next.** If they still won't talk and you believe they're in danger, tell them that, as their parent, you need to look at their phone together, only for signs of danger, not to read everything. Explain what you'll look for and why. It's about safety, not punishment.
- 6 Offer another door.** If talking to you feels too hard, help them find someone they can talk to: a relative, a coach, the school counselor, or their doctor. What matters most is that they talk to someone.

Stay steady

If they get angry or upset, stay calm and let them know you heard them: "I can tell you're really upset, and I'm not going anywhere." You don't have to win the argument. Take a break and come back to it.

If the signs point to danger

Don't wait for them to talk. Stay with them, and call or text **988**, or call **911** if the danger is immediate. See page 17.

— **Next:** whether they've told you or you've seen enough, **Do something** shows you what to do.

Do something.

This part helps you act: make a plan with your child, protect them online, work with their school, and know when to bring in more help.

“If you don’t remember a single other word I say up here today, I want you to try really, really hard to remember this man’s words. This guy’s name was Edward Hale. He was a writer and he said, ‘I am only one, but I am one. I can’t do everything, but I can do something. And because I can’t do everything, I will not refuse to do that something that I can do.’”

Kirk Smalley, speaking to students

Kirk is quoting a saying long credited to Edward Everett Hale (1822–1909), an American author and minister.

Do something p. 22

Make a plan together

Do something p. 23

Images and threats

Do something p. 25

Work with the school

Do something p. 26

Bring in more help

Do something p. 27

If your child is bullying

Do something p. 29

Beyond your home

Make a plan together.

Review these options with your child. You make the final call, but talking it through teaches them how to weigh choices, and each step tells you whether the next one is needed.

First, save the evidence

Before you block or report anything, save it. Blocking and reporting can make posts disappear, and you may need them later.

- Take screenshots that show the message, the username, and the date.
- Copy links, and write down what happened and when, in your child's words.
- Keep copies somewhere other than the phone, like your email or a printout.

One exception: for a sexual image of anyone under 18, save the messages, never the image. See page 23.

— Then, with your child

- **Block and lock down accounts.** Use privacy settings to block the person and limit who can see and contact your child.
- **Report it to the platform.** Every major app has a way to report harassment.
- **Don't reply or strike back.** Replying usually feeds it. Slow breathing or stepping away from the screen can help your child hold off.
- **Consider one clear request to stop.** Only with a classmate or former friend, never a stranger, an adult, or anyone making threats or asking for images. Send it once, save a screenshot, and don't answer what comes back.

A request to stop

"Stop posting about me and stop messaging me. I'm not going to reply after this."

If it keeps going: the school (page 25), the police for threats or stalking (page 26), or a counselor or doctor if your child is struggling (page 26).

When it's explicit or AI-made.

Finding out that someone has shared or made a sexual image of your child is one of the most frightening things a parent can face. There's also more you can do about it than most parents realize, and the first steps are the same whether the image is real or made with AI.

Start with your child. Whether they sent a photo, were tricked, or never sent anything at all, it is not their fault. Tell them that before anything else: "You're not in trouble. You're the one being hurt here, and we're going to handle this together."

Don't

- Don't screenshot, download, or forward the image, not even as evidence.
- Don't delete or move an image that's already on a device until you've called NCMEC for help.
- Don't confront the person who shared it.
- Don't share it with other parents, even to warn them.

Do

- Save the messages around it, the sender's username, and the date, without the image.
- Report it to NCMEC's CyberTipline at report.cybertip.org or 1-800-843-5678.
- Report it to the platform, and tell the school if classmates are involved. You can also report it to your local police.

— Getting it taken down

- **Take It Down** (takeitdown.ncmec.org) is a free, anonymous service for nude or sexual images taken before age 18. Your child uses it on the device that has the image, and the image never leaves that device. It helps participating platforms find and remove exact copies. It can't reach encrypted private chats, so report to the platform, too.
- **Platforms have to act.** Federal law now requires them to remove intimate images shared without consent, including AI-made ones, within 48 hours of a valid request.
- **If it's an image of another child,** don't try to handle it yourself. Report it to the CyberTipline and follow their guidance.

Stay close. The shame that comes with this can feel unbearable to a kid. Keep checking in, and if they say anything about hurting themselves, stay with them and call or text **988**.

If someone is threatening them.

This is called sextortion. It usually starts with someone online who seems like a teen, often flirting, who asks for a photo. Then the tone changes: send money or more pictures, or everyone sees it.

It can happen to any kid. When the goal is money, the FBI says most victims are boys ages 14 to 17. The people doing it are often part of organized scams, and they count on a child being too scared and ashamed to tell anyone. That's why the most important thing you can do is make it safe for your child to tell you.

What to do

- 1 **Don't pay.** Paying rarely ends it, and it often leads to more demands. If your child already paid, stop now.
- 2 **Stop responding.** Don't send anything else, and don't try to reason with them.
- 3 **Save, report, then block.** Screenshot the conversation without the image, and note the sender's username and profile link. Report the account in the app, then block it. Don't delete your child's messages or account.
- 4 **Report it** to NCMEC's CyberTipline at report.cybertip.org or 1-800-843-5678, and to the FBI at tips.fbi.gov or 1-800-CALL-FBI. You can also contact your local police.
- 5 **Secure their accounts.** Change passwords and turn on two-factor sign-in.
- 6 **Get the image taken down.** If an image was shared or might be, see Take It Down on page 23.

Watch out for "recovery" offers

Don't pay a service that promises to find the person or delete the images. That can be another scam. Report only to the platform, NCMEC, the FBI, or the police.

Support them through it

Kids who are being sextorted can feel trapped and panicked. Stay close, and keep reminding them it isn't their fault. A frightened or ashamed child can call or text **988**, or you can call with them. If anyone is in danger right now, call **911**.

Work with the school.

Even when it happens online, cyberbullying usually connects to school. You often find out first, but the school can see what you can't: who's involved, what's happening in the hallway, and whether it's part of a pattern.

"You can't go in there yelling and screaming 'protect my kid,' no matter how bad you want to do that. We got to work with the schools."

Kirk Smalley

Before the meeting

- Bring your evidence: screenshots, dates, and your notes.
- Ask for the school's bullying policy and how it covers what happens online.
- Ask your child what would help them feel safe at school. Their answer belongs in the plan.

In the meeting

- Stay calm and stick to the facts.
- Ask who will look into it, how they'll keep your child safe meanwhile, and when you'll hear back.
- Ask how they'll protect your child from retaliation.
- Ask them not to put the kids in a room together to "work it out."
- If images are involved, ask that no one at school view or share them, and ask about counseling.

After the meeting

- Send a short email that sums up what was agreed.
- Keep a simple log of every conversation, with dates.
- Follow up in writing if you don't hear back. If nothing changes, write to the principal, then the superintendent.
- If the bullying is about race, national origin, sex, disability, or religion, say so in writing. Federal civil rights law requires the school to address it.

"The teachers and principal haven't talked to them or even done anything in general to help at all."

A student, writing to Kirk

That's why following up matters. Most schools want to help, and a calm, persistent parent with good records makes sure a child doesn't fall through the cracks. Email templates for each step are in the free toolkit at standforthesilent.org/areyouokay/toolkit.

Bring in more help.

Some situations are bigger than a family should handle alone, and that's what the people on the other end of the line are there for.

— Contact the police when there are

- Threats of violence
- Stalking, or someone tracking where your child goes
- Hate crimes
- Private information shared to put your child at risk, like their address

Sexual images and sextortion have their own steps on pages 23 and 24.

Call **911** if anyone is in danger right now.

Otherwise, use your local police non-emergency line, bring your evidence, and ask for a report number.

— Talk to a professional when

- The signs from page 10 last, or get worse
- Your child seems hopeless, withdrawn, or not like themselves
- They're struggling with sleep, eating, or school
- You're not sure what to do next

Start with whoever your child trusts most: the school counselor, their doctor, or a therapist. You can simply say, "I think my child is being bullied online, and it's affecting them. Can we talk?" Let your child know that seeing someone is a way to get support, never a punishment.

If cost is a worry, the school counselor and your child's doctor are good first stops, and calling **211** can point you to free and low-cost counseling nearby.

If they talk about hurting themselves

Stay with them and call or text **988**, any time. If anyone is in danger right now, call **911**. You can call 988 for yourself, too. More on page 17.

If your child is the one bullying.

"I am a bully. All my friends are bullies. Seeing your presentation made me want to change that. I realize now someone's life is not worth being cool or funny for a day... I wish I could find them and tell them I am sorry."

A student, writing to Kirk

Finding out your child has been hurting someone is hard to hear. Most parents' first instinct is to defend their child or to explode. Try to do neither. Your child is not a bad kid, but they did something that hurt someone, and how you respond now will shape whether they learn from it.

Some kids who bully online are being bullied themselves, or are trying to fit in with friends who do it. Many don't realize how much damage a joke or a pile-on can do until someone helps them see it.

Start by listening

- Stay calm, and let them tell you what happened before you react.
- Ask what was going on: were friends involved, were they angry about something, or is someone treating them this way too?
- Look at what was actually posted or sent, together.

"As a kid you don't see what you are doing to others."

An adult, writing to Kirk about bullying others as a kid

Breaking the cycle

Kids who hurt others are sometimes carrying hurt of their own, from being bullied, left out, or something harder at home. That doesn't excuse what they did, but it can point to what they need. Every parent who helps their child make it right helps break the cycle.

If your child is also being targeted, or seems hopeless or not like themselves, the advice on page 26 applies to them, too.

Help them make it right.

The goal is to help your child understand what happened, repair what they can, and choose differently next time, not to punish them into feeling terrible.

- 1 **Be clear that it's not okay.** Separate the behavior from who they are: "You're a good kid, and this was a hurtful thing to do."
- 2 **Help them see the other side.** Ask, "How do you think they felt when they saw it?" and give them time to answer.
- 3 **Undo what you can.** Take down posts, leave group chats that target someone, and ask friends to stop sharing.
- 4 **Apologize, if the other child wants it.** Check with the school or the other family first, because contact that isn't welcome can feel like more of the same. A sincere apology can mean a great deal.
- 5 **Choose consequences that teach.** Tie them to what happened, like supervised phone use for a while or rebuilding trust step by step. Aim for learning, not humiliation.
- 6 **Work with the school.** Let them know you're taking it seriously, and ask how you can help repair things.
- 7 **Model it at home.** Kids learn how to treat people from how they see us treat people, including online.
- 8 **Keep checking in.** Change takes time. If it keeps happening, a counselor can help get at what's underneath it.

"When we mess up, we got to learn to go back and apologize. Believe me, it can make a lifetime's worth of difference to somebody."

Kirk Smalley

A free "Making it right" worksheet is in the toolkit at standforthesilent.org/areyouokay/toolkit.

Beyond your home.

Cyberbullying isn't just a problem between two kids, and it won't end one situation at a time. You already have more on your plate than there are hours in the day, so here are a few small steps that make a real difference.

— At your child's school

- **Share this guide** with your PTA and school counselor: standforthesilent.org/areyouokay.
- **Ask about the school's policies**, including how they handle online bullying and AI-made images.
- **Suggest a parent night** on cyberbullying and what families can do.
- **Invite Stand for the Silent** to speak to your students.

— In your community

- **Share this guide with three other parents**, and follow up with a call or a coffee.
- **Start a small group of parents** who want to raise awareness and figure out next steps together.
- **Bring people together:** invite a school counselor or a local police officer to talk with parents.
- **Let local leaders know** this matters to you.



"Check in... truly check in, ask them: how are you? How are your kids?"

Epiphany, cyberbullying survivor

For teachers, counselors, and after-school leaders

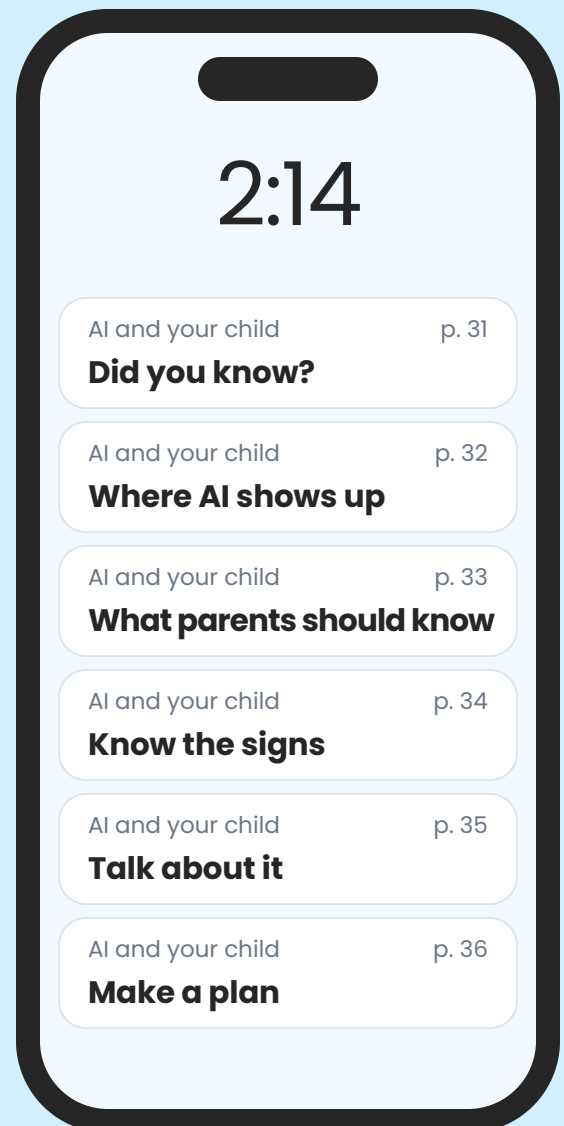
You see kids every day, often in ways parents don't. Watch for the signs on page 10, use the What would you do? scenarios with groups, follow your organization's reporting procedures, and make sure every student knows at least one adult they can go to. More for school staff on page 37.

When the one they talk to isn't a person.

For a lot of kids today, the first one they tell isn't a friend, a parent, or a teacher. It's a chatbot, an AI program that writes back like a person.

Think about what a chatbot offers a kid who's hurting. It's awake at 2 a.m. It answers instantly. It never sighs and never looks disappointed. That's also what makes it risky. A chatbot can't notice that your child sounds different tonight, and it can't sit with them on the edge of the bed.

None of this makes AI the enemy. This part is about the moment it stops being a tool and starts becoming a confidant.



Did you know?

Two numbers explain why this part of the guide exists.

64%

of teens say they use AI chatbots.
Only about half of parents think their teen does.

1 in 3

teens who use AI companions,
chatbots built to act like a friend, have
talked to one about something serious
instead of a person.

Most kids still want you.

8 in 10 teens who use AI companions still spend more time with real friends, and about two out of three say talking to AI is less satisfying than talking to a friend. The rest of this part is about the kids for whom that isn't true yet.

— A few words worth knowing

- **Chatbot:** a program you can text with that writes back like a person.
- **AI companion:** a chatbot designed to act like a friend or partner.
- **Deepfake:** a fake photo, video, or voice made with AI that looks and sounds real.
- **Nudify app:** an app or website that uses AI to make fake nude images from regular photos.
- **Sextortion:** threatening to share sexual images, real or fake, unless the person sends money or more images. See page 24.

Where AI shows up.

Kids don't need a special app to talk to AI anymore. It's built into the apps they already use, often in the same place they message their friends. That's a big part of why so many parents don't realize their kids are using it.

AI assistants

General chatbots kids use for homework, questions, and writing help. Most of the time they're a tool, but plenty of kids also end up talking to them about how they feel.

Chatbots inside social apps and games

AI that lives right in the messaging, social, and gaming apps kids already use, sometimes with its own name and personality.

AI companions

Apps built to be a friend, a romantic partner, or a confidant. They remember what your child tells them, reply like a person, and are designed to keep them coming back.

Image, video, and voice tools

Apps that make realistic pictures, videos, and voices of real people, including “nudify” apps that turn an ordinary photo into a fake nude.

An easy way in

Ask your child which of these they use and what they like about them. You may be surprised by the answer, and most kids enjoy getting to be the expert for once.

What parents should know.

AI isn't all good or all bad. The trouble starts when a chatbot becomes the place a child takes their feelings.

What the testing found

The researchers who tested the most popular AI companion apps recommend that no one under 18 use them. Their advice for parents: stay curious, not judgmental, and keep kids connected to real people.

It's built to agree.

Companion apps are designed to keep kids talking and coming back, and agreeing is the easiest way. That can feel a lot like being understood.

It can miss a crisis.

It may gloss over signs that something is really wrong.

It isn't private.

What feels like a secret conversation may be stored and kept long after your child forgets it.

It can cross lines.

Some apps have drifted into sexual or harmful conversations, even with kids.

It can crowd out friends.

Kids learn friendship by working through disagreement and making up. A chatbot that always agrees skips all of that.

It can be used to hurt.

Fake photos and videos of real kids, including fake nudes, can be made quickly and spread like any other bullying.

Nobody knows the long-term effects yet. Until we know more, the safest bet is the oldest one: stay close and keep talking.

Know the signs.

Most kids use AI the way they use a search engine, and that's nothing to worry about. What you're watching for is the moment it starts to take the place of people, especially if it happens suddenly or shows up alongside the signs on page 10.

— Watch for a child who

- Has long chats with AI, especially late at night
- Gets secretive or defensive about how they use it
- Talks about AI like it understands them better than people do
- Would rather talk to AI than to friends or family
- Gets upset or restless when they can't get to it
- Is pulling away from friends, family, or things they used to enjoy

Why kids like it

It answers right away. It never judges, never argues, and never gets tired of listening. For a kid who feels misunderstood, that's a powerful pull, and a clue to what they need right now.

Who it pulls hardest

AI tends to pull hardest on kids who are already lonely, anxious, or carrying something they can't talk about. If your child is being bullied or has recently lost a friend group, pay a little closer attention.

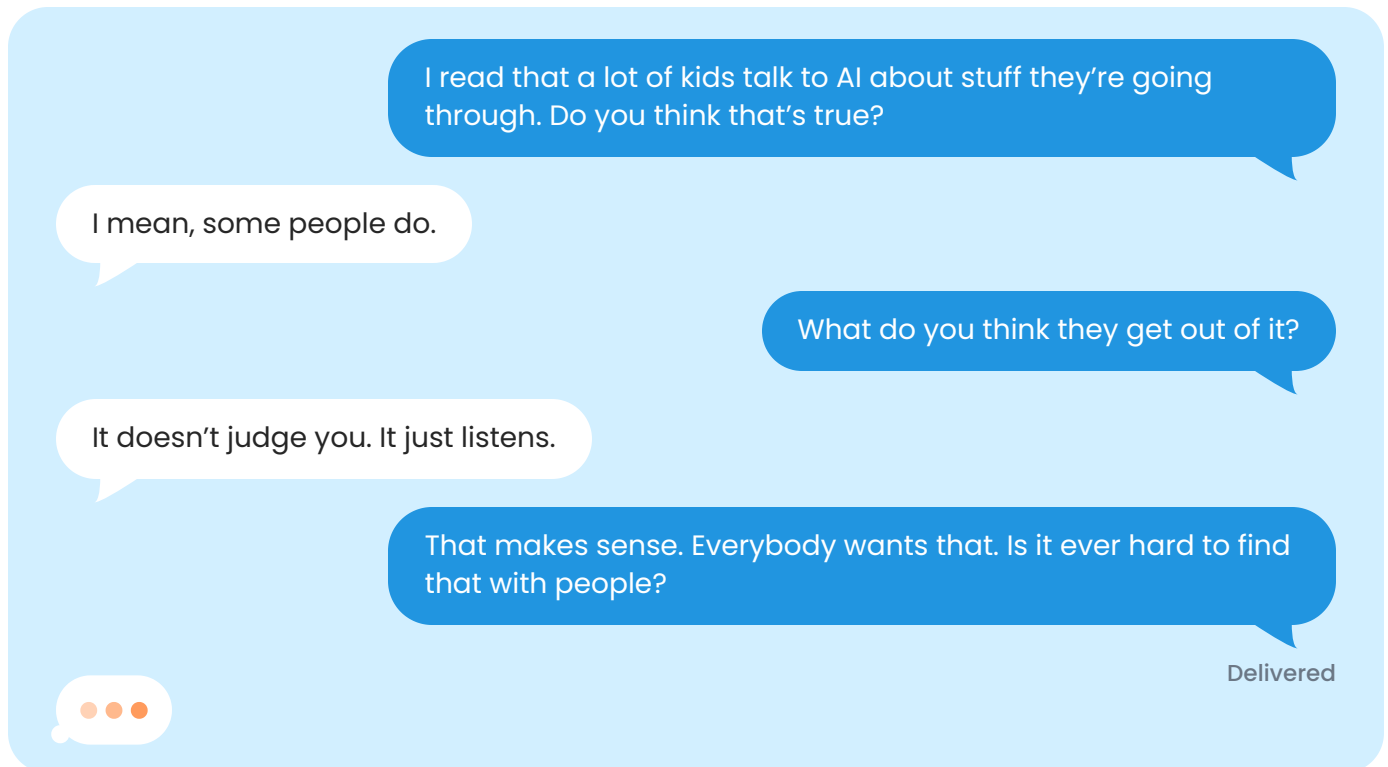
AI can also be used to bully, through fake photos, videos, and voices of real classmates. If that happens, see page 23.

Talk about it.

The ladder from page 14 works here, too. Start from afar, and climb only as far as your child lets you.

- 1 **Kids in general:** “I read that a lot of kids talk to AI about stuff they’re going through. Do you think that’s true?”
- 2 **Kids at school:** “Do kids at your school use AI like a friend?”
- 3 **Close friends:** “Do any of your friends talk to it when they’re upset?”
- 4 **Your child:** “Have you ever talked to it about something hard? How did you feel afterward?”

— Here’s what that can sound like



That parent didn’t lecture or call it weird. They listened and asked one honest question. The most important one comes later, when the moment feels right: **“What do you get from it that you’re not getting somewhere else?”**

- **Don’t shame them for using it.** Shame mostly teaches kids to hide what they’re doing.
- **Try it together.** Ask it a question side by side, then talk about what it got right and what it left out.
- **Pull back the curtain.** Explain that it’s built to agree and keep them talking, the way a game is built to keep them playing.

Make a plan.

You don't have to ban AI to keep your child safe. A few clear rules, made together, go a long way.

- **No AI companion apps before 18.** It's what the researchers who tested these apps recommend, so it's a rule you don't have to defend on your own.
- **Make a family plan for everything else.** Decide together what AI is for, when it's okay, and where. Aim for phones and laptops out of bedrooms overnight.
- **Use parental controls as a backstop.** Some AI assistants now let parents link accounts and set quiet hours. Parents usually can't read the conversations, and teens can often unlink. No setting replaces a conversation.
- **Teach three rules:** it isn't private; don't share personal details about yourself or anyone else; and never make or share a fake image of a real person, even as a joke.
- **Model it yourself.** Kids copy what we do. Let them see you question what AI tells you, and take the things that matter to a person.
- **If AI is replacing people,** talk with your child's doctor or a counselor. For a fake image of your child, see page 23.

If your child is already attached

If your child talks to an AI companion every day, taking it away overnight can feel to them like losing a friend. You can still end it, but talk first, explain why, make the change together, and help fill the space with real people: a friend, a coach, a club, more time with you. If they seem deeply upset by the change, share that with their doctor or a counselor.

If they say they want to hurt themselves

Stay with them and call or text **988**. If anyone is in danger right now, call **911**. More on page 17.

A family tech and AI agreement you can fill in together is in the toolkit at standforthesilent.org/areyouokay/toolkit.

For the adults at school.

Kids spend a big part of their day with you, and you often see changes before anyone at home does. Follow your school's procedures for student safety, confidentiality, and reporting, and involve families when it's appropriate and safe for the student.

Teachers and after-school leaders

- **Ask about AI casually,** the way you'd ask about a show they're watching or a game they're playing.
- **Teach how it works:** it can be wrong, it's built to agree, and it isn't private.
- **Use the What would you do? scenarios** with groups.
- **Watch for the signs** on pages 10 and 34, and share concerns with your counselor.

Counselors

- **Make AI part of every check-in.** Ask what they use it for and how they feel afterward.
- **Listen for the kid who has no one else.** A student who says the chatbot is the only one who understands them needs a person, fast.
- **Point families to support:** your school and community resources, this guide, and 988 whenever safety is a concern.

Administrators

- **Put AI-made fakes in your policies,** and share them with students and families.
- **Respond with care:** protect the student's privacy, never view or share the images, and offer counseling and help with takedowns.
- **Train staff** on what to do when a student comes forward.
- **Bring parents in early.**

If a student discloses a sexual image

Don't view, copy, download, or forward it, and don't ask the student to show you. Follow your school's reporting procedures, which may include reporting to NCMEC's CyberTipline and law enforcement, and connect the student with support.

A staff guide, a scenario discussion guide, and a letter to families are at standforthesilent.org/areyouokay/toolkit.

If you're a kid reading this.

We're glad you picked this up. Here's what we want you to know.

If it's happening to you

It's not your fault, and you don't have to handle it alone. Don't answer back. Save messages without sexual images, and tell a trusted adult. If the first adult doesn't help, tell another one.

If you see it happening

Don't like it, share it, or add to it. Message the person so they know someone's on their side, and tell an adult.

If you did it

You can stop today. Take it down, and ask an adult to help you make it right.

About AI

- **It can sound like a friend**, but it's built to agree with you and keep you talking. A real friend will sometimes tell you what you don't want to hear.
- **It's not private**. Anything you type may be saved, so don't share your full name, where you live, your school, or anything about other people.
- **Never make or share a fake image of a real person**, not even as a joke. It can hurt someone badly, and fake sexual images can break the law.
- **If someone made a fake of you, it's not your fault**. Tell an adult you trust. There are ways to get it taken down.
- **If a friend says an AI is the only one they talk to**, tell a trusted adult. That's how you help them.

If you're going through something hard

Talk to a person: a parent, a teacher, a coach, a counselor, or a friend's parent. If it feels like too much, you can call or text **988** any time, day or night. Someone real will answer.

You are somebody.

Help when you need it.

Keep this page handy. Not sure which fits? Start with any that might.

— Right now

911
Call 911

If anyone is in danger right now and needs police, fire, or an ambulance.

988 Suicide & Crisis Lifeline
Call or text 988
988lifeline.org

For thoughts of suicide, self-harm, or emotional crisis, any time. You can call for yourself, or because you're worried about someone.

Crisis Text Line
Text HOME to 741741

Free, confidential support by text, 24 hours a day.

— Sexual images and sextortion

NCMEC CyberTipline
report.cybertip.org
1-800-843-5678

Report sexual images of anyone under 18, real or AI-made, and online exploitation or sextortion.

Take It Down
takeitdown.ncmec.org

Free, anonymous help removing nude or sexual images taken before age 18 from participating sites. The image stays on your device.

StopNCII
stopncii.org

The same kind of help for images taken at 18 or older.

FBI
tips.fbi.gov · 1-800-CALL-FBI

Report sextortion and other online crimes.

— Learning more

StopBullying.gov
stopbullying.gov

Federal information on bullying, cyberbullying, and what schools and families can do.

Your free toolkit
standforthesilent.org/areyouokay/toolkit

Evidence logs, school emails, conversation cards, and more, made to use with this guide.

Send Kirk a message
**standforthesilent.org/for-students/
send-a-note-to-kirk**

Kirk reads every message himself, though he can't always answer right away. If you need help now, use the numbers at the top of this page.

Take the pledge.

At the end of every Stand for the Silent presentation, students make a promise. Read it with your child, and if it feels right, sign it together.

From this day forward, I promise to respect those around me as well as respect myself. I am somebody, and I can make a difference. I can make another feel loved. I can be the helping hand that leads another back to the path of hope and aspiration. I will not stand silent as others try to spread hatred through my community. Instead, I pledge to lift up those victims and show them that their lives matter. I will be the change, because I AM SOMEBODY!

Signed

Date

ImL,

Kirk

About Stand for the Silent.

Stand for the Silent was started in 2010 by a group of students from an Upward Bound chapter in Oklahoma City, after they heard what happened to Kirk and Laura Smalley's son, Ty.

Since then, Kirk has carried Ty's story into schools across the country. Students hear it, they go quiet, and many of them write to him afterward. Those letters, and the conversations that follow, are the reason this guide exists.

6,800+

schools visited

4.6M

students reached

195K

messages from kids
and parents

Bring Kirk to your school

Stand for the Silent presents to elementary, middle, and high schools, as well as community groups. Learn more at standforthesilent.org/schools.

Stay connected

Visit standforthesilent.org for more free resources, including a K-2 curriculum, and to donate or sign up for the newsletter.

Stand for the Silent is a nonprofit organization. EIN 45-2317929.

Thank you.

This guide exists because people chose to speak up.

To Ty, whose story started all of this, and who is still teaching kids to stand for the silent.

To Kirk and Laura Smalley, who turned the hardest thing a parent can face into a movement that reaches kids in schools across the country.

To Caleigh, Nick, and Epiphany, who told their own stories so other kids would feel less alone.

To every student and parent who has written to Kirk. Your words are on these pages, and they are the reason this book sounds the way it does.

To Karen S. Goldberg, LCSW-C, whose original guide is the foundation of this one.

To the students who wrote the Stand for the Silent pledge, and to every kid who has taken it since.

And to the schools, partners, and donors who make it possible to bring this message to one more classroom, and one more family, every year.

— The research behind this guide

The advice in this book draws on research and guidance from child safety, mental health, and bullying prevention organizations. They're listed on the next page.

— About this edition

The 2026 edition and its online toolkit were conceived and produced by Peter J. Goodman, who has worked with Kirk Smalley and Stand for the Silent since 2013. He is the author of *We're All Different But We're All Kitty Cats* and co-creator, with Karen S. Goldberg, of Stand for the Silent's K-2 curriculum.

Sources.

The numbers and guidance in this book were checked in fall 2026. Each source below is a link, and the full list, kept up to date, is at standforthesilent.org/areyouokay.

— Statistics

Cyberbullying Research Center, [2025 Cyberbullying Data](#) (page 4)

Pew Research Center, [How Teens Use and View AI, 2026](#) (page 31)

Common Sense Media, [Talk, Trust, and Trade-Offs, 2025](#) (page 31)

Common Sense Media, [AI Companions Decoded, 2025](#) (page 33)

— Safety and mental health

National Institute of Mental Health, [Warning Signs of Suicide](#)

National Institute of Mental Health, [5 Action Steps to Help Someone Having Thoughts of Suicide](#)

988 Suicide & Crisis Lifeline, 988lifeline.org

National Child Traumatic Stress Network, [About Child Trauma](#)

911.gov, [Calling 911](#)

— Bullying

[StopBullying.gov](https://stopbullying.gov), [What Is Bullying](#)

[StopBullying.gov](https://stopbullying.gov), [Federal Laws](#)

[StopBullying.gov](https://stopbullying.gov), [Misdirections in Bullying Prevention and Intervention](#)

PACER's National Bullying Prevention Center, [Reasons Teens Don't Tell](#)

— Sexual images and sextortion

NCMEC, [Take It Down](#)

NCMEC, [CyberTipline](#)

U.S. Department of Justice, [Sextortion Victim Resource Sheet](#)

FBI, [Sextortion](#)

FBI, [Sextortion: A Growing Threat Targeting Minors](#) (page 24)

U.S. Congress, [TAKE IT DOWN Act, Public Law 119-12](#) (2025)



You are somebody.

Are You Okay? is a free guide from Stand for the Silent.

Download it, share it, and find the free toolkit at

standforthesilent.org/areyouokay

Need help now?

Call or text

988

Text HOME to

741741

In an emergency, call

911