



Australian Government



Parents and carers

Helping your child develop responsibility and independence

If your child or young person, or any other child, is in immediate danger, call **Triple Zero (000)**.

Responsibility and independence are two of the most important skills you can help your child or young person develop when they are dealing with social conflict.

Responsibility is about understanding how their actions affect others and taking steps to repair the harm. Independence is about giving them real choices along the way, rather than just telling them what to do.

When children have both, they're more likely to build genuine understanding, not just go through the motions – and that's what helps their behaviour change over time.

What is taking responsibility?

When your child has caused harm, guiding them to take responsibility is one of the most powerful things you can do to support positive behaviour change. This means helping them understand what happened, recognise the impact on the other person (regardless of what they intended) and take real steps to repair the harm.

This matters because simply punishing a child rarely changes their behaviour in the long term. It can even make things worse by pushing them further away from school and support without addressing what led to the behaviour in the first place. Helping your child truly understand the impact of their actions and take steps to repair it builds the understanding they need to do better next time.

Example

Your child excluded someone from a group chat. Responsibility does not mean forcing them to apologise. It means helping them understand how that may have felt for the other child and thinking together about what they could do differently next time.

What taking responsibility can build

- ⦿ Stronger peer relationships
- ⦿ Greater trust with friends and family
- ⦿ Stronger sense of self
- ⦿ More positive future behaviour

Strategies for learning how to take responsibility

- ⦿ Create space for reflection – not interrogation. You are not asking them to explain themselves. You are asking them to practise empathy.
- ⦿ Separate the behaviour from the person. Remind your child that doing something harmful does not make them a bad person. It means they have something to learn.
- ⦿ Focus on repair. Do not focus on getting a confession from your child. Small, genuine actions matter more than a forced apology.

What it is and what it is not

Taking responsibility is:

- ⦿ reflection
- ⦿ understanding of impact
- ⦿ genuine acknowledgement
- ⦿ attempt to repair
- ⦿ changing future behaviour.

Taking responsibility is not:

- ⦿ punishment
- ⦿ a forced apology
- ⦿ revenge
- ⦿ shame.

If your child is in primary school:

Use concrete, simple language. Try: 'How do you think that felt for [name]?' Focus on one small action they could take.

If your young person is in secondary school:

Invite your young person into the conversation rather than telling them what to do.

Adolescents tend to respond better to this approach. Try: 'What do you think needs to happen now?' Give them space to arrive at their own answer.

What if my child is not ready yet?

Genuine responsibility for actions cannot be forced. If your child is not yet ready to take responsibility, create space for reflection without pushing for an immediate resolution. Keep the conversation open and return to it gently.

Taking responsibility works best when children also feel independent in doing so — that they are choosing to own their actions, not just being made to. That is what the next page is about.

What is independence?

Independence means choosing how to act based on your own values, rather than because you were told to or felt pressured. It is not freedom from consequences – it is the experience of choosing to do the right thing. When children feel they have a genuine choice in how they respond, they are better placed to repair harm and shift their own behaviour toward more positive ways of treating others.

Example

Instead of telling your child they must apologise, explain why repair matters and ask them how they would like to approach it. A child who chooses to make things right is more likely to follow through. They are also more likely to make a different choice next time.

What independence can build

- ◉ Higher motivation to do the right thing
- ◉ Better emotional regulation under pressure (controlling feelings and reactions)
- ◉ Greater resilience when things go wrong (the ability to cope with challenges)
- ◉ Stronger and more trusting peer relationships

Help your young person understand that the other person may not want to repair the relationship, and that is their choice. Your young person cannot control how the other person responds. What they can control is taking responsibility and committing to do better.

What it is and what it is not

Independence is:

- ◉ understanding why something matters and choosing to act on it
- ◉ acting from your own values even when it is hard
- ◉ making responsible choices within rules and limits.

Independence is not:

- ◉ having no rules or consequences
- ◉ doing whatever you want
- ◉ ignoring the impact on others.

If your child is in primary school:

Offer simple choices within clear boundaries. Try: 'You need to try to make things better with [name]. Would you like to do that today or tomorrow?' The choice is small, but the experience of choosing matters. Help your child understand that [name] may not want to be friends again, and that is their choice. What matters is that your child tries to make things right and does better next time.

If your young person is in secondary school:

Involve them in the reasoning. Explain why the expectation exists, rather than just stating it as a rule. Try: 'I am asking you to do this because I think it will matter to you in the long run, not just because you got caught.'

Strategies for building independence

- ⦿ Explain your reasoning. Avoid: 'because I said so.' Try: 'I want you to understand why this matters.'
- ⦿ Offer choices within boundaries.
Independence is not about having no limits. It is about having some say within the limits.
- ⦿ Invite your child into the process. Where it is appropriate, ask what they think should happen next. Their answer might surprise you, and involving them increases the chance they will follow through and change their behaviour in the longer term.

Taking responsibility and acting with independence are not things you get right once and never have to think about again. They are habits you build over time. Your child will not always get it right, and that is okay. What matters is that they keep coming back to both – and that you are there to guide them when they do.

Children and young people who are supported to take responsibility and make their own choices are better placed to change their behaviour in the long term. They are also more likely to treat others well, manage conflict in healthy ways, develop stronger friendships and make better choices as they grow. Small, consistent steps – guided by you – can build lasting change over time.

Connected resources

- ⦿ What if I think my child is bullying?
- ⦿ Understanding the online world of your child or young person
- ⦿ Working with schools early on

Where to get more help

If you need further support, help is available:

For children and young people

Kids Helpline (national): 1800 55 1800.
Free, confidential counselling for bullying, school issues, online harm and wellbeing, available 24/7.

headspace/ehedspace: 1800 650 890 or headspace.org.au. Mental health, wellbeing and early intervention support, available 9 am–1 am daily.

For parents and carers

Parenting support lines

ACT: 02 6287 3833

New South Wales: 1300 1300 52

Queensland and Northern Territory:
1300 30 1300 or parentline.com.au

South Australia: 1300 364 100

Tasmania: 1300 808 178

Victoria: 13 22 89

Western Australia: 08 9368 9368

For all ages

Beyond Blue: 1300 22 4636 or beyondblue.org.au. Mental health support for stress, anxiety and overwhelm, available 24/7.

Dolly's Dream Bullying Support Line: 13 36 55 (13 DOLLY) or dollysdream.org.au. Free, confidential bullying support for children, young people, young adults, parents and carers, available 24/7.

Lifeline: 13 11 14 or lifeline.org.au. Crisis support and counselling if things feel overwhelming, available 24/7.

13YARN: 13 92 76. Culturally safe 24/7 support for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander parents and carers.

QLife (LGBTIQA+ young people):

1800 184 527 or qlife.org.au. Free, anonymous peer support and referral service, available 3 pm–9 pm daily.

1800RESPECT: 1800 737 732 or 1800respect.org.au. Available for free 24/7 to support people impacted by domestic, family and sexual violence.

eSafety Commissioner:

esafety.gov.au. Report cyberbullying, get advice, and request content removal support.

Australian Human Rights Commission:

humanrights.gov.au. Support for cases involving discriminatory harm. Reports can be made via the website or by emailing infoservice@humanrights.gov.au.

State, territory and non-government education sectors will reflect the expectations of the National Framework for Addressing Bullying in Australian schools in their policies and procedures by Term 1 2027. This includes making reasonable efforts to initiate a response to bullying and harmful behaviour within two school days, recognising that further time may be required to fully address the issue. By Term 1 2027, all schools will also publish or link to policies and procedures that align with the National Framework (or equivalent contemporary jurisdiction specific Frameworks) and their local polices and school context.