



Australian Government



Parents and carers

Identifying harmful behaviour

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

What can harmful behaviour look like? It's not always obvious. Knowing what to look for can help you act early.

This resource focuses on recognising, preventing and responding to all harmful behaviours early, so every child and young person can feel safe, respected and supported.

What matters most is the impact of the behaviour and acting early – not whether it is considered serious bullying.

Disagreements and arguments

Disagreements and arguments can be a normal part of relationships when both people feel heard and things can be resolved.

A disagreement becomes harmful when it makes someone feel unsafe, affects their sense of belonging or wellbeing or threatens their right to a safe learning environment.

If your child is in primary school:

Two friends argue about who gets to decide the game. One excludes the other for the rest of the day. They repair the friendship, but while it was happening, the excluded child felt genuinely upset.

If your young person is in secondary school:

Two friends argue over something in a group chat. They repair the friendship, but the disagreement is still there for everyone to see.

Bullying and other harmful behaviours

Bullying is one form of harmful behaviour. Harmful behaviours are actions that hurt, exclude, intimidate or make someone feel unsafe. They can happen in person or online, once or many times.

Some harmful behaviours are easy to spot. Others are harder to see, such as being left out, ignored or talked about behind someone's back. It can happen when one person or group thinks they have more influence, for example, through social status, physical strength or access to someone's personal information.

What bullying and other harmful behaviours may look like

- ◉ Exclusion, gossip or social isolation
- ◉ Name-calling or intimidation
- ◉ Online harassment, image-based abuse or group chats targeting someone
- ◉ All forms of discrimination and harassment based on race, religion, gender, sexuality, disability or body or any other factor
- ◉ Physical aggression or threats
- ◉ Emotional abuse or harmful relationships and interactions

Emerging forms

Harmful behaviour also includes newer forms of online harm:

- ◉ Impersonation
- ◉ Sharing AI-generated content
- ◉ Deepfakes (realistic fake images or videos of a real person)

These can cause serious damage to how a young person is seen by others and to how they feel about themselves.

'Bullying doesn't always result in a bloody nose. The most harmful forms leave you questioning yourself. Long after everyone has moved on, you're still doubting your worth.'

– YOUNG PERSON, 18,
PROJECT ROCKIT NATIONAL
YOUTH COLLECTIVE



Note

Social and relational bullying (exclusion, rumours and friendship manipulation) are the most common forms experienced by children and young people and the most frequently missed or taken less seriously by adults.

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

'Young people don't always tell adults what's going on – not because they don't trust them, but because they're unsure if they'll be understood.'

– YOUNG PERSON, 16,
PROJECT ROCKIT NATIONAL
YOUTH COLLECTIVE

What matters most

Use these principles to identify bullying or harmful behaviour involving your child, at any school age:

- ◉ **Focus on impact, not labels.** What matters most is how someone has been affected. The impact often causes distress, lower self-worth or not wanting to go to school. In serious cases, it can lead to self-harm or suicide.
- ◉ **Harm is harm, even once.** This includes one-off incidents, especially when they affect how safe someone feels.
- ◉ **Intent matters less than impact.** How someone is affected is more important than whether harm was intended.
- ◉ **Ask the right question.** Instead of asking, 'Is this bullying?', try: 'Has someone been hurt, excluded or made to feel unsafe?'
- ◉ **Act early.** Respond to all harmful behaviour early. You do not have to wait until something becomes 'serious bullying' to get help. If something feels wrong or is having an impact, speak up early.

Disagreements and arguments can be a normal part of relationships. However, they become harmful when they affect someone's sense of safety, wellbeing or belonging. What matters is not the label.

The goal is to stop the harm, support everyone involved and help prevent it from happening again. We all have a part to play in keeping children safe, at school, at home and online.

Reflection tool

Use the reflection tool to help with what you are noticing and find out what to do next.

What are you noticing?

This is a private space to think through what may be concerning you about your child or young person. Take your time. You do not have to answer every prompt at once, and you can skip anything that does not feel relevant right now.

Before you begin, take a slow breath. You are here because you care about your child. Whatever you are noticing, even if it is small or you are unsure, it is worth paying attention to.

These questions apply to you as the parent or carer of a primary or secondary school-aged child.

1. What have I noticed?

Think about what brought you to this resource.

- ◉ Describe what you have noticed or what your child or someone else has told you.
- ◉ What has been happening, as best you understand it?

2. Where and when?

Bullying and other harmful behaviours can happen in person, online or both. It can happen at school, at home, in sports or community activities or in online spaces.

- ◉ Where has this been happening? When did you first notice it?
- ◉ Has it happened more than once?

- ☐ In person
- ☐ Online
- ☐ Both

3. What is the impact on my child?

Harmful behaviour does not need to leave a visible mark to cause real harm. Often, the biggest impacts are the hardest to see.

What have you noticed in your child since this began? Look for changes in mood, sleep, appetite, whether they want to go to school, how they talk about friends or how they seem after being online. These issues don't necessarily mean that your child has experienced bullying and other harmful behaviours, but they can be signs to take seriously.



4. What has your child told you?

Children and young people do not always have the words or the confidence to name what is happening to them.

- ◉ What has your child said about the situation, if anything?
- ◉ How did they describe it?
- ◉ Have they said it was not that bad or asked you not to do anything?

5. What do you think is happening?

Look back at the information about identifying harmful behaviour as you answer this question.

- ◉ What do you think is happening with your child? Answer honestly based on what you have read and what you are noticing.

Tip

For more information about early signs, see the connected resources listed at the end of this resource.

6. What does your child need right now?

Whatever is happening, the most important question right now is: 'What does my child need from me?' This might be a conversation, speaking with the school, getting professional support or simply asking more questions. It might be more than one of these things.

- ◉ What feels like the most important first step?

*'Parents, sometimes we
don't need you to fix things,
just reassure us.'*

– YOUNG PERSON, 16,
PROJECT ROCKIT NATIONAL
YOUTH COLLECTIVE

7. What do you need as a parent or carer?

Supporting your child through a difficult situation is demanding. Your own wellbeing matters too.

- ◉ Is there someone you can talk to about what you are going through?
- ◉ What kind of support would help you right now?
- ◉ For further information about support, see the organisations listed at the end of this resource.

You do not need to have all the answers right now. What matters is that you are paying attention and taking your child's situation seriously. The goal is not to find the right label. It is to make sure your child feels safe, supported and heard.

Where to from here?

Use what you have reflected on to guide your next step. If you are still unsure, early action is always the best approach. You do not need certainty before you act. For more information, see the connected resources listed at the end of this tool.

'The adults who helped the most made me feel trusted and heard, rather than managed.'

– YOUNG PERSON, 18,
PROJECT ROCKIT NATIONAL
YOUTH COLLECTIVE



Report illegal and harmful online content or online abuse to the platform or service first, then report it to **eSafety** at esafety.gov.au/report.

If your child has experienced bullying for discriminatory reasons, such as on the basis of their race, gender or disability, you may be able to make a complaint to the **Australian Human Rights Commission** at humanrights.gov.au.

Connected resources

- ◉ Strategies to connect with your child or young person
- ◉ Understanding the online world of your child or young person
- ◉ Supporting your child with friendships and navigating conflict
- ◉ First response guide
- ◉ What if I think my child is bullying?

Where to get more help

If you need further support, help is available:

For children and young people

Kids Helpline: 1800 55 1800 or kidshelpline.com.au. Free, confidential counselling for bullying and other harmful behaviours, school issues, online harm and wellbeing, available 24/7.

headspace/eheadspace: 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 policies and school context.