



Australian Government



Years 8 and above

Identity-based harm

A note on this resource

Identity-based harm affects people differently, depending on their identity, background and life experience. This resource does not try to cover every experience. Instead, it focuses on the patterns that show up across different types of identity-based harm.

This could be how harmful behaviours attack your sense of who you are. It could be how easily they are dismissed by others or how the stress they cause builds up over time. This resource is designed to respect and validate what you are going through.

Identity-based harm is one of the most common but least talked about forms of harmful behaviour. It happens when someone is targeted not for something they did, but for who they are. This could include a person's race, cultural background, sexuality, disability, gender or any other identity-based factor.

People often dismiss it as 'just a joke', a 'cultural difference' or 'oversensitivity'. Because of this, peers, adults – and sometimes even the person experiencing it – often don't recognise it for what it is.

'It's easy to label discriminatory language as "just a joke" because it's harder to fix a systemic issue of prejudice than it is to deal with a specific scenario.'

– YOUNG PERSON, 16,
PROJECT ROCKIT NATIONAL
YOUTH COLLECTIVE



If you have been bullied or harmed because of who you are, such as your race, gender, disability or any other identity-based factor, go to the **Australian Human Rights Commission** at humanrights.gov.au to learn about your rights and find support.

Assumption versus reality

The joke excuse

Assumption

It was just a joke about where they're from.
They need to stop taking everything so seriously.

'Often when boundaries aren't set, it can be difficult to tell bullying apart from "a joke".'

– YOUNG PERSON, 13,
PROJECT ROCKIT NATIONAL
YOUTH COLLECTIVE

Reality

Comments targeting someone's identity are not jokes. They are a form of psychological harm that can impact a person's sense of belonging. The true impact of a comment is the harm felt by the person receiving it, not by the intent of the person who said it.

What you can do: You have every right to set a boundary when a 'joke' targets who you are. Ask the person to stop making the comments. You could also seek support from a trusted friend or adult or a support service.

For further support, see the organisations listed at the end of this resource.

The teasing comparison

Assumption

Everyone has a bit of a hard time or gets teased at school. It's honestly not that big of a deal.

Statistics

Data from the Australian Human Rights Commission indicates that identity-based harm builds up over time. This leads to much higher rates of missed school and anxiety than general peer conflict.



Reality

Being targeted because of your race, disability, gender, sexuality or religion is different from general teasing because it attacks an unchangeable part of yourself. Because it targets your identity, the emotional weight of this harm can build over time, causing stress and anxiety.

What you can do: This is a bigger issue than personal teasing – recognising that is the first step. You have the right to feel safe and to ask for that. Talk to trusted friends or adults so they can help you signal that the harmful behaviour is not okay.

Misinterpreting silence

Assumption

Well, they didn't even say anything or look upset when it happened, so they obviously didn't mind.

Research

National youth surveys show that students experiencing identity-based harm are the least likely to report it. This is often because they are afraid of being isolated, facing payback or having adults treat the behaviour as normal.



Reality

Silence doesn't mean someone agrees or doesn't care. It can be a way of coping in a stressful situation. This means a person might look completely calm on the outside while carrying a lot of hurt and stress on the inside.

What you can do: Knowing this allows you to look past the silence and choose to be the person who checks in and offers support.

The context denial

Assumption

People around here are pretty open-minded. That kind of discrimination doesn't actually happen at our school.

Statistics

Australian studies, including 'Writing Themselves In', show that over 60% of LGBTIQA+ students and a high percentage of First Nations students and students with disabilities report experiencing discrimination in educational settings.



Reality

Identity-based harm happens in all kinds of Australian schools, in every postcode. Pretending these issues do not exist only protects the people causing harm and leaves the people being targeted to struggle alone.

What you can do: Openly admitting that identity-based harm happens helps us work together to stop it and build a community where everyone belongs.

The 'behind a screen' excuse

Assumption

It's just some random memes and comments in a group chat. It's not like anyone is saying it to their face.

Research

According to the eSafety Commissioner website, digital harassment is often more damaging than in-person harm. It spreads rapidly, leaves a permanent digital footprint and follows young people into the safety of their own homes.



Reality

Online identity-based harm, such as racist memes, homophobic slurs or targeted harassment about a disability, causes the same psychological harm as in-person harm. Because there is no escape from a screen, the pressure can feel constant and overwhelming.

What you can do: Remember that digital evidence is powerful. Saving screenshots (do not save or share sexual images of a child), as well as usernames, links or messages, gives you what you need to report the behaviour and take back control online.



You can report harmful behaviour online to **eSafety** at esafety.gov.au/report.

The bystander dilemma

Assumption

If I get involved or try to call it out, it'll just kick off and make things way worse for everyone.

Statistics

Research shows that when a bystander steps in or discourages harmful behaviour, it stops within 10 seconds in over half of all cases.



Reality

Staying silent signals to the person causing harm that their behaviour is acceptable. It allows the harm to continue and possibly escalate.

What you can do: You do not need to confront the person causing the harm to make a difference. Small actions can shift the dynamic and help someone when they need it most. For example, refusing to laugh, reporting the incident (to school or a trusted adult) or offering a private word of support to the person being harmed.

*'Don't be afraid to speak up – change only happens through action.
Try and try again, because eventually your actions will make a difference in
changing the culture around bullying.'*

– YOUNG PERSON, 16, PROJECT ROCKIT NATIONAL YOUTH COLLECTIVE

Unpacking the patterns

You have probably come across others making the kinds of assumptions above. Maybe you've been caught up in thinking them too. Nobody gets everything right all the time. The important part is staying open-minded and understanding the impact that harmful words and behaviours can have.

Now that you know what identity-based harm looks like, you can learn how to handle it safely and practically.

What to do next

If you are experiencing identity-based harm yourself or watching it happen to someone else, you do not need to have all the answers. You just need to take one step in the right direction.

If identity-based harm is happening to you

- ◉ **You do not have to prove intent:** You do not need to prove that someone meant to cause harm to seek support. The impact of the harm is what matters. If it is affecting your wellbeing, it should be taken seriously.
- ◉ **Document what is happening:** Keep a clear record. Write down dates, times, exactly what was said or done and who was present. Save any digital evidence such as screenshots (do not save or share sexual images of a child), usernames, links or direct messages. Do not delete them.
- ◉ **Tell a trusted adult:** Talk to someone you trust at school or home, or contact a support organisation listed at the end of this resource. If the first person you tell does not help or take you seriously, tell someone else. Keep trying until you find someone who listens.
- ◉ **Know your rights:** The Australian Human Rights Commission treats harmful behaviour that targets a person's identity as a serious form of harm. You have the right to a safe environment.



You can report harmful behaviour online to **eSafety** at esafety.gov.au/report.



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If you are witnessing identity-based harm

- ◉ **Do not participate:** Do not laugh at the comment, share the post or engage with content that targets someone's identity. Even staying silent in a group chat can make the harm worse.
- ◉ **Check in privately:** Reach out to the person who was targeted after the incident or online. You do not need to have the perfect words. Just saying, 'Hey, I saw what happened/what they said, and it wasn't okay. Are you doing alright?' makes a difference.
- ◉ **Report the behaviour:** Report what you witnessed to a trusted school staff member or another trusted adult. If you are worried about someone's safety or wellbeing, you do not need their permission to report an incident. If the first person you tell does not help, tell someone else.
- ◉ **Use online reporting tools:** If the harm is happening online, use the platform's built-in report and block tools (after saving the evidence).



You can report harmful behaviour online to **eSafety** at esafety.gov.au/report.

What if it does not go to plan?

Reporting identity-based harm or trying to stop it does not always create immediate change. If the first response you get is unhelpful, it does not mean that you have to handle it alone. If you don't feel heard by an adult, you need to tell someone else. This could be a family member, school counsellor, principal or someone at a support organisation listed in this resource.

If the harmful behaviour has become worse after you spoke up or if you are feeling overwhelmed, step away from the situation. Mute online accounts and seek help from a trusted adult or support organisation listed at the end of this resource.

Connected resources

- ◉ What does courage look like?
- ◉ Support systems
- ◉ Things seem to be escalating. What should I do?

Where to get more help

If you need further support, help is available:

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.

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

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

Dolly's Dream Bullying Support Line: 13 36 55 (13 DOLLY) or dollysdream.org.au. Counselling and guidance for children and young people experiencing bullying and other harmful behaviour, available 24/7.

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

1800RESPECT: 1800 737 732 or 1800respect.org.au. Sexual assault, family and domestic violence counselling line for anyone who has experienced, or is at risk of, family and domestic violence and/or sexual assault, available 24/7.

13YARN: 13 92 76 or 13yarn.org.au. Culturally safe 24/7 support for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

QLife (LGBTIQA+ young people): 1800 184 527 or qlife.org.au. Free, anonymous peer support and referral service, available 3 pm–9 pm daily.

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 their 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.