



My child has caused harm

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

This guide is for when you know your child or young person has caused harm. For example, if the school has contacted you, or you have been told directly by your child or another party. The steps below are to help you focus on what to do next.

Finding out your child has harmed someone can be one of the hardest things a parent or carer can face. It is normal to want to protect or defend your child. It is also normal to feel shame, confusion or grief. This guide does not expect you to be a perfect parent or carer. It asks you to be honest and to keep the needs of everyone involved – including your child, the child or children impacted, and yourself – at the centre of what comes next.

What you will need

- ⦿ A private space to reflect as you work through this guide.
- ⦿ A trusted adult or support person you feel safe talking to (if needed).
- ⦿ Your child's school contact details and, if relevant, any written or other records (for example, images) of what has happened.



Note

If you are still working out whether your child or young person is engaging in bullying or other harmful behaviours, go to 'What if I think my child is bullying'.

Step 1: Pause before you respond

Before you do anything else, give yourself time to reflect on how you are feeling. Call a friend, talk to a partner or another family member, or sit quietly for a moment. Acting out of shock, anger or shame is likely to make the situation harder for everyone, including your child.

Tip

Pausing before you act is one of the most helpful things you can do in this moment. Parents and carers who take some time before responding tend to have more useful conversations with their child and with the school.



Step 2: Understand the full picture

When it has been confirmed that your child has engaged in harmful behaviours, focus on understanding what happened. Talk to your child, the school and, where appropriate, other trusted adults. It is important to get more than one account before deciding what happened. Don't minimise or defend the behaviour.

Tip

Getting the full picture does not mean doubting that harm occurred. It means understanding the situation well enough to respond effectively.



If your child is in primary school:

Your child will read your emotional state before they hear your words. Using a calm, warm tone will make it more likely they will engage rather than shut down.

If your young person is in secondary school:

Adolescents can be very sensitive to shame and judgment. Taking a moment to calm your emotions, thoughts and reactions before you speak gives you the best chance of an honest conversation.

'You don't want people to stop bullying because they are scared of being caught, but because they genuinely realise what they were doing was bad.'

– YOUNG PERSON, 15,
PROJECT ROCKIT NATIONAL
YOUTH COLLECTIVE

Example

'I have heard some things about what happened at school. Before I say anything, I want to understand it better from your point of view.'

Step 3: Have an honest conversation with your child

This conversation is different to exploring a concern – you are no longer trying to work out whether harm has occurred. Approach this conversation with curiosity, not accusation. There are four things your child needs to hear from you in this conversation:

- ◉ that you care about them and are on their side
- ◉ that you take bullying and other harmful behaviours very seriously
- ◉ that you will work through it together
- ◉ that accountability is not the same as punishment.

Step 4: Two things can be true at once

It is possible for your child to have caused harm and also to have experienced harm. Both can be true at the same time, and both deserve attention. If you suspect your child is also experiencing bullying or other harmful behaviours, take that seriously and address it alongside this process, not after it.

In the conversation, you can approach this directly. Try: 'I want to understand everything that has been going on, including anything that has been happening to you.' For more information, see the connected resources listed at the end of this guide.

Step 5: Engage with the school constructively

Contact the school and approach them as a partner. Ask:

- ◉ What is the school's response process and what are the timeframes?
- ◉ What support is available for my child through this process?
- ◉ How will I be kept informed?

If your child is in primary school:

Keep language simple and specific.

Try: 'I heard that something happened with [name]. Can you tell me about it? I am not here to get you in trouble. I want to understand.'

If your young person is in secondary school:

Name your intention before anything else.

Try: 'I know this is hard to talk about. I am here to support you. I want to understand what happened so we can figure out what to do next together.'



Tip

Addressing both engaging in and experiencing harm does not mean excusing what happened. It means you are seeing the full picture of your child's experience.



Tip

Schools are expected to make a reasonable effort to initiate a response within two school days¹ of becoming aware of bullying and other harmful behaviours. Further time may be required to fully address these issues. Knowing this helps you work together with the school to act early.

¹ 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.

Step 6: Support your child through taking responsibility

Taking responsibility is a process, not a single moment. Help your child understand the impact of their behaviour, and acknowledge and change it over time. A forced apology is not the goal – an apology made under pressure will not reflect genuine understanding and rarely leads to lasting behaviour change

If your child is in primary school:

Focus on one small, concrete action.

Try: 'Is there something you could do to make this a little better for [name]?' Keep it achievable, support your child to take action, and follow up with them afterwards.

If your young person is in secondary school:

Involve them in thinking about what repair could look like.

Try: 'What do you think needs to happen now? What would you want to happen if it had happened to you?' If they say, 'nothing', do not push back immediately. Ask them to think it over and return to the conversation later. Genuine reflection often needs more than one attempt.

Step 7: Know when to report outside the school

If the harm involved threats, physical violence, sexual content, image-based abuse, or other potentially unlawful conduct, you may need to report it outside the school.

'An apology means little if everything around the behaviour stays the same. Real accountability is shown through what changes, not what is said.'

– YOUNG PERSON, 18,
PROJECT ROCKIT NATIONAL
YOUTH COLLECTIVE



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

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.

For advice on harm involving discrimination, including identity-based targeting: Contact the **Australian Human Rights Commission** at humanrights.gov.au.

Step 8: Look after yourself

This process will ask a lot of you. Take care of yourself so you can best support your child through this. Reach out to a friend, family member, counsellor, or another trusted adult or support service. Further support options are listed at the end of this resource.

Reflection tool

My child has caused harm

This reflection tool sits alongside the how-to guide. It is not a checklist of things you should have done. It is a reflective tool to help you notice where you are in this process and what you might need to do or focus on next. There are no right or wrong answers. Use it at your own pace and skip anything that does not feel useful right now.

Before you begin, take a slow breath. Whatever you are feeling right now is okay. There is no wrong way to use this tool.

1. How are you feeling right now?

Finding out your child has caused harm can bring up a lot of feelings. Before anything else, notice what you are feeling.

- ◉ *Right now I am feeling... because...*
- ◉ *What I most need right now is...* (For example, a moment to pause and breathe, time to yourself, someone to help process my thoughts and emotions.)

What if things do not go as expected?

Your child may deny what has happened. The school may not respond as quickly as you hoped. The first conversation may not go as well as you hoped. None of this means the process is over. Stay connected to your child, keep communication open with the school, and return to Step 1 if you need to. Progress in these situations is rarely straightforward. What matters is that you keep trying.

'You don't want people to stop bullying because they are scared of being caught, but because they genuinely realise what they were doing was bad.'

– YOUNG PERSON, 15,
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YOUTH COLLECTIVE

2. Pause before responding

Before taking action, were you able to take a private moment or talk with someone you trust to help you work through your own reaction?

- ◉ **If yes:** What helped you to feel calmer before engaging with your child or the school?
- ◉ **If not yet:** What would help you to feel calmer before the next conversation?

3. Preparing for the conversation with your child

Think about the conversation you have had or are preparing to have with your child.

- ◉ What do I most want my child to know going into this conversation?
- ◉ What do I find most difficult about approaching this with curiosity rather than accusation?

5. Looking after yourself

This process is asking a lot of you. That is important to acknowledge.

- ◉ What support do I have around me right now?
- ◉ What is one thing I can do today to look after myself?

4. Engaging with the school

Think about how you want to approach and communicate with your child's school.

- ◉ How am I feeling about engaging with the school?
- ◉ Can I approach them as a partner, or does it feel like the school and I are on opposite sides?
- ◉ What do I most need from the school right now, and how will I ask for it?

Your child causing harm does not make them a bad person. It does not make you a bad parent or carer. Choosing to stay engaged with what has happened, rather than withdraw, is one of the most important things you can do for your child right now. What is one small step you can take today? It might be for your child, for those affected, or for yourself.

Connected resources

- ◉ Strategies to connect with your child or young person
- ◉ First response guide
- ◉ My child has been harmed
- ◉ Working with schools early on
- ◉ Helping your child develop responsibility and independence

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/ehespace: 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.