



Australian Government



Parents and carers

Protective and risk factors for children and young people

Understanding what protects your child and what puts them at risk



As a parent or carer you can do many things to help your child or young person. One of the most useful things to know is what protects them, and what raises their risk of bullying and other harmful behaviours. This factsheet explains what protective and risk factors are and why they matter. It also shows you how to use that knowledge to best support your child.

This factsheet is for parents and carers of children in both primary school and secondary school.

Before you start: Knowing the protective and risk factors in your child's life helps you understand their world more clearly. This helps you support them with more confidence and care.



What are protective factors?

Protective factors are the relationships and personal strengths in a child's life. They help children cope with challenges, reduce the impact of harm and support healthy development.

Examples of protective factors

Individual

- ◉ personal resilience (the ability to cope with challenges)
- ◉ emotional regulation skills (the ability to manage emotions and reactions)
- ◉ sense of identity and self-worth
- ◉ sense of belonging
- ◉ social skills
- ◉ help-seeking confidence
- ◉ problem-solving skills
- ◉ healthy peer relationships

Family

- ◉ positive parenting practices and role modelling
- ◉ open communication
- ◉ warmth and connection
- ◉ consistent boundaries and routines

School and community

- ◉ positive school engagement
- ◉ safe and inclusive school environment
- ◉ trusted adults across different settings
- ◉ access to mental health and wellbeing services
- ◉ cultural connection and pride
- ◉ opportunities for meaningful participation and leadership
- ◉ community support networks

Key facts

- ◉ Children can have many protective factors at the same time. You can strengthen these factors over time.
- ◉ A child who has at least one trusted adult they feel comfortable talking to can seek help earlier and feel supported when things go wrong.
- ◉ Protective factors can exist across individual, family, school and community levels. No single factor works alone.
- ◉ When you strengthen protective factors, you build your child's resilience (their ability to cope with challenges) and support their overall wellbeing.



What are risk factors?

Risk factors are the things in a child's life that may make them more at risk for bullying and other harmful behaviours. This includes both experiencing or participating in these actions. These factors can appear at an individual, family, school or community level, and they can affect each other.

Examples of risk factors

Individual

- ◉ low self-esteem
- ◉ social isolation
- ◉ difficulty with emotional regulation (the ability to control feelings and reactions)
- ◉ low empathy
- ◉ mental health challenges
- ◉ limited help-seeking confidence
- ◉ limited understanding of harmful behaviours and how to respond

Family

- ◉ family dysfunction or instability
- ◉ limited communication
- ◉ exposure to family violence

School and community

- ◉ school disengagement
- ◉ community disadvantage or violence
- ◉ limited access to services
- ◉ exposure to discrimination, such as racism, ableism, misogyny or homophobia
- ◉ pressure from peers to take part in harmful or risky behaviour, including online

Key facts

- ◉ Children can experience multiple risk factors at the same time, and these can reinforce each other. For example, social isolation may contribute to mental health difficulties, which may in turn reduce help-seeking.
- ◉ When a child is regularly left out of social groups or peer activities, they may feel like they do not belong. This can make harmful behaviours more likely, or make it harder for them to ask for help when something is wrong.
- ◉ When you understand which risk factors are present, you can focus your energy and support where it is most needed.

Risk factors you can act on

Many risk factors can be changed or reduced over time. Knowing which ones you can act on helps you focus your energy where it will make the most difference.

Some risk factors are harder to change directly, such as a child's family history, a past experience of trauma or limited access to services and opportunities in your community. Understanding these helps you focus on what you can control.

There is a lot you can do. For example:

- ◉ You can strengthen the connection and communication within your family.
- ◉ You can increase the number of trusted adults in your child's life.
- ◉ You can seek mental health support for your child or family.
- ◉ You can help your child build friendships and feel like they belong.

Small, consistent actions in these areas can reduce risk and build protective factors over time.

'The adults who helped the most made me feel trusted and heard, rather than "managed." Oftentimes, these were also the adults who weren't trying to speak for me or solve my problems but the ones who helped me find my confidence and voice to speak for myself.'

– YOUNG PERSON, 18, PROJECT ROCKIT NATIONAL YOUTH COLLECTIVE

Next steps

Use the checklist below to build a picture of which protective factors and risk factors are present in your child's life right now.

Identify one or two dynamic risk factors you could begin to address and one or two protective factors you could strengthen.

For more information, see the connected resources listed at the end of this factsheet and checklist.

Protective and risk factors: A checklist for parents and carers

Use this checklist as a practical starting point. It can help you identify the protective factors and risk factors in your child's or young person's world. There are no right or wrong answers, and this is not about judging yourself or your child. Take your time with each item and select the option that feels most accurate for you.

If you are unsure about any of your responses, note these down. They may open up useful conversations with your child or point you toward where more support could help.

When you have finished, guidance on how to use your responses is at the end of the checklist.

Protective factors: if your child is in primary school

My child has at least one trusted adult outside our home that they feel comfortable talking to openly. For example, a grandparent, uncle, aunt, teacher, coach or mentor.

☐

'Yes, this is present'

☐

'I am not sure'

☐

'I would like to explore this further'

My child has friendships where they feel accepted and valued for who they are.

☐

'Yes, this is present'

☐

'I am not sure'

☐

'I would like to explore this further'

My child is encouraged to feel proud of their identity, appearance and background at home.

☐

'Yes, this is present'

☐

'I am not sure'

☐

'I would like to explore this further'

My child is growing up in a household where talking about feelings and mental health is normal.

☐

'Yes, this is present'

☐

'I am not sure'

☐

'I would like to explore this further'

My child is curious about others and able to form social connections.

☐

'Yes, this is present'

☐

'I am not sure'

☐

'I would like to explore this further'

My child knows that it is okay to ask for help when something feels wrong.

☐

'Yes, this is present'

☐

'I am not sure'

☐

'I would like to explore this further'

My child is engaged at school and has at least one adult at school that they feel connected to.

☐

'Yes, this is present'

☐

'I am not sure'

☐

'I would like to explore this further'

Risk factors: if your child is in primary school

My child has experienced significant changes recently, such as starting a new school, friendship changes or family disruption.

☐ 'Yes, this is present' ☐ 'I am not sure' ☐ 'I would like to explore this further'

My child spends a lot of time alone or has limited social connections with peers.

☐ 'Yes, this is present' ☐ 'I am not sure' ☐ 'I would like to explore this further'

My child may be experiencing, witnessing or at risk of discrimination based on who they are, such as their cultural background, sexuality, gender, disability or any other factor.

☐ 'Yes, this is present' ☐ 'I am not sure' ☐ 'I would like to explore this further'

My child has limited access to positive role models across the settings they are in.

☐ 'Yes, this is present' ☐ 'I am not sure' ☐ 'I would like to explore this further'

My child lives in a household or community where there is significant stress, instability, or limited access to services or resources.

☐ 'Yes, this is present' ☐ 'I am not sure' ☐ 'I would like to explore this further'

Protective factors: if your young person is in secondary school

My child has more than one trusted adult outside our home that they feel safe with and can talk to openly. For example, a grandparent, uncle, aunt, teacher, coach or mentor.

☐ 'Yes, this is present' ☐ 'I am not sure' ☐ 'I would like to explore this further'

My child has friendships where they feel genuinely accepted and valued for who they are.

☐ 'Yes, this is present' ☐ 'I am not sure' ☐ 'I would like to explore this further'

My child is developing a strong sense of identity and pride in who they are.

☐ 'Yes, this is present' ☐ 'I am not sure' ☐ 'I would like to explore this further'

My child feels comfortable talking about their feelings, stresses or worries at home.

☐ 'Yes, this is present' ☐ 'I am not sure' ☐ 'I would like to explore this further'

My child knows how to support a friend who is being harmed or left out.

☐ 'Yes, this is present' ☐ 'I am not sure' ☐ 'I would like to explore this further'

My child is engaged at school and has at least one adult at school that they feel connected to.

☐ 'Yes, this is present' ☐ 'I am not sure' ☐ 'I would like to explore this further'

My child knows where to go for help if something goes wrong, both inside and outside of school.

☐ 'Yes, this is present' ☐ 'I am not sure' ☐ 'I would like to explore this further'

Risk factors: if your young person is in secondary school

My child has experienced significant changes recently, such as moving schools, friendship changes, family disruption or moving countries.

☐ 'Yes, this is present' ☐ 'I am not sure' ☐ 'I would like to explore this further'

My child spends a lot of time alone or has limited social connections with peers.

☐ 'Yes, this is present' ☐ 'I am not sure' ☐ 'I would like to explore this further'

My child may be experiencing or at risk of discrimination based on who they are, such as their cultural background, sexuality, gender, disability or any other factor.

☐ 'Yes, this is present' ☐ 'I am not sure' ☐ 'I would like to explore this further'

My child has experienced or is currently experiencing mental health difficulties that feel unresolved.

☐ 'Yes, this is present' ☐ 'I am not sure' ☐ 'I would like to explore this further'

My child shows signs of school disengagement, such as reluctance to attend, withdrawal or declining performance.

☐ 'Yes, this is present' ☐ 'I am not sure' ☐ 'I would like to explore this further'

Digital risk factors: all young people with access to the internet

My child has limited guidance or conversations about their online life and safety at home.

☐ 'Yes, this is present' ☐ 'I am not sure' ☐ 'I would like to explore this further'

My child spends a lot of time online and does not have a trusted adult they feel comfortable talking to about their online experiences.

☐ 'Yes, this is present' ☐ 'I am not sure' ☐ 'I would like to explore this further'

My child has been exposed to harmful or distressing content online.

☐ 'Yes, this is present' ☐ 'I am not sure' ☐ 'I would like to explore this further'

For more information about understanding the online world of your child, see the connected resources at the end of this checklist.

Identity-based risk factors: all young people

My child has experienced, or may be experiencing, discrimination related to their race, cultural background, sexuality, disability, gender or any other identity-based factor.

☐ 'Yes, this is present' ☐ 'I am not sure' ☐ 'I would like to explore this further'

My child belongs to a group that may face additional barriers to seeking help. For example, a child from a culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) background who may face language or other barriers to accessing relevant services.

☐ 'Yes, this is present' ☐ 'I am not sure' ☐ 'I would like to explore this further'

My child has experienced or witnessed racism, homophobia, transphobia, ableism, misogyny or other forms of identity-based harm.

☐ 'Yes, this is present' ☐ 'I am not sure' ☐ 'I would like to explore this further'



Evidence shows that some groups of children and young people can experience bullying and other harmful behaviours at higher rates. This includes young people from First Nations and culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) backgrounds, young people with a disability and young people who identify as LGBTIQ+.

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

Some young people may also have more than one identity or experience that increases their risk of harm or creates barriers to getting support. For example, a young person may be both from a CALD background and identify as LGBTIQ+ or have a disability. When these experiences overlap, the challenges they face can be greater and more complex.

Next steps

Take a moment with your responses. Notice where protective factors are strong. These are real strengths worth noticing. If you were unsure about any of your responses, those areas are worth exploring further. They may open up useful conversations with your child or point you toward where more support could help. Then identify one or two risk factors you could begin to address, and one or two protective factors you could strengthen further. Treat this as a starting point, not a to-do list.

Awareness is the first step. You do not have to work through the next steps alone, and asking for help is a sign of strength.

Connected resources

- ◉ Strategies to connect with your child or young person
- ◉ Understanding the online world of your child or young person
- ◉ Something does not seem right: Early signs of harm

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 online harm, 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.