



Australian Government



Parents and carers

Something does not seem right: Early signs of harm

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

Signs of harm are often subtle. The more you understand what is normal for your child or young person, the easier it is to act early. This helps you provide support and prevent long-term impacts. It also helps to stop the cycle of bullying and other harmful behaviours.

It's normal to find this hard – many parents and carers feel the same way, and you are not alone. You know your child or young person better than anyone. Regular check-ins and ongoing conversation, even when things seem fine, make it easier to notice if something changes. This also helps your child feel comfortable coming to you.

Why the baseline matters

A behavioural baseline is what is normal for your child during a calm, connected period of their life. It is not a fixed standard; it shifts over time and is unique to every child.

When you have a sense of what their 'normal' is, you are more likely to notice when something changes. It is the shift from their normal that matters – not a comparison to others.

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.



It is not always obvious

Early signs of harm can be easy to miss – especially the social forms of bullying, such as leaving someone out or spreading rumours.

These leave no visible signs and are the most commonly overlooked by adults.

'You don't always notice the moment it changes ... only the moment it stops feeling safe.'

– YOUNG PERSON, 16,
PROJECT ROCKIT NATIONAL
YOUTH COLLECTIVE

Signs to look out for

Bullying and other harmful behaviours can happen at home, at school, online, in the community or through sport – and can move between these settings. The signs to look out for are often similar, wherever it's happening.

Signs of harm you may notice in your child include:

- ⦿ becoming withdrawn or quieter than usual
- ⦿ changes in sleep, appetite or mood
- ⦿ frequent negative comments about themselves or feelings of worthlessness
- ⦿ emotional outbursts that feel out of proportion or out of character
- ⦿ aggression
- ⦿ seeming anxious or feeling sick before school, training or other activities
- ⦿ seeming distressed or anxious after being online, or withdrawing from family conversation afterwards
- ⦿ reluctant to talk about school or friends

- ⦿ sudden loss of friendships or being excluded from social groups
- ⦿ signs of physical injury
- ⦿ missing, damaged or unexplained loss of personal belongings
- ⦿ not wanting to go to school
- ⦿ making excuses to stay home
- ⦿ drop in engagement or grades
- ⦿ loss of interest in, or making excuses not to take part in, hobbies, sports, training, clubs or other activities they usually enjoy
- ⦿ becoming secretive about their phone or device, or repeated notifications.

You don't need to wait for a big sign before checking in. Regular, everyday conversations about their day, their friends or what they're doing online help your child open up. They also make it easier to notice if something changes.

If your child does come to you, it is important to listen without judgement. Taking their concerns seriously matters more than knowing exactly what to say.

Online harm

Online harm can be especially hard to spot, including newer or emerging forms. A child worried about their image, reputation or about content shared without their consent may be feeling anxious. You do not need to be a technical expert. Ask questions, listen and take their concerns seriously. If harmful, manipulated or non-consensual content is involved, help your child report it and access the support they need. For more information about understanding the online world of your child, see the connected resources at the end of this resource.

'It's like you notice how the things they used to love, they now hate, or they are quieter and more reserved because they're scared that their actions will be made fun of.'

– YOUNG PERSON, 15,
PROJECT ROCKIT NATIONAL
YOUTH COLLECTIVE

Signs can be inward or outward

Inward signs:

- ◉ Withdrawal
- ◉ Anxiety
- ◉ Changes in appetite or sleep
- ◉ Reluctance to attend school

Outward signs:

- ◉ Irritability
- ◉ Secrecy
- ◉ Dismissiveness about peers
- ◉ Changes in friendship groups or no contact with friends

Inward and outward signs are both important to take seriously.

Age makes a difference

- ◉ A primary school-aged child may show regression, changes in play or reluctance to go to school.
- ◉ A secondary school-aged young person may show withdrawal, phone secrecy, friendship changes or reluctance to go to school.

The reflection tool helps you identify your child or young person's baseline.

Note

Early warning signs do not confirm that harm is happening – only that something may be worth paying closer attention to. Trust what you notice.





Neurodivergent and disability note

If your child is neurodivergent or a person with disability, knowing their baseline and behaviour range is very important. Trust what you notice and seek support if something feels consistently different or concerning. Some children with disabilities might not always see signs of bullying or other harmful behaviours. Having strong relationships with school staff can help you spot and address any concerns.

Discrimination and targeted bullying note:

Some children and young people are more likely to be targeted because of who they are. Bullying and other harmful behaviours can target a child because of their background or characteristics, including their race, cultural background, sexuality, disability, gender or any other identity-based factor.

If your child or young person is at risk of discrimination because of who they are, watch for changes. Notice shifts in their mood, connections or willingness to go to school or join community activities.



Note

Early signs are rarely obvious. Here are some examples of what they can look like in everyday life.

If your child is in primary school:

Scenario 1: Cassie, 9, used to run to the car at pick-up and talk all the way home. Lately, she gets in quietly and says everything is fine. She has started asking to stay home on Mondays and no longer eats the food in her lunchbox. Her mum cannot identify a specific cause, but something feels different.

This shift away from the baseline is worth paying attention to.

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.

If your young person is in secondary school:

Scenario 2: Jayden, 14, used to love Saturday morning footy training. Over the past month, they have found a reason not to go every week – a sore leg, too much homework, or they just don't feel like it. Jayden still goes online but seems tense afterwards. Their parents have said they haven't seen Jayden's friendship group or teammates around lately. Jayden says everything is fine, and they keep telling themselves what their friends and teammates say is just joking around – no one really means it.

No single thing is alarming. The change is.

If your young person is in secondary school:

Scenario 3: Priya, 16, has become increasingly private about her phone. She angles the screen away from family, gets noticeably anxious when her phone buzzes and has become quieter at dinner. When her older sister asked if everything was okay, she said yes, but her sister wasn't convinced.

Something is off. Trust that feeling.

Reflection tool

Use the reflection tool in this resource to think about your child's baseline. This way, if anything changes, you will be ready to notice.

What is normal for my young person?

You know your child or young person better than anyone. This tool is designed to use that knowledge. There are no right or wrong answers. Take your time and skip anything that does not feel relevant right now. You do not need to have all the answers yet.

How to use this tool

Think of a recent period when your child seemed calm, connected and doing well. That is their baseline – what normal looks and feels like for them.

- ◉ Work through each question below with that period in mind. Place a dot on the scale where it feels most accurate.
- ◉ Then, during a period when something does not feel right, return and place a second dot in a different colour. Notice what has shifted and by how much.

1. Friendships

If your child is in primary school:

My child has at least one friendship where they feel accepted and valued.

NOT AT ALL VERY MUCH SO

If your young person is in secondary school:

My young person has friendships that feel stable and mutual – not ones that leave them anxious or upset.

NOT AT ALL VERY MUCH SO

2. Talking to trusted adults

If your child is in primary school:

My child will come to another trusted adult or me when something is bothering them.

NOT AT ALL VERY MUCH SO

If your young person is in secondary school:

My young person is willing to talk to another trusted adult or me when something is wrong, even if they don't always do it straight away.

NOT AT ALL VERY MUCH SO

'...every individual has their own sparkle or glow, where they shine when they are happy or are being their true self, and when they get bullied, they lose that.'

– YOUNG PERSON, 15,
PROJECT ROCKIT NATIONAL
YOUTH COLLECTIVE

3. Connection to school

If your child is in primary school:

My child seems to enjoy going to school or at least feels okay about it.

NOT AT ALL VERY MUCH SO

If your young person is in secondary school:

My young person feels connected to at least one person or thing at school – a teacher, a friend, a subject or an activity.

NOT AT ALL VERY MUCH SO

4. Life outside of school

If your child is in primary school:

My child has activities outside of school – such as sport, creative hobbies or family time – that they look forward to.

NOT AT ALL VERY MUCH SO

If your young person is in secondary school:

My young person participates in activities outside of school that feel meaningful or enjoyable to them.

NOT AT ALL VERY MUCH SO

5. Sense of self

If your child is in primary school:

My child seems comfortable and confident in who they are.

NOT AT ALL VERY MUCH SO

If your young person is in secondary school:

My young person generally feels okay about who they are and is not often upset or distressed about their identity.

NOT AT ALL VERY MUCH SO

6. Managing emotions

If your child is in primary school:

My child can manage strong feelings without them becoming a significant problem.

NOT AT ALL VERY MUCH SO

If your young person is in secondary school:

My young person can manage difficult emotions without frequently shutting down, losing control or becoming overwhelmed.

NOT AT ALL VERY MUCH SO

7. Online life

If your child is in primary school:

My child is open about what they do online and seems comfortable after using their device.

NOT AT ALL VERY MUCH SO

If your young person is in secondary school:

My young person is open about what they do online and does not seem worried or upset about their phone or how they are seen online.

NOT AT ALL VERY MUCH SO

8. Home and family

If your child is in primary school:

My child seems comfortable at home and in our family relationships.

NOT AT ALL VERY MUCH SO

If your young person is in secondary school:

My young person feels stable and supported at home, even when things are not always easy.

NOT AT ALL VERY MUCH SO

Reflection notes

Look at where your two dots sit and what the distance between them tells you.

Noticing a shift does not automatically mean bullying or other harmful behaviours are occurring.

Use your reflection as a prompt to ask a few gentle questions, with curiosity and care.

Some of these signs may point to other challenges for your child, such as health or mental health-related matters. If they persist, consider professional support options.

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/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.

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.