



Something is off: identifying early signs

Sometimes when something doesn't seem right, we cannot always say exactly what it is. That feeling is worth paying attention to. This resource will help you notice signs that you or someone else might be experiencing bullying or other harmful behaviours. It will also help you know what to do next.

The scenarios below show examples of what early signs of bullying and other harmful behaviours can look like. This can help you start to notice signs in yourself and others.

Scenario 1: Janvi

Janvi has always been loud and outgoing. He enjoys spending time with friends during breaks. But lately, he has been different. He says he has work to finish at lunch and sits by himself instead.

You have heard him say a few times that he isn't feeling well and wants to go home. He has been late to school a few times in the past few weeks, and he missed hanging out after school last week.

After school, you see him check his phone and then quickly put it away. He looks worried. You ask him if he is okay, and he shrugs it off, saying that he is fine.

On their own, these things might seem like nothing. But together, they form a bigger picture.

'Bullying isn't just defined by one set of actions – only when we understand the variety of ways it arises can we understand how to avoid it.'

– YOUNG PERSON, PROJECT
ROCKIT NATIONAL YOUTH
COLLECTIVE

Reflection prompts

- ◉ What are the signs that something is off?
- ◉ Could any of these signs be easy to miss or explain away? Why?
- ◉ What would you do if you noticed this happening to a friend or to yourself?

Scenario 2: Zara

You and your friends usually hang out together at school and catch up on weekends. Zara is part of the group.

Lately, something has changed. When Zara joins in, people start speaking more quietly, or they change the subject. Plans are made without her. Her messages in the group chat often go unanswered.

One day, everyone in the group is chatting. Zara asks if people can slow down a little so she can follow along. Someone replies, 'Don't worry about it. You don't need to know,' then keeps talking.

Nothing dramatic has happened. But you are starting to wonder if Zara is being left out on purpose.

Scenario 3: Paul

Paul is known for making people laugh. He often tells jokes and doesn't seem to mind laughing at himself too.

Lately, though, you've noticed that people have started making Paul the punchline. When he gets an answer wrong or makes a mistake, someone says, 'Classic Paul,' and everyone laughs. Paul usually laughs along too. But he doesn't seem as comfortable as he used to.

Over the past few weeks, Paul has stopped putting his hand up as often. He has become much quieter in class. When you mention it to your friends, they say, 'It's fine. Paul jokes around all the time.' You are not so sure.

Reflection prompts

- ◉ What are the signs that something is off?
- ◉ Could any of these signs be easy to miss or explain away? Why?
- ◉ What would you do if you noticed this happening to a friend or to yourself?

Reflection prompts

- ◉ What are the signs that something is off?
- ◉ Could any of these signs be easy to miss or explain away? Why?
- ◉ What would you do if you noticed this happening to a friend or to yourself?

'Sometimes the first step isn't speaking up, it's simply noticing that something doesn't feel right.'

– YOUNG PERSON, PROJECT ROCKIT NATIONAL YOUTH COLLECTIVE

How can you help?

When you notice that something doesn't seem right, there are things you can do. There isn't just one right way to help. Different situations need different approaches. Even small actions can make a big difference. Here are some simple ways you can support someone who is experiencing bullying or other harmful behaviours.

Go to the 'Connected resources' section for more advice on how to support a friend.



Note

If the bullying or harmful behaviour is happening online, save any evidence, like screenshots, before you block or report it. Then tell a trusted adult.

If the first person doesn't help, tell someone else. Keep trying.



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

Step 1: Trust what you notice

If something feels off, that feeling is worth taking seriously. You do not need to be certain before you act.

Step 3: Name what you are seeing

If you feel comfortable, gently name what you have observed to the person you are worried about. Keep it simple and kind.

You may say something like, 'You have been a bit quiet today. Are you okay?' or 'I noticed that you haven't been sitting with your friends much. Can I help?'

What if I am not sure?

You do not need proof or a full story. Just share what you have noticed. Noticing is the first step, and that alone can start to make a difference.

Step 2: Check in

If you are worried about a friend, a simple check-in can really help. You do not need to know exactly what to say. Just let them know that you noticed and you are there. This could be as simple as, 'Hey, are you okay?'

Step 4: Tell a trusted adult

If you are worried about someone or yourself, you should tell a trusted adult. If the first person doesn't help, tell someone else. Keep trying.



Note

If you're not sure who to tell, go to the 'Connected resources' section for more support.

You can also talk to someone at the support organisations listed in the 'Where to get more help' section at the end of this resource.

Connected resources

- ◉ How do I support someone?
- ◉ Who's in my corner?
- ◉ What if I don't want to tell? A guide to help-seeking

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 polices and school context.