



Australian Government



Years 8 and above

Understanding peer norms

Unspoken rules: How can group culture cause harm without us knowing?

People who witness bullying and other harmful behaviours often don't challenge them. Just one person signalling that these behaviours are not okay can change the pattern. It empowers others to step up and challenge a harmful peer norm.

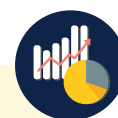
This resource will help you understand how harmful behaviour can happen and the steps you can take to contribute to more positive peer norms.

What are peer norms?

Peer norms are unspoken rules a group follows on what is acceptable, normal, funny or off-limits. Every social group has them, such as friendship groups, sports teams, classrooms and group chats. They are rarely stated out loud but are understood and followed by most members of the group.

How do peer norms form?

Norms form through repeated signals: what the group smiles and laughs at, what it ignores, what it calls out and what it shares. Over time, these signals become the invisible rules of the group. No one decides them consciously. They emerge from collective behaviour.



Statistics

Over half (55%) of people do nothing when they see bullying and other harmful behaviours.

How do peer norms enable harm?

Bullying and other harmful behaviours are reinforced when a group signals that the behaviour is acceptable. Those signals cause harm when the group's behaviour goes unchecked.

One small act

When negative peer norms go unchecked, the peer group starts to accept harmful behaviour.

Collective, repeated signals maintain peer norms, so even one person changing their signal can disrupt harmful patterns.

How do peer norms change?

Peer norms shift when people in a group signal that something is not okay. That shift can start with one person. You can signal that something is not okay in a few ways. Don't react to 'jokes' that could hurt someone. Don't share harmful content. Or check in privately with someone who was targeted. You could also call it out and say, 'I don't think that's very nice.' See 'Four small acts' below for more strategies.

Four small acts you can do today to help shift peer norms and be an upstander

1. Disruption via non-participation

Harmful behaviours thrive on validation, such as laughter, likes or shares. If you remove that validation, you send a powerful, low-risk signal that the behaviour is not supported.

Statistics

Research shows that bullying and other harmful behaviours frequently reduce when just one person acts differently. It is important to remember that norms are not fixed.



Note

The term 'upstander' in this resource is in line with the findings of the Anti-Bullying Rapid Review Report. An upstander is someone who chooses to act positively and safely to support a person being bullied or harmed and upholds values of kindness and empathy.



2. Direct redirection

Moving your group away from negative peer norms doesn't have to be confrontational. You can gently pivot the focus away from harmful behaviour.

- ◉ **The topic pivot:** If a conversation turns into gossip or mocking, smoothly change the subject.
Try: 'Hey, speaking of the weekend, did anyone watch [name of show] last night?' or 'Anyway, what time are we meeting for project prep?'
- ◉ **The awkward question:** Ask the person to explain the joke as if you don't understand it. This makes them explain the harm out loud, which often makes the joke harder to land.
Try: 'I don't get it. Why is that funny?' or 'What do you mean by that?'
- ◉ **The positive counterweight:** If someone is being picked on or ignored in a group setting, deliberately pull them into a positive interaction.
Try 'Hey [Name], I wanted to hear what you thought about that new movie,' or 'Nice play on that last routine, [Name].'

3. Post-incident support (the private check-in)

A major part of how peer norms enable harm is by making the targeted person feel completely isolated. Reaching out privately validates their experience and weakens the group's power.

- ◉ **The direct text:** Send a quick, low-pressure message after an incident occurs.
Try: 'Hey, what happened in the chat earlier wasn't cool. Just wanted to see how you're doing.'
- ◉ **The in-person sidebar:** Catch the person when they are away from the group.
Try: 'Hey, I noticed how they were talking to you during training today. It seemed unfair. I'm glad you're on the team.'
- ◉ **The digital ally:** If someone is being targeted or excluded in a group chat, message them individually to let them know they're not alone.

'The strongest friendships aren't the ones where nothing goes wrong; they're the ones where people are willing to call things out when it does.'

– YOUNG PERSON, 16,
PROJECT ROCKIT NATIONAL
YOUTH COLLECTIVE

4. Cultural protective practices

Many cultural, faith and community traditions have built-in practices around belonging, hospitality and care for each other. Using these values can help your group get along better and reduce the influence of harmful norms.

- ◉ **The restorative circle:** Resolve a group disagreement by sitting down together to hear how everyone was affected, instead of taking sides or talking behind closed doors. A trusted adult may need to help with this.
- ◉ **Extending the table (inclusion as a standard):** Actively invite someone who is being excluded to sit with you, join your group chat or participate in a group activity.

Next steps

You don't need to be the loudest voice in the room. You just need to think about the signals that you give to harmful behaviours. When you stop signalling that harmful behaviours are okay, others who feel the same way are more likely to do the same. These small acts can build up over time and help your group develop more positive peer norms. What is one small act that you can do today?

'A lot of friendship groups have unspoken rules. Nobody sits you down and explains them, but you learn them quickly because you notice what gets people accepted and what gets them left out.'

– YOUNG PERSON, 16,
PROJECT ROCKIT NATIONAL
YOUTH COLLECTIVE

Reflection tool

You have looked at peer norms, how they form and how they can be changed. Now it's time to go a little deeper and reflect on groups you have been a part of. Instead of focusing on what you personally do, take a step back. Look at your social circles (your friends, your teammates or your classmates) as if you were an outside observer.

These prompts are designed to help you observe the unwritten rules that shape how people act around each other. This isn't a test, and no one will collect, read or display your answers unless you choose to share them. Focus on one of your social groups when reflecting on the questions. You can come back and answer the questions for other groups at any time.

1. Signals and unwritten rules

Can you think of signals where harmful behaviour has been tolerated by your group? Are these signals different, depending on whether you're online or face-to-face?

2. Unspoken agreement

Are there behaviours in your group that people seem uncomfortable with but no one says anything about?

3. Vibe shift

Can you think of a time when one person challenged the unspoken rules or changed the tone of a situation? What did they do?

4. An outsider's view

What do you think your group is known for by people outside it?

5. A quiet observation

One unwritten rule or pattern in my group that I want to keep an eye on is ...

6. One small act

One small change I can make to challenge harmful peer norms is ...

These questions give you a chance to check in with who you are and how you want to navigate the world around you. Remember that peer norms are not fixed. Just one small act can make an important difference to those being hurt by negative peer norms and contribute towards more positive ones.

Connected resources

- ◉ Who do you want to be?
- ◉ What does courage look like?

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.