



Australian Government



Years 8 and above

What does courage look like?

Courage does not always look like an explosive confrontation or a hero stepping into the spotlight. Courage is much quieter than that. It is deciding to act differently when you see harmful behaviour in a group. It is asking if someone is okay when they have been excluded or hurt. It is saying something instead of staying silent.

Courage can be a single, small action that can change the social dynamic and support people when they need it the most.

An upstander is someone who chooses to act safely and positively to support a person being bullied or harmed. They act with kindness and empathy.

This resource helps you recognise small acts of courage, understand why we hesitate to act and know what to do if speaking up doesn't go as expected.

It is important not to blame people who do not speak up. Everyone finds courage in different ways in their own time. Small acts by a few can start to build a culture of courage and support. Even when actions feel small, they can shift the norm and make it easier for more people to act when they see harmful behaviour.

Read the story on the next page about taking a 'joke' too far and think about what you would do in a similar situation.

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.



'Courage isn't not feeling afraid ... it's deciding someone else's wellbeing matters more than your discomfort.'

– YOUNG PERSON, 16,
PROJECT ROCKIT NATIONAL
YOUTH COLLECTIVE

Taking a 'joke' too far

It started as a joke in the Year 9 group chat over the weekend, just a meme edit of Ethan at the swimming carnival. Everyone threw in laughing emojis, so by Monday lunchtime under the shade sails, it felt like an open invitation.

'Oi, Ethan. Bringing your floaties tomorrow? Don't want you sinking again, mate,' I called out.

A few boys next to me cracked up. That quick hit of social currency felt good. I kept pushing, adding a bit more edge to it, bringing up how he choked on the final lap. Ethan stopped, his hand tightening on his backpack strap. He tried to laugh it off, muttering, 'Yeah, right, very funny,' but his eyes were darting around, looking for an exit route. He looked a bit embarrassed and pretty isolated.

Inside, a small voice told me that the joke had run its course. It was moving from being a laugh to just being heavy and mean. But stopping is weird. If I stopped, the silence would be awkward, and suddenly the spotlight would be on me.

I took a quick look around our circle under the shade sails to see where everyone stood. Their silence felt like a massive nod of approval. It told me that what I was doing was fine, or at least acceptable enough that no one wanted to mess up the lunchtime vibe by interrupting. Their silence felt like a giant green light.

If I had looked closer, the silence was not a green light at all. It was a gridlock of people trying to figure out how to navigate the moment.

- ◉ Tom and Jax were right beside me, leaning forward, smirking and tossing in their own comments. They were feeding the fire; caught up in the same rush I was.
- ◉ Chloe stared intensely at her laptop screen. She was typing furiously, pretending not to hear.
- ◉ Sarah looked past Ethan, her face completely blank. She was hiding her discomfort because her brain was warning her: 'If you stick up for him, they'll turn on you next.'
- ◉ Liam was drinking from his water bottle. He froze, the bottle at his mouth, and just watched us. He was caught in that friction point where you want to do something, but you tell yourself it's just banter. He was hoping Ethan would get over it, or that someone else would say something.

Everyone kept their heads down, waiting for the bell to rescue them. When it finally rang, Ethan turned and walked toward the tech building alone.

As we grabbed our bags, Liam broke the silence. He did not call me out or start a fight. Instead, he caught up to Ethan and walked next to him. I saw him say something low, giving his shoulder a quick, reassuring pat.

It took about four seconds all up. But watching Liam walk off with Ethan instantly changed the dynamic I'd created. It went from incredibly loud to almost silent; an empty space where everyone was holding their breath.

By choosing not to laugh and checking in with Ethan, Liam showed that the crowd was not unanimous. I was left standing there, wondering if my joke had actually landed or if it was not a joke at all.

Discussion questions: the witnesses' perspectives

Imagine you were in this group, standing near those shade sails. Maybe you were like Sarah, keeping her face blank, or Chloe, burying her head behind a screen or Liam, deciding if he should step out of line.

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

– YOUNG PERSON, 16,
PROJECT ROCKIT NATIONAL
YOUTH COLLECTIVE

Look at that moment from the inside out:

1. What subtle physical signs would have told you that Ethan was not finding the joke funny? How did you know this was more than 'having a laugh' and was actually harmful behaviour?
2. Witnesses like Chloe and Sarah stayed frozen. If you wanted to say something but felt frozen, what thoughts or excuses would your brain use to keep you silent?
3. The storyteller mentions that the crowd's silence felt like a 'giant green light'. Why do people choose to hide behind their phones or stay quiet in these moments? How does that silence look different to the person causing the harm versus the person being targeted?
4. Think about your own school experiences or group chats. Have you ever witnessed a joke gradually cross the line into something harmful without anyone intending it to go that far? What did that shift feel like to watch?
5. Liam did not start an argument. He just broke the silence by quietly checking in with Ethan. If you want to avoid a confrontation, how does knowing that courage can be a small act change what you might do next time? What is one minor action you could take as an upstander to show that the crowd is not unanimous?

What would you do? Think about one thing you would say to Ethan if you could.

Thought versus truth

It is completely normal if you saw a part of yourself in that story – whether you were the one driving the joke, the one hiding behind a screen, or the one pretending to take a drink. Most people recognise themselves somewhere in that scenario. This is not about feeling ashamed or being labelled a bad person.

Recognition is simply the starting point. It is the moment you stop reacting on autopilot and start noticing the hidden thoughts that keep us stuck.

When we witness something harmful, our brains instantly generate excuses to protect us from discomfort. Here is what those internal barriers (the thoughts) look like and what is actually happening beneath the surface (the truth).

Thought (assumption)

It is not that serious. Everyone else seems fine with it.

Truth (reality)

Most people in that circle may be secretly uncomfortable. Silence is not a sign of agreement. It is usually a sign of uncertainty, awkwardness or fear.

Thought (assumption)

It is not my problem. I'm not the one saying or doing it.

Truth (reality)

The person directing the behaviour uses the crowd's presence as permission to keep going. Being there makes you part of the situation. Doing nothing is still a choice that shapes the outcome.

Thought (assumption)

If I say something, they will turn on me and make me the next target.

Truth (reality)

This fear is real, but speaking up does not have to turn into a dramatic confrontation. You do not have to start a fight to show that you don't agree with what is happening.

Thought (assumption)

I am just one person. Nothing I do or say is going to make a difference anyway.

Truth (reality)

A crowd only feels unanimous because everyone is hiding behind everyone else. A single, minor shift, like not laughing or walking away, is often all it takes to break the pattern and give others permission to do the same.

Thought (assumption)

I do not know what to say or do, so it is better to say nothing.

Truth (reality)

There is no perfect script. You do not need a flawless speech to be an upstander. Even a tiny, clumsy action or a quiet check-in after the incident can change the dynamic and support someone when they need it.

Thought (assumption)

It will blow over on its own. It is better if I do not get involved.

Truth (reality)

Harmful behaviour rarely fixes itself. It usually gets worse until someone steps in to stop it. Waiting for it to disappear just leaves the person being targeted feeling isolated for longer.

The spectrum of courage

Courage is not a single heroic act. It exists on a spectrum. Different situations carry different levels of social risk. What feels safe for one person might feel impossible for another. All kinds of upstander actions count towards breaking the silence.

'The bravest thing you can ever do in these situations isn't to fight back ... The biggest part of courage is taking action, even if you're scared.'

– YOUNG PERSON, 18,
PROJECT ROCKIT NATIONAL
YOUTH COLLECTIVE

Examples of small acts of courage

In-person actions

- ⦿ **Not laughing:** Choosing to keep your face completely blank when a cruel joke is made, so the joke doesn't get the attention it's looking for.
- ⦿ **Moving away:** Visibly stepping out of the circle or walking away to show you don't support what's happening.
- ⦿ **Checking in privately afterwards:** Catching up with the person targeted at the lockers or on the walk to class to say, 'Hey, that was pretty rubbish. Are you alright?'
- ⦿ **Saying something quietly, one-on-one:** Approaching the person who led the behaviour – later, when there is no crowd around – and saying, 'Hey, that joke at lunch got a bit heavy.'
- ⦿ **Telling a trusted adult:** Reporting the situation to a teacher, school counsellor or trusted adult. If the first person does not take you seriously, keep trying and tell someone else.
- ⦿ **Saying something in the moment:** Speaking up directly in the circle using a simple phrase like, 'Alright, that's getting old,' or 'Leave it.'

Online actions

- ⦿ **Not reacting online:** Not reacting to, liking, or commenting on a harmful post, meme or comment.
- ⦿ **Stopping the spread:** Refusing to forward, screenshot or share harmful content with other people or group chats.
- ⦿ **Sending a DM:** Sending a quick, private text to let them know that you do not agree with what was said.
- ⦿ **Reporting anonymously:** Using the platform's reporting tools to report the harmful content without anyone knowing it was you.
- ⦿ **Disrupting the thread:** Posting something totally unrelated – a link, meme or question – to change the subject and stop the harmful conversation continuing.
- ⦿ **Stepping in publicly:** Dropping a brief comment in the thread like, 'Come on guys, this is a bit much,' to show not everyone agrees.

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





Courage doesn't mean being a hero or putting yourself at risk. If speaking up directly feels unsafe or too risky, remember that indirect actions — like not laughing, stepping away or leaving the group chat — matter just as much and can have a real impact.

Look at the range of example small acts and pick one that feels doable. You don't have to do all of them, and you don't have to pick one that feels too hard. Just look at the choices, look at your situation and choose one that feels right. That is more than enough to start.

A note on personal safety

You do not have to put yourself at risk to do something that matters. If a situation feels dangerous or too heavy to handle on your own, telling a trusted adult is one of the most powerful things you can do.

If the first person you tell does not help or take you seriously, tell someone else. Keep trying until you find someone who listens. For further support, see the organisations listed at the end of this resource.

I have taken action, and it has not gone to plan

Sometimes, taking action to be an upstander requires a lot of courage. Things can get harder before they get better. Pretending that it is always easy would be dishonest. This how-to guide gives you practical steps to navigate situations that you might encounter after taking action to stop harmful behaviour.

If things feel worse after you acted

You might have acted, and things got worse. Maybe the group turned on you, or an adult dismissed your concerns. That is a hard experience. It does not mean you were wrong to act. It simply means you are still dealing with a complex social situation, and you deserve support to navigate it.

Do not manage it alone

Share what is happening with a trusted adult as soon as possible. Tell them exactly what you did to help and how the other person or group reacted. This gives the adult the full picture so they can adapt their strategy to protect you.



Tip

Do not wait to see if the retaliation stops on its own. Speaking up early prevents the behaviour from becoming normal for the group.

Example

'I need to report something. Last week I told a group to stop sending mean messages to a classmate, and now those same people are targeting me in the school yard and leaving me out.'

Document everything

Keep a factual, private record of each interaction that has happened since you stepped in. Note down the dates, times, locations, what was done or said and who was standing nearby. This record will be helpful if you need to make a formal complaint later.



Tip

Stick to the facts of what happened, rather than writing down guesses about why people did it.

Example

A log entry might look like: 'Tuesday 14 July, lunchtime. Person X and person Y blocked me from sitting at our usual table on the oval and told me to "Go find new friends."'

Record digital evidence

If the backlash is happening online, save proof of the behaviour before you block anyone or delete an app. Take screenshots or screen recordings of the comments, direct messages or group chat threads. Once you have saved the evidence safely to your device, see if the platform's features allow you to report and block the accounts.



Tip

Avoid the temptation to reply, argue or defend yourself in the chat. This could make the situation worse and be used against you later.

Example

Take a clear screenshot that shows the offensive comment, the username of the person who sent it and the timestamp of the message.

Seek help from someone else if you are ignored

If the first adult you approach dismisses your concerns or tells you to 'just ignore it,' do not give up. Keep trying. Take your evidence to a different teacher, a year coordinator, a school counsellor or your parents or carers. You have the right to feel safe and keep asking for help until someone listens.



Tip

Remember, if an adult dismisses you, that's about their misunderstanding of the situation. Your problem is still serious.

Example

You could say to a different teacher: 'I spoke to my homeroom teacher about some bullying after I stood up for a classmate, but nothing has changed, and I still feel unsafe. Can you please help me look into this?'

Refer to 'Things seem to be escalating. What do I do?' for further support.

If you are finding it hard to process

Separate your action from the outcome

It is completely normal to experience a conflicting mix of emotions after intervening, including relief, regret, anxiety, anger or self-doubt. Recognise that deciding to be an upstander reflects your character and values. How other people react or behave afterwards reflects on them, not you, and you cannot control it. A messy outcome does not mean you made a bad choice.



Tip

Avoid replaying 'what if' scenarios in your head. You can't predict how other people will act.

Focus on the present

Don't try to work out how your entire school year or friend group will look after this event. Instead, focus on the one safe step you need to take today. That might be eating lunch somewhere you feel comfortable, talking to a parent or simply turning off your phone for the evening.

Decompress with a professional

For further support, see the organisations listed at the end of this resource. Many services are free, confidential and available 24/7. They will help you with any mixed feelings or working out what to do next.



Tip

When thoughts about the future start to spiral, gently bring yourself back by asking: 'What is one small thing I can do right now to make myself feel a little safer?'



Tip

You do not need to wait for a crisis to call. Clearing your head after a bad day is exactly what they are there for.

Example

You could start the conversation by saying: 'I tried to do the right thing and help someone at school, but it totally backfired, and now I'm feeling really stressed out and full of self-doubt.'

Summary

If things feel like they are worse after you acted:

- ◉ do not try to manage it alone
- ◉ document everything
- ◉ record digital evidence (including usernames, links or messages)
- ◉ escalate if ignored.

If you are finding it hard to process:

- ◉ separate your action from the outcome
- ◉ focus on the present
- ◉ talk to a professional.

Connected resources

- ◉ Understanding peer norms
- ◉ Understanding the bystander effect
- ◉ Identity-based harm

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.