



What is harmful behaviour and how to make things better

Everyone has moments where they've done or said something that they don't feel proud of. What matters most is what you do next.

This resource can help you understand what's happening in these moments and what steps you can take to make things better. It explains what different types of harmful behaviour can look and feel like. As you read, notice if anything sounds familiar.

Arguments and disagreements

What it can look like

This can be an argument, disagreement or falling out between people, where both sides are involved. This is a normal part of relationships, and it can usually be sorted out. It can feel upsetting at the time, but it doesn't usually last.

What it can feel like for the person experiencing it

They can feel frustrated, upset or angry, or they might feel like the situation is unfair. This can be hard, but misunderstandings and disagreements can usually be worked through by talking to the other person.

'Bullying doesn't always result in a bloody nose. The most harmful forms of bullying leave you questioning yourself. Long after everyone has moved on, you're still doubting your worth.'

– YOUNG PERSON, PROJECT
ROKIT NATIONAL YOUTH
COLLECTIVE

Examples

- ◉ Falling out with a friend over a misunderstanding.
- ◉ Arguing about who said what in a group chat.
- ◉ Disagreeing about rules in a game.
- ◉ Two people having a verbal fight that is resolved by the next day.

Note

If arguments or disagreements are not sorted out, they can become bullying or other harmful behaviours. It is important to think about how your words and actions affect other people. This is true even if it starts small, like a disagreement with a friend.



Bullying and other harmful behaviours

What it can look like

This is behaviour that hurts someone. It can be physical, verbal, social or emotional. It can happen in person or online. It can be on purpose or not. It can happen once or again and again. What matters most is the impact on the person it happens to, not what we call it.

Examples

- ⦿ **Physical:** Physical harm includes things like pushing, hitting, shoving or scaring someone. Maybe you've shoved someone on the bus or seen someone block another person's path.
- ⦿ **Verbal:** Verbal harm can be name-calling, threats or comments that are hurtful or make someone feel small. It can be said on purpose or as a 'joke'. Perhaps you've made a mean comment about how someone looks. Or perhaps you've seen teasing keep going after the other person asked it to stop.
- ⦿ **Social:** Social harm includes leaving someone out, spreading rumours, turning others against someone or using friendships to control or hurt. Maybe you kept leaving the same person out of your group.
- ⦿ **Online:** Online harm includes any harmful behaviours that occur online. This can mean sending unkind messages, posting hurtful comments or sharing content to embarrass someone.
- ⦿ **Identity-based:** Identity-based harm includes harmful behaviour that is aimed at someone because of who they are, including their race, culture, religion, disability, gender, sexuality or appearance. This includes comments framed as 'banter' or 'jokes'. But this kind of behaviour targets something important about who someone is and can be especially harmful.



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



If you have been bullied or harmed because of who you are, such as your race, gender, disability or any other identity-based factor, go to the **Australian Human Rights Commission** at humanrights.gov.au to learn about your rights and find support.

What it can feel like for the person experiencing it

They might feel hurt, unsafe, embarrassed or confused, even after just one time, especially if no one offers support. If it keeps happening, they may start to feel like they don't belong. They might dread certain situations or become afraid to speak up.

The impact is real, whether it happens in person, online or both. Bullying and other harmful behaviour can affect someone for a long time. It can hurt their mental health, their confidence, their friendships and their sense of belonging and safety. Even one incident can have a real, lasting effect.

It is always important to think about the impact of your actions on other people and how you want to act in the future.

If you have done something hurtful, even if you didn't mean to, what matters is noticing it and being willing to do something about it.



'Sometimes people don't stop hurting [others] because they were told to ... they stop when they finally understand the impact. That understanding is where real repair begins.'

– YOUNG PERSON, PROJECT
ROCKIT NATIONAL YOUTH
COLLECTIVE

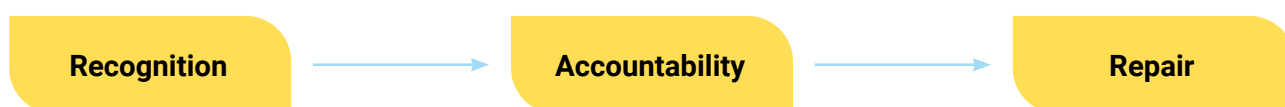
How can I make things better?

This reflection tool is for people who have read the factsheet and noticed something in themselves or things they may have said or done. It is also for people who have been asked to look at this by someone else. It aims to help you understand your impact on others and think about what you can do next.

Before you begin, take a slow breath. It is okay to make mistakes. The important thing is what you do next.

Reflecting on what happened

There are 3 main stages we can work through when we look at our behaviour.



Recognition

After reading the factsheet, did anything feel familiar?

Maybe it was something you've done.
Maybe it's something happening in your friendship group.

Maybe it was something you said that you treated as 'just a joke'. Maybe it was a time you left someone out without really thinking about it. Or maybe it's something happening in a group chat that doesn't feel right.

Write about anything that you've said, done or seen that didn't feel right.

Was there a certain person you were thinking about while you read the factsheet? Or a certain moment?

You don't have to name them. But if someone or something comes to mind, that's worth paying attention to.

Accountability

How do you think the other person or people involved might be feeling?

Think about when it happened. Did they seem okay? Did they go quiet, pull away or seem upset? Even if they didn't say anything, their reaction might tell you something.

What do you think was behind your behaviour? What were you looking for or wanting to feel at that moment?

You might have said something hurtful in a moment when you were stressed, trying to fit in, trying to be funny or wanting more control. None of these reasons makes the behaviour okay. But understanding the reasons can help you choose differently next time.

Reflect on the moment and write down anything that comes to mind.

Repair

Is there something you could do, even something small, to help make things better?

Repair doesn't always mean having a big talk. It could be saying sorry and meaning it. It could be making an effort to include the person next time. It could be stopping unkind behaviour in a group chat or just being kinder from now on.

What feels like the right first step for you?



Is there a trusted adult you could talk to about what you've recognised here?

This doesn't have to be getting yourself or someone else in trouble. It might just mean talking it through with someone you trust, like a parent, a teacher or a school counsellor, so you can work out what to do next. Asking for help to do the right thing is one of the bravest things you can do.

Who is someone you can talk to about it?

Noticing your own behaviour and wanting to do better is one of the best things a person can do. It isn't easy. But the fact that you are here, reading this and thinking it through, says something meaningful about who you are and who you want to be.

Connected resources

- ◉ Who's in my corner?
- ◉ Rebuilding trust and safety

Note

If what you've noticed feels serious or if someone is unsafe, talking to a trusted adult is an important next step. This is true even if it happened once, online or somewhere you weren't meant to be. What matters is that you help, not where it happened. Choosing to act is a sign of maturity, not weakness.

Go to the 'Connected resources' section for more support if you're finding it hard to think of someone to talk to. 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.

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

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.