



When do jokes become harmful?

Jokes and banter are a normal part of friendships. But a joke can turn into bullying or other harmful behaviours if it hurts, embarrasses, discriminates or leaves someone out. Sometimes the person telling the joke does not realise this is happening. This resource will help you work out when jokes can become harmful.

Myth versus fact

This section explores common thoughts or myths that can make bullying or unkind behaviour harder to notice or that people use to excuse it. Understanding these myths and what is really happening can help you think about ways to respond in the future.

Myth

If I'm laughing along, it means I'm okay with it.

Myth

It's just banter; they know I don't mean it. We're friends, so they shouldn't be offended.

'It can be hard as a young person to identify and respond to bullying, especially when it's hidden underneath "jokes".'

– YOUNG PERSON, PROJECT
ROCKIT NATIONAL YOUTH
COLLECTIVE

Fact

People often laugh when they feel uncomfortable or when they want to fit in. They might not know how to respond, or they might feel too scared to act differently. Laughing does not mean everything is fine. It does not make the behaviour okay.

Fact

The impact of your words matters more than what you meant by them. You might not have been trying to hurt someone. But if your words hurt, embarrass, discriminate against or exclude someone, that effect is real. This is true even if you did not mean it or if they are your friend.

"Friendly" banter often crosses lines that we convince ourselves we are okay with crossing.'

– YOUNG PERSON, PROJECT ROCKIT NATIONAL YOUTH COLLECTIVE

Myth

No one said anything, so everyone is fine with it.

Fact

Silence doesn't mean agreement. This is like when people laugh along. Others might not know how to respond, might be too scared to say something, might not know it hurts or may be trying to fit in.

Myth

It's only bullying if it happens repeatedly.

Fact

Bullying is one type of harmful behaviour. Harmful behaviours are actions that hurt, exclude, scare, discriminate against or make someone feel unsafe. This can happen online or in person. It can happen once or many times.

Myth

They need to toughen up and stop being so sensitive. Can't they take a joke?

Fact

Telling someone to toughen up puts the responsibility on the wrong person. It is not the job of the person being hurt to stop feeling hurt.

Myth

I tease everyone, so I am treating them the same as everyone else.

Fact

Just because some people might be okay with teasing, it does not mean everyone is or has to be. Others are allowed to feel the way they feel, and it is important to respect their feelings.

Myth

It wasn't about that person. It was about something else.

Fact

Comments and stereotypes about groups can hurt individuals. Even if you weren't talking about that person, jokes about someone's background or identity can cause harm. This kind of targeting is never okay.



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.

Myth

I only said it online, not to their face.

Fact

There is still a real person behind the screen. You may feel removed from the person, but they still have feelings and can be impacted by what is said.



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

Myth

No one else stopped me, so they are part of the problem too.

Fact

There are many reasons why people might not act, but they are not to blame. The person causing harm is responsible for their actions.



Note

Something in this resource might feel familiar. It could be something happening to you, something you've seen or something you've been part of. You don't have to deal with this by yourself. Talk to a trusted adult or contact one of the support organisations listed in the 'Where to get more help' section at the end of this resource.

Most people have, at some point, either said something hurtful or been hurt by something someone else said. Understanding when a joke becomes harmful does not mean judging yourself or others. It is about noticing how your words and actions affect the people around you and thinking about how you might do things differently when these situations happen.

Connected resources

- ◉ Something is off: identifying early signs
- ◉ What is harmful behaviour and how to make things better

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.