Australian Government

TOGETHER AGAINST BULLYING

Preventing cyberbullying, image-based abuse and online harm: supporting student safety

Who is this resource for?

All school staff.

Resource purpose

This resource outlines practical ways schools can prevent cyberbullying and other online harm, including image-based abuse, by strengthening students' online safety skills, relationships, belonging and wellbeing.

It focuses on preventing bullying behaviours and harmful antecedent behaviours (referred to throughout this resource as bullying and other harmful behaviours). Antecedent harmful behaviours cause harm and may continue or escalate if they are not addressed early. The resource should be read in the context of relevant school and school system policies, procedures and frameworks.

Key practice question

What can our school do to strengthen the skills, relationships, environments and supports that help prevent cyberbullying, image-based abuse and other online harms?

Quick reference guide

Key messages for school staff

Schools can help prevent bullying and other harmful online behaviours by strengthening protective factors that promote student safety, wellbeing, belonging and positive relationships:

1. **Build students' online safety skills.**
   Teach online safety, digital citizenship, digital literacy and social and emotional learning (SEL) skills through classroom learning, everyday interactions and role-modelling.
2. **Build positive peer behaviour.**
   Help students understand how their online actions can either contribute to harm or help prevent it.
3. **Create safe, inclusive and supportive environments.**
   Ensure students know how to seek help, feel included and connected, and trust their concerns will be taken seriously.
4. **Work with parents and carers.**
   Where appropriate, support families and carers with practical guidance and clear reporting pathways.
5. **Strengthen leadership, systems and staff capability.**
   Set clear expectations, reporting processes and guidelines, staff roles and ongoing professional learning to support prevention efforts.

Understanding online harm

Online harm can take different and overlapping forms. The examples below are not exhaustive, and online behaviours continue to evolve.

You do not need to be an expert to support students to stay safe online. Having an understanding of common online harms, your school's and education sector processes, and where to go for more information, such as the eSafety Commissioner website, can help you recognise and respond appropriately to concerns.

Types of online harm



Cyberbullying

Bullying that is carried out through technology. It can occur through social media, games, apps, messaging services and other online platforms.

Harm type	Description
Harmful communication	Sending hurtful, abusive or threatening messages; harassment or repeated targeting.
Identity-based harm	Discriminatory behaviour targeting a person's identities or background, such as their culture, religion, disability or sexuality.
Social harm	Spreading rumours, sharing embarrassing content or excluding someone from online groups or activities, including through inaccessible platforms.
Impersonation	Pretending to be someone else online.
Privacy violations	Sharing personal information without permission, including doxxing.



Image-based abuse

Image-based abuse is when a person shares, or threatens to share, an intimate image or video of someone without their consent (eSafety).

Harm type	Description
Sharing images	Sharing or threatening to share images without consent.
Capturing images	Taking and sharing images without the person's knowledge or consent.
Creating or altering images	Creating or manipulating images to embarrass, humiliate, discriminate against or target someone.
AI-generated images	Sharing AI-generated or manipulated images without consent, including deepfakes.

	Harm type	Description
AI-enabled and emerging harms **Harms using artificial intelligence or other emerging technologies.**	**AI-enabled impersonation**	**Fake voice recordings, images or videos.** For example, creating a fake voice recording that sounds like a student saying something they did not say.
	Fabricated content	**Fake screenshots or messages.** For example, creating a fake screenshot that makes it appear a student sent a hurtful message.
	Other AI-generated or altered content	**Content used to target someone.** For example, altering a video to make it appear that a student did or said something embarrassing.

Note: Technologies and online behaviours continue to evolve. For current guidance, refer to the eSafety website at www.eSafety.gov.au.

How online harm can differ from in-person harm

Online harm can affect students' wellbeing, relationships, learning, attendance, participation and confidence to seek help.

Some features of online environments can make online harm particularly challenging to avoid or recover from. Online content can:

- reach large audiences quickly
- remain online or reappear
- be created or shared anonymously
- follow students across home, school and social settings, making it hard for students to get away from the harm.

Social Media Minimum Age (SMMA) restriction:

While the Australian Government's SMMA restrictions prevent children under 16 from having accounts on age-restricted social media platforms, cyberbullying and other online harms can still occur. Older students may continue to use these platforms, and younger students may encounter harm through messaging apps, group chats, text messages, online games and other online spaces.

For more information, please visit www.esafety.gov.au/about-us/industry-regulation/social-media-age-restrictions-hub

Prevention guide:

Strengthen protective factors across the school community

Many of the protective factors that help prevent in-person bullying also help prevent cyberbullying, image-based abuse and other online harm.

The following sections outline practical actions schools can take to strengthen these protective factors in online contexts. Staff can start with one or two actions that best respond to their students' needs and school context.

Foundation skills: Social and emotional learning

Social and emotional learning (SEL) skills are important building blocks for positive relationships, inclusion, belonging and wellbeing. These skills are developed intentionally and progressively over time through curriculum-aligned learning, regular opportunities to practise and everyday interactions across the school day.

Skills such as empathy, emotional regulation, perspective-taking, problem-solving and responsible decision-making underpin many of the protective factors in this resource and help students navigate online interactions safely, respectfully and ethically.

Tailor teaching to students' strengths and needs

Students bring different strengths, identities, experiences, communication styles and ways of understanding online interactions. Do not assume all students will develop online safety skills through observation or classroom lessons alone. Some students may benefit from more explicit teaching, examples, guided practice, visual supports and opportunities to check understanding.

1. Build digital citizenship and digital literacy

Digital citizenship involves developing the knowledge, skills and judgement to use digital technologies safely, respectfully and ethically, and contribute to safer and inclusive online communities. Teach and reinforce these skills in age and developmentally appropriate, curriculum-aligned ways through classroom lessons, everyday interactions, scenarios, discussions and practical activities.

Digital citizenship and SEL work together

Digital citizenship and SEL both support ethical decision-making online. Skills such as empathy, perspective-taking, emotional regulation and responsible decision-making help students consider the potential impact of their actions on others, understand their rights and responsibilities, and make respectful and responsible choices online.

The table below provides practical examples of what school staff can teach and discuss with students.

Topic	What school staff can do	Discussion prompt
Consent	Teach students to ask permission before sharing another person's image or information.	*What could you do if someone asked you to share an image of another student?*
Recognising online harm	Help students identify threatening, humiliating, discriminatory or exclusionary online behaviour and know when to seek help.	*Zuri, a Year 4 student, is left out of an online game. What did the other students do that could hurt Zuri? How might Zuri feel? Who could Zuri ask for help?*
Responsible online decision-making	Teach students to pause before posting, commenting, liking or sharing. Encourage them to consider the impact on others, whether they have permission to share content, whether the action is respectful, and when they should ask an adult for help.	*What impact could this have on others? Do you have permission? Is this respectful? Should you ask an adult for help?*
Seek help	Ensure students know who they can talk to and how to report online concerns, and encourage them to seek help early. Display help-seeking information where students can find it.	*Who could you talk to if something online made you feel unsafe or uncomfortable?*
Respectful online behaviour	Use fictional scenarios to explore respectful and disrespectful online behaviour.	*What does respectful and disrespectful online behaviour look like? What could you do if you received a hurtful message?*

Use safe teaching materials

Use everyday conversations and age-appropriate scenarios to help students build the confidence and language to talk about online harm. Do not use real, graphic, distressing or humiliating content.

2. Build protective online peer behaviour

Help students understand how their online actions can either contribute to harm or help reduce it.

Online safety tip:
Use the eSafety Guide on the eSafety Commissioner website at www.esafety.gov.au/key-topics/esafety-guide to find step-by-step instructions for blocking users, changing privacy settings and reporting harmful content on specific apps, games and online platforms.

A simple framework for teaching protective online peer behaviour



NOTICE

Think before sharing, liking or commenting

Discuss how these actions can spread harmful content or make it seem acceptable.



SUPPORT

Check in with the person affected

Encourage students to show care and safely support peers who may have been affected by online harm, for example through privately checking in with them.



HELP

Tell a trusted adult

Practise phrases such as:

"Let's tell an adult we trust."

"I can come with you to get help."



PROTECT

Respond safely

Teach students not to reply to, like, comment on, or share harmful content. Depending on the situation, students can:

- **leave the conversation**
- **block the account**
- **report harmful content.**

3. Create a safe and supportive school environment

Create an environment where students feel safe, valued and able to ask for help. This includes:

Focus Area	What school staff can do	Ask...
Help students seek support	Identify staff members students can approach about online harm and make support information visible and easy to find.	*Who is an adult at school you could talk to if something happened online?*
Build trusting relationships	Greet students and check in with them regularly. Listen without judgement, show genuine interest in their lives, and take their concerns seriously.	*How are things going for you?*
Strengthen supportive peer relationships	Provide opportunities to practise listening, cooperation, inclusion and peer support.	*What helps someone feel they can trust and seek support from you or a peer?*
Set clear expectations	Reinforce that expectations for safety, respect and inclusion apply online and offline.	*What does showing respect look like in a group chat, online game or shared document?*
Promote inclusion and belonging	Use classroom and whole-of-school activities to help students feel known, included, respected and valued.	*What can we do to make sure everyone feels included in our class, both online and in person?*
Support cultural safety and identity	Respect students' identities and challenge harmful stereotypes and discrimination.	*What would help you feel safe, respected and supported?*

4. Work with parents and carers

Where appropriate, schools can support parents and carers to help prevent and respond to cyberbullying, image-based abuse and other online harms by helping them to:



UNDERSTAND

Provide parents and carers with clear guidance on:

- privacy and consent
- respectful online behaviour
- recognising online harm
- privacy settings, blocking accounts and reporting content
- age requirements, where relevant to the school context and age group.

This information can be shared through newsletters, parent and carer information sessions, school websites and other communication channels, where appropriate.



TALK

Share simple conversation starters that help families maintain regular discussions about online experiences.

For example:

"What are you enjoying online at the moment?"



SEEK HELP

Encourage parents and carers to:

- respond calmly when a child raises a concern
- maintain open communication
- seek support when needed.



REPORT

Help parents and carers understand:

- how to report concerns
- who to contact
- where to find support.

Where appropriate, display contact details in newsletters, enrolment information, school websites and other communication channels.



RESPOND

Encourage parents and carers to focus on safety and wellbeing first, before making decisions about access to devices or online platforms.



BELONG

Use communication approaches that help parents and carers feel welcomed, respected, valued and included.

Consider whether language, format, cultural factors, accessibility considerations or previous experiences may affect how comfortable or able parents and carers feel to raise concerns.

5. Strengthen leadership and policy

Strong leadership and clear systems help schools prevent, identify and respond to online harm consistently and effectively.



Expect

Embed safe and respectful online behaviour in:

- policies
- classroom practices
- school communications

Reinforce that preventing online harm is everyone's responsibility.



Report

Maintain clear policies and procedures for:

- reporting
- escalation
- responding to online harm.

Make sure staff, students and parents and carers know:

- how to report concerns
- who to contact
- display reporting flowcharts and contact information.



Roles

Clearly define responsibility for:

- receiving reports
- supporting students
- contacting parents and carers where appropriate
- managing technology issues
- escalating serious concerns.



Learn

Provide ongoing professional learning on:

- cyberbullying
- image-based abuse
- emerging technologies
- reporting responsibilities
- effective responses for students who may have additional support needs or other complexities.



Review

Strengthen and improve practice by:

- reviewing incident data to identify patterns and trends
- using an existing leadership, governance or wellbeing team, where possible, to oversee prevention and response activities
- keeping guidance up-to-date, including to respond to emerging harms.

Clear expectations, strong systems, capable staff and ongoing improvement create safer and more respectful online environments for all students.

Further information

For detailed guidance on reporting, evidence collection, platform-specific reporting tools, cyberbullying, image-based abuse, and emerging online harms, along with support materials for students, educators and parents/carers, refer to the eSafety Commissioner website at: www.esafety.gov.au.

For information on how online safety is addressed across the Australian Curriculum, refer to the Online Safety Curriculum Connection: Online Safety | V9 Australian Curriculum.

Where to get more help

Beyond Blue: 1300 22 4636 or beyondblue.org.au. Mental health support for stress, anxiety and overwhelm.

Lifeline: 13 11 14 or lifeline.org.au. Crisis support and counselling if things feel overwhelming.

13YARN: 13 92 76. Culturally safe support for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.

1800RESPECT: 1800 737 732 or 1800respect.org.au. Free support for people impacted by domestic, family and sexual violence.

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 the website or by emailing infoservice@humanrights.gov.au.

Medicare Mental Health: Visit medicarementalhealth.gov.au or call 1800 595 212 to find free mental health services and Medicare Mental Health Centres.

QLife: 1800 184 527 or qlife.org.au. Peer support and referral for LGBTQIA+ people.

Kids Helpline: 1800 55 1800 or kidshelpline.com.au. Free counselling and support for children and young people aged 5–25 years.