Australian Government

TOGETHER AGAINST BULLYING

Understanding Multi-Tiered Systems of Support

A framework for the prevention, early intervention and management of bullying and other harmful behaviours

Who is this resource for?

Staff involved in planning, implementing or reviewing whole-of-school approaches to preventing and responding to bullying and other harmful behaviours.

Resource purpose

Multi-Tiered Systems of Supports (MTSS) is a flexible framework that helps schools organise prevention, early intervention and responses to bullying behaviours, including harmful antecedent behaviours (referred to throughout this resource as bullying and other harmful behaviours). Antecedent harmful behaviours are behaviours that cause harm and, if left unaddressed, may continue or escalate over time.

MTSS brings together what schools are already doing across learning, wellbeing and behaviour to provide the right level of support for each student's needs. It starts with a strong foundation of support for all students, with targeted or intensive support added to match students' needs.

This resource should be read in the broader context of school and school system policies, procedures and frameworks.

Key practice question

Are we building a strong, positive whole-of-school foundation, identifying needs early, matching support to those needs, and checking whether it is working?

Quick reference guide

1. **MTSS is a framework, not a program.**
   MTSS helps schools organise and adjust support to meet students' strengths, needs and the school context.
2. **Build a strong whole-of-school foundation.**
   Actions taken every day can help shape a positive school culture. Teach, model and reinforce positive relationships, social-emotional skills, behaviour expectations, help-seeking and inclusion.
3. **Identify needs early.**
   Use observations, student voice and relevant school data to identify students who may need additional support.
4. **Match support to needs.**
   Consider each student's strengths, needs and circumstances. Provide the least intensive support likely to be effective, with more targeted or intensive support when needed.
5. **Coordinate, monitor and adjust.**
   Work with students, parents and carers, relevant staff and external services, where appropriate. Check whether support is helping and adjust it as needs change.

Multi-Tiered Systems of Support: The three tiers

MTSS is a flexible, whole-of-school approach that can help schools strengthen and coordinate existing practices to support student learning, wellbeing and behaviour. It brings together prevention, early intervention and more intensive support, helping schools provide the right support at the right time and adjust the support as students' needs change.

MTSS uses evidence-informed practices and can incorporate new evidence-based programs where appropriate, to help staff ask:

› what can we do to support all students to thrive?

› who might need additional support?

› who needs more intensive or ongoing support?

› is the support helping?

› what needs to change as the student's needs change?

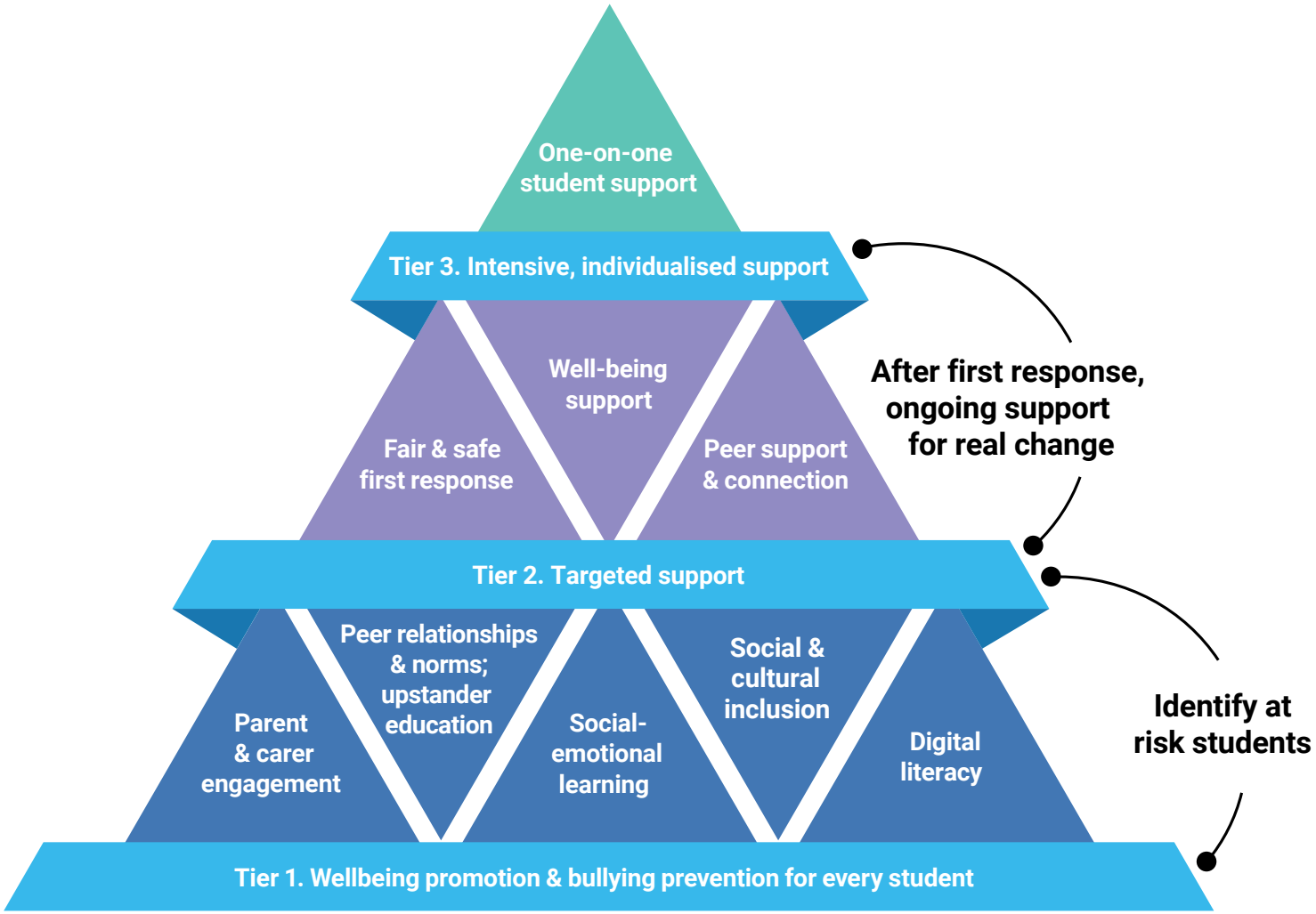
It helps match supports to students' strengths and needs and adjust support as their needs change. Students may move between tiers or receive supports from multiple tiers at the same time, depending on their needs.

The three tiers are layers of support, not separate pathways.

	Tier 1: Universal	**Tier 2:** Targeted	**Tier 3:** Intensive
Who?	All students, all the time	Students who may benefit from additional support	Students who need intensive or ongoing individualised support
Focus	Prevention, belonging, safety, relationships and participation	Early and targeted support	Coordinated, individualised support
Examples	Teach and reinforce expectations; build positive relationships; promote inclusion; increase supervision where needed	Trusted-adult check-ins; mentoring; small-group support; access to calm or supervised spaces	Individualised support planning; coordinated specialist support; safety planning; case management
Monitor	School-wide patterns and student wellbeing, behaviour and engagement	Individual progress and changing needs	Progress against individual needs and goals

Applying MTSS across the three tiers

Multi-tiered systems of support for whole-of-school bullying prevention and intervention



Tier 1 – Start with a positive whole-of-school culture

Universal support - Promoting positive wellbeing, relationships, inclusion and safety

Tier 1 is the foundation of MTSS. It provides evidence-informed and accessible whole-of-school and classroom practices for all students, all the time. Prevention of bullying and other harmful behaviour is most effective when it is part of everyday school life rather than something that happens only after an incident.

	Tier 1 supports might include
Teach	› explicitly teach and reinforce curriculum, including respectful relationships, social-emotional skills, ethical decision-making and behaviour, digital citizenship and digital media literacy and help-seeking strategies › teaching should be age- and developmentally appropriate, accessible and responsive to the diverse strengths and needs of all students, including those from priority equity groups.
Model and reinforce	› model respectful, inclusive and culturally safe interactions › reinforce consistent expectations across classrooms and other school settings.
Build inclusion and belonging	› build positive staff-student and peer relationships › recognise student strengths, identities and contributions › provide inclusive activities and opportunities for participation and leadership › engage parents and carers as partners, where appropriate, in culturally safe and accessible ways.
Create safe environments	› respond early to stereotypes, prejudice, discrimination, social exclusion and identity-based harm › teach and reinforce respectful engagement across cultures, identities and experiences › provide appropriate supervision in locations or at times where harmful behaviour is more likely to occur › create safe, clean and welcoming learning environments.

In practice	› greeting students by name and using regular meetings or circle time to support respectful communication
	› using structured cooperative-learning opportunities to practise social-emotional skills, for example:
	  › using picture books, stories and guided discussions to teach empathy, kindness and inclusion (primary)
	  › advisory or home group lessons that teach wellbeing and social-emotional skills (secondary)
	› providing student leadership, peer mentoring, clubs or lunchtime activities that promote inclusion and positive peer relationships.

Tier 2 – Early additional support for students with emerging needs

Targeted support - Students at risk of, or involved in, bullying and other harmful behaviours

When a student needs more support than Tier 1 provides, including when concerns are emerging or additional support may prevent them from becoming more serious. This might include emerging concerns about discrimination, exclusion, isolation or identity-based harm.

Responsibility for coordinating Tier 2 supports will vary between schools, depending on local context and need. This role is typically undertaken by various staff including classroom teachers, allied health staff, and school leadership.

	Tier 2 targeted support
Students who may benefit from targeted Tier 2 support are those who	› are experiencing or have experienced bullying or other harmful behaviours › are engaging in bullying or other harmful behaviours › have witnessed or been involved in harmful behaviour › are experiencing more risk factors, e.g., social isolation or difficulties with peer relationships, discrimination or identity-based harm, have additional support or accessibility needs, or other factors › may benefit from strengthened protective factors such as cultural identity and belonging, connection or supportive relationships.
A school's Tier 2 supports might include	› identifying the students' strengths and needs › offering targeted support before concerns escalate › involving the student and their parents or carers, where appropriate › identifying who will coordinate the support › monitoring progress › adjusting the support if it is not helping.
In practice	› regular check-ins with a trusted adult › small-group social-emotional learning or targeted skills programs › mentoring › access to calm and/or supervised spaces › where appropriate, working with parents and carers and external services › referral to external services, where appropriate.

Tier 2 note: Schools/teachers should not wait until a concern becomes serious before providing additional support.

Tier 3 – Intensive individualised support

Intensive support – Coordinated and individualised support when a student's needs are serious, ongoing, persistent or complex

Tier 3 does not replace Tier 1 or Tier 2 support. Students are not assigned to a tier. They may receive support from multiple tiers at the same time, and the level of support can change as their needs change.

	Tier 3 Individual support
At Tier 3, schools may need to	› assess the student's strengths, needs, contributing factors and goals › develop and coordinate an individualised support plan › align the plan with other supports the student receives (for example, disability-related and allied health supports, culturally safe supports and language supports) › involve the student and parents or carers in planning and review, where appropriate, ensuring the information provided is culturally safe and accessible › coordinate relevant school staff, specialist staff and external services › plan for safety or transitions where needed

Tier 3 note: Support should be tailored to each student's age, developmental stage, strengths, needs and circumstances. Responsibility for coordinating Tier 3 supports will vary between schools, but is typically led by school leadership, in collaboration with relevant staff, and external professionals or agencies as required.

Putting MTSS into practice

Schools can strengthen MTSS by building on the systems, relationships and practices they already have.

1	**Strengthen the foundation**	Build consistent Tier 1 practices across the school.
2	**Identify needs early**	Use observations, student voice and relevant school data to identify students who may need additional support.
3	**Match support to need**	Consider the student's strengths, needs and circumstances and provide the least intensive support likely to be effective.
4	**Coordinate support**	Clarify who is responsible and work with the student, relevant staff, parents and carers, and external services where appropriate.
5	**Monitor and adjust**	Check whether support is helping. Increase, reduce or change support as needs change, and use school-wide information to guide ongoing improvement.

School leaders can help staff use MTSS effectively by providing:

- ✔ clear information about the framework
- ✔ clear roles and responsibilities
- ✔ professional learning relevant to staff roles
- ✔ opportunities to practise and reflect to strengthen learning
- ✔ access to advice and support
- ✔ sufficient time and practical resources to implement MTSS effectively.

Questions for school teams

When reviewing support for a student, ask/consider:

- › what are the student's strengths and needs, including taking into account their unique identities and background?
- › what support are they already receiving?
- › is tier 1 support being provided consistently?
- › what additional support may help?
- › who will coordinate it?
- › how will we know whether it is helping?
- › when will we review it?
- › what will change if the student's needs change?

Making MTSS effective: What schools need in place

MTSS is more likely to be effective when schools have:

Schools need	What this means in practice
Clear referral and review processes	Staff know how to identify students who need additional support and how their progress will be reviewed
Clear roles and responsibilities	Responsibilities are understood at each tier and for coordinating support
Appropriate data and information	School-wide and student information is used to understand strengths, needs, monitor progress and guide decisions. This includes patterns relating to belonging, participation and inclusion.
Relevant professional learning	Staff are supported to recognise strengths and needs, reduce escalation and identify when specialist support may be required
Time, advice and practical resources	Staff have the capacity and support needed to implement MTSS effectively
Alignment with existing systems	MTSS is integrated with learning, wellbeing and behaviour processes rather than treated as a separate initiative

Remember

- MTSS is a flexible framework for organising support around student needs (not a program or a three-step pathway)
- strong universal practice is the foundation and targeted and intensive support are added as needed
- students are not assigned to a tier and may receive support from more than one tier at the same time
- support should be coordinated, monitored and adjusted as needs change.

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.