Australian Government

TOGETHER AGAINST BULLYING

Understanding bullying and other harmful behaviours

Who is this resource for?

All school staff.

Resource purpose

A shared understanding of bullying and other harmful behaviours is important for effective prevention and response in schools.

This resource supports school staff to understand 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.

The resource includes information on:

- bullying and other harmful behaviours and the forms they can take
- the impacts of bullying and other harmful behaviours
- how school staff can build a more complete picture of bullying and other harmful behaviours in their school communities.

The resource should be read alongside relevant school and school system policies, procedures and frameworks.

Quick reference guide

Key messages

1. **Take all harmful behaviour seriously.** All forms of harmful behaviour should be taken seriously and responded to early and appropriately.
2. **Focus on impact.** Consider how the student has been affected, what support they need and the risk of further harm.
3. **Build a more complete picture and avoid assumptions.** Consider what happened, who was involved and the influences and potential motivations for the behaviour.

Understanding bullying and other harmful behaviours

Bullying is one type of harmful behaviour. Harmful behaviours are any kinds of behaviour that can make students feel unsafe, upset, excluded, threatened or unable to learn and participate fully at school.

Harmful behaviours can happen in person or online and can take many forms, such as bullying, cyberbullying, harassment, racism, ableism, homophobia, religious discrimination, misogyny, aggression, social exclusion and conflict.

All harmful behaviours should be taken seriously and addressed early, taking account of relevant school and school system policies, procedures and frameworks.

When deciding how to respond, the **priority is understanding the impact of the behaviour** and how the student has been affected, rather than focusing on how the behaviour is categorised.

By recognising and responding to all forms of harmful behaviour early, schools can help prevent behaviours from escalating, reduce the risk of further harm, and create safer, more respectful and inclusive environments for everyone.

The impacts of bullying and other harmful behaviours

Bullying and other harmful behaviours can affect a student's:

- learning and concentration
- relationships and sense of belonging
- attendance and participation
- confidence in seeking help
- sense of safety
- mental health and wellbeing.

The impacts can continue even after the behaviour has stopped. Noticing changes, checking in early and helping students access support can reduce further harm.

Building a more complete picture

When bullying or other harmful behaviour occurs, it can be helpful to consider four questions to inform effective responses:

1. **What happened?**
2. **Who was involved?**
3. **What may be influencing the behaviour?**
4. **What are the individual motivations for the behaviour?**

1: What happened?

Bullying and other harmful behaviours can take different forms. The table below outlines some common forms of harmful behaviour.

Form	Description	Examples
Physical (direct)	Physical actions intended to harm, intimidate or damage	Hitting, kicking, pushing, damaging or stealing belongings
Verbal (direct)	Words used to cause harm, intimidate or humiliate	Name-calling, threats, insults, teasing, offensive comments, racist, homophobic, transphobic, ableist, sexist or other discriminatory comments targeting a person's identity or background
Relational or social (indirect)	Actions that damage a person's relationships, reputation, social standing or belonging	Excluding, spreading rumours, publicly embarrassing someone or manipulating friendships
Cyberbullying	Harmful behaviour carried out using digital technologies	Online harassment, discrimination, humiliating posts, exclusion from group chats, impersonation or deepfakes
Identity-based harm	Harm targeted at a person's identity, characteristics, background or circumstances, such as their race, culture, language, disability, gender, sexuality, religion, family structure or other aspects of who they are	Identity-based harm can occur through any of the forms of bullying and other harmful behaviours above

2: Who was involved?

Students can take on different roles in bullying and other harmful behaviours. These roles can influence whether the behaviour begins, continues, escalates or stops. The table below outlines these roles and their implications for school staff.

Role	What it might look like	What this means for staff
Students engaging in bullying or other harmful behaviours	May initiate or direct bullying or other harmful behaviours, with individual motivations for this varying across students	To inform the response, consider what may be driving the behaviour and avoid making assumptions about individual motivations
Followers	May encourage or participate by laughing, liking posts or otherwise reinforcing the behaviour. Some may participate because of peer pressure, fear of exclusion or concern that they could become a target themselves	Addressing follower behaviour can disrupt the social rewards and acceptance that help to maintain bullying and other harmful behaviours
Witnesses	May see or know about bullying and other harmful behaviours without acting. This can occur for a range of reasons, including fear of potential consequences of speaking up	Help students understand that silence can unintentionally reinforce the behaviour. Teach safe ways to seek help and support others, such as speaking to a trusted adult
Upstanders	May safely and positively support the student affected or seek help from a trusted adult	Teach and practise safe options and acknowledge and support students who report concerns
Students experiencing bullying and other harmful behaviours	May or may not appear distressed or disclose what is happening	Notice changes in behaviour such as attendance, engagement or relationships and check in where there are concerns. These signs may not indicate bullying or other harmful behaviours but should prompt a supportive check-in
Dual-involved students	Experience bullying and other harmful behaviours while also engaging in these behaviours. This group may experience significant distress and poorer wellbeing outcomes	Provide support that addresses both the harm they have experienced and the harm they have caused

3: What may be influencing the behaviour?

Bullying and other harmful behaviours do not happen in isolation. Understanding individual, social and environmental influences can help staff build a complete picture and identify strengths, supports and opportunities for prevention and intervention.



Individual experiences

Consider students' strengths, experiences, identities, cultures, abilities, circumstances and support needs, including experiences of trauma, exclusion, discrimination and stress.



Peer groups and classrooms

Consider whether peers are reinforcing, participating in or challenging the behaviour. For example, through laughter, silence or sharing online content.



Relationships with families and school staff

Strong relationships and accessible communication can support early identification and consistent responses. This includes considering cultural, linguistic and accessibility factors, as well as potential trust barriers from previous experiences engaging with schools.



School culture, policies and procedures

Clear expectations and consistent responses can help students feel safe to report concerns.



Wider social influences

Consider how attitudes and discrimination may influence behaviour including racism, ableism, homophobia, misogyny, transphobia, religious discrimination, and other forms of identity-based bias.



Physical and digital environments

Consider where the behaviour occurs and how supervision, visibility, platforms and technologies may influence it.

Look beyond the behaviour itself. Consider the different roles students may be playing and what may be influencing their actions. Take time to understand each student's context, strengths, needs, identity, culture and experiences, including any experiences of discrimination or exclusion.

Consider how these factors can inform your prevention and response actions. Responses should be trauma-informed, culturally safe and responsive, student-centred and tailored, including as new information and needs emerge.

4: What are the individual motivations for the behaviour?

Students engage in bullying and other harmful behaviours for a range of different and sometimes overlapping reasons.

Understanding possible motivations can help staff tailor responses to support the safety and wellbeing of students. The table below outlines some possible motivations and how staff can support positive change to address these.

Possible motivation	What it may involve	How staff can support positive change
Reward	Seeking status, attention, belonging, influence or power	Reduce social rewards and strengthen positive peer norms
Rage	Responding impulsively to anger, threat or misunderstanding	Support emotion regulation, perspective-taking and safer responses to strong emotions
Revenge	Responding to a real or perceived injustice	Address underlying harm, support problem-solving and challenge retaliation
Recreation	Seeking entertainment, excitement or relief from boredom	Challenge harmful humour, build awareness of impact and support positive ways to connect

Listen, gather information and consider the individual student and context rather than making assumptions about what may be driving the behaviour.

Bullying and other harmful behaviours can take many forms and can have significant and long-lasting impacts on students. Considering the questions above can help you build a more complete understanding of bullying and other harmful behaviours within your school community. Looking at what happened, who was involved, the factors influencing the behaviour, and the possible motivations behind it can help you identify risks, understand the impact on students, and inform effective responses to support the safety and wellbeing of all students.

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.