Guide to responding to serious online safety incidents

eSafety Toolkit for Schools

Creating safer online environments

Why has this guide been produced?

This guide provides support and advice to Australian schools to respond confidently and effectively to serious online safety incidents, including serious cyberbullying. Visit eSafety's cyberbullying pages for a definition of what constitutes serious cyberbullying. Online safety policies and procedures should align with relevant legislation, as well as departmental or sector policies and procedures.

Important note

Regardless of when or where an incident has occurred, or whether the incident meets the threshold of 'serious', if a student is distressed and needs support, their wellbeing, rights and best interests should guide your response.

It is important to provide that support in a timely manner. If a staff member is unsure about what to do, they should seek advice from the school leadership or online safety team.

Schools should have a designated person or team of people responsible for online incidents. All members of staff (including non-teaching) need training to recognise, respond to, or refer, serious online safety incidents. This can be covered in professional learning and school policy.

1. Understand

If a staff member becomes aware of an online safety incident at school, or a student reports an incident that is negatively impacting them, it should be investigated as soon as possible.

The student/s affected may experience anxiety, anger or distress so it's good to involve a teacher, counsellor or support person the student feels comfortable with to help make the disclosure process easier.

When taking a report, the staff member involved needs to remain calm, reassuring and non-judgemental, and refrain from saying or doing anything that would shame anyone involved. Trauma-informed approaches may help during this process.

It is important to speak calmly to the affected student/s as soon as possible and try to find out:

- Who is involved (student/staff/parent/carer/other)?
- What has happened (bullying, image sharing, trolling)?
- How has it occurred (photos, videos, messages/ specific social media platform/online collaboration tool)?
- When did it happen (when did it start, is it ongoing, how often has it happened)?
- Where did it happen (is it on a school or personal device, is it occurring at school, at home or somewhere else)?
- What are the circumstances surrounding the incident (is it part of a wider situation that is occurring face to face)?
- Who else is aware of the issue (other students, parents/carers, staff)?
- Is it an ongoing or one-off incident and is likely to be repeated?
- How widely has any content been shared and with whom?

2. Collect evidence

Collecting evidence or proof of an online incident may help in having the online content removed. This includes taking screenshots on devices and recording the URLs (website addresses) of where any relevant content is hosted. The eSafety website includes videos about how to collect this information.

When dealing with explicit material, different procedures apply. Staff should not copy, share or record the material. Refer to eSafety's eSafety's Guide to responding to the sharing of explicit material for further information.

There may be incidents where there is no public facing content, such as if direct message was used. If content has been shared on a personal device, secure the devices in line with school and sector policy and any relevant legal requirements. Make sure to check state, territory or school policy and only confiscate or search students' personal devices with a student or parent/carer's consent — or if allowed by policy or guidelines. Youth Law Australia provides guidance on relevant state and territory laws.

3. Manage and plan the response

Staff should work with the student/s involved to understand the circumstances surrounding an incident, noting that it might be part of a broader situation — then plan a response. Additional support may be required and the response should be tailored to each student's needs and wellbeing. This could include counselling, mediation or other support services.

The next step is to explain the response process, expected timeframes and what to do if further issues occur and consider when others might need to be involved (e.g. parents/carers, staff, police, eSafety).

Staff should follow school policy and procedures about when to involve parents/carers. For younger students, parents/carers should be involved throughout the process. For older students, their level of maturity and autonomy should be considered, as well as whether it is appropriate to let the young person tell their parents/carers first.

There may be circumstances where there is a good reason not to involve parents/carers. An example is if notifying a parent/carer puts the student at further risk, or if it will hamper a police investigation. In these instances, discuss the most appropriate course of action with the school child protection/student wellbeing officer, local police or relevant child protection agency, considering the student's rights, views and best interests.

4. Removing content

To remove content that is circulating online and causing harm, evidence must be collected and saved. Once this is done, staff should advise or assist the student to report any cyberbullying content to the social media service on which it appears and encourage all students to delete the content from their devices.

If a student refuses to delete the content from their device, consider confiscating the device in line with the relevant education department or sector policy. Escalating the issue to parents/carers or the police may be required.

If a social media service fails to remove reported content within 48 hours of a report, and the content constitutes serious cyberbullying, students, their parent/carer or an authorised adult can make a complaint to the eSafety Commissioner. Student permission is required to lodge a complaint on their behalf. This can be verbal or written agreement, noting that verbal approval should be recorded. Staff and students might consider lodging the complaint form together.

5. Resolving the conflict

A school's response should be proportionate to the nature, severity and impact of an incident, and in the best interests of the students involved.

Staff should follow their school's behaviour management policies when responding to misconduct, focus on restoring relationships and work with the students and parents/carers involved to resolve the issue. If appropriate, staff could invite suggestions from the student/s involved. It is important that staff follow up with parents/carers to discuss the actions the school has taken to resolve the issue and strategies if the behaviour is repeated.

Reminding students about acceptable use and respectful online behaviours is valuable. eSafety's Educate resources can be used to support students to understand and apply these behaviours.

The aim is for the student responsible for online misconduct to take responsibility for their actions and understand not to repeat the behaviour. All students should feel safe and supported.

Depending on the type of incident and the wellbeing of the students involved, it may be helpful to include school counsellors or engage external support services.

The eSafety website includes a list of counselling and support services that can be filtered by audience, the type of support required, issue and state/territory. Your education department or sector may also offer tailored support.

6. Recording the incident, and reflecting

After an incident has been resolved, it is important to record details including actions taken in the school incident management system (or via school reporting documents). Recording incidents supports further monitoring and ensures a robust approach in assessing the school's online environment. Incident records may also be used if police or legal involvement is required. In these circumstances, schools, students or their parents/carers may need to seek legal advice.

Complete eSafety's Post-incident checklist to help evaluate how effective the response was, and to identify areas for improvement. A review of existing policies and procedures should be included.

Debrief with staff, students and parents/carers where appropriate so they understand the steps taken to resolve the issue and the strategies that will be used if the behaviour continues.

7. Monitor the situation

Schedule follow-ups with students to check on their wellbeing and confirm if the issues have stopped. If the issues continue it is important that the repeated behaviour is addressed proactively with the students involved and across the school. Where appropriate contact the parents/carers of the students involved to inform them of the actions the school has taken.

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