

# Guide to responding to cyber abuse that targets staff

## eSafety Toolkit for Schools

Creating safer online environments



This guide provides advice for Australian schools about how to respond when staff are the targets of cyber abuse. It should be read alongside education department or sector policies and advice provided by education unions.

**Cyber abuse** is behaviour that uses technology to threaten, intimidate, harass or humiliate someone — with the intent to hurt them socially, psychologically or even physically. It is generally used to refer to the online abuse of adults. Cyber abuse can take place on social media, through online chat and messaging services, text messages, emails, on message boards and in online forums that allow people to comment publicly.

**Disclaimer:** This material is general in nature. It is made available on the understanding that the Commonwealth is not engaged in rendering professional advice. Before relying on the material in any matter, you should carefully evaluate its accuracy, currency, completeness and relevance for your purposes and should obtain any appropriate professional advice relevant to your particular circumstances. The Commonwealth does not guarantee, and accepts no legal liability whatsoever arising from or connected to, the accuracy, reliability, currency or completeness of any material contained in this resource or on any linked site. References to other organisations or websites are inserted for convenience and do not constitute endorsement.



### Important note

Schools need to create a positive reporting environment, where staff and students feel empowered to speak up if they experience, or witness, any form of bullying or abuse, either online or offline. Teachers and school leaders, as professionals with responsibility for educating and supporting children and young people, should model positive behaviours to create child safe environments. This includes reporting concerns when they arise and being confident that proper processes will be followed when they do.

Being targeted by other members of the school community can have a serious impact on an individual's mental health and wellbeing.

Principals and school leaders play an active role in building a positive learning and working environment where the whole school community feels included, connected, safe and respected. As an employer, the wellbeing of staff is critical and is an obligation under state and territory work health and safety laws.

## 1. Managing incidents

If a staff member discloses that they are being targeted online, the school leadership team should work with them to resolve the issues in a timely manner. [eSafety's Cyber Abuse factsheet](#) may help staff to do this. It's important to find out the relevant information, collect any evidence and keep accurate written records of the incident and outcomes, being mindful of the staff member's privacy.

If it is safe and appropriate to do so, a face-to-face conversation with the staff member and other parties involved may assist in achieving a resolution. The staff member concerned may wish to have a support person involved in any meetings. In cases involving parents/carers, it may be more appropriate for the school leadership team to meet with the parents/carers to explain that targeting staff online is not acceptable and to remind them of the school's process for raising concerns about staff.

Following are some general guidelines on responding to these incidents:

- If a parent/carer is targeting a staff member online, the parent/carer should be advised that their behaviour is inappropriate and they should be reminded of the appropriate ways to raise issues with the school.
- If a colleague is targeting a staff member online, it should be dealt with through the school's workplace harassment and workplace code of conduct processes.
- If a student is targeting a staff member online, the school should take steps to minimise harm in accordance with their duty of care to both staff and students. This can involve supporting the staff member to have the content taken down as quickly as possible

and supporting the student to understand online behaviour expectations.

The process to resolve any online incident should aim to restore relationships in a way that promotes the safety, wellbeing, privacy and procedural fairness for everyone involved.

## 2. Content removal

If working with members of the school community does not resolve the problem, there are alternative pathways for help and support. This includes advising or assisting the staff member to:

- Report the abuse to the social media service. Depending on the platform, they can also block, report or mute the abuse. The eSafety Guide has links to the latest games, apps and social media, with tips on how to report abuse.
- Collect evidence, take screenshots/ prints of messages or web pages, including the URL (web address) where relevant, and record the date and time.
- Seek support and remember that they do not need to deal with cyber abuse alone.
- Obtain consent prior to taking any action on behalf of the school or staff member.

### 3. Legal action

Some forms of cyber abuse are illegal under state or federal legislation. Legal advice can help the targeted staff member determine how to address the cyber abuse. Education unions, community legal centres or Legal Aid in each state/ territory may be able to provide this advice. Your education department or sector may also provide this advice. Information about, and the location of, community legal centres is available on the [National Association of Community Legal Centres](#) website.

### 4. Ongoing support

School leaders can help staff by providing referral to employee assistance providers, union representatives, wellbeing representatives and external agencies if required.

Encourage staff to check the eSafety website's list of [counselling and support services](#), which can be filtered by audience, the type of support required and state/territory.

School leaders should consider whether an incident requires follow-up communication with those involved or to the whole school to help manage the issue.

School leaders can also ensure school policies outline clear expectations about acceptable behaviour, online and offline, for all members of the school community.

