

Guide to responding to online 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 online abuse. It should be read alongside education department or sector policies and advice provided by education unions.

Serious [online abuse](#) is when someone sends a communication to a person, or about them, that is seriously harmful to their physical or mental health. Harmful communications can be sent or shared in many ways. For example, the content can be a post, comment, chat, text, message, email, meme, livestream, image or video.

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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 issue in a timely manner. [eSafety's 8 ways to deal with adult cyber abuse](#) 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. Collecting evidence and reporting

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:

- Obtain consent prior to taking any action on behalf of the school or staff member.
- Collect evidence. Take screenshots of messages or web pages, include the URL (web address) where relevant, and record the date and time.
- Report the abuse to the online service or platform. [The eSafety Guide](#) has links to the latest games, apps and social media with tips on how to report abuse. If you don't hear back from them, [report the abuse to eSafety](#).

If the online service or platform does not remove the reported abuse, a report can be made to eSafety. eSafety has the authority to compel social media services to remove seriously harmful content within 24 hours of receiving a formal notice.

3. Legal action

Some forms of online abuse are illegal under state or federal legislation. Legal advice can help the targeted staff member determine how to address the online 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 be able to help. Information about, and the location of, community legal centres is available on the [Community Legal Centres Australia](#) website.

4. Ongoing support

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

Encourage staff to check eSafety's website for a 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.

