

Tips for supporting students involved in an online incident

eSafety Toolkit for Schools

Creating safer online environments



This resource provides practical tips to support the safety and wellbeing of students involved in an online incident. These tips should assist in planning a comprehensive response that involves the student/s, parents/carers and support services (as appropriate). Support for peers, bystanders and siblings may also need to be considered as part of this process.

Research indicates a notable overlap between students who are the target of negative online behaviour and those who engage in it. This may be a barrier to some students making a report. Regardless of the student's role in the incident, they may feel heightened emotions such as anger, fear or shame. It's important to reassure any student involved and encourage them to report incidents, even when they may have also engaged in negative behaviours or contributed to online conflict/abuse.

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Important note

The guide is designed to support students' rights, safety and wellbeing, to encourage a culture of help-seeking and to remove stigma around reporting. It should be read alongside applicable school, departmental or sector policies, procedures and advice.

1. Reassure

Remember to remain calm and non-judgemental when talking with a student about an online safety incident. Reassure them that there are steps in process to address the incident and that you will support them through it. Avoid making unrealistic promises. Recognise that for some students it might be difficult to ask for help and let them know that they have done the right thing by coming to you.

2. Stay calm and listen

It will be easier to learn the specifics of the incident if you remain calm and listen. You might like to ask what you can do to make the conversation more comfortable. Ask open ended questions, for example: 'If you're comfortable talking with me, tell me why we are here today and start at the beginning'. Let those involved know who else they can approach for support and advice through the process. Consider informing them that you may have to tell others what has happened, for example if anyone is at risk of harm (as per [mandatory reporting obligations](#)). Drawing on [trauma informed approaches](#) may help to provide support during the disclosure process.

3. Ask students how they'd like to resolve the problem

Where appropriate, ask the student/s what steps they would like to see implemented to resolve the problem. While there are procedures to follow when an incident occurs, students have a right to participate in decisions about their life. Being involved in the solution may give them a sense of empowerment in what may feel like a powerless situation.

4. Communicate with students and parents/carers

If appropriate, work closely with the parents/carers of involved students and their support network (siblings and friends). It is important to maintain clear communications with everyone involved. Lack of clarity about actions and time frames can lead to anxiety, upset and anger. Set a schedule to review actions and make expectations clear to avoid the chance of miscommunication or misinformation.

Part of the process may involve reporting the incident within the school, to the education department, school board or to an outside agency. If required, and it is appropriate to do so, explain to students why these steps are being taken and what will happen next. Let students know you will keep them informed, where appropriate. Schedule check-ups with all students involved to support their wellbeing and ensure that negative behaviours have stopped.

5. Involve student wellbeing staff

Consider involving other support people through the process, such as a trusted teacher, school counsellor, chaplain or psychologist. You might like to provide the student/s an opportunity to nominate a support person.

Engage with student wellbeing support staff (counsellors/nurses/pastoral care workers/chaplains) to select resources for students to develop help seeking behaviours and build their resilience. Behaviour and learning support for the student who instigated the online incident should also be considered. Your student wellbeing support staff should be able to assist in selecting an appropriate social and emotional learning, respectful relationships or conflict management approach.

6. Support for bystanders/peers/siblings

Staff should be aware of the impact of online incidents on students involved, including bystanders, and provide support for these students. Students may discuss their experiences with friends, siblings or in the classroom. This is a normal response to a difficult incident. Staff can help to keep the tone of conversations positive, and the focus on help seeking. Normalising conversations around online safety will help to remove stigma around reporting and support students to develop help-seeking behaviours.

7. Counselling and support services

The [eSafety website](#) includes a list of counselling and support services that can help anyone involved in an online safety incident. This list can be filtered by audience, the type of support required, issue and state/territory. Your education department or sector may also offer tailored support services.

Additional resources

- [headspace — support following large scale incidents](#)
- [National Office for Child Safety Complaint Handling Guide](#)
- [Blue Knot Foundation — fact sheets for talking about trauma](#)
- [Bullying. No Way! — How Australian schools respond](#)

