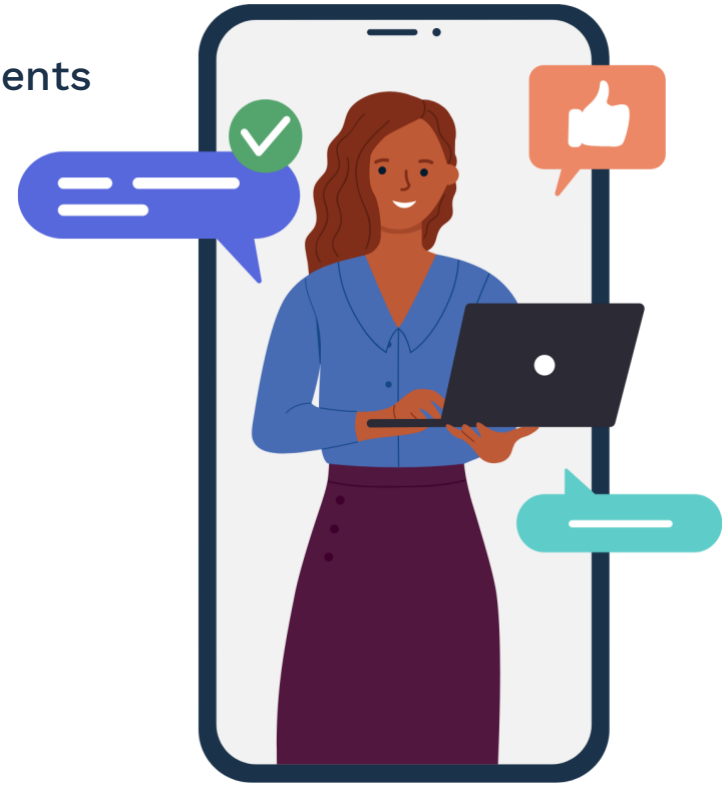
Quick reference guides for responding to online safety incidents

Creating safer online environments



Why has this guide been produced?

This resource includes quick reference guides for responding to online safety incidents.

Your school and/or education sector may have incident management and reporting processes, and these should always be followed as a first priority.

A note about online incidents involving social media: No matter how old your students are or what platforms they have used, if they experience an online incident, they should feel free to ask you for help – even if they are under 16 and it has happened on an age-restricted social media platform or service. This would be in alignment with your school's general duty of care. Remember, if an under-16 has an account on an age-restricted social media platform they are not breaking the law. It's only the platforms and services themselves that face penalties if they fail to take reasonable steps to stop under-16s creating or having accounts.

Online safety incidents happen in and outside of school hours and grounds. The Australian Government's Anti-Bullying Rapid Review has recognised the benefit of schools intervening early and appropriately to prevent the development and/or escalation of harmful behaviours.

Using this guide

This quick reference guide provides a framework for thinking about online safety incidents on a continuum from mild to critical. It outlines potential responses to online incidents that lie along this continuum. For practicality, we use 2 flexible categories: mild/moderate, and severe/critical. The categories are not intended to be applied strictly, and in some instances, there may be grey areas and overlap.

Online incidents can vary according to many factors (as described in Respond 1 – Guide to assessing online safety incidents). So, it can be difficult to predict the consequences that a given incident will have for those involved. It depends on the student's characteristics including risk and protective factors, the type of incident, who was involved (and how many), its frequency, the likelihood of stopping the harm, and more.

The advice in this guide is general in nature and should be considered alongside school and/or education sector advisors, policies and procedures.

eSafety's Quick reference guide for responding to mild/moderate incidents

Understand and assess

- Reassure students that they have done the right thing by reporting the incident.
- The wellbeing and protection of the students and/or staff involved – including the target(s), instigator(s) and bystander(s)/upstander(s) – should always be the primary concern.
- Action is necessary when schools become aware of an incident, even if the incident appears to be mild. If mild, the incident can provide an opportunity to build healthy relationships.

Manage the response

- Manage the response internally in line with relevant school and/or education sector policies and procedures for example, behaviour management, code of conduct, acceptable use, bullying prevention, child protection.
- Provide support for all students and involve them in decision making – students value having agency in the way incidents are handled.
- Explain the processes and potential outcomes to all involved.

Resolve the conflict

- If the incident appears to be mild and the student/s has capacity and capability to respond appropriately, adult intervention can focus on monitoring and support.
- Encourage students to report to the platform or service on which the incident occurred - The eSafety Guide provides information about how to do this.
- Encourage students to delete inappropriate content, however, be aware that if content is deleted it may not be recoverable if required at a later stage. Students may want to consider saving content in an appropriate format in case it is needed later.
- Focus on restoring relationships and ensuring all students feel safe and supported. Involve students in resolving the conflict with scaffolding provided by adults.
- Address behaviours – ensure students are supported to recognise their mistakes, be accountable for their actions and learn for next time.
- Teach online safety education to equip students with knowledge, skills for respectful online behaviour.

Record and reflect

- Support students in a way that promotes their sense of agency and involvement in decision-making.
- For less mature/younger students, let parents/carers know that there has been an issue. Explain how the issue has been resolved, unless there a good reason not to involve parents/carers – for example, because it causes further harm.

- For older/more mature students, their level of maturity and autonomy should be considered, as well as whether it is appropriate to let them tell their parents/carers first.
- Record the incident, response and actions taken in accordance with school and/or education sector protocols.
- Review processes to identify how incident responses can be strengthened.

Monitor

- Follow up by monitoring whether the behaviour has stopped and intervene early if further support is needed to prevent the development and/or escalation of harmful behaviours.
- Regularly check in with students as part of routine practice to cultivate pro-social behaviour and to create a climate where students feel safe and supported.
- Adjust plans if necessary.

Call Triple 000 if a student is at risk of immediate harm.

eSafety's Quick reference guide for responding to serious/severe incidents

Understand and assess

- School staff must act as soon as they become aware of an incident involving student/s and/or staff at your school.
- If the incident appears to be serious or critical, always seek support from the school Principal/school leadership team.
- If a student/s discloses an incident, assure them that they have done the right thing by telling someone about it.
- If the incident was brought to light by another means, find out all relevant information from those who were alerted to the incident or brought it to your attention.
- If student/s experience an online incident, they should feel free to ask you for help – even if they are under 16 and it has happened on an age-restricted social media platform or service.
- Remain calm, reassuring and non-judgemental. It is important that responses are age-appropriate, child-focused and avoid apportioning blame.
- Insofar as possible, identify who has been harmed, how they have been harmed, and what they need to feel safe.
- The wellbeing and protection of the students and/or staff involved – including the target(s), instigator(s) and bystander(s)/upstander(s) – should always be the primary concern.
- Be aware that some cases may be unlawful and may activate police reporting, notification of reportable conduct or mandatory reporting obligations. Always seek support from the school Principal/school leadership team when responding.
- For cases of image-based abuse, including sexual extortion, see Respond 3A – Guide to responding to image-based abuse.
- For cases involving deepfake image-based abuse, see Respond 3B – Guide to responding to image-based abuse involving AI deepfakes.
- For cases involving cyberbullying, see eSafety's guidance here: What you can report to eSafety | eSafety Commissioner .
- For cases involving illegal and/or restricted content, see eSafety's guidance here: What you can report to eSafety | eSafety Commissioner

Support student safety and wellbeing

- If a student is in immediate danger or a life-threatening situation, phone Triple Zero (000).
- Support students and staff members using a trauma-informed approach that prioritises safety, builds and maintains trust, respects autonomy, and reduces the risk of re-traumatising those affected.
- Follow school and/or sector policies and procedures relating to incident notification and response.
- Talk with the affected student/s and staff member/s as soon as possible and collect information about:

    - who is involved, and their ages if known
    - what has happened
    - where it has happened (for example, if it's on a school or personal device, the name of the platform, service, or app)
    - any steps the student or staff member has taken to manage the situation so far
    - the account names, display names and/or URLs from which the material has been shared
- Do not formally interview students (particularly the student/s responsible) or ask for written statements. This is not the role of the school. Should police become involved, they may do this as part of their investigations, and students and/or their parents/carers may wish to seek legal advice.

Collect and preserve evidence

- Gather facts, including profile/usernames and document what has happened.
- For non-explicit material, where possible, take screenshots and record URLs, account or profile names and usernames or other information about where the material is located.
- For explicit material (for example, intimate images or videos including deepfakes or illegal and/or restricted content), do not take screenshots, view, or share the material — refer to eSafety's Respond 3A - Guide to responding to image-based abuse, including sexual extortion and Respond 3B Guide to responding to image-based abuse involving AI deepfakes.
- Encourage students to delete inappropriate content, however, be aware that if content is deleted it may not be recoverable if required at a later stage. Students may want to consider saving content in an appropriate format in case it is needed later.
- Consider the need to temporarily remove and secure device/s early in the process, but only if permitted by your school and/or education sectors policies. See advice on dealing with devices in Respond 3A – Guide to responding to image-based abuse, including sexual extortion. This advice is relevant even if the incident does not involve image-based abuse.
- Where a report is made to police, there may be additional advice provided regarding evidence management (see Report, below).

Manage the response

- Focus on providing support for all students and involve them in decision making.
- Determine who to inform and when to involve others (for example, parents/carers, other staff or students).
- Consider giving the young person the opportunity to tell their parents/carers themselves. Provide support where needed.
- Consider engaging parents/carers as soon as possible so that the school and families can work together to respond to the incident, unless there is a good reason not to involve parents/carers, for example when it may cause further harm

or hamper a police investigation. Involve students in these decisions where possible.
- Assess whether school-wide communication is appropriate.
- Explain the processes and potential outcomes to all involved.

Report

- Note advice above about collecting and preserving evidence - the approach required will vary according to the nature of the incident.
- Encourage those responsible to follow eSafety's advice for stopping the image or video spreading: What to do if you shared someone's intimate image or video.
- If evidence has already been collected and preserved and material is continuing to circulate encourage students receiving the material to delete the material where possible and/or report it to the platform or service where it was posted **The eSafety Guide** provides information about how to do this.
- For cases involving serious child cyberbullying (that is, the material is targeted at a specific child and is seriously humiliating, seriously threatening, seriously harassing or seriously intimidating) report to the platform or service on which the incident occurred. The eSafety Guide has information about how to do this. If content has not been removed after a report to the platform or service, then make a report to eSafety. Parents/carers or school staff may do this on behalf of a student if the student has provided their consent. Alternatively, the student can report directly to eSafety with support provided by trusted adults.
- For cases involving image-based abuse of a child under 18, make a report to eSafety, making sure the student has given their consent. If material is of a sexual nature, it may be considered child sexual abuse material and must be reported to police.
- For cases of child cyberbullying and image-based abuse of a child under 18, if more than one student is involved, separate reports should be made for each individual student.
- For cases involving illegal and/or restricted content (online content that shows or encourages child sexual abuse, terrorist acts, extreme violence, crime, self-harm or suicide), report to eSafety immediately.

Resolve the conflict

- In critical incidents, it may not be possible to resolve the conflict at the school level.
- Additional support from critical incident support specialists may be required.
- Where possible and recommended by specialists, work with students to restore student trust and safety.
- In cases where appropriate, consider working with students to restore relationships. This might include an apology and repair however, ensuring students are supported to recognise their mistakes, be accountable for their actions and learn for next time is important.
- It may not be productive immediately following an incident, however, at the appropriate time, introduce teaching of online safety education to equip students with knowledge, skills for respectful online behaviour in future.

- Reinforce, model, and promote acceptable use for all members of the school community, including school staff.
- Assess whether school-wide communication is appropriate and what type of intervention is required, such as engaging external providers (Trusted eSafety Providers) and support services (such as Kids Helpline, headspace, ReachOut, Beyond Blue, Orygen).
- Consider referring students for ongoing counselling and support.

Record and reflect

- Record the incident in your school incident management system (or via school reporting documents) and follow up according to school or sector policies and processes.
- Complete a Respond 8 - Post-incident checklist.
- Review and improve existing policies and procedures following the incident.
- Debrief with staff, students and parents/carers, where appropriate.
- Keep students' families appropriately informed about ongoing actions taken by the school to address the incident and ensure their child's safety and wellbeing.

Monitor

- Follow up by monitoring whether the behaviour has stopped and intervene early if further support is needed to prevent the development and/or escalation of further harmful behaviours.
- Regularly check in with students as part of routine practice to cultivate pro-social behaviour and to create a climate where students feel safe and supported.
- Adjust plans where necessary, keeping the school community appropriately informed.