

The digital sideline:

Exploring cyberbullying and online hate by people connected to children's sports



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Acknowledgement of Country

eSafety acknowledges all First Nations people for their continuing care of everything Country encompasses – land, waters and community. We pay our respects to First Nations people and to Elders past and present.

Acknowledgements

We would like to thank the participants in this research who gave their time to contribute to a greater understanding of the online experiences of children and their parents and caregivers in Australia.

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About this report

Australia is a sporting nation and, as shown in this report, most children in Australia participate in some form of organised sporting activities during their childhood.

Participation in sports provides children with a range of physical benefits (Asaduzzaman et al., 2023). It can also enhance mental health and emotional wellbeing – for example, by giving children opportunities to build resilience, connection to peers and social skills (Asaduzzaman et al., 2023; Hoffmann et al., 2022). Most children who play sports say they enjoy it and give friendship as their number one reason for participating, followed by fitness and fun (Sport Integrity Australia, 2026).

However, engaging in sporting activities can present risks. Some children experience harms in the context of their sports that go beyond the inherent chance of accidental injury, including bullying, verbal abuse, racism, discrimination, pressure to train excessively and exposure to inappropriate sexual behaviour (Sport Integrity Australia, 2025, 2026).

Our study shows that some children are also treated in harmful ways in online spaces by people connected to their organised sporting activities.

Between December 2024 and February 2025, eSafety conducted the '**Keeping Kids Safe Online**' survey capturing the online experiences of over 3,000 children in Australia aged 10 to 17 years and their parents and caregivers. This survey was conducted at a unique time for online safety research, shortly after the Online Safety Amendment (Social Media Minimum Age) Bill 2024 passed through the Australian Parliament in November 2024.

The legislation came into effect on 10 December 2025, requiring age-restricted social media platforms to take reasonable steps to prevent children under 16 from having accounts. This policy context is considered in our conclusions and implications, particularly in relation to what the findings might mean for those supporting children involved in organised sports to have safer experiences online, in a landscape where many children may have lost access to social media accounts.

This report is part of a series drawing on data from the 'Keeping Kids Safe Online' survey and focuses specifically on a subset of 1,972 children who had ever taken part in organised sporting activities outside of school time.

The report investigates the incidence of cyberbullying and online hate among children aged 10 to 17 in Australia, where the person or people responsible were connected to their sporting activities. It provides insights into who was responsible and the online locations where each of these types of harms occurred. We also consider differences by age, gender, sexuality, indigeneity, language background and disability/diagnosis wherever sample sizes are sufficient.

Overall, the study found that a significant minority of children have been cyberbullied, and some have experienced online hate, by someone connected to their sporting activities. Those responsible were most likely to be peers but also included people in positions of authority (for example, coaches, referees and trainers), parents and other adults. These online harms often occurred in individual messages or calls, group chats, and comments or posts on social media (belonging to the child being targeted or someone else), although some took place on channels run by sporting organisations. Both cyberbullying and online hate by people connected to sporting activities were more likely to have been experienced by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children, those from non-English language backgrounds and teens (aged 13 to 17).

The report concludes with a discussion of what these findings might mean for those working to ensure children's participation in community sport is both rewarding and safe, including how the risk of harmful online experiences can be mitigated.

The findings will inform eSafety's advice and resources aimed at supporting more positive online experiences for children involved in sport. They also contribute to the wider evidence base around the relationship between children's participation in sporting activities and their online experiences.

Key terms

Children: Children and teenagers aged 10 to 17.

Cyberbullying: when someone uses the internet to hurt, upset or intimidate a child with the intention of making them feel bad, humiliated or disliked.

Online hate: when someone uses the internet to post offensive or threatening things about a person or group based on characteristics they can't change, such as their race, religion, culture, country of origin, ethnicity, sexual orientation, disability or gender.

Parents: parents, guardians and primary caregivers of children aged 10 to 17.

Sports or sporting activities: organised club- or team-based sporting activities conducted outside of school time.

Key findings

A significant minority of children are cyberbullied by people they know through their sporting activities. Almost 1 in 5 children who had ever taken part in sporting activities (18%) had experienced cyberbullying by someone connected to their sport.

Cyberbullying by people connected to children's sport often occurs in individual or group chats, as well as on social media and, in some cases, club-run platforms. Of the 18% of children who indicated they had been cyberbullied by someone connected to their sport, almost 3 in 5 (59%) said it happened via messaging, group chats or calls, more than 1 in 3 (36%) said it happened in comments or posts either on their own social media (22%) or on someone else's social media (22%), and 23% said it happened in an online video game or associated forum. A slightly smaller proportion (18%) indicated they had been targeted in comments or posts on online platforms run by their sports team or club (for example, its social media page or website).

Peers account for most cyberbullying by people linked to children's sports, but some instances involve adults or people in official roles. Among the 18% of children who had experienced cyberbullying from someone connected to their sport, 2 in 3 (66%) said the person responsible was a teammate or someone in another team, and 1 in 5 (20%) said it was a child or teenager who watches or follows their team/sport. However, around 1 in 5 said it was a coach, trainer, instructor or referee (20%) or a parent, caregiver or family member of a teammate or opponent (19%), and 16% said it was an adult who watches or follows their team/sport.

Sporting connections are a source of online hate for a small proportion of children. Among children who had ever taken part in sporting activities, 6% reported being targeted with offensive or threatening comments or content online because someone connected to their sport was hateful of one or more aspects of their identity.

Online hate from sporting connections often happens in individual or group chats or on social media, but it also takes place on club-run platforms. Of the 6% of children who indicated they had been subjected to online hate from someone linked to their sport, almost 3 in 5 (57%) said this had happened to them via messaging, group chats or calls. Almost half (48%) said this had happened to them in comments or posts either on their social media (25%) or on someone else's social media (33%). Just under 1 in 3 said it was in comments or posts on platforms run by their team or club (32%) or in online video games or associated forums (29%).

Peers are the main source of sports-related online hate towards children, though adults and authority figures also contribute. Among the 6% of children who had experienced online hate from someone connected to their sporting activity, half (50%) said the person responsible was a teammate or someone in another team and 1 in 5 (20%) said it was a child or teenager who watches or follows their sport. However, around 1 in 3 indicated it was a coach, trainer, instructor or referee (35%), a parent, caregiver or family member of a teammate or opponent (33%), or an adult spectator/follower of their sport (28%).

Cyberbullying and online hate by people connected to sporting activities disproportionately affects Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander children, those from non-English language backgrounds, and teens. In addition, a relatively high proportion of children with disability had experienced cyberbullying from someone connected to their sport.

Methodology

This research draws on data from eSafety's 'Keeping Kids Safe Online' study, which aimed to strengthen understanding of children's online experiences in Australia and to provide an updated evidence base to inform the development of online safety resources for children and their parents.

Online survey

A total of 3,454 children aged 10 to 17 and their parent or caregiver took part in the 'Keeping Kids Safe Online' survey, which was conducted between December 2024 and February 2025.

The survey had three components: a 15-minute parent survey, a 20-minute child core survey, and a 10-minute child follow-up survey.

A sample of *n* = 2,302 Australian children aged 10 to 17 years took part in the 'Keeping Kids Safe Online' follow-up survey (the data source for this report).[1] Most of these children, *n* = 1,972 (85%), indicated they had 'ever' taken part in one or more organised sporting activities.[2] The most common sporting activities were swimming, soccer, dancing and basketball (see Table A1 in the Appendix).

The sample of children who had ever taken part in sporting activities included children with a disability or diagnosis (*n* = 533), children from non-English language backgrounds (*n* = 396), Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander children (*n* = 167), sexually diverse teens (aged 13 to 17) (*n* = 89), and trans and gender diverse children (*n* = 46). The demographic profile of children who had participated in sports was similar to that of those who have never participated in sports, apart from age. Older teens, aged 16 to 17, were more likely than younger children to report that they had never participated in organised sporting activities. It may be that some of these older teens had forgotten or discounted having participated in sporting activities when they were younger (see Table A2 in the Appendix).

Informed consent to participate in all components of the study was sought from both parents and children. The research was approved by the Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies ethics committee, ensuring it met high standards for research involving children. Additionally, the survey was developed in collaboration with domestic and international experts, was informed by the latest literature, and was cognitively tested with children and parents to ensure clarity and sensitivity. For further details on the survey methodology, see the methodology report.

[1] For more information about the methodology of the research, see the methodology report.

[2] The following definition of organised sporting activities was provided to participants: 'Organised' sporting activities are things you do as part of a club or a team, outside of school time (like after school or on the weekends). They don't include games or activities you do on your own, or just with friends and family. We note that different definitions may be used in other studies/contexts.

Data analysis

Apparent differences between subgroups of children who participated in the survey were tested for statistical significance using Q Research Software and were reported on only when the difference was statistically significant.

We note that the sample size for some subgroups is relatively small. As such, an absence of statistically significant differences in the data doesn't necessarily mean there are no differences in the population. This should be considered when interpreting the findings presented in this report.

Percentages in tables and figures may not sum to 100% due to rounding or to question formats that allowed for multiple responses. Tables and figures may not include the response options 'prefer not to answer', 'don't know' or 'another reason' – for example, if the number of respondents was small.

Limitations

This study is a subsection of the larger 'Keeping Kids Safe Online' study and was intended to provide an initial exploration of online harms in the context of children's participation in organised sporting activities. As such, it examined a limited range of online harms and included only a small number of follow-up questions about where these harms occurred and who was responsible for them. Further research is required to develop a more comprehensive understanding of the relationship between children's participation in organised sport and their online experiences, including how they influence each other.

Specifically, this study focused on children's lifetime experience of online harms perpetrated by someone connected to their sport, among those who had ever participated in organised sporting activities. More detailed information about the extent, nature and recency of children's sporting participation would be required to explore how these factors relate to the incidence and nature of online harms associated with sports. This could, for example, include examining differences based on children's level of involvement (such as community, pathway or elite sport) or their role in sport (including as competitors, coaches or referees).

In addition, our study asked children if someone 'connected' to their sport was responsible for online harms, rather than whether they had experienced harms that were triggered by or directly related to their sporting activities. This is an important distinction, as children may interact with people connected to their sporting activities across a variety of settings, such as at school, in youth groups or through family relationships. Further research is therefore needed to establish the extent to which shared participation in sporting activities was a key contributing factor to these online experiences.

Lastly, the number of trans and gender diverse children in our sample who had participated in organised sporting activities was too small for reliable subgroup analysis. Given evidence of higher rates of online harm among this group in other contexts (for example, eSafety, 2025a, 2025b) and public discourse around trans and gender diverse people's participation in sports, further research involving larger samples of trans and gender diverse children would be valuable in better understanding their online experiences in this context.

Further details on the limitations of the 'Keeping Kids Safe Online' study are provided in the methodology report.

Positionality statement

eSafety understands the impact on our research and analysis of researchers' intersecting experiences of power and marginalisation. The team that authored this report is made up of cis-gender women. Identities represented in the team include parents, queer women, people with disability, and people from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds. Our team has expertise in quantitative and qualitative methodologies, online harms and safety, and the lived experiences of people at risk of online harms.

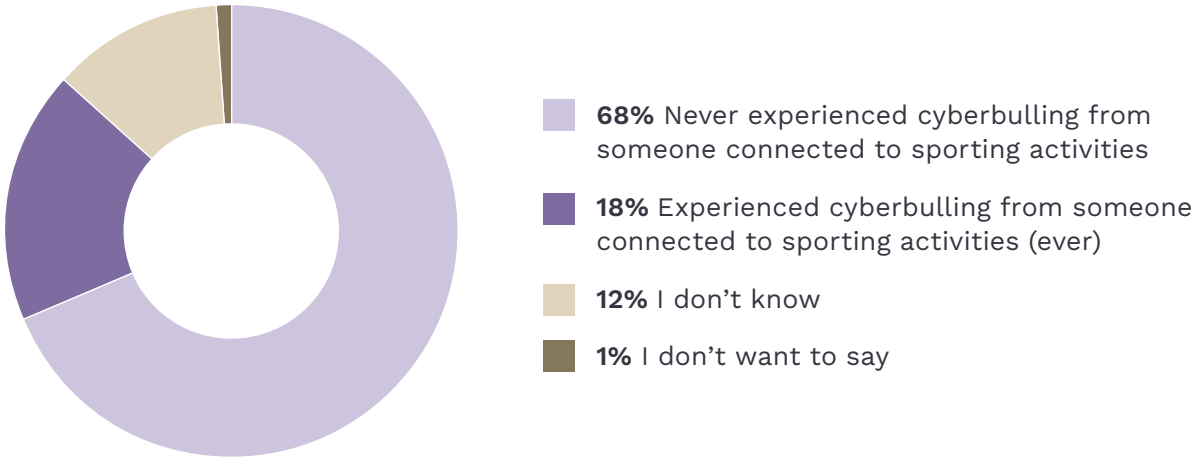
Cyberbullying

Participation in sport is beneficial for children in many ways. However, there is the potential for harm to occur, both in-person and online. This section of the report documents the incidence of children being cyberbullied by people connected with their sport, followed by the online spaces where these experiences occurred and who was responsible for them.

Almost 1 in 5 children have been cyberbullied by someone linked to their sporting activities.

Among children who had ever taken part in sporting activities, almost 1 in 5 (18%) said they had ever experienced cyberbullying from someone connected to their sporting activities, as shown in Figure 1.

Figure 1: Lifetime experience of cyberbullying by someone connected to sporting activities

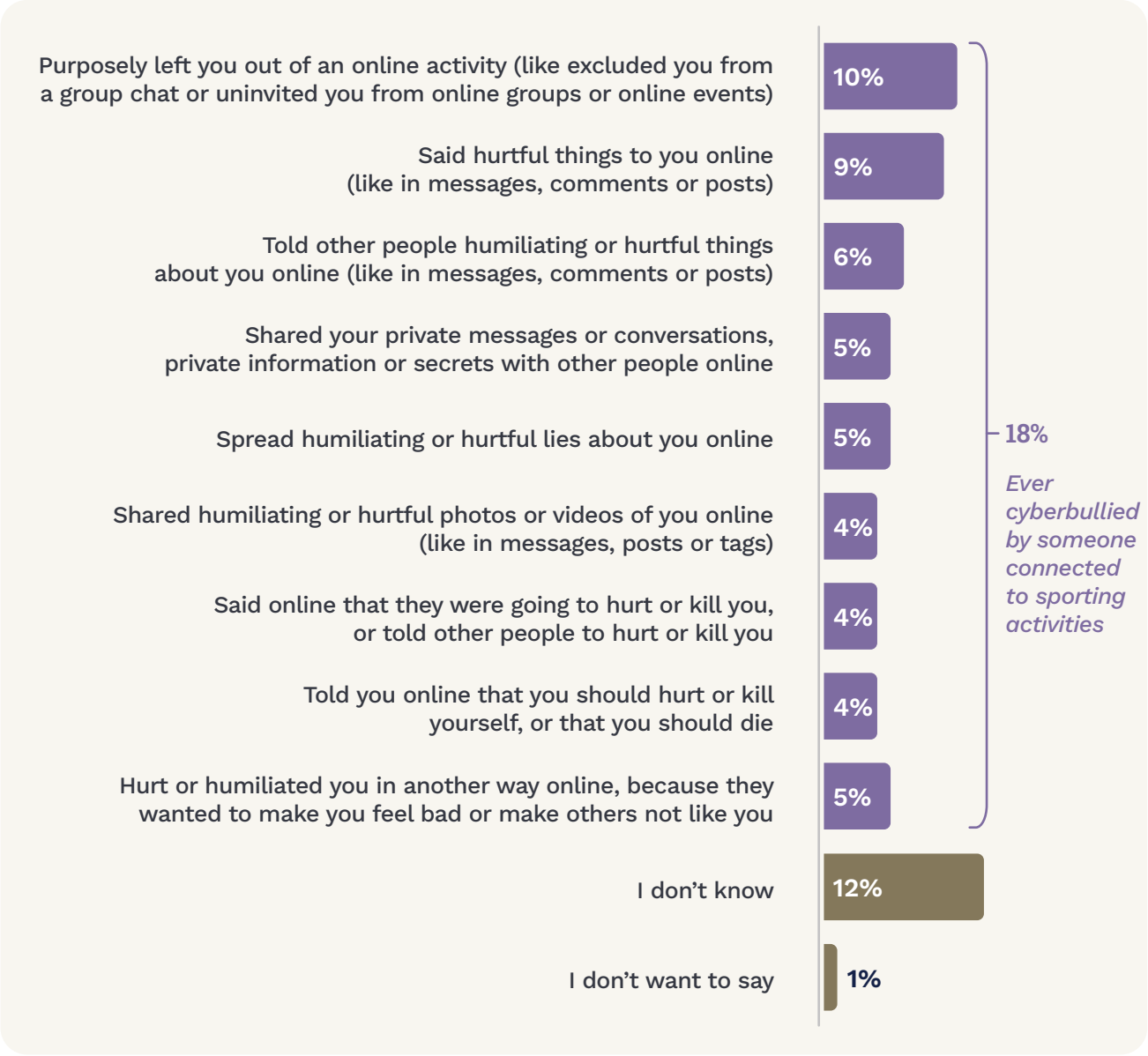


Q: Has anyone who is connected in any way to your sporting activities ever done any of the following things to you online because they wanted to humiliate you or make you feel bad, or to make others not like you? This could be teammates, competitors, coaches, referees, instructors, managers, people who watch or follow the sporting activity or team, parents or caregivers of players, or anyone else related to your sporting activities. Important: Answer 'yes' to these questions only if you think the person did these things to you on purpose because they really wanted to humiliate you or make you feel bad, or to make others not like you.

Note: Children aged 10 to 17 who did the recontact survey and had taken part in sporting activities (*n* = 1,972).

The most common form of cyberbullying by someone connected to sporting activities was being purposely left out of an online activity (10%) and people saying hurtful things (9%), as shown in Figure 2.

Figure 2: Lifetime experience of cyberbullying by someone connected to sporting activities, by type of cyberbullying



Q: Has anyone who is connected in any way to your sporting activities ever done any of the following things to you online because they wanted to humiliate you or make you feel bad, or to make others not like you? This could be teammates, competitors, coaches, referees, instructors, managers, people who watch or follow the sporting activity or team, parents or caregivers of players, or anyone else related to your sporting activities. Important: Answer 'yes' to these questions only if you think the person did these things to you on purpose because they really wanted to humiliate you or make you feel bad, or to make others not like you.

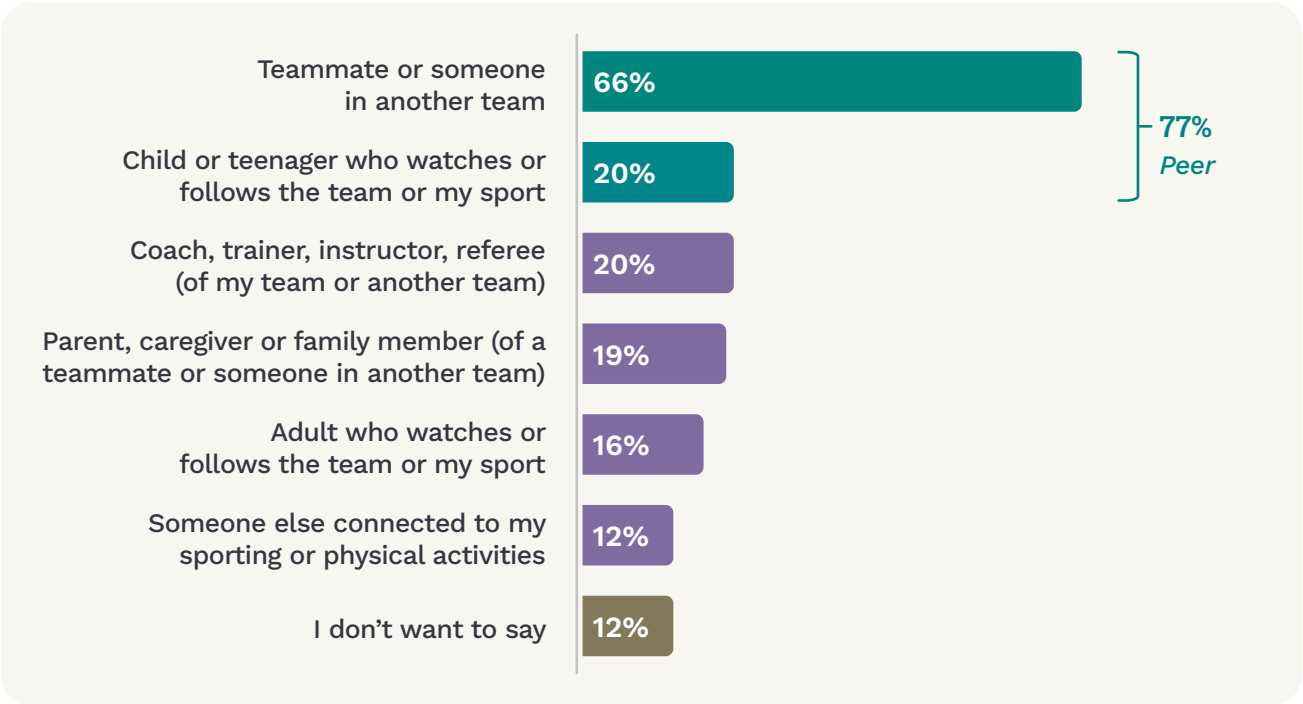
Note: Children aged 10 to 17 who did the recontact survey and had taken part in sporting activities (*n* = 1,972).

Cyberbullying by people connected to sporting activities is most often carried out by peers, but authority figures or adults involved in sports can also be responsible.

Among children who had experienced cyberbullying from someone connected to their sporting activities, the person responsible was most likely to be a peer (77%), such as a teammate or someone in another team (66%), or a child or teenager who watches or follows the team/sport (20%).

However, around 1 in 5 said it was a coach, trainer, instructor or referee (of their team or another team) (20%), or a parent, caregiver or family member of a teammate or someone in another team (19%), and another 16% said it was an adult who watches or follows their team/sport, as shown in Figure 3. While many individuals in these roles would be adults, some may also be older children or teens, such as those working or volunteering as referees or coaches, as well as siblings of teammates or competitors. This is supported by Australian research showing that 1 in 5 children and young people aged 12 to 18 who participate in sports also hold non-playing roles, including scorers, referees, coaches and assistants (Sport Integrity Australia, 2026).

Figure 3: People connected to sporting activities who were responsible for cyberbullying



Q: Think about when someone connected with your sporting activities [SPECIFIC TYPE OF CYBERBULLYING EXPERIENCE]. Who were they? You can choose more than one answer.

Note: Children aged 10 to 17 who did the recontact survey and had taken part in sporting activities and experienced cyberbullying from someone connected to their sporting activities (*n* = 329).

We note that some children gave multiple answers to this question. These children may have experienced cyberbullying from someone connected to their sporting activities on multiple occasions, had a single experience of this type of behaviour that involved multiple people, or had a single experience where one individual in multiple roles was responsible (for example, a parent who was also a coach).

Cyberbullying by sporting connections often occurs in individual or group chats, as well as on social media and, in some cases, club-run platforms

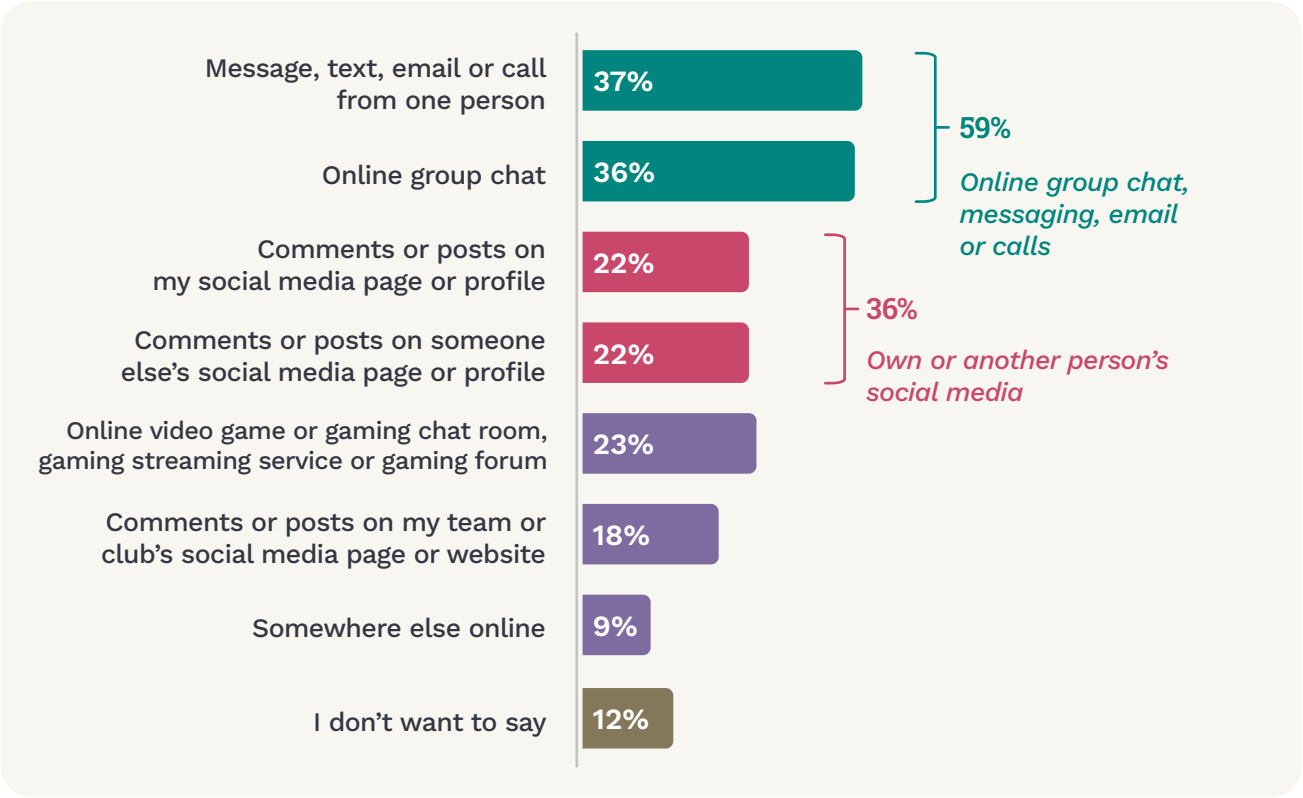
In terms of the location(s) where children experienced cyberbullying by someone connected to sporting activities, almost 3 in 5 (59%) said this had happened to them via messaging, group chats or calls – 37% via messages, texts, emails or calls from an individual person and 36% via online group chats. More than 1 in 3 (36%) said they experienced cyberbullying in comments or posts either on their own social media (22%) or on someone else's social media (22%). Other online locations included:

- video games, or associated chat rooms, streaming services or forums (23%)
- team- or club-run platforms (18%)
- somewhere else online (9%), as shown in Figure 4.

Some children gave multiple locations, which could indicate multiple experiences of cyberbullying and/or that an incident took place across various platforms.

We also note that sports clubs involving children might run or use a range of online platforms to connect with their teams, parents, officials and supporters, such as sports management, livestreaming and coach management apps. In our survey, the response option for club-run platforms only referenced social media and websites, but children may have interpreted this more broadly to include these other types of platforms.

Figure 4: Location of cyberbullying by people connected to sporting activities



Q: Think about when someone connected with your sporting activities [SPECIFIC TYPE OF CYBERBULLYING EXPERIENCE]. Where did this happen to you? You can choose more than one answer.

Note: Children aged 10 to 17 who did the recontact survey and had taken part in sporting activities and experienced cyberbullying from someone connected to their sporting activities (*n* = 261).

Cyberbullying by people connected to sporting activities disproportionately affects Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander children, those from non-English language backgrounds, those with a disability or diagnosis, and teens

As shown in Table 1, the experience of cyberbullying by someone connected to sporting activities was more common among children who:

- are Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander (32% versus 17% of non-Indigenous children)
- are from a non-English language background[3] (23% versus 16% of those from an English language background)
- have a disability or diagnosis[4] (21% versus 17% of those who don't)
- are teens (20% of 13- to 17-year-olds versus 15% of 10- to 12-year-olds).

[3] The child or a parent/caregiver speaks a language other than English at home.

[4] The child has a disability or diagnosis that has lasted (or is likely to last) at least six months (including neurodivergence and diagnosed mental health conditions).

Table 1: Lifetime experience of cyberbullying by someone connected to sporting activities, by child demographics (row %)

	%	Base
Child gender		
Boys	17	992
Girls	19	934
Child age		
10–12 (younger children)	15	796
13–17 (teens)	20	1,176
Language background		
Language(s) other than English	23	396
English only	16	1,570
Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander		
Yes	32	167
No	17	1,794
Disability or diagnosis		
Yes	21	533
No	17	1,417
Sexuality (teens only)		
Sexually diverse[5]	26	89
Heterosexual (straight)	19	931

Q: Has anyone who is connected in any way to your sporting activities ever done any of the following things to you online because they wanted to humiliate you or make you feel bad, or to make others not like you? This could be teammates, competitors, coaches, referees, instructors, managers, people who watch or follow the sporting activity or team, parents or caregivers of players, or anyone else related to your sporting activities. Important: Answer 'yes' to these questions only if you think the person did these things to you on purpose because they really wanted to humiliate you or make you feel bad, or to make others not like you.

Base: Children aged 10 to 17 who did the recontact survey and had taken part in sporting activities.

Note: Different colour shading indicates that differences are statistically significant between subgroups. An absence of shading indicates that differences are not statistically significant. The sample size for some subgroups is relatively small. As such, an absence of statistically significant differences in the data doesn't necessarily mean there are no differences in the population.

Further analysis by key demographics shows that teens (aged 13 to 17) who had been cyberbullied by someone connected to their sporting activity were more likely than younger children (aged 10 to 12) to report that an authority figure was responsible, such as a coach or referee (23% versus 12%), as well as people who follow their sport – adults (19% versus 9%) and children or teens (24% versus 11%).

[5] Gay, lesbian, bisexual, or another sexuality that isn't 'straight' or heterosexual. Only teens were asked their sexuality.

Children from non-English language backgrounds who had experienced this were less likely than their peers to have been cyberbullied by teammates or other players (54% versus 71% of those from English language backgrounds), but more likely to have been targeted by each of the other groups. Lastly, Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander children were more likely to have experienced cyberbullying by adults watching or following their sport (29% versus 14%), as shown in Table 2.

Table 2: People connected to sporting activities who were responsible for cyberbullying, by child demographics[6] (%)

	Gender		Age		Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander		Language background		Disability or diagnosis	
	Boys	Girls	10–12 (younger children)	13–17 (teens)	Yes	No	Non-English	English only	Yes	No
Teammate or someone in another team	70	65	73	63	65	66	54	71	65	67
Coach, trainer, instructor, referee (of my team or another team)	22	17	12	23	28	19	29	16	17	21
Child or teenager who watches or follows the team or my sport	20	17	11	24	23	19	29	16	18	20
Parent, caregiver or family member (of a teammate or someone in another team)	18	18	16	20	27	18	29	15	21	17
Adult who watches or follows the team or my sport	17	14	9	19	29	14	25	13	17	16
Someone else connected to my sporting or physical activities	13	10	9	13	16	11	13	11	7	14
I don't want to say	15	11	14	11	6	13	12	12	15	11
Base: Children aged 10–17 who have ever been cyberbullied by someone connected to their sporting activities	**153**	**164**	**110**	**219**	**51**	**276**	**78**	**251**	**95**	**230**

Q: Think about when someone connected with your sporting activities [SPECIFIC TYPE OF CYBERBULLYING EXPERIENCE]. Who were they? You can choose more than one answer.

Note: Different colour shading indicates that differences are statistically significant between subgroups. An absence of shading indicates that differences are not statistically significant. The sample size for some subgroups is relatively small. As such, an absence of statistically significant differences in the data doesn't necessarily mean there are no differences in the population.

There were no statistically significant differences by key child demographics in terms of where cyberbullying by someone connected to sporting activities took place.

[6] The sample size was too small for analysis by sexuality.

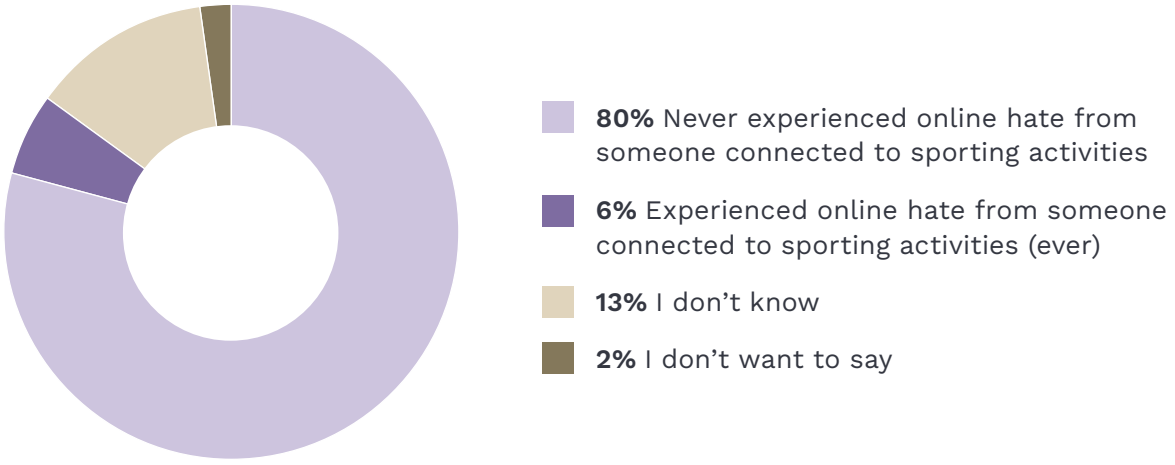
Online hate

This section focuses on children's experience of online hate by people connected with their sporting activities. We explore the contexts in which this online hate occurred and who was responsible. We also report on the specific characteristics that were the focus of online hate by people connected to children's sports.

1 in 17 children have been targeted with online hate by someone connected to their sport

Among children who had ever taken part in sporting activities, 6% said they had personally experienced online hate from someone connected to these sporting activities, as shown in Figure 5. That is, someone connected to their sport had said or posted online offensive or threatening things to or about them because they were hateful of one or more of their identity characteristics (for example, indigeneity, race, culture, gender, etc.).

Figure 5: Lifetime experience of cyberbullying by someone connected to sporting activities



Q: Has anyone online ever said or posted offensive or threatening things to or about you personally because they were hateful of: (a) your being Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander; (b) your skin colour, race or culture; (c) the country you are from; (d) your being gay, lesbian, bisexual, or another sexuality that isn't straight or heterosexual; (e) your being transgender, non-binary or gender diverse; (f) your being a girl; (g) your being a boy; (h) your religion; (i) your disability or diagnosis ...?

Q: You told us that the things below happened to you online. Was the person (or people) who did these things connected in any way to any of your sporting activities? This could be teammates, competitors, coaches, instructors, referees, managers, people who watch or follow the sporting activity or team, parents or caregivers of players, or anyone else related to your sporting activities.

Base: Children aged 10 to 17 who did the recontact survey and had taken part in sporting activities (*n* = 1,796).[7]

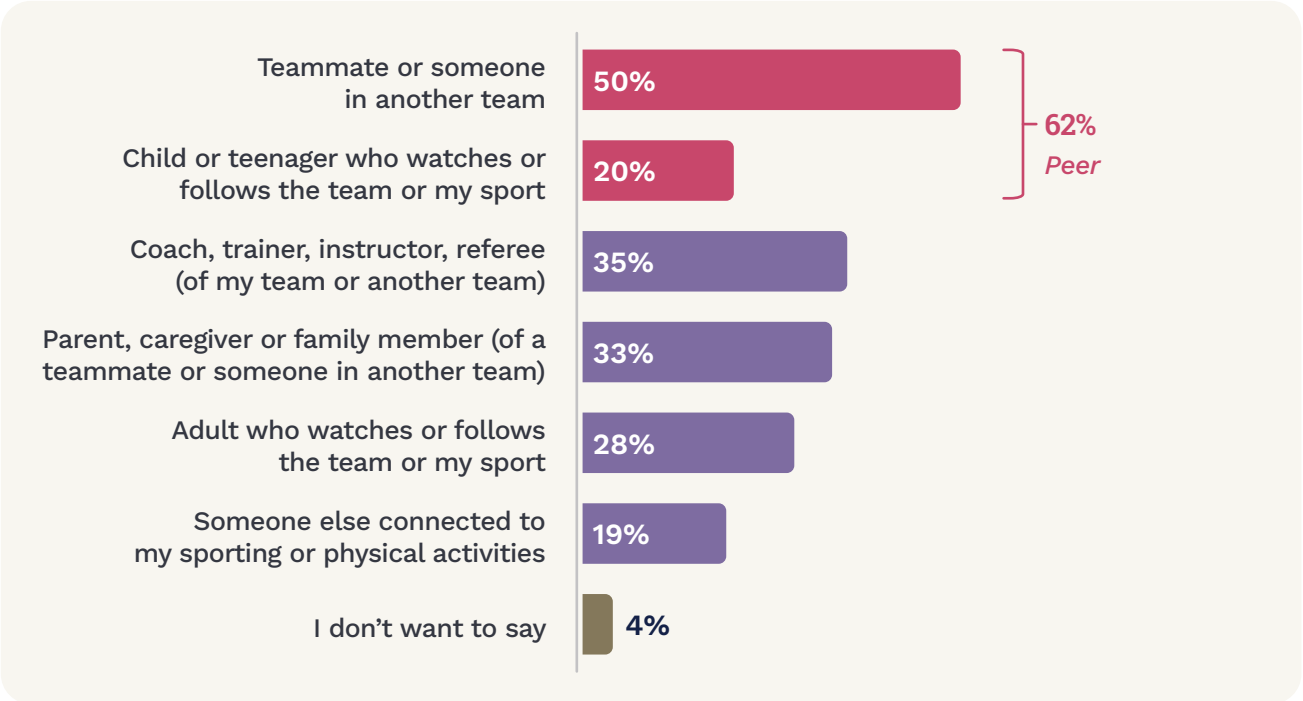
[7] Children were given the option of skipping certain questions in the survey, including those on their identity characteristics. Among the 2,302 children who completed the recontact survey, 304 declined to answer one or more questions about their identity characteristics and consequently weren't asked whether they had experienced certain types of online hate. Of these 304 participants, 81 had experienced at least one other type of online hate, while 223 hadn't experienced any other type of online hate or they didn't know or didn't want to say if they had done so. These 223 participants have therefore been excluded from the overall prevalence of online hate, which is based on a subset of the sample (*n* = 2,079 overall / *n* = 1,796 who had ever participated in organised sporting activities).

Most online hate directed at children by someone connected to their sporting activities comes from peers, though some cases involve adults or authority figures

Among the children who had experienced online hate from someone connected to their sporting activities, around 3 in 5 (62%) reported that a peer was responsible, specifically a teammate or someone in another team (50%) or a child or teenager who watches or follows their team or sport (20%). However, this was followed by:

- a coach, trainer, instructor or referee (of their team or another team) (35%)
- a parent, caregiver or family member (of a teammate or someone in another team) (33%)
- an adult who watches or follows their team/sport (28%)
- someone else who was connected to their sporting activities (19%), as shown in Figure 6.

Figure 6: People connected to sporting activities who were responsible for online hate



Q: Has anyone online ever said or posted offensive or threatening things to or about you personally because they were hateful of ...?

Q: You told us that the things below happened to you online. Was the person (or people) who did these things connected in any way to any of your sporting activities? This could be teammates, competitors, coaches, instructors, referees, managers, people who watch or follow the sporting activity or team, parents or caregivers of players, or anyone else related to your sporting activities.

Base: Children aged 10 to 17 who did the recontact survey and had taken part in sporting activities and experienced online hate from someone connected to their sporting activities (*n* = 111).

As we observed in relation to cyberbullying, some children gave multiple answers to this question. Again, this may indicate multiple experiences of online hate, the involvement of multiple people, and/or that one individual in multiple roles was responsible.

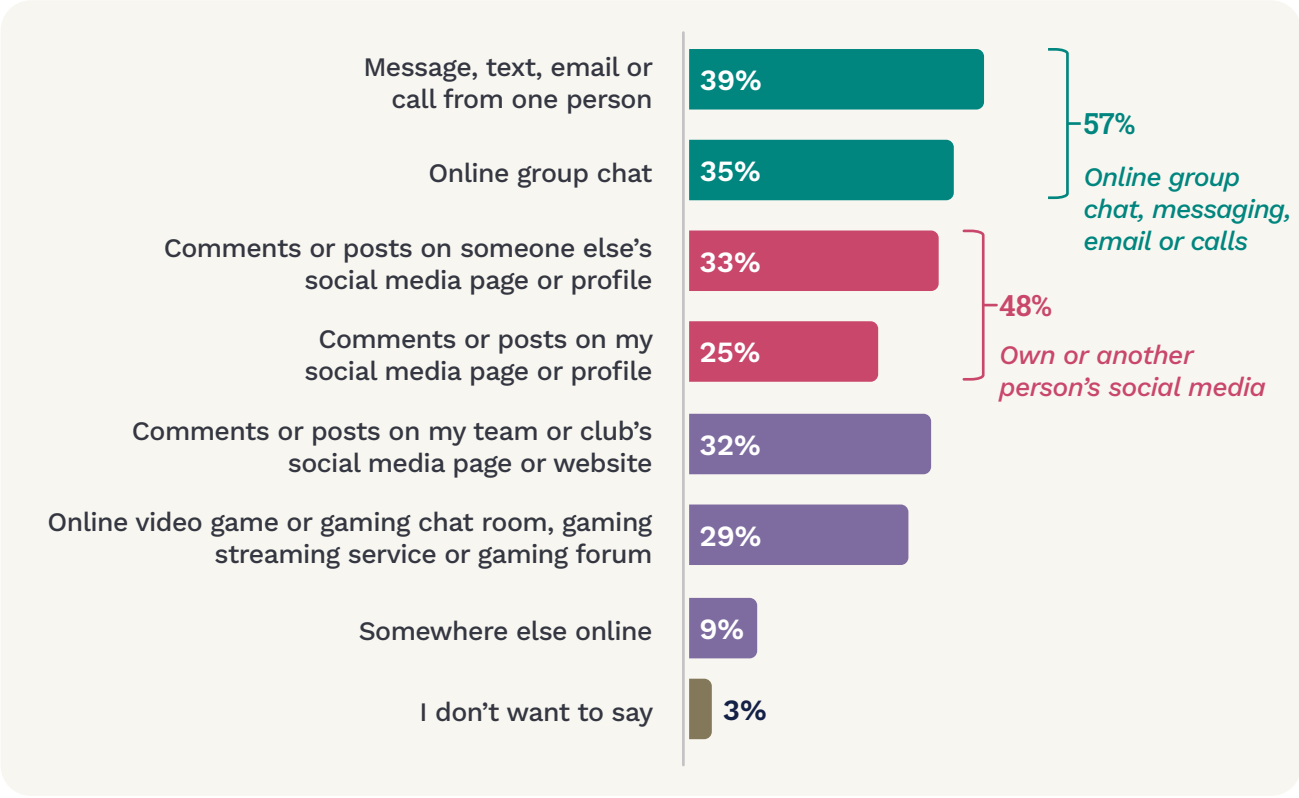
Online hate by people connected to children's sporting activities often happens in individual or group chats or on social media, but it also takes place on club-run platforms

Almost 3 in 5 (57%) of those who had been targeted with online hate by someone linked to their sporting activity told us it had happened in messaging, group chats or calls. This includes messages, texts, emails or calls from an individual person (39%) and online group chats (35%). Almost half (48%) told us this had happened to them in comments or posts either on their own social media (25%) or on someone else's social media (33%). The other online locations where this occurred were:

- comments or posts on platforms run by their team or club (32%)
- video games, or associated chat rooms, streaming services or forums (29%)
- somewhere else online (9%), as shown in Figure 7.

Again, some children gave multiple answers, indicating that they experienced online hate connected to their sporting activities multiple times via different channels or that a single experience played out across multiple channels.

Figure 7: Location of online hate by people connected to sporting activities



Q: Think about when someone connected with your sporting activities [SPECIFIC TYPE OF ONLINE HATE EXPERIENCED]. Where did this happen to you? You can choose more than one answer.

Base: Children aged 10 to 17 who did the recontact survey and had taken part in sporting activities and experienced online hate from someone connected to their sporting activities (*n* = 110).

Online hate by people connected to sporting activities disproportionately affects Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander children, children from non-English language backgrounds, and teens

Experiencing online hate by people connected to sporting activities was more common among children who are:

- Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander (19% versus 5% of non-Indigenous children)
- from a non-English language background (11% versus 4% of those from an English language background)
- teens (7% of 13- to 17-year-olds versus 4% of 10- to 12-year-olds), as shown in Table 3.

We note that online hate can be directed at multiple aspects of a child's identity. For instance, an Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander child may be targeted not only for their indigeneity, but also for their gender, disability or other characteristics.

Table 3: Lifetime experience of online hate by someone connected to sporting activities, by child demographics (row %)

	%	Base
Child gender		
Boys	5	909
Girls	6	844
Child age		
10–12 (younger children)	4	747
13–17 (teens)	7	1,049
Language background		
Language(s) other than English	11	346
English only	4	1,446
Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander		
Yes	19	164
No	5	1,626
Disability or diagnosis		
Yes	7	493
No	5	1,295
Sexuality (teens only)		
Sexually diverse	10	87
Heterosexual (straight)	5	919

Q: Has anyone online ever said or posted offensive or threatening things to or about you personally because they were hateful of: (a) your being Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander; (b) your skin colour, race or culture; (c) the country you are from; (d) your being gay, lesbian, bisexual, or another sexuality that isn't straight or heterosexual; (e) your being transgender, non-binary or gender diverse; (f) your being a girl; (g) your being a boy; (h) your religion; (i) your disability or diagnosis ...?

Q: You told us that the things below happened to you online. Was the person (or people) who did these things connected in any way to any of your sporting activities? This could be teammates, competitors, coaches, instructors, referees, managers, people who watch or follow the sporting activity or team, parents or caregivers of players, or anyone else related to your sporting activities.

Base: Children aged 10 to 17 who did the recontact survey and had taken part in sporting activities (*n* = 1,796).

Note: Different colour shading indicates that differences are statistically significant between subgroups. An absence of shading indicates that differences are not statistically significant. The sample size for some subgroups is relatively small. As such, an absence of statistically significant differences in the data doesn't necessarily mean there are no differences in the population.

Below, we examine the incidence of hate speech directed at a particular characteristic among children with that specific characteristic or a related characteristic. The incidence rates reported here are lower than those reported in Table 3 because some children had experienced hate focused on multiple aspects of their identity.

- Among **Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander** children who had ever taken part in sporting activities, **7%** told us they had been targeted online by someone connected to their sport because that person was hateful of their being Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander.
- Among children from a **non-English language background** who had ever taken part in sporting activities, **5%** told us they had been targeted online by someone connected to their sport because that person was hateful of their skin colour, race or culture.
- Among **sexually diverse** teens (aged 13 to 17)[8] who had ever taken part in sporting activities, **5%** told us they had been targeted online by someone connected to their sport because that person was hateful of their sexuality.
- Among children with a **disability or diagnosis** who had ever taken part in sporting activities, **3%** told us they had been targeted online by someone connected to their sport because that person was hateful of their disability or diagnosis.
- Among **girls** who had ever taken part in sporting activities, **3%** told us they had been targeted online by someone connected to their sport because that person was hateful of their being a girl.
- Among **boys** who had ever taken part in sporting activities, **1%** told us they had been targeted online by someone connected to their sport because that person was hateful of their being a boy.

The sample size of children who had experienced online hate by someone connected to their sporting activities was too small to explore how children's demographic characteristics might relate to where online these experiences took place and who was responsible for them.

[8] Relatively small sample size (n = 89).

Discussion

This report provides an initial exploration of how children's participation in organised sporting activities may relate to their experience of online harms, specifically cyberbullying and online hate. Unfortunately, these are widespread issues. Other data from our 'Keeping Kids Safe Online' study shows that more than half of children (53%) have ever been bullied online, and over a quarter (27%) have been targeted with online hate (eSafety, 2025a, 2025b). It isn't surprising, therefore, that these behaviours sometimes occur within communities connected to children's sport.

Just under 1 in 5 children (18%) reported experiencing cyberbullying by someone connected to their sporting activities. Given the ubiquity of childhood participation in sports in Australia, this is an issue affecting many children. The proportion of children who had experienced online hate by a person connected to their sports was smaller (6%); however, this still represents many children when extrapolated to the population. We recognise that children can encounter people involved in their sporting activities in various settings, so further research is needed to determine whether these harmful behaviours were directly influenced by children's participation in sport.

When examining which people connected to children's sporting activities are perpetrating cyberbullying and online hate, it is perhaps to be expected that those responsible are most often the children's peers. It may be more surprising that people in positions of authority and adults are also quite often involved in these behaviours. However, other Australian studies investigating in-person behaviour in children's sports have documented harmful or inappropriate behaviours being perpetrated by people in official roles, such as coaches (Sport Integrity Australia, 2025, 2026; Pankowiak et al., 2023) and parents (Sport Integrity Australia, 2026; Pankowiak et al., 2023), as well as by peers.

Both cyberbullying and online hate perpetrated by people connected to children's sporting activities often take place in group chats or through one-to-one channels such as text messaging. This means sporting organisations may not be aware it is happening, unless someone in the group chat or the person being targeted chooses to tell them. It is also common for both cyberbullying and online hate to play out in comments or posts on social media. While these behaviours might be seen by multiple people, again sporting organisations might not be aware unless they are alerted by a targeted child or someone in their social circle. Unfortunately, other research has shown that children may be reluctant to report harmful experiences in sporting contexts (Woessner et al., 2024), suggesting that there is more work to be done to ensure that children who experience online harms in sporting contexts receive sufficient support.

Our findings also show that while these types of behaviours occur less often on club-run platforms (for example, club social media), they are not uncommon. In these instances, sporting organisations may be able to observe what is happening and therefore have opportunities to intervene or implement preventative measures.

Where behaviours such as cyberbullying and online hate occur in spaces that can be observed by multiple people, such as on social media or group chats, it may indicate that those involved believe this type of behaviour is normal or at least tolerated. There are many reasons why this might be the case in the context of sports in particular, such as witnessing the public abuse and harassment of elite athletes, the misconduct of some parents and other adults involved in or on the sidelines of community sports, and controlled forms of aggression being allowed within the rules of some sports, which may then continue off the pitch. Indeed, research by Sport Integrity Australia (2026) indicates that children and young people who have witnessed a range of inappropriate behaviours in their sports are more likely to accept these behaviours as 'OK and just part of sport'.

Cyberbullying and online hate by people connected to children's sporting activities disproportionately affect Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander children and those from non-English language backgrounds. This finding reflects patterns identified more broadly in other online contexts (eSafety, 2025a, 2025b). It also reflects the experiences of professional athletes who have been targets of online hate because of aspects of their identity, including race and religion (Ofcom, 2025a, 2025b; McGrane et al., 2024). It is particularly concerning that children from non-English language backgrounds who had been cyberbullied by someone linked to their sport were more likely than other children who had these experiences to report that people in official roles, such as coaches and referees, were responsible, as well as people who watch or follow their sport.

Both cyberbullying and online hate by someone connected to children's sporting activities were also more commonly reported by teens than by younger children. Other findings from our 'Keeping Kids Safe Online' study show that teens are more likely than younger children to have experienced various online harms, not just harms perpetrated by people connected to their sports. This is likely related, at least in part, to teens using social media and communication platforms more frequently than younger children (eSafety, forthcoming). In addition, a relatively high proportion of teens who had been cyberbullied by someone connected to their sporting activities told us that people in official roles, such as coaches and referees, were responsible, along with people who watch or follow their sport (compared to younger children who had experienced cyberbullying in this context). This may be related to sporting activities becoming increasingly competitive, with more pressure to perform as children get older. There may also be a perception that teens are more able to deal with this kind of behaviour or are less likely to be impacted by it.

Conclusions and implications

This study shows that a significant minority of children are cyberbullied and that a small proportion experience online hate by people connected to their sporting activities. Those responsible are primarily peers but also include people in positions of authority, such as coaches and referees, parents and other adults. These harms occur in various online locations, including one-to-one messaging or calls, group chats, social media and club-run platforms.

Online harms such as cyberbullying have been associated with negative impacts on children's physical and mental health (World Health Organization, 2022). Research has also shown that negative experiences such as bullying and discrimination by peers, as well as excessive pressure or bullying from parents and coaches, can contribute to children dropping out of sports (Sport Integrity Australia, 2026; Connolly, 2022).

Collectively, these findings suggest there is more work to be done to ensure that children participating in organised sporting activities have positive, safe and inclusive online experiences, so they can continue to engage in sport and realise its well-established benefits for health, wellbeing and social connection.

Below, we consider the various ways this might be achieved.

Cyberbullying and online hate might not be witnessed directly by people working or volunteering in children's sports, so it is important to raise awareness of the issue

Sporting organisations involving children should be informed about the prevalence and impacts of cyberbullying and online hate, including by people connected to children's sporting activities, to encourage them to be vigilant and to ensure they have plans in place to deal with these occurrences. This is particularly important given the prominence of messaging, calls and chat groups in these findings, as well as the introduction of social media age restrictions, which may result in harmful behaviour targeting younger children increasingly occurring in more private or less visible digital spaces.

Sporting organisations may require targeted capacity-building and staff and volunteer training to ensure they are equipped to prevent, identify and respond effectively to online harms

Sporting organisations may not feel fully equipped to deal with issues such as cyberbullying and online hate, particularly community organisations that often rely on volunteers. It is crucial to build the capability of the sports system, including sporting organisations, staff and volunteers, to recognise online harms, respond effectively to

issues, and build positive online and offline cultures. Sporting organisations might also benefit from ready-made educational and communication resources to reduce duplication across the sector and support volunteer workforces.

Coaches, managers, referees, parents and others involved in supporting children's participation in sport should be provided with education on appropriate online behaviours for them, as well as training on how to support children who are experiencing online issues. It is important that this education is extended to children and young people who take on leadership or supervisory roles within sporting organisations, such as coaching or refereeing.

To promote vigilance and tailored support, educational materials should emphasise that some children face heightened risks of online harms. Training should also provide clear guidance on when concerns require escalation – for example, to child protection authorities.

Adults working with children in sport have an important role to play in educating young participants about respectful behaviour and online safety in sport-related digital environments

With peers accounting for most cyberbullying and online hate by people connected to children's sport, children and young people should be advised about respectful online behaviour in sporting contexts. Opportunities to strengthen education could build on existing sporting programs and systems – for example, in pre-season team talks and meetings, or more formally through existing sport eLearning or outreach sessions.

Sporting organisations should set clear expectations for online behaviours and build positive online cultures through their policies and codes of conduct

Sporting policies and codes of conduct for everyone involved in children's sports, including players, spectators, family members and adults or older children in positions of authority, should be explicitly extended to online contexts. These should be coupled with clear and transparent processes for addressing behaviours that don't align with expectations, that are applied consistently in online and offline contexts. As with all integrity issues in sport, proactive and ongoing communication to members of all ages, participation levels and roles is vital. In addition to promoting and clearly communicating their policies and codes of conduct, sporting organisations should aim to reinforce these by regularly championing respect online and talking to participants about safe online conduct.

Children require clear and accessible mechanisms for reporting online issues within sporting organisations and encouragement to use them

Cyberbullying and online hate by people connected to children's sport were shown to occur most often in messaging, calls and chat groups, as well as in comments or posts on children's or other people's social media. This presents a challenge for sporting

organisations, which may find these behaviours difficult to detect unless they are reported. As mentioned earlier, with social media age restrictions now in effect, harmful behaviours may increasingly occur in private or less visible digital spaces, reinforcing the importance of clear reporting pathways for children. Sporting organisations must communicate clearly to children how to reach out for support if they experience or witness online harms connected to their sport.

Strong codes of conduct, education, ongoing messaging about respectful online conduct and effective responses to inappropriate behaviours (as already outlined) may reassure children that issues will be taken seriously and encourage them to report harmful behaviours directed at themselves or others. Education might also help to encourage upstander behaviour, where appropriate.

Effective online moderation of platforms run by sporting organisations is crucial for preventing harm and signalling zero tolerance for inappropriate behaviours in sporting contexts

Given that some instances of online hate and cyberbullying occur on sporting organisations' platforms, effective moderation of messages, posts and comments is essential to prevent harm and to indicate that these behaviours won't be tolerated. Sporting organisations' platforms and social media should also have clear and easy avenues for reporting inappropriate behaviours, along with processes for responding in a timely and effective manner to such reports. It is important that this approach is applied across all platforms used by sporting organisations, including club-run social media, team group chats, and sports management, coach management and livestreaming apps.

As digital technologies and communication norms evolve, sporting organisations may need to adjust how they identify, prevent and respond to online harms

A key implication of these findings is the importance of sporting organisations remaining responsive to ongoing changes in digital environments. This includes remaining attentive to shifts in the digital spaces children use to communicate and ensuring that approaches to prevention and support remain effective across both visible and less visible online environments.

Although not the primary focus of this research, it is also important to recognise that advances in digital technologies are continually reshaping the nature of online harms. For example, generative AI can be misused to manipulate images to humiliate or harm children, or to produce child sexual exploitation and abuse material. Sporting organisations should regularly review and adapt their policies and codes of practice to ensure they keep pace with emerging digital risks.

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Appendix: Additional data tables

Table A1: Self-reported lifetime participation in organised sporting activities (outside of school time) (%)

	Total
Swimming	34
Football/soccer	27
Dancing	21
Basketball	21
Australian Football League (AFL)	16
Tennis	16
Gymnastics	14
Netball	14
Cricket	13
Martial arts or karate	12
Running/athletics	11
Rugby League	7
Group exercise classes	6
Touch Rugby/AusTag	6
Nippers or surf life saving	4
Hockey	3
Rugby Union	2
Another organised sporting activity	6
I have never done any organised sporting activities outside of school time	13
Any organised sporting activity (combined)	**85**
I don't know	1
I don't want to say	1
Base: Children aged 10 to 17 who did the recontact survey	**2,302**

Q: Which organised sporting activities have you ever done? You can choose more than one answer. 'Organised' sporting activities are things you do as part of a club or a team, outside of school time (like after school or on the weekends). They don't include games or activities you do on your own, or just with friends and family.

Table A2: Participant demographics: All children who participated in the follow-up survey and organised sporting activity subgroup

Demo-graphics	Follow-up sample (*n*)	Follow-up sample (weighted %)	Ever participated in sporting activities (*n*)	Ever participated in sporting activities (weighted %)	Never participated in sporting activities (*n*)	Never participated in sporting activities (weighted %)
Age[9]						
10-11	610	26	538	26	60	20
12-13	591	26	520	26	62	21
14-15	574	25	491	26	78	26
16-17	527	23	423	22	92	32
Gender						
Boys	1,149	50	992	51	141	48
Girls	1,095	48	934	47	139	48
Trans and gender diverse[10]	58	2	46	2	12	4
Sexuality (teens only)						
Straight	1,085	78	931	79	141	72
Sexually diverse[11]	115	8	89	7	24	12
Chose not to answer	165	12	134	12	25	14
First Nations						
Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander	197	6	167	6	26	6
Language						
Non-English language background[12]	461	23	396	23	59	24
Disability or diagnosis						
Child is a person with disability or diagnosis[13]	639	27	533	26	93	31
TOTAL	**2,302**	**100**	**1,972**	**85**	**292**	**13**

[9] Age when the core survey was conducted.
[10] 'Trans and gender diverse' includes participants who are a 'trans girl', 'trans boy', 'non-binary', 'brotherboy', 'sistergirl', 'another gender' or 'questioning' their gender.
[11] 'Sexually diverse' includes participants who are gay or lesbian, bisexual, queer, asexual, pansexual or 'still working it out'.
[12] Non-English language background: the child and/or at least one parent or caregiver speaks a language other than English at home.
[13] The child has a disability or diagnosis that has lasted (or is likely to last) at least six months (including neurodivergence and diagnosed mental health conditions).