

headspace and yourtown submission on the Anti-Bullying Rapid Review

yourtown and **headspace** welcome the opportunity to provide a submission to the Anti-Bullying Rapid Review. This review is an opportunity to identify current practice across Australia, including examples of good practice and gaps, and benefits that may be achieved through development of a consistent national standard.

Bullying is a significant concern for young people. **headspace** National's Youth Mental Health Survey in 2025 found almost half (48%) of young people experienced some form of bullying in the last year (either in person or online).¹

At **yourtown's** Kids Helpline, approximately 3,500 responses undertaken in 2024 were directly related to bullying, accounting for about 5% of all contacts. Bullying was most commonly reported by children aged 10 to 14, and for children aged 5 to 9, bullying was the most common reason for reaching out, making up 12% of contacts. Reports of cyberbullying remain consistently higher across all ages and gender identities, with particularly elevated rates among older age groups, specifically 15 to 18 (33%) and 19 to 25 years (55%). Of concern was that one in seven contacts aged 10 to 14 years who sought support for bullying also reported current thoughts of suicide. This figure increases to one in six for 12-year-olds contacting about bullying. In addition, 208,000 users accessed Kids Helpline's dedicated bullying support resources on its website.

In **yourtown's** Your Voice survey, 4,608 respondents rated the importance of taking or continuing action on key issues.² Of the respondents aged 12 to 17 years, 73% rated bullying as a topic that requires action. Furthermore, 60% of respondents aged 18 to 25 years stated that it was important or very important to take action on bullying. Through our ongoing consultations and analyses, it has become clear that action is required throughout the community, with the experience of bullying not just limited to school and peers, but also experienced from adults, strangers, and the workforce in their daily lives.

Particular cohorts of young people experience higher rates of bullying and discrimination. For example, a disproportionate number of LGBTIQ+ young people experience bullying, prejudice, discrimination and abuse because of identifying as LGBTIQ+.³

First Nations young people also experience high rates of bullying and discrimination. In Mission Australia's 2019 Youth Survey, three in ten (30%) of First Nations young people said they had experienced bullying during the past 12 months, compared to two in ten (20%) of non-Indigenous respondents.⁴ Nearly three-quarters (73%) had experienced bullying at school, TAFE or university.

¹ **headspace** National, National Youth Mental Health Survey, 2022 (unpublished).

² **yourtown**, Your Voice 2025 (to be published later this year).

³ LGBTIQ+ Health Australia, Beyond urgent: National LGBTIQ+ mental health and suicide prevention strategy 2021-2026, 2023.

⁴ Mission Australia, Youth Survey Report 2019, 2019.

What we know about bullying

The impact of bullying

As outlined in the Consultation Paper, bullying significantly impacts on physical and mental health and wellbeing. Experiencing bullying can be traumatic and affect performance at school, university, TAFE or work, and increase the risk of depression, anxiety, self-harm and suicide.⁵

Being bullied can decrease self-esteem, cause a young person to feel unsafe at school and subsequently develop negative feelings towards school and lower attendance. Bullying can also be a contributing factor in youth suicide; however it is important to note that suicide is not the result of one factor.

For Kids Helpline, the most frequently reported concerns alongside bullying contacts were emotional wellbeing, suicide-related issues, and mental health challenges. Thirteen per cent of bullying contacts reported experiencing current thoughts of suicide, with the highest prevalence among the 10 to 14 age group.

"I have watched a happy, engaged, learner who enjoyed going to school slowly lose trust, disconnect, become depressed, and spiral unable to find a way out and unable to escape the source of their trauma." headspace Youth National Reference Group.

"They do need to crack down on bullying, at least in my experience. The amount of racism, homophobia, ableism and transphobia at my school is kinda insane when I think about it, and as far as I know, nobody is getting any consequences for it. Granted, a lot of it happens in quick little remarks outside of class and things like that, but I've seen heaps of people throw slurs around in the middle of class and nothing was done." yourtown Your Voice survey respondent

"As a young person who was bullied and discriminated against, I withdrew from school, extra-curriculars and from my family. I didn't want to leave my house, and I had full panic attacks at the idea of going to the place where the bullies were. I believed that I didn't deserve to belong, and I never would." headspace Youth National Reference Group.

Online bullying has grown as a major challenge; it often occurs outside of school hours and can be difficult to respond to. The **headspace** National Youth Mental Health Survey, 2022 found that six in ten young people (61%) had experienced some form of cyberbullying in their lifetime. This included having someone: threaten to hurt them; post hurtful or mean comments about them; spread rumours about them online; or exclude them from group chats or messages.⁶

"The effects of cyber bullying and lack of online safety is appalling. I say this as a victim of cyberbullying AND harassment not just on social media but through my actual phone number. An outcome of this is that I have now developed even worse self-esteem issues, my anxiety has absolutely taken over my life and with that my depression has also had more control over me. More actions need to be taken to protect youth against this as they are now more than ever influenced by things online." yourtown Your Voice survey respondent

However, young people can find it difficult to reach out for support. They can feel embarrassed, blame themselves, be worried about being seen as weak, or worry that they

⁵ See for example: Suicide Prevention Australia, Social-economic and environmental determinants of suicide: Background paper, August 2023

⁶ **headspace** National, National Youth Mental Health Survey, 2022 (unpublished).

won't be believed; and that seeking support will make the situation worse, or risk parents or teachers monitoring or limit their internet access.

Bullying can also impact on those witnessing bullying; witnesses can become distressed, feel powerless to stop what is happening to their peer/s and can fear that they too may become a victim of bullying.

Causes of bullying

Causes of bullying are multifactorial. Bullying is often due to a complex interaction between social, personal and psychological factors and can be a result of many things occurring in someone's life.

Personal circumstances can lead someone to bully others. For example, if they have experienced bullying or violence themselves, have poor self-regulation and anger management skills, want to feel more powerful or secure, or they may be motivated by distrust, jealousy, fear, or misunderstanding. These risk factors can increase the likelihood of someone engaging in bullying behaviour; however, it is these same factors can contribute to young people being affected by bullying behaviour. To address bullying, there must therefore be a focus on the bully, the victim and witnesses. This was strongly supported in feedback from the **headspace** Youth National Reference Group, whereby support must be provided to both the victim and the person who is bullying.

More broadly, societal and environmental factors can contribute to social challenges. For example, the COVID-19 pandemic interrupted young people's social and emotional development, which has led to social difficulties and school attendance issues. In addition, there is often a link drawn between the use of technology and bullying. Technology enables bullying to be done anonymously and be undetected by schools and adults. In addition, young people can be influenced by what they see online, including gender-based violence.

The role of schools and educators

Schools have a critical role to play in addressing bullying. Due to the many and complex causes and impacts of bullying, it is important for schools to approach bullying holistically, through establishing and maintaining a whole of school and community approach to building positive school environments, rather than a singular focus on bullying. Whole-of-school approaches should be centred around respectful relationships, inclusivity, celebrating diversity, and developing a culture that does not tolerate bullying, harassment and discrimination.

In addition, with a strong link between bullying and mental health, schools are in a good position to foster a whole-of-school culture that promotes and encourages healthy relationships, positive messaging around mental health literacy and help seeking pathways and builds emotional regulation.

Whole-of-school approaches can be promoted within the school, to students and staff, and also among the wider school community, including through communications to parents/carers and other members of the school community.

"The one thing my school did well was providing me with a safe space: allowing me to sit at a desk outside the counsellor's office, do work in the library, or spend time with my favourite teacher in her classes. These supports were the only thing that got me to go to school. It gave me a place where I could be myself and not worry about others." **headspace** Youth National Reference Group

Building educator confidence is also essential. Knowing how to respond when a student is experiencing distress and/or bullying is equally important for both the person doing the bullying and the victim of bullying, because both will need support. Educators must be

equipped with the knowledge and skills to identify and respond to bullying, with effective responses to bullying being underpinned by wellbeing and reflective practice rather than adopting a punitive focus. More broadly, educators must also:

- understand and implement evidence-based trauma informed approaches to teaching and learning, and
- know how to notice and respond to signs of distress and emotional dysregulation.

“In my experience, I never had any staff offering help, stepping-in or reacting to myself directly telling them what I was experiencing. I believe this comes down to a lack of appropriate training and preparedness.” headspace Youth National Reference Group

Be You is an example of a whole-of-school approach to building mentally healthy communities through fostering connection, positive and respectful relationships and inclusive environments. Be You offers professional learning courses for educators in early childhood, primary and secondary education. The content highlights the importance of family partnerships, social and emotional learning and resilience, early intervention and working together to prepare for and respond to critical incidents. For further information, see: <https://beyou.edu.au/>.

Schools are also well positioned to educate young people and families about how to respond to bullying. Upstander training, for example, can build the confidence of young people to call out behaviour. A focus on online safety is also critical so that young people and their families know how to respond to cyberbullying and where to get support.

A student-centric whole-of-school approach

A whole-of-school approach to bullying must ensure that students' voices, experiences, and needs are at the heart of prevention and response strategies. Whole-of-school approaches are more effective, relevant and impactful when they integrate student perspectives.⁷⁸ When students are actively involved in shaping anti-bullying policies, they feel heard and take ownership of creating a positive school culture. This participation can take the form of student-led initiatives, peer mentoring, and regular feedback mechanisms. Furthermore, school leaders must champion anti-bullying efforts and collaborate with teachers, parents, and the wider community to create a unified approach. A vital component of this approach is clear reporting and support systems. Schools must have transparent procedures for addressing bullying incidents so that students feel safe reporting bullying and have access to support services.

Recommendations

Schools should ensure students are actively involved in shaping anti-bullying policies and initiatives.

Schools should implement a student-centric whole-of-school approach to bullying that involves regular feedback mechanisms, transparent reporting systems, and a collaborative approach between students, teachers, parents, and the wider community to foster a unified response.

⁷ Runions, K. C., Pearce, N., & Cross, D. (2021). *How can schools support whole-school wellbeing? A review of the research*. Report prepared for the Association of Independent Schools of New South Wales.

⁸ Education Council. (2018). *Australian student wellbeing framework*. Education Services Australia.

The following sets out **yourtown** and **headspace's** responses to the Anti-Bullying Rapid Review and select questions in the Consultation Paper.

General comment

Focusing on the wider community

We note that the Review is focused specifically on bullying in schools. The scope is too narrow given that bullying does not only occur during school hours or only on school grounds; this is especially the case with the advent of cyberbullying. Furthermore, the effects of bullying are not just experienced during school hours or only on school grounds. Children and young people contact Kids Helpline about bullying at all hours of the day and week; however, they are most likely to seek help from Kids Helpline about bullying and cyberbullying during 10am – 6pm, that is, during and after school hours. In addition, young people are increasingly utilising alternative pathways to complete their secondary school education, by going into TAFE and taking up traineeships and apprenticeships. This cohort are also working outside of school. Kids Helpline data indicates that bullying is a consistent concern among the older age group of 19- to 25-year-olds. This suggests that young people are experiencing bullying beyond school into workplaces, TAFEs and universities. Therefore, anti-bullying initiatives should also be targeted in these settings, and cover:

- developing targeted support services for young people experiencing bullying outside of school, including workplace harassment and cyberbullying
- strengthening policies and reporting mechanisms in TAFEs, universities, and workplaces to ensure bullying is addressed effectively, and
- collaborating with organisations like Kids Helpline to provide accessible, 24/7 support for children and young people affected by bullying.

This scope needs to extend to the media, to ensure responsible reporting of bullying, including being cautious about reporting that links suicide solely to bullying and that sensationalises bullying or suicide. This can contribute to further harm such as suicide contagion, triggering distress and creating risk for those who have bullied others. Instead, the focus of reporting should be on wellbeing, help-seeking and prevention, and addressing the many factors that can contribute to both bullying and suicide risk. This could be supported by media guidelines that discourage sensationalism and oversimplification of suicide causes, ensuring reporting focuses on prevention and available support.

Recommendations

The Commonwealth, state and territory governments should work together to consider evidence-based ways to expand anti-bullying initiatives beyond traditional school settings to include workplaces, TAFEs, and universities and by developing targeted support services in these settings, strengthening policies and reporting mechanisms, and linking with organisations like Kids Helpline to provide accessible, 24/7 support.

Media guidelines should be established to promote responsible media reporting on bullying and suicide to minimise harm and encourage help-seeking.

Promoting respectful behaviours and wellbeing

Communities play a vital role in shaping the social environment for young people. Demonstrating kindness, respect, and inclusion helps build a culture where bullying is less likely to escalate. When communities actively model positive behaviour, they create an environment where respect and kindness become the norm. Young people are more likely to adopt respectful behaviours when they see them reinforced by those around them. In

addition, when community members actively address bullying and support victims, it sends a strong message that this type of behaviour will not be tolerated.

In contemporary research and socio-ecological models on the social drivers of the high prevalence of men's violence against women, including bullying, drivers include: attitudes that condone or are dismissive of violence against women; men's control over women's behaviour and independence; strict gender stereotyping that emphasises feminine traits as being lesser than male traits; and cultures that emphasise aggression and dominance (e.g., male cultures that use sexism to build social networks).⁹ Any community campaign to promote respectful behaviours should also address toxic masculinity and gendered violence.

Focusing solely on bullying is a limited and problematic approach. Firstly, a bullying-focused approach often focuses on punishment rather than prevention, whereas a respectful behaviours and wellbeing approach teaches positive social skills, reducing bullying before it starts. Secondly, schools that only address bullying may struggle to create a positive, inclusive environment, while on the other hand, a whole-of-school approach fosters respect, empathy, and healthy relationships, making bullying less likely. Thirdly, bullying interventions may stop incidents temporarily but do not always change underlying behaviours, whereas respectful behaviour programs build lifelong social skills, improving mental health, relationships, and resilience.

A holistic, whole-of-school approach that integrates respectful behaviours into wellbeing programs can significantly reduce bullying, create safer and healthier school environments, and improve student outcomes.¹⁰ Importantly, young people's voices must be heard in a holistic, whole-of-school approach to bullying prevention so that any interventions are more effective, relevant, and impactful. Changing the focus to extend beyond bullying so that it encompasses respectful behaviours involves:

- creating safe environments - schools that promote respect, inclusion, and kindness see lower rates of bullying
- teaching empathy, healthy relationships, communication, and conflict resolution - encouraging students to understand boundaries, safety, and others' perspectives helps prevent bullying
- encouraging help-seeking - schools that actively promote help-seeking create an environment where students feel empowered to speak up, seek support, and intervene in bullying situations
- developing upstander culture instead of bystander culture - empowering students to stand up against bullying rather than passively witnessing it fosters a positive school climate.

Young people in Your Voice emphasised the need to empower victims of bullying to safely participate in school-directed dialogue with the bully (e.g. restorative justice approaches). Schools typically tailor their anti-bullying policies to ensure safety and fairness for all students. The restorative justice approach focuses on repairing relationships rather than punishing the bully. Schools using this approach encourage open dialogue between the bully and the victim, aiming to foster understanding, accountability, and reconciliation. However, this may not always be appropriate, especially in severe bullying situations. Schools should have clear guidelines on when restorative justice is appropriate. Students affected by bullying should be allowed to opt in or out of restorative processes without coercion. Students who choose not

⁹ Our Watch. Change the story: A shared framework for the primary prevention of violence against women in Australia. 2nd ed. Melbourne: Our Watch; 2021.

¹⁰ Gaffney, H., Ttofi, M.M., & Farrington, D.P. 2021, What works in anti-bullying programs? Analysis of effective intervention components, *Journal of School Psychology*, 85: 37-56; Ansay, N.S., et al, 2015, Guidance for schools selecting antibullying approaches: Translating evidence-based strategies to contemporary implementation realities, *Educational Researcher*, 244(1): 27-36.

to participate due to safety concerns should be offered alternative support mechanisms such as counselling and peer support. While advocates for this approach may argue that the victim's participation is voluntary, it should be kept in mind that there is an unequal power dynamic if teachers are encouraging victims to engage in this process, almost to the point where some victims feel they are being forced to participate. Educators should be trained on facilitating restorative dialogues in a way that acknowledges power imbalances and prioritises fairness. The outcomes of restorative justice approaches need to be monitored to promote accountability and reconciliation without causing further harm.

Recommendations

A holistic, whole-of-school approach to promote respectful behaviours and wellbeing should be implemented alongside bullying prevention initiatives, and include: integrating respect, empathy, and healthy relationships into educational programs; creating a safe and inclusive environment; encouraging help-seeking behaviours among students; and addressing gendered violence and toxic masculinity to help shift harmful attitudes and reduce aggressive behaviour.

Restorative approaches should prioritise safety and voluntary participation, through providing clear guidelines of its use, empowering students with choice to participate, training educators to recognise power imbalances, and monitoring outcomes.

A nuanced approach is required to address online bullying

School approaches to bullying need to include online bullying, given the prevalence and its potential impact.

It is common for young people to experience multiple forms of bullying: research shows that children and young people who are bullied online are also often bullied in person.¹¹ Online harassment can be a constant (and anonymous) presence, extending in-person bullying beyond school hours. Given the links between and impact of different forms of bullying, school standards must address both in-person and online bullying:

This needs to include online bullying, because:

- bullying extends beyond school grounds - unlike physical bullying, cyberbullying follows students' home, making it harder to escape and increasing emotional distress
- bullying impacts on mental health - just like in-person bullying, cyberbullying can lead to anxiety, depression, and even suicidal thoughts
- bullying has educational consequences - victims of cyberbullying often struggle academically due to stress and fear, affecting their ability to focus and perform in school
- schools have a legal and ethical responsibility - schools must ensure a safe learning environment, which includes addressing online bullying that affects students, and
- students need digital literacy and responsibility - teaching students about online behaviour, empathy, and consequences can prevent harmful interactions before they start.

"Schools need to do more about bullying and have proper consequences for bullying and cyber bullying and have better mental health support in schools." yourtown Your Voice survey respondent

¹¹ See for example: Estevez et al, 2020, Continuity and overlap of roles in victims and aggressors of bullying and cyberbullying in adolescence: A systematic review, *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*, 17(20): 7452.

Technology companies can play an important role alongside schools in addressing online bullying by embedding Safety by Design principles into their platforms. This approach prioritises user safety and rights at the centre of their online products from the outset rather than implementing protections after harm occurs. These companies must listen to young people about their experiences and challenges in dynamic online environments and then take proactive steps to minimise risks of harm. In addition, they should empower young people to control their online experience through safety settings. Finally, they should then clearly communicate their policies and enforce consequences for violations. While there is still work to be done in this space, these compliance requirements of service provider responsibility, user empowerment, and transparency are now enforced through regulatory frameworks and industry guidelines.

Recommendations

Cyberbullying needs to be addressed explicitly in school standards, policies and processes.

Technology companies should collaborate with schools to strengthen online safety education and integrate Safety by Design principles into students' digital experiences, by listening to young people to understand their online experiences and challenges, taking proactive steps to minimise harm, empowering users with safety settings, communicating policies clearly so users understand acceptable behaviour, and enforcing consequences for violations to promote accountability.

What resources are available for school staff to support action on bullying? What else would help build capability to support staff to prevent and manage bullying?

Many schools lack the funding required to implement proactive bullying prevention programs. Digital supports and resources are crucial for school staff in tackling bullying because they provide accessible, scalable, and structured strategies to prevent and respond effectively. A variety of digital services such as Kids Helpline, Kids Helpline @ School, eheadspace, eSafety, Project Rockit, and Raising Children Network are evidence-based and provide resources and support to assist students with promoting respectful behaviours, responding to bullying, and supporting others who are experiencing bullying. In addition, Kids Helpline @ School assists the school community, including teachers and parents, to prevent bullying and Kids Helpline can support students who have been affected by bullying.

Kids Helpline @ School is a free educational program designed to support the mental health and wellbeing of students in primary and high schools across Australia. Qualified Kids Helpline counsellors lead the interactive online learning sessions, covering topics like bullying, resilience, friendships, managing emotions, and transitioning to high school. In 2024, Kids Helpline @ School reached 150,035 primary and high school students across Australia. Specifically, in 2024 Kids Helpline @ School delivered 146 sessions on bullying and cyberbullying to almost 6,000 participants. Using this service and with the support of our partner Bupa, we ran Kids Helpline's largest anti-bullying lesson in 2024. Nearly 200 schools registered, and more than 26,000 students were able to access the session.

The Kids Helpline counselling service and the Kids Helpline @ School service provides information and resources for school staff regarding bullying, including:

- **Educational resources** – Kids Helpline @ School offers videos, articles, posters, and worksheets designed by counsellors to help students, teachers and parents understand bullying and cyberbullying and how to respond to it.

- **Interactive lessons** – Kids Helpline @ School offers free, interactive online sessions led by qualified counsellors to help schools tackle bullying. The program aligns with the Australian Schools Curriculum and is based on psychoeducational research. Schools can book a session to equip students with tools to recognise, respond to, and prevent bullying effectively. Schools can access anti-bullying lessons that teach students how to be upstanders and navigate bullying situations. These sessions are designed for students and include:
 - Understanding bullying - What it is (and is not) and its impacts.
 - Practical strategies - How to respond in the moment and support others.
 - Interactive activities - Group work, role-playing, video watching, and games.
 - Personalised learning - Sessions are tailored to the needs of each class.
- **Counselling support** – School staff have the option of directing students to Kids Helpline, which provides:
 - Free, confidential 24/7 counselling services – Young people can access professional counsellors any time via phone, web chat, for guidance and emotional support.
 - Tailored support for schools – Schools can request counsellor-led sessions to help students understand mental health, resilience, and coping strategies.
 - Safe and non-judgmental space – Kids Helpline ensures that students feel heard, supported, and empowered to address their concerns.
 - Resources for children and young people – The website provides age-appropriate content to support children and young people to understand bullying, its impacts, how to cope when experiencing bullying, and how to support others experiencing bullying.
 - Resources for educators and parents – The website provides guides and tools to help adults support young people facing challenges.
- **Cyberbullying awareness** – Kids Helpline @ School offers information and support on cyberbullying which assists students, parents, and teachers to recognise harmful online behaviour and take action. It includes:
 - Educational sessions – Interactive online learning sessions are led by professional counsellors, covering topics like online safety, digital footprints, and cyberbullying prevention.
 - Resources for students and educators – Schools can access guides, worksheets, and classroom activities designed to help students understand cyberbullying and develop strategies to stay safe online.
 - Confidential support – The program raises awareness among students of Kids Helpline which provides 24/7 counselling for young people experiencing cyberbullying, offering guidance on reporting abuse and coping strategies.
 - Support for parents and teachers – The program offers tips and advice for parents and educators on how to support children affected by cyberbullying and create safer online environments.
- **Parent and teacher guidance** – Kids Helpline @ School provides resources that help parents and educators support children affected by bullying and create safe school environments. These include evidence-based strategies for parents and teachers to help children cope with bullying and build resilience. Other resources and supports include:
 - Tailored educational sessions for teachers and parents – Schools can request customised sessions based on their needs, covering topics like bullying prevention, mental health support, and effective intervention strategies.

- Q&A with professional counsellors – Sessions include interactive discussions where parents and teachers can ask questions and receive expert advice.
- Guidance on supporting young people – Sessions provide insights into why children seek help, how to identify signs of distress, and ways to create a safe and supportive environment.
- Free online resources – Schools and parents can access guides, worksheets, and classroom activities to help educators integrate anti-bullying strategies into their teaching.

headspace programs and services provide support and resources for young people, family and educators, including:

- **Mental Health Education Program** – the headspace National Schools and Communities division delivers evidence-based workshops to young people, families and educators. Workshops are aimed at increasing mental health literacy, reducing stigma and building the capacity of young people to understand their own wellbeing needs, support their peers and explore pathways for help-seeking. A range of workshop topics are offered, including a bullying specific one which covers information on:
 - how the body and brain react to stress
 - the connection between power and bullying
 - the impact of bullying on mental health
 - strategies to support young people including who they can talk to.
- **digital mental health programs and resources** – headspace uses its digital platform to make a range of information and supports accessible to young people, parents and carers, professionals and educators.
- **ehespace** – headspace offers this virtual service to provide safe, secure support to young people and family. Experienced youth mental health professionals deliver support via email, webchat or phone. There are also online group sessions led by clinicians or peers, focused on big issues facing young people.

Recommendations

Schools should leverage digital resources, including Kids Helpline @ School to assist school staff to identify, address and prevent bullying.

Schools should prioritise evidence-based programs when selecting bullying supports to ensure students receive effective, reliable, and safe information and assistance.

Schools should actively promote support services that allow students to seek help anonymously, recognising that privacy is a key concern for young people.

What guiding principles or other elements could be helpful in developing a consistent national standard for responding to bullying?

Youth participation

Young people and their families must be involved in shaping a national standard for responding to bullying. Best practice design for the development of the standard should incorporate human-centred design (a problem solving technique that places real people at the centre of the development process, enabling the creation of products and/or services that resonate and are tailored to the audience's need) and co-design (design process that is participatory, in which community members are treated as equal collaborators in the

design process). Following models like **headspace** and **yourtown**, where children young people, families, and educators co-design solutions, can make the standard relevant and effective.

“Youth participation is crucial in addressing bullying and harassment because young people are often the first to witness these behaviours, are most affected by them, and can have a powerful influence on their peers. When students are genuinely involved in creating solutions, the efforts are more relevant, effective and long lasting.” **headspace** Youth National Reference Group member.

“Youth participation isn’t just helpful, it’s essential. When schools invite students to co-create a safer, kinder environment, the results are more authentic and impactful. The key is giving students real roles, real voices and real support. That’s how change becomes more than a rule, it becomes part of the culture.” **headspace** Youth National Reference Group member.

Recommendation

Young people, their families, and educators must be involved in the development of a national standard for responding to bullying, ensuring it reflects their lived experiences.

Guiding principles

Young people in **yourtown’s** Your Voice project strongly assert that safety from bullying is a fundamental right, and that everyone deserves to feel secure in their homes, schools, and physical and online communities. Developing a consistent national standard for responding to bullying requires a rights-based, structured, and research-backed approach. The following could be included as guiding principles that could help shape the standard:

- **Clear definition and scope** – Establish a precise definition of bullying, including physical, verbal, social bullying and including covert, in-person and online bullying, to ensure consistent identification and response.
- **Prevention and early intervention** – Focus on proactive measures (such as education programs, awareness campaigns, and social-emotional learning) to reduce bullying before it escalates.
 - Young people participating in **yourtown’s** Your Voice Project suggest that bullying prevention approaches in schools should incorporate education on disability inclusion, racism, homophobia, and sexism (including sexual harassment). The focus of these approaches would be belonging and creating safe, respectful, and inclusive environments. In addition, Your Voice participants highlighted the importance of early education regarding online environments so that young people can remain safe, be resilient if faced with online bullying, and think critically if exposed to online hate cultures.
- **Whole-of-school approach** – Encourage collaboration between students, teachers, parents, and the wider community to create a safe and supportive environment, and support education and upskilling of all adults (parents, non-teaching staff, community leaders) around preventing and addressing bullying.
- **Community engagement** – Foster collaboration between schools, families, and policy makers to create a culture of respect and inclusion.
- **Data-driven decision making** – Use research and national data to continuously evaluate and improve anti-bullying strategies.

- **Support for affected individuals** – Provide mental health resources, counselling, and peer support programs to help victims recover and perpetrators reform, in each situation considering the specific needs of the children and young people involved.
 - The key themes about initiatives to support people affected by bullying that arose from **yourtown's** Your Voice project include peer-led support, specific mental health support for those experiencing bullying, and trauma-informed education. In particular, young people advocate for greater transparency about actions that can and are being taken to address bullying issues at school, in the community and the workplace. Victims can feel increased fear and anxiety when bullying is unaddressed and then feel dismissed when there are no consequences. This is especially pronounced in the online space where young people observe online platforms not following through on their safety policies. Altogether this has led to a lack of trust in providers, adults, authorities and community in general.
- **Consistent policies and legislation** – Align school policies with national and state-level legislation to ensure uniformity in responses across different jurisdictions.
 - National standards would need to align with legislation in Australia regarding bullying and cyberbullying (i.e., the Online Safety Act 2021 which empowers the eSafety Commissioner to remove harmful online content; the Criminal Code Act 1995 (Cth) which makes it illegal to use the internet or mobile services to menace, harass, or offend; and each state and territory's education policies and criminal laws on bullying and cyberbullying).

We would welcome the opportunity to explore these ideas with you in further detail. Should you require further information about any issues raised in the response, please do not hesitate to contact Tracy Adams, CEO of **yourtown** via email at advocacy@yourtown.com.au

About headspace

headspace is the National Youth Mental Health Foundation, providing early intervention mental health services to 12 to 25 year olds. **headspace** has 173 services across Australia in metropolitan, regional and remote areas, and offers online and phone support services and digital resources through eheadspace. **headspace** provides multidisciplinary care for mental health, physical health, alcohol and other drug use, and work and study needs.

Our integrated services provide the holistic, multi-faceted support that is a necessary component of a responsive service system model. This includes:

- **headspace centres:** the **headspace** network of services are youth-friendly, integrated service hubs, where multidisciplinary teams provide holistic support across the four core streams.
- **community awareness:** guided by local youth reference groups and centre staff, Community Awareness Officers at each **headspace** centre work locally to build mental health literacy, reduce stigma, encourage help-seeking, identify local needs and ensure young people know they can access help at **headspace**.
- **digital mental health programs and resources:** **headspace** uses its digital platform to make a range of information and supports accessible to young people, parents and carers, professionals and educators.
- **eheadspace:** our virtual service provides safe, secure support to young people and their family and friends from experienced youth mental health professionals via email, webchat or phone. There are also online group sessions led by clinicians or peers, focused on the big issues facing young people and their family and friends.
- **headspace regional telephone counselling service:** **headspace** offers integrated holistic teleweb support for students in eligible schools in regional Victoria (locations more than 50km from a **headspace** centre).
- **headspace campaigns:** campaigns focus on stigma reduction, building mental health literacy and encouraging help seeking, while ensuring young people know **headspace** is a safe and trusted place they can turn to in order to support their mental health.
- **headspace in schools and universities:** Through evidence-based mental health promotion, prevention, early intervention and postvention services, **headspace** delivers key initiatives designed to support the mental health and wellbeing of school communities. This includes:
 - **Be You** – a mental health and wellbeing initiative for learning communities. In particular, **headspace** can support secondary schools to prepare for, respond to and recover together where there has been a death by suicide.
 - **Mental Health Education Program** – this program provides free mental health education workshops for schools
 - **University support program** – this provides training and education opportunities to Australian universities to build their capacity and confidence to engage in conversations about mental health and wellbeing
- a range of programs for First Nations young people, and projects to improve the culturally safety of **headspace's** services, including:
 - **Cultural supervision pilot** where Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander supervisors provide cultural supervision for non-Indigenous clinicians, to develop their knowledge, skills,

insight and wisdom in how to support and care for both young people, and themselves, in the cultural context of working with community.

- **First Nations Community connection project** providing support to centres to connect with local First Nations communities, enhance community engagement, outreach and collaborative activities and increase access by First Nations young people
- **Our Way Our Say** culturally safe social and emotional wellbeing training resources for young people in Darwin schools, developed by an Aboriginal Cultural Advisory Council of key Aboriginal leaders from the Darwin community, in partnership with **headspace** National.
- **Yulara and Mutitjulu service expansion** from **headspace** Alice Springs, established by the Central Australian Aboriginal Council in partnership with **headspace** National, and funded by the Northern Territory PHN. The expansion required innovation of the **headspace** Model to meet the needs of the young people and families in the remote communities of Yulara and Mutitjulu.
- **Yarnspace** – a safe, anonymous online group for First Nations young people to yarn and connect, moderated by First Nations peer workers.
- **vocational supports: headspace** centres provide integrated mental health and vocational support to young people to help them remain engaged in work and study, including implementing Individual Placement and Support (IPS) in **headspace** centres. In addition, **headspace** provides vocational support via:
 - **headspace Work and Study Online** (hWS) is a national digital program that provides integrated mental health and vocational support via the phone, video conferencing, online messaging and email. hWS works closely with young people across their work/study journey from identifying work/study goals to maintaining a work/study placement, typically for a period of around three months.
 - **headspace Career Mentoring** connects young people aged 18 to 25 years living with mental health challenges with industry professionals to meet fortnightly over a period of six months via video conferencing and/or the phone to enhance a young person's employment and career opportunities.

About yourtown

yourtown is a trusted provider of services for young people, with a focus on mental health and wellbeing, parenting and early childhood development, long-term unemployment, prevention of youth suicide, child protection, and support for those experiencing domestic and family violence. **yourtown** has evolved to helping hundreds of thousands of young people each year through a range of service offerings, supporting them through many difficult challenges.

Our services

- Kids Helpline, providing professional counselling and support to 5–25-year-olds across Australia since 1991
- Kids Helpline @ School and Kids Helpline @ High School, which delivers early intervention and prevention programs through primary and secondary schools
- My Circle, a confidential, private, online peer support network for 13–25-year-olds to share information and build coping skills
- Mental health service/s for children aged 0–11 years old and their families, with moderate mental health needs.
- Employment, education, and social enterprise programs to help long term unemployed young people re-engage with education and/or employment
- Domestic and family violence refuge, accommodation, and therapeutic supports for women and their children, including post-refuge support
- Accommodation and therapeutic supports for young parents and their children at high risk
- Parentline, a telephone and online counselling and support service for parents and carers in the Northern Territory and Queensland
- Expressive Therapy interventions for young children and infants who have experienced trauma and abuse, or been exposed to violence, and
- Young Parents Program providing parenting support to help with child development, life skills and health and wellbeing activities in safe, supportive environments.

Kids Helpline

yourtown's Kids Helpline is Australia's only free and confidential 24/7 phone and online counselling service for any young person aged 5 to 25. It offers children and young people a range of care options that are right for their needs and circumstances. Our commitment to being there anytime, and for any reason, has meant that we have responded to more than 8.9 million contacts from children and young people nationally in the 34 years since our service was established, while also providing tens of millions of self-help interactions via our website and social channels. In 2024 our Kids Helpline counsellors responded to more than 130,000 contacts from children and young people across Australia, including 4,632 crisis/safety interventions for children and young people at imminent risk of harm.

Family and Domestic Violence Refuge and Transitional Housing

yourtown's refuge offers supported accommodation for up to 12 weeks. A specialised team provides women and children with a safe and welcoming environment and creates opportunities for mothers to re-build self-concept and experience control and empowerment over their lives. The wrap-around care also includes linking with transitional housing and community outreach programs for women and children exiting refuges. Transitional housing is a vital steppingstone for women and children moving towards long term, safe and sustainable independent living in the community. **yourtown's** transitional housing offers a safe and supportive environment for 6 – 12 months, with support for legal and financial matters, accessing pre-employment support, and helping children into school.

Children and Families

yourtown provides accommodation and intensive individualised support to vulnerable young parents and their children through our San Miguel service. For over 40 years, San Miguel has provided a place to call home for vulnerable and at-risk families.

Early Childhood Development Programs

We support vulnerable pre-school aged children to make a successful transition to school by using prevention and early intervention approaches to create health families and strong, child-friendly communities. This includes working with parents to better understand their child's barriers to reaching social development milestones, how to help them thrive at school, collaborative case management and support, and in-home help.

Employment Services

For over 20 years **yourtown** has been delivering specialist youth employment services. Our employment services programs, including Transition to Work, Skilling Queenslanders for Work, and Get Back in the Game, provide young people with training to expand their options and help them find sustainable employment.

Social Enterprises

yourtown has worked with young people and employers to break down barriers to sustainable employment for more than 20 years. As a leader in work-based enterprises we provide young people at risk of long-term unemployment paid jobs in the following areas: construction, landscaping, and asset maintenance to help their transition to open employment.

Parentline

Parentline offers free confidential phone and webchat counselling and support for parents and carers of children in Queensland and the Northern Territory. It offers a safety net for families by providing support when it is most needed. This includes after hours and weekends, where families feel isolated and where local services are unavailable.