Noticing Early Signs of Bullying

Sometimes something can feel a little bit off, but you can't quite explain why. Maybe a friend has gone quiet, or the group chat feels colder. That feeling is worth noticing.

Bullying isn't always obvious. It can show up in small moments; like changes in behaviour, being left out or jokes that stop feeling funny.

If something feels off for you or someone you care about there are steps you can take to make you, or your friend safe.

You don't have to have all of the answers before you ask for help.



Speak, even if your voice shakes. Noticing is a brave first step.

When being left out starts to hurt

Sometimes bullying can look like exclusion. People might:

- Make plans without someone on purpose
- Ignore their messages
- Make them feel like they don't belong.

It may not seem like much from the outside, but being left out on purpose can really hurt.

What you can do:

Invite them in, reply to their messages or sit beside them. Small acts of kindness can help someone feel seen again.



Small changes can be big clues

You might notice someone is acting differently from usual, but it can be hard to know what's going on.

What you can do:

If you start to notice changes in someone, try not to judge or jump to conclusions.

Lead with kindness and check in, ask "Are you okay?" and let them know you're there for them and show them they do not have to carry it alone.



When a friend pulls away

Imagine a friend who usually loves being part of your group starts spending more time alone. They say they have homework to finish, feel sick more often or stop coming to things they used to enjoy. After checking their phone, they seem worried, but when you ask, they say "I'm fine".

It might be nothing, but they might need support.

What you can do:

Keep checking in. Ask if they're okay and let them know you're there if they want to talk. A small check in can make a big difference.



When the joke goes too far

If someone becomes the punchline too often, it stops feeling like a joke. They might laugh along, but become quieter, stop joining in or seem less confident. If a joke keeps being about the same person, it's worth asking whether yourself: "is it still funny?"

What you can do:

You can help change the moment by not laughing, changing the subject or saying something like "that's enough".



Scenario: Mia's group chat goes quiet

Mia usually loves chatting with her friends after school. Lately, though, the group chat feels different. People reply to each other quickly, but Mia's messages are left on read. When she asks what everyone is doing on the weekend, no one answers. On Monday, she finds out they all caught up without her.

At school, Mia still smiles and says she is okay, but she has started spending more time in the library at lunch. She checks her phone a lot, then puts it away quickly. It might look like nothing big has happened, but this is a form of bullying and it can really hurt.



Scenario: Noah is always the joke

Noah is funny and usually laughs along with everyone. But lately, the jokes are always about him. If he drops something, someone says, "Classic Noah." If he gets an answer wrong, people giggle before he has a chance to try again.

Noah still laughs sometimes, but he has stopped putting his hand up in class. He sits further away from the group and looks down when people start joking. A joke that keeps making one person feel small is not really a joke anymore. It is a sign to pause, be kind and check in.

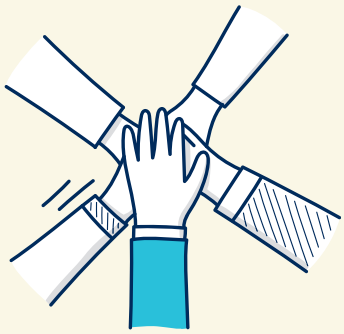


Questions to help you notice



- Has someone started acting differently around certain people or in certain places?
- Are they being left out, ignored, laughed at or made to feel small?
- Do they seem worried after checking their phone or being online?
- Are they avoiding school, activities, friends or group chats?
- Would a kind check-in help them feel less alone?

What you can do next



You do not need proof or a perfect plan before you act.
If something feels off, trust that feeling and take one safe step.

Check in gently.
Try, "I've noticed you seem a bit different lately. Want to talk?"

Name what you have seen.
Keep it simple and kind, without blaming or pushing.

Stay close.
Sit with them, walk with them, invite them in or send a kind message.

Tell a trusted adult.
If you are worried about yourself or someone else, speak to an adult who can help. If the first person does not listen, tell someone else.

Save online evidence.
If something harmful is happening online, take screenshots before blocking or reporting.

If you are still not sure

You do not have to wait until things get worse. You can share what you have noticed and ask for help. Saying something early can help stop harm from growing.

BE KIND. A small moment of care can help someone feel safer than you know.



Support you can use now

13 DOLLY: Call **13 DOLLY, 13 36 55**, for bullying support and guidance for kids, young people, and adults including parents, carers and teachers. Get confidential support via phone or webchat.

eSafety Commissioner: Go to esafety.gov.au/report for help reporting cyberbullying or harmful online content.

000: Call **000** if you or someone else is in immediate danger.