



Policy brief
February 2018



Children and young people speak out about education and safety in schools

“It may be hard for kids to come to school if they are being bullied or don’t feel safe.”

Education is a key influence on a child’s life. Early engagement with school and learning assists a child to develop skills to succeed academically as well as build and maintain social relationships.

Research shows poor engagement with school may result in poor educational outcomes, diminished employment prospects and, for some, adverse life outcomes including social exclusion, poverty and involvement with the justice system.¹

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) states that children and young people have the right to accessible education and should be encouraged to reach the highest level of education of which they are capable.²

The UNCRC also makes clear that children have the right to feel safe and to be safe at all times³ – wherever they are – at home, school, clubs, churches, sport and public places.

Relationships and situations within an environment occur across a continuum – from positive and healthy to negative and abusive. Any events that cause children and young people to feel unsafe, fearful or ashamed are harmful and have the potential to negatively affect wellbeing.⁴ Evidence strongly suggests that children and young people who feel safe and are safe are more resilient, confident and have a stronger sense of self-identity.⁵

Adults have a responsibility to help children and young people understand their rights about safety, support them to speak up about any concerns, and to act appropriately on concerns regarding safety. Furthermore, adults are responsible for creating environments that are child safe.

A child safe organisation values children and understands safety doesn't just happen. A commitment to protecting children and promoting their wellbeing is embedded in the organisation's culture and is understood and accepted by everyone.⁶

Within education, safety is critical for learning as it affects students' willingness to attend school and their ability to engage in learning.

The importance of adequate systems and structures to promote and support student safety in schools and to respond to concerns for safety cannot be understated. Within schools, feeling and being safe is essential for students to be ready and able to engage with learning.

What do children and young people say about education and safety in schools?

In 2016, the Commissioner for Children and Young People WA undertook a consultation with more than 1,800 Year 3 to Year 12 students enrolled in government, Catholic and independent schools across WA. The key purpose of the consultation was to seek students' views on the positive and negative factors that influence their engagement in education.⁷

'Feeling safe' was one of nine factors that were identified as having a strong influence on students' engagement with school and learning. Students referred to various aspects of the school environment as either creating or hindering feelings of safety, including the physical environment, the behaviour of peers and school staff, relationships with others in the school, teaching practices and use/access of the school grounds by community members. For students across Year 3 to Year 12, safety affected their willingness to attend school and their ability to engage in learning, and fully benefit from their educational opportunities. When students felt unsafe, it adversely affected their behaviour and their feelings towards school and learning.

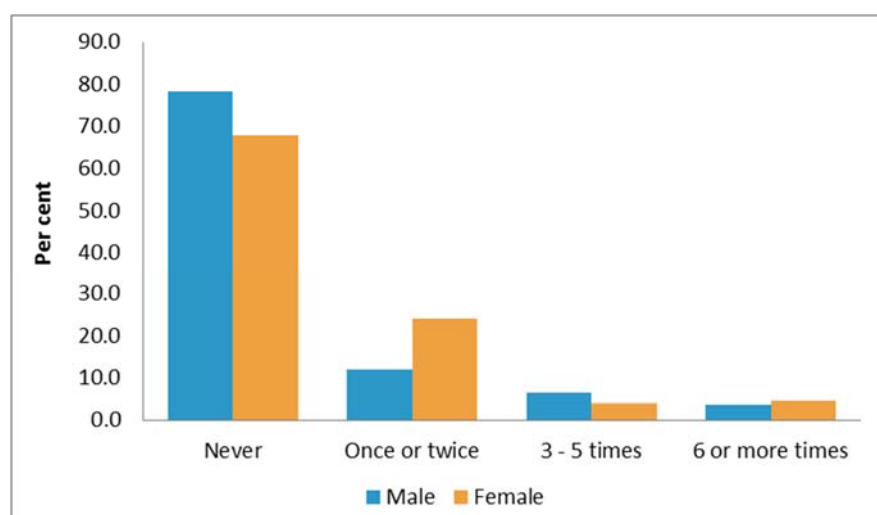
Most students feel safe at school

Through the School and Learning Consultation survey, the **majority** of students said they **feel safe** at school all the time or at least most of the time.

However, **11 per cent** of Year 3 to Year 6 students and **20 per cent** of Year 7 to Year 12 students said they **feel unsafe** sometimes or often.

Further, **44 per cent** of Year 7 to Year 12 students reported having been **afraid that someone will hurt or bully them** at school at least once in the current school year and 28 per cent said they have not gone to school at least once because of it.

Proportion of Year 7 to Year 12 students saying they have never, once or twice, 3 to 5 times, or 6 or more times been afraid that someone will hurt or bully them at school, by gender



Relationships and action by school staff are important for feeling safe

Throughout the consultation, students spoke strongly of their relationships with others as influencing their sense of safety. Additionally, proactive action by schools and responsiveness from school staff to concerns, particularly about bullying, contributed positively to safety.

Friends create safety. Students characterised friends as reliable and trustworthy – as people who would take their concerns seriously and ‘have their back’. Friends were a protective factor against bullying as being with friends lessened the likelihood of bullying occurring. Further to this, if bullying did occur, students felt confident in their friends as supportive bystanders. The actions friends took varied from ‘standing up’ to the bully, providing support and comfort to the victim or, for students in Year 3 to Year 6, seeking help from school staff.

“Friends help you feel accepted and also make the environment feel safer and more enjoyable/ comfortable.”

“[Without friends] you feel alone, unsafe, insecure.”

Through the survey, more than **three-quarters** of all participating students reported usually **getting along** with their peers. Roughly the same proportion of students said that it is very important to them to have a close friend or friends in their class.

Teachers create safety. Students referred to the qualities of teachers that made them feel comfortable and safe – they were caring, nice, helpful and approachable. Feeling comfortable with school staff meant students felt happy at school, able to voice their opinions and able to discuss their concerns or ask for help.

“Teachers need to learn how to empathise with students and understand the unsafe community other students can create.”

“Much less BULLYING because I’m getting bullied too much. Help me teachers.”

More than **60 per cent** of Year 3 to Year 6 students agreed with the statement that **teachers 'always' do something that helps** when they know a student is being hurt or bullied.

Among Year 7 to Year 12 students, **one-half** believed that **teachers 'almost always' take action** when they know a student is being hurt or bullied, however, only **one-third** of these respondents believed that the action teachers take helps or makes the situation better.

Proportion of Year 7 to Year 12 students saying teachers take action when they know a student is being hurt or bullied almost always, now and then, almost never or they are unsure, by gender and region

	Male	Female	Metropolitan area	Regional area	All
Almost always	53.2	47.2	51.5	44.2	49.3
Now and then	27.3	28.0	25.9	32.5	27.9
Almost never	8.5	14.0	12.8	10.2	12.0
Unsure	11.0	10.9	9.8	13.1	10.8

Female students were more likely than male students to say that teachers do not take action when they know a student is being hurt or bullied and, in addition, they were less likely to agree that the action that teachers take helps or makes the situation better.

There were also some differences between regional and metropolitan students, however, these were not statistically significant.

Safety is important for learning

Feeling safe within the school and the classroom is a particularly important precursor to learning. Students said they enjoyed learning when they were in an emotionally safe environment that enabled them to engage in learning.

"Because it was a safe place to learn about new things."

"I liked [learning] when [name of staff] was here and I worked a lot and I loved the safe environment I was in."

Concentrating on learning was difficult when students were worried about their safety. Students explained if they felt unsafe they also felt no one would listen to them, they would feel upset and felt they could not think straight. Concerns for safety had an impact on students thinking, learning and behaviour.

"It makes it hard [to learn] when you get bullied cause your mind is still thinking about it."

Safety at school is also particularly important for children who may not experience safety in other aspects of their lives.

"Kids need emotional support to help them work at their best and focus on their work rather than other distractions (problems at home etc.)"

How does safety influence engagement in school and learning?

Safety experienced through positive and supportive relationships within the school environment positively influences student engagement across a range of indicators.

Cross tabulation of survey results showed that students who said they get along with their peers and teachers are more likely to feel safe and have no fear of being hurt or bullied.

Getting along with peers and teachers → more likely to feel safe at school

Further, students who say they feel safe are more likely to feel part of their school, to like school and to say it is very important for them to be at school every day.

Feeling part of school, liking school and saying that regular attendance at school is important are strong indicators of students' engagement with school and learning.

Getting along with peers and teachers → more likely to feel safe at school → more likely to be engaged with school and learning.

For Year 3 to Year 6 students, feeling safe also had a positive influence on academic achievement. The data for Year 7 to Year 12 students, however, did not support this finding. Year 7 to Year 12 students who always felt safe were equally likely as students who sometimes felt unsafe to achieve highly in their academic results.⁸

What does the research say about education and safety in schools?

Evidence shows there is a strong link and interrelationship between learning and safety, and this has been recognised by many education systems around the world. Students who do not feel safe at school cannot learn to their full potential because they are distracted by feelings of stress or anxiety.⁹

Insights from the field of neuropsychology show that under conditions of stress or anxiety (evoked by, for example, feelings of unsafety and fearfulness) there is "a loss of focus on the learning process and a reduction in task focus."¹⁰ Neuroscientist and educator Robert Sylwester describes the critical relationship between emotion and learning:

"[...] emotion is very important to the educative process because it drives attention, which drives learning and memory."¹¹

This research explains and validates comments from students in the consultation who described that learning is difficult when they are worried about their safety or when they are feeling upset because, under these circumstances, they feel as if they cannot 'think straight'.

The interrelationship between safety and learning is also strongly recognised through the six guiding principles of The Australian National Safe School Framework¹² that emphasise “the importance of student safety and wellbeing as a prerequisite for effective learning in all school settings.”¹³

In regard to students’ views on friends and teachers in relation to safety, evidence shows that for children and young people safety is largely relational (or based on relationships). According to a recent study by the Institute of Child Protection Studies¹⁴, feeling safe and being safe is influenced by the relationships children and young people have with the people around them. Safety is experienced when children and young people have “adults and peers around them whom they trust and who would protect them from danger.”¹⁵ In addition, the key characteristics of safe people as well as safe places, activities, times and things are “familiarity and predictability.”¹⁶

Within institutional contexts such as schools, children and young people are most concerned about bullying (by peers or by adults).¹⁷

Research on bullying is vast and multifaceted. Australia’s Safe and Supportive School Communities Working Group has published a comprehensive literature review¹⁸ on the topic of bullying with a specific focus on the Australian educational context. It explores definitions of bullying, the roles in the bullying dynamic, the impact of bullying, and the roles of parents or carers, school culture and school policy. It also provides an overview of evidence-based practices that schools can adopt.

In regard to the prevalence of bullying in Australian schools, the Working Group emphasises that estimating a prevalence rate of bullying behaviour in schools is extremely difficult with some researchers suggesting it is not quantifiable because of differences in the way bullying is defined, measurements used and self-report bias. However, the best estimate extrapolated from the research is that one in four Australian students reports being bullied at least once in the last term at school, where bullying is defined as repeated, intentional and where the target cannot easily stop it from occurring.^{19 20} Notably, this does not include instances of bullying that may occur via digital technology, such as cyberbullying, cyber abuse or revenge porn.²¹

The nationally agreed definition of bullying for the education policy context sets a primary focus on the existence of relationships: “Bullying is an ongoing misuse of power in relationships [...]”^{22 23} This definition reflects students’ perceptions of safety as relational and provides schools with a starting point to design school policy to respond to and prevent bullying.²⁴

The views expressed by students in the School and Learning Consultation about the impacts of bullying such as school avoidance (“you feel unable to come [to school]”), poor mental health (“feeling depressed”) and overall disengagement with learning were consistent with the literature on the topic.²⁵

Finally, research also supports the view that schools have an important role to play in providing safe and nurturing environments particularly for students who may not experience safety in other aspects of their lives. The adverse educational consequences of students’ exposure to family violence and other traumatic events have long been recognised by educators and researchers alike. The outcomes range from diminished concentration, memory and language abilities to depression and anxiety.^{26 27}

Specifically in relation to learning, the capacity of traumatised children and young people to learn is significantly compromised. Due to a range of factors, such students find the demands of the school environment extremely challenging to navigate and benefit from.²⁸ There are therefore strong calls in the literature for schools to adopt trauma-informed approaches that are sensitive and predictable in their implementation to help children dealing with trauma to learn, form relationships, and function appropriately in the classroom to help them reach their academic potential.²⁹

The Australian Childhood Foundation has published a resource guide for schools to better understand, support and work with traumatised children and young people.³⁰

What needs to be done about education and safety in schools?

There is now strong awareness within Australia of the importance of safe learning environments in promoting social and academic outcomes for students.

The revised National Safe Schools Framework (NSSF)³¹ was endorsed by all ministers of education in December 2010. The Framework recognises students' fundamental right to learn in a safe, supportive environment and to be treated with respect, and it obligates schools to promote and provide a supportive learning community where all students feel and are safe.³² The NSSF aligns closely to principles of child safe organisations.

To support schools to implement the framework, the government has published the Student Wellbeing Hub³³, an online one-stop shop that provides school communities including teachers, school leaders, students, parents and specialist professionals with a range of safe school strategies and resources that are underpinned by the framework.

Other online resources helping school communities create safer learning environments are the 'Bullying. No Way!' website managed by the Safe and Supportive School Communities Working Group³⁴, the National Centre Against Bullying website³⁵, the Office of the eSafety Commissioner website³⁶ and the Friendly Schools Plus website³⁷. Friendly Schools is an anti-bullying initiative for schools developed through extensive research with Australian children and adolescents. It is recognised as a comprehensive, evidence-based approach that can reduce bullying behaviour. It has been designed to align with both the Australian Curriculum and the National Safe Schools Framework.

Yet despite strong policy interventions and much research and investment in the area, students in the consultation nominated feeling safe at school a key issue that continues to impact on their learning outcomes and experiences of school. Consequently, more needs to be done to address this issue.

Firstly, school governing authorities must closely review existing resources in this area, monitor the implementation of the National Safe Schools Framework and child safe policy and practice at an individual school level, and then assist schools in addressing any barriers. This might include improvements to individual implementation strategies, staff training or capacity building within schools. This must also include ongoing monitoring of outcomes to ensure the implementation strategy and use of resources is effective in providing a safe and positive learning environment for all students in WA.

Secondly, schools must encourage and enable students to report on matters such as safety at school, for instance through a regular student survey. Schools must then monitor their students' reporting on an ongoing basis and use this feedback to review and amend (if required) their implementation strategy of the National Safe Schools Framework and child safe policy and practice more broadly.

The Commissioner has made two recommendations for safety in schools based on what students have said in School and Learning Consultation:

Recommendation 11

Governing authorities review and report on the resourcing, support and ongoing monitoring of the implementation of child safe policy and practice, and positive behaviour management across all schools in WA.

Recommendation 12

All schools implement the principles and practices of child safe organisations, underpinned by their own child safe policy. The National School Opinion Survey (NSOS) or other surveying of students should be used to monitor students reporting of safety at school on an ongoing basis.

Priorities for policy and program development

Significant programs and initiatives addressing safety in schools are already being implemented across the WA school sector. The priority for future work in the area must be on ensuring that resources are evidence-based and used to their full potential so that schools have the capacity to successfully implement them and to measure their effectiveness.

Further, student participation is critical to effective program development and implementation. Giving students a voice and encouraging them to be involved in decisions affecting them can result in more effective strategies to address safety, better decision making overall and stronger, more positive outcomes.

Through various consultations, children and young people have outlined what makes them feel safe in organisations and innovative responses to their safety concerns.³⁸ In relation to the school environment, students provided a **range of suggestions** to improve their sense of safety related to school culture, student participation and the physical, social and emotional environment. These include:

- Schools can nurture and promote a culture of safety based on positive relationships between students, their peers and teachers. This includes proactive approaches such as positive behaviour programs to reduce bullying and fighting, increased education for students and school staff about gender identity and sexual orientations, and no labelling of students.
- Clear and consistently applied rules and consequences by school staff, particularly in response to bullying and fighting. Students felt instances of bullying or fighting were 'noted' and that this was an inadequate response.
- Schools to provide a welcoming and safe physical environment addressing areas of unsafe behaviours and activities from the perspective of students. Suggestions to make schools

safer and more inviting included reducing congestion, increasing lighting and different building materials and colour choices.

- Schools to implement, promote and share with students different approaches to safety, including positive messaging around the school (such as through posters), increased natural surveillance (through more staff on duty, and cameras or walkie talkies for ease of communication), and discussion with students about the steps schools were taking to keep them safe.

Further information

For further information about these issues and the Commissioner's work, visit the website ccyp.wa.gov.au.

- Engagement in Education project – various reports and resources
- Child Safe Organisations WA – various resources
- Participation – various resources

More information on education and safety in schools:

- [The National Safe Schools Framework](#)
- [National Centre Against Bullying](#)
- [Bullying. No Way!](#)
- [eSafety Commissioner](#)
- [Friendly Schools](#)
- [Victorian State Government's Child Protection Protocol](#)

Endnotes

- ¹ Australian Institute of Health and Welfare 2015, *Australia's welfare 2015*, Australia's Welfare Series No. 12, Cat. No. AUS 189, Australian Institute of Health and Welfare
- ² Articles 28 and 29, United Nations 1989, *Convention on the Rights of the Child*, United Nations Human Rights, Office of the High Commissioner
- ³ Article 3, United Nations 1989, *Convention on the Rights of the Child*, United Nations Human Rights, Office of the High Commissioner
- ⁴ Commissioner for Children and Young People Victoria 2015, *A guide for creating a child safe organisation – Version 2.0*, Commissioner for Children and Young People Victoria.
- ⁵ From ARACY report card – needs exact reference
- ⁶ Commissioner for Children and Young People WA, *Child Safe Organisations WA and Information for parents, carers and family. Child Safe Organisations WA*, resources available from website, <<https://www.ccyp.wa.gov.au/our-work/projects/child-safe-organisations-wa/>>
- ⁷ Commissioner of Children and Young People WA 2018, *School and Learning Consultation – Technical Report*, Western Australia.
- ⁸ This is a complex issue that requires further analysis. Year 7 to Year 12 data from this research showed that feeling safe had a positive influence on academic achievement for many students however some high achieving students also reported sometimes or often feeling unsafe. Research on bullying suggests that students belonging to certain subgroups or who vary from the social norm (in this context in regard to their academic ability ie. 'giftedness') are more likely to be bullied. Compare Department of Education and Training 2015, *A review of literature (2010-2014) on student bullying by Australia's Safe and Supportive School Communities Working Group*, available at <<https://bullyingnoway.gov.au/UnderstandingBullying/BullyingResearch/Pages/Research-for-schools.aspx>>
- ⁹ Compare Blakemore SJ & Frith U 2005, *The learning brain: Lessons for education*, Blackwell Publishing.
- ¹⁰ Elias M et al 1997, *Promoting social and emotional learning: guidelines for educators*, p. 3
- ¹¹ Sylwester R 1995, *A Celebration of Neurons: An Educator's Guide to the Human Brain*, cited in Elias M et al 1997, *Promoting social and emotional learning: guidelines for educators*, p. 5
- ¹² Ministerial Council on Education, Early Childhood Development and Youth Affairs 2010, *National Safe Schools Framework* (revised 2011), available at <https://docs.education.gov.au/system/files/doc/.../national_safe_schools_framework.pdf>
- ¹³ National Safe Schools Framework, p.3
- ¹⁴ Moore T et al 2015, *Taking Us Seriously: Children and Young People Talk about Safety and Institutional Responses to Their Safety Concerns. A Report for the Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse*, Institute of Child Protection Studies, Australian Catholic University.
- ¹⁵ Moore T et al 2015, *Taking Us Seriously: Children and Young People Talk about Safety and Institutional Responses to Their Safety Concerns. A Report for the Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse*, Institute of Child Protection Studies, Australian Catholic University, p. 7
- ¹⁶ Ibid. p. 8
- ¹⁷ Ibid p.9
- ¹⁸ Department of Education and Training 2015, *A review of literature (2010-2014) on student bullying by Australia's Safe and Supportive School Communities Working Group*, available at <<https://bullyingnoway.gov.au/UnderstandingBullying/BullyingResearch/Pages/Research-for-schools.aspx>>
- ¹⁹ Australia's Safe and Supportive School Communities Working Group 2015, *What is the prevalence of bullying in schools?*, Research snapshot from a literature review on student bullying [website], <https://bullyingnoway.gov.au/UnderstandingBullying/BullyingResearch/Pages/Research-for-schools.aspx>
- ²⁰ The Australian Covert Bullying Prevalence Study also reported that 1 in 4 students reported being bullied every few weeks or more. See Cross D et al 2009, *Australian Covert Bullying Prevalence Study*, Child Health Promotion Research Centre, Edith Cowan University. Retrieved from <<https://www.education.gov.au/bullying-research-projects#australian-covert-bullying-prevalence>>
- ²¹ For a paper on policies and guidelines about bullying and cyberbullying and the perspectives of those who are involved in their construction see Chalmers C et al 2016, 'School policies on bullying and cyberbullying: perspectives across three Australian states', in *Educational Research*, 58(1), p. 91-109. Available at <<http://ro.ecu.edu.au/ecuworkspost2013/1538/>>
- ²² Cited in Department of Education and Training 2015, *A review of literature (2010-2014) on student bullying by Australia's Safe and Supportive School Communities Working Group*, p. 17

²³ This definition is very limited in that it does not adequately capture the three key definitional elements of bullying 1) intention, 2) power imbalance, and 3) repeated.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Compare Department of Education and Training 2015, *A review of literature (2010-2014) on student bullying by Australia's Safe and Supportive School Communities Working Group*, p. 34-42

²⁶ Cole SF 2005, *Helping Traumatized Children Learn. Supportive school environments for children traumatized by family violence*, Massachusetts Advocates for Children: Trauma and Learning Policy Initiative, p. 4

²⁷ Further evidence also suggests diminished neural development.

²⁸ Australian Childhood Foundation 2010, *Making SPACE for Learning. Trauma Informed Practice in Schools*, Australian Childhood Foundation, p. 51

²⁹ Cole SF 2005, *Helping Traumatized Children Learn. Supportive school environments for children traumatized by family violence*, Massachusetts Advocates for Children: Trauma and Learning Policy Initiative, p. 1

³⁰ Australian Childhood Foundation 2010, *Making SPACE for Learning. Trauma Informed Practice in Schools*, Australian Childhood Foundation. Available for download from the Department of Education WA's website at <<http://det.wa.edu.au/detcms/inclusiveeducation/child-protection/public/files/making-space-for-learning---trauma-informed-practice-in-schools.en?title=Making+Space+for+Learning+-+Trauma+Informed+Practice+in+Schools>>

³¹ The NSSF represents a social vision of how schools can be when they address the issue of bullying and focus on student safety and wellbeing. In 2004, legislation was passed which requires the NSSF to be implemented in all Australian schools by 1 January 2006. Education Ministers further agreed that implementation of the NSSF will be reported on annually, through the Ministerial Council on Education, Employment, Training and Youth Affairs' (MCEETYA) Annual National Report on Schooling in Australia (ANR). A revised Framework was endorsed in 2010.

³² National Safe Schools Framework, p.3

³³ The Student Wellbeing Hub is accessible at <<https://www.studentwellbeinghub.edu.au/>>

³⁴ The 'Bullying. No Way' website is available at <<https://bullyingnoway.gov.au/>>. The website is managed by the Safe and Supportive School Communities Working Group which has representatives from all states and territories, including the Catholic and independent schooling sectors.

³⁵ The National Centre Against Bullying (NCAB) is a peak body working to advise and inform the Australian community on the issue of childhood bullying and the creation of safe schools and communities, including the issue of cyber safety. Its website is available at <<https://www.ncab.org.au/who-we-are/about-us/>>

³⁶ The eSafety Commissioner is responsible for promoting online safety for all Australians. Their website is available at <<https://www.esafety.gov.au/>>

³⁷ The Friendly Schools Plus website is available at <<http://friendlyschools.com.au/fsp/>>

³⁸ See for example Commissioner for Children and Young People WA 2015, *Creating Child-Safe Organisations. Report on consultation with children and young people*, Commissioner for Children and Young People WA, and Moore T et al 2015, *Taking Us Seriously: Children and Young People Talk about Safety and Institutional Responses to Their Safety Concerns. A Report for the Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse*, Institute of Child Protection Studies, Australian Catholic University.