



*PROJECT
ROKIT*

This is what it's like

Youth-driven perspectives on bullying today
– and what schools can do to change it



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Submission to the Anti-Bullying Rapid Review, June 2025

Executive summary

PROJECT ROCKIT welcomes the opportunity to contribute to the Federal Government's Anti-Bullying Rapid Review. Our submission draws on 19 years of youth-led work tackling bullying, hate, and prejudice in Australian schools and online spaces. Central to this submission are the voices of our National Youth Collective – 43 diverse young Australians (aged 12–21) whom we engage as paid co-researchers, co-designers, and creators of anti-bullying solutions.

We highlight a critical gap between how bullying is defined and addressed by adults, and how it is actually experienced by young people. Current responses are often procedural, reactive, and disconnected from the realities of young people's lives. We call for a shift toward prevention approaches that are co-designed with young people and grounded in peer connection, inclusion, and student voice.

To be effective, a national standard must:

1. Reflect the lived realities of bullying experienced by young people
2. Understand and address harms across contexts
3. Ensure school responses centre the needs of young people most affected
4. Prioritise prevention by building inclusive, respectful school cultures
5. Support youth-driven approaches that mobilise young people to lead the change

This submission shares practical insights and recommendations shaped by students and teachers alike, and concludes with real-life stories from members of our National Youth Collective (see Appendix) to bring these perspectives to life.

1. Reflect the lived realities of bullying experienced by young people

The current national definition of bullying does not fully account for how bullying is experienced by young people. Our National Youth Collective challenges the traditional conceptualisation around repetition, intent, and power imbalance as exclusionary to the kinds of harm that play out across social media and school spaces.

Young people report being disbelieved or dismissed because their experiences don't fit adult-imposed definitions. For example, digital exclusion, subtle group dynamics, or even 'jokes' that reinforce social hierarchies may not meet the national definition but still cause ongoing psychological harm.

"What's important in understanding bullying is the atmosphere that it creates around a person. One instance can be enough to create an environment where you feel attacked, bullied and unsafe. You might experience something at the hands of one person and then they might never talk to you again... then it might be at the hands of another person. By common definitions, these people might not be seen to be bullying you but you are still being bullied, because you are at the centre of this pattern where people are being repeatedly unkind to you." – Olivia, 18 years old, National Youth Collective

"The textbook definition of bullying has been drilled into our heads through school health lessons. So when people experience bullying that doesn't fit into a definition, they find it hard to speak out about it or get help because they don't think they're actually being bullied. Society almost tells you that you're overreacting." – Mehela, 15 years old, National Youth Collective

"Bullying isn't just extreme physical violence or verbal abuse. It can be small, passive aggressive instances that build over time that can cause the deterioration or erosion of someone's mental and physical health. It doesn't have to be what you stereotypically see in movies, but much more nuanced than that." – Abbey, 18 years old, National Youth Collective

To build an effective national standard, we must centre the lived experience of young people and ensure that definitions of bullying are inclusive of both covert and online dynamics.

"It's so demeaning when you're vulnerable to a trusted teacher and they don't take it seriously. It sets a dangerous precedent."

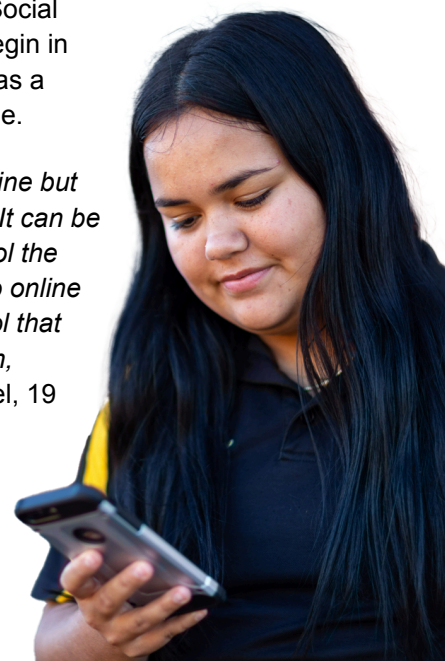
– Raghu, 17 years old, National Youth Collective

2. Understand and address harms across contexts

Building on the importance of lived experience, we must also consider the environments in which these experiences unfold. While the Consultation Paper recognises that bullying can happen online, the education system's narrow focus on bullying 'in schools' misses how harm actually moves. It travels – through hallways and group chats, from classroom to screen and back again.

Bullying is now embedded in the interplay between physical and digital spaces. Social exclusion, image-based abuse, targeted group chats, and viral humiliation can begin in person and ripple across digital spaces (and vice versa). Failing to treat bullying as a seamless experience across these realms limits the effectiveness of any response.

"Bullying flows across different spaces, not just between schools and online but also after-school hangouts, public transport, hubs like shopping centres. It can be a conflict that happened on social media late at night, escalating at school the next day. It can also be vice versa, with interactions at school spilling into online harassment or the overwhelming gossip around what happened at school that day. There's a perspective from students that the school can't touch them, which gives them a sense of freedom to harass in online spaces." – Adriel, 19 years old, National Youth Collective



Young people highlight how school cultures sometimes normalise everyday harmful peer behaviour, responding only to extreme harms with blame and punishment.

“Coming into a classroom and feeling inherently unsafe despite not being immediately targeted, just knowing that the people I’m surrounded with have that culture of being mean and bullying other people.” – Lucia, 21 years old, National Youth Collective

“A lot of the time we blame young people for any negative behaviours that they display but really it’s the environment and the things that are happening around them that lead to them engaging in those behaviours.” – Taihan, 16 years old, National Youth Collective

Teachers too, tell us that bullying is both impacted by and impacts issues that extend beyond school, making it difficult to resource and deliver responses that address the complex dynamics at play.

“The amount of bullying at school is causing students to become chronic school refusers. We have a high number of students with suicidal ideations and self-harm tendencies, as a result of bullying. We don’t have the resources or expertise to cater for these students. We are also seeing many students who are abusing drugs and alcohol as a way to cope with the bullying that they are experiencing.” – Teacher, Victoria

“Bullying is an ongoing issue both in the school and outside the school gates. This includes cyberbullying. Staff are dealing with the mental health concerns arising from these incidents on at least a weekly basis.” – Teacher, New South Wales

“We are seeing an escalation in incidents related to social media use and cyberbullying which is often occurring within the community and then brought into school, preventing students from focussing on their learning and impacting their sense of safety within the school environment.” – Teacher, Victoria

“We are seeing massive increases year on year in harm caused by online bullying and harassment, including setting up fights, filming and distributing videos of fights, and using social media to pick on other young people. It’s having lasting impacts on student mental health and well-being.”

– Teacher, Northern Territory

3. Ensure school responses centre the needs of young people most affected

Our National Youth Collective consistently reports that formal school responses to bullying can be ineffective or even damaging when they fail to centre the needs of young people most impacted. Common responses, such as mediation between victim and perpetrator, strict punitive approaches, heavy documentation, or requiring students to prove harm before support is provided, often re-traumatise survivors or escalate social fallout.

“You tell the teachers what happened, they’re like, ‘Ok, let’s go into a room and try and solve this by talking to them,’ and you’re like – ‘I actually feel unsafe in a room with this person.’ They just don’t realise the extent to which your mental health is actually impacted.” – Lucia, 21 years old, National Youth Collective

“Suspension is just a shortcut. It avoids acting on the underlying issue or teaching positive behaviour.” – Neerja, 19 years old, National Youth Collective

“The worst thing you can do when you have a stigma around bullying is to treat the resolution as a contract dispute and go ‘full Department’ on them... and bring out a 5-stage that doesn’t really solve anything, just overcomplicates the process.” – Raghu, 17 years old, National Youth Collective

“At school, we were taught the ‘Five Finger Rule’ (try to sort things yourself first, then ask friends, then a teacher). But honestly, it didn’t help. When I told a teacher, all they did was tell the bully to apologise; they didn’t really try to understand why the bullying was happening. Meanwhile, I felt more and more left out by my grade.” – Chris, 17 years old, National Youth Collective

Many students fear that reporting bullying will make them less safe, less liked, or viewed as problematic. For students from marginalised communities, this risk is heightened.

“I was always known as a snitch for telling on bullies for bullying my friends....” – Ayush, 16 years old, National Youth Collective

“Teachers never seem to understand that maybe the comments are just lighthearted according to them, but people who come from a different background or culture might perceive it in a different way. They could be shattered by what that person said.” – Jovia, 15 years old, National Youth Collective

“My school was mostly Caucasian and the few minorities that were there were constantly getting bullied. The school knew how to deal with physical and verbal bullying, and to an extent, cyberbullying, but they didn’t know how to deal with racial bullying. That was the moment when I realised the school isn’t going to do anything to support us.” – Raghu, 17 years old, National Youth Collective

“I remember being told, in vague terms, that ‘being mean is wrong.’ But I can’t point to a specific time where we were explicitly informed that abusing a person, through means such as x, y, z, on the basis of their race, weight, appearance, gender, ability, or on any basis at all, is unacceptable.” – Olivia, 18 years old, National Youth Collective

A consistent national standard must promote safety, dignity, and student agency, ensuring that support does not come at the cost of social belonging.

“How schools deal with bullying is very slow, it’s very ‘Government.’ They usually follow what the Department says is right and wrong, which is a bit sad because the unique circumstances where the ‘bully’ might also be ‘bullied’ are swept under the rug.”

– Chris, 17 years old, National Youth Collective



4. Prioritise prevention by building inclusive, respectful school cultures

Beyond responding to bullying, young people report that school approaches to actively prevent it are off the mark and perceived as a 'box-tick.' Current efforts that tend to focus on educating students on what bullying is (where, as described, definitions do not resonate with lived experience) and not to do it, fail to target the underlying drivers of bullying.

"Most people understand what bullying is and that it's 'bad', but the education is so un-impactful that it's just another 'class' on their daily schedule" – Adriel, 18 years old, National Youth Collective

Prevention must empower young people through meaningful connection and practical tools to support themselves and each other. This must extend beyond visibility and repetition of anti-bullying messaging, which is perceived by young people as words on walls if lacking real follow-through.

"My school has so many posters promoting anti-bullying and kindness yet they don't do anything when it actually happens." – Max, 17 years old, National Youth Collective

Instead, young people call for ongoing efforts, like *"running activities and fun interactive workshops that keep students engaged and actually interested in the topic"* (Anonymous, 18 years old, National Youth Collective). Schools clearly also value proactive interventions, as evidenced by teachers seeking out PROJECT ROCKIT to both address negative bullying behaviours and to nurture protective skills among students.

"We would like to see a reduction in bullying related mental health issues amongst our student population. We would like to see more pro-social skills being used to problem solve and therefore a reduction in suspensions relating to school based violence. Finally, we would like to see more self-worth and empathy being demonstrated amongst our young people, so they can aspire to achieve great things in their lives, beyond school." – Teacher, Victoria

Echoing this, a former PROJECT ROCKIT participant reflected on how prevention extends beyond reactive responses to creating school cultures that actively reduce bullying:

"PROJECT ROCKIT changed the environment of our class and school society. Honestly, I was pretty shocked by how many people stopped bullying others. Even though PROJECT ROCKIT came, like, 3 years ago to my school, the bullying has only once again begun. It really made a big difference and helped our school become a better place." – Past participant, aged 14

This highlights the urgent need for schools to actively support inclusion and access by driving diversity literacy, cultivating student leadership, and strengthening peer connection. Bullying prevention must be embedded in ongoing efforts that empower young people to lead positive change, creating safe and inclusive environments where every student belongs and can thrive.

"The effort needs to be ongoing – running activities and fun interactive workshops that keep students engaged and interested in the topic, helping students to have enough self awareness to know that what is being said or done could really hurt someone."

– Anonymous, 18 years old, National Youth Collective

5. Support youth-driven approaches that mobilise young people to lead the change

The success of youth-driven initiatives like PROJECT ROCKIT offers insights into designing effective bullying prevention interventions that meet student populations by understanding their needs. Our approach is grounded in co-design, lived experience, and long-term partnership with young people. Reflecting on youth-led solutions, one young person shared this powerful memory four years after taking part in a PROJECT ROCKIT program at their school:

“They were young and relatable compared to somebody just showing a power point. I know a few people who have lost their lives to cyberbullying and if PROJECT ROCKIT had been in their schools they could still be with us today.” – Past participant, aged 20

Adapted from our 2022 co-research with Western Sydney University,¹ effective, scalable solutions must be grounded in these interconnected principles that genuinely resonate with young people:



Youth-centred

Mitigate power imbalances between young people and adults by honouring young people’s existing knowledge and practices.



Grounded in diversity

Ensure diverse representation of experience, relatable content and respect for the backgrounds and experiences of student cohorts.



(Inter)active

Provide practical, dynamic and multi-modal learning experiences that allow learners to engage with content in a variety of ways.



Open and collaborative

Ground learning in a multi-directional exchange of ideas between participants, as well as between students and teachers.



Authentic

Centre youth lived experience and allow room for making and learning from mistakes. Embrace complexity and avoid over-simplification.



Original

Create innovative learning experiences that break away from formulaic and predictable educational content and delivery.

While PROJECT ROCKIT is one example, these principles can be adapted and scaled across many different school environments. We would welcome further consultation with the Department to support schools to develop appropriate solutions for their communities and contexts.

“It is definitely possible to get young people to speak out about bullying. If you get young people saying ‘hey this person has treated me unfairly,’ they want a solution that was developed by young people to support young people. That’s what matters, that’s what will truly make an impact.”

– Raghu, 17 years old, National Youth Collective

¹ Marsden L, Moody L, Nguyen B, Tatam L, Welland L and Third A (2022) Reimagining online safety education through the eyes of young people: co-design workshops with young people to inform digital learning experiences. Young and Resilient Research Centre, Western Sydney University, Sydney. <https://doi.org/10.26183/3bz3-r451>



Recommendations for a national standard

Bullying is not an isolated issue, rather it reflects the broader social and cultural ecosystems that young people navigate every day. This Review presents a unique opportunity to redefine how we approach bullying in Australia, shifting from reactive measures to proactive, inclusive strategies that create lasting cultural change.

To achieve this, a national standard must:

- **Reflect the lived realities of bullying experienced by young people** – evolve narrow definitions to recognise the most common and damaging forms of harm young people actually face.
- **Understand and address harms across contexts** – respond to how bullying flows seamlessly between digital and physical spaces, rather than treating them in isolation.
- **Ensure school responses centre the needs of young people most affected** – prioritise safety, belonging, and agency, especially for students who experience marginalisation.
- **Prioritise prevention by building inclusive, respectful school cultures** – embed proactive approaches that foster empathy, connection, and shared responsibility across the whole school community.
- **Support youth-driven approaches that mobilise young people to lead the change** – invest in peer-led, co-designed solutions that equip young people with the tools and platform to shape safer, more inclusive environments.

To be effective, a national standard must be shaped with (not just for) young people. PROJECT ROCKIT is ready to support this vision by continuing to centre youth voices, champion peer-led solutions, and share what we've learned from nearly two decades working alongside young Australians. We invite the Department to collaborate with us and the communities we serve to develop a national approach that is bold, inclusive, and grounded in lived experience, because every young person deserves to feel safe, valued, and supported to thrive.



APPENDIX: Real life stories

“For as long as I can remember, I’ve (not to play the victim) been bullied. It got to a point where it felt normal for people to make criticisms and hateful comments, so I didn’t think much of it.

When I migrated to Australia, it continued. I was bullied for my race, my body, my voice, my intellect, and even my food. I felt powerless. Why? Because I saw how hard my mum worked to get us here, and I’d always tell myself others had it worse. School was tough – every day in primary, I’d feel insecure the moment I stepped onto the grounds.

Just to be clear, it wasn’t just Caucasian students who were bullying me. I was bullied by people from all kinds of backgrounds. I guess I was ‘lucky’ to build thick skin young, because I never felt truly valued at school. When I did speak up to a teacher, the ‘resolution’ was always the same: a bland apology. That’s still the go-to resolution in schools: a sorry from the bully and some Google advice on being strong.

But it’s not all on them. A lot of the people who bullied me were clearly hurting too. They needed help regulating their emotions and weren’t getting it. Additionally, those who were resolving the issue, were hurting too, and so the best advice they could ever give is the things they are trying to do for themselves (which sometimes doesn’t even work for them).

We also need to talk about the systems in place. I was diagnosed with a chronic condition at the start of senior school, and it hit me hard. On top of that, comments like “are you blind?” or “did you get your eyes checked?” were like darts. And not to play the victim again, but honestly if I have to deal with a school culture that sucks, why can’t I at least have my basic rights to level the playing field for me to do well in my academics?”

– Chris, 17 years old, National Youth Collective

“At the end of year six, I decided I wanted to change my pronouns to ‘they’ and ‘them.’ When I reached year seven I was bullied constantly for this fact whenever I would correct the teachers on my pronouns everyone would snicker. They would even tease me for going to a place called the queer alliance which was a safe space for LGBTQIA+ people and their supporters. They bullied me to the point where I didn’t feel like I could be non-binary any more and so I changed my pronouns back to ‘she’ and ‘her.’ When people ask me about my choice to change it back I normally just say it was a phase but it felt more than a phase. It also sucked having to constantly tell people or I’m actually non-binary and then them stumbling over their words trying to say they were sorry. I felt bad for them.

There were some people in my life, like my close friends, who were super supportive of me. I didn’t have many because of the fact that everyone saw me as weird for being non-binary but the ones who I were close with were very nice to me. It did help having that safe space at the queer alliance – having people where I could share my thoughts and feelings. I think all schools should have that.”

– Darcey, 14 years old, National Youth Collective

"For me, the experiences I have had of bullying have related to how the structures around me perceive who I am. From a young age, the assumptions of institutions designed to 'care' for me were passed to my peers. Before starting primary school, the whole school (admittedly small, 130 students total) had a 'talk' to discuss the new kindergartener starting the next year. That kindergartener was me. They told everyone that I was fragile, they had to be careful with how forceful they were, to not touch me or I might break – how frightening is that? So when I arrived, loud, opinionated, ambitious as I was, my peers were afraid of me. They were scared to hug me, play sports with me, or invite me to hang out with them. It turned into subtle remarks, exclusion, callousness that I could not understand. I did have friends, I was even reassigned a 'buddy' who had diabetes – she could relate to me. But I never REALLY fit in. Which is okay, I kept to my best friend and we shared so much laughter. I did not realise that the assumptions of others about who I was, passed down to everyone else but me. Before meeting me, I was a child with a rare bone disability, probably quiet and reserved. My mum was courageous for sending me to a mainstream school setting, maybe a little misguided or not careful enough. Shouldn't she seek to 'wrap me up in cotton wool' like everyone else suggested? Or assumed?"

I came to know of the 'talk' everyone had had after several years. Once the people in the year above me graduated (who had rejected me but I never understood why), it was shared to me that they were 'scared.' Whilst I don't think all of their behaviours can be attributed to some misguided beliefs, I was alienated in their eyes before they had met me. That's enough. But how does a school redress a culture of silence, passivity around disability, when they also perpetuate the same thing? Accidentally or unintentionally, it's hard to confront when it stems from the very place that's trying to create change, to advocate for me.

I had, at the ripe age of six, as a kindergartener, interacted with systems that did not value my agency. I was loud and opinionated because I had to be, although to see the value in my voice is a privilege. One kept alive by my mum, who did not subscribe to the assumptions of others. I am not sure why, I don't think I would be immune from it myself. But I am grateful to carry her fire with the voice I use today. Without interacting with systems and assumptions that tried to silence me, I do not think I would be as passionate as I am. I think I would find it difficult to understand this experience, and maybe I would have been a passive consumer of assumptions. But by challenging the institutions that feed us these views, ideas, perspectives and assumptions, we can each contribute to a world that is less passive, more active; in the fight against bullying, hate and prejudice."

– Caitlin, 19 years old, National Youth Collective

"A story about a friend: There was this boy in the year below that used to hang out with my old friend group. He would crack jokes but sometimes the girls in our group took offence. Eventually they started talking about him behind his back and they would use the f-slur to mock him and his sexual orientation. He was also uninvited from a girl's surprise birthday party and one of the girls that was co-facilitating the bullying got the birthday girl's mum to harass him via school e-mail. It made me feel awful witnessing all of this because he was also my friend and I didn't like seeing him being treated in that way. It was also a painful feeling to see people you once considered close friends turn into bullies and hurt people in such horrific ways. And I knew that he was hurting too despite him telling me that everything was fine and not to worry. I don't think he was getting any support at the time, he didn't want to get teachers involved because I think in his eyes there was 'no point' since he was moving schools. And

despite me checking up on him, I still felt like I wasn't giving him the best support he needed. I think what made things worse for me is the fact that by not knowing what to do, I ended up doing nothing.

To this day I still feel like I was just a bystander. I wish what my school had done differently – and schools in general – is to check the types of e-mails that students are receiving. My school has an IT system like that in place, but I guess they either didn't care or it went unnoticed. If they were more proactive, they would have noticed something wasn't right and maybe he would have gotten help."

– Rispah, 17 years old, National Youth Collective

"As a young person who's recently graduated from high school, I have had experiences of bullying, and have witnessed others be targets of bullying, that have impacted me greatly. There were times when I was a newly arrived student, not only to the school but to the country, where I was met with apathy, indifference, judgement and in accusatory ways about things I was not responsible for doing by other students. There were times where I was forced by teachers to engage in mediation, despite not wanting to and having expressed that, and being aware that the other person was not interested in any kind of solution-based conversation. I have experienced being indirectly threatened to comply with the bullies' ways, or I would be met with the same attitudes and harmful behaviours that they were imposing on others. I have been peer pressured into not supporting another young person for fear of also being marginalised and discriminated against as a result. The teacher's responses were uncaring, the most they would do is give a stern look and not say much about the situation, let alone try to help. This made me feel isolated, helpless, worthless, and alone. Some of these things led to me having to move schools, and having to accept that I'd have a solitary experience at school sometimes.

I can't say I know how to support schools to do better when met with situations like these, but I can ask you to avoid taking away a young person's sense of agency. Avoid forcing them to be in the same room engaging in what may not be a helpful conversation with their bully. Ask them what they need, what would help them. Remember you may have been a teacher for a very long time, but every single young person is different, has different backgrounds, values, beliefs, needs and wants. No single approach will help everyone, and not putting enough effort in to understand, hear, and acknowledge their experience will only cause harm. We need you to do better so that we can do better too."

– Lucia, 21 years old, National Youth Collective

PROJECT ROCKIT is Australia's youth-driven movement against bullying, hate and prejudice, mobilising young people to lead positive impact in their communities. Learn more about our work at www.projectrockit.com.au.