

# Responding to student exposure to distressing content



*Written by Online Safety Expert:  
Kat Howard, Digital Safeguarding Specialist*

*Last modified Aug 11, 2022*

- Schools are often required to support students when harmful content is shared. When content spreads quickly, this can be a challenging task, usually requiring expert intervention and advice.
- Connecting the right people at the appropriate time with the information needed is important when seeking to minimise the impact on students' learning.

## **Exposure to harm**

In 2019, a lone gunman entered a mosque in Christchurch, New Zealand, and opened fire. Over the next 17 minutes, he live-streamed the attack on Facebook, where it was viewed around the world. Although the platform removed the original live stream within an hour, it had already been shared widely on Facebook and uploaded to other platforms, including Reddit, Twitter, and YouTube, faster than the algorithms could remove it. Not surprisingly, the content was seen by children and young people, and unfortunately, this was not a one-off event.

The Internet was created to share information quickly. The rise of the ‘social reporter’ has meant that news content is now delivered to us live, 24/7, and consequently, our students are continuously exposed to content that is not appropriate for them to view. Graphic violence from war-torn regions or horrifying explicit sexual content can easily find its way into students’ news and social feeds without them searching for it.

## Taking Action

When distressing content starts circulating online, schools, school districts, and local authorities are often required to deal with the fallout. To help, we’ve put together some guidance on how to respond to and provide initial support when a distressing incident first occurs.

**Important note:** Supporting students who have suffered trauma resulting from exposure to harmful and distressing content, whether off or online, requires specific expertise and training. The guidance below outlines the initial steps to take when students are first exposed; however, we strongly recommend that schools, districts, and local authorities reach out urgently to appropriate support agencies for targeted advice and incident response support.

### Providing support and reassurance

As with all online or offline incidents that involve student wellbeing and safety, support and reassurance are vital. It’s critical that the response is quick to minimise harm and prevent content from being shared widely within the school and its community.

### Validate help-seeking behaviour

Students may fear being reprimanded for viewing the content or being ridiculed by their friends for being ‘soft’, and it’s likely taken a lot of courage for them to approach an adult to ask for help. Ensure their bravery in seeking help is acknowledged.

### Avoid judgement

Whether a student went looking for the content or stumbled across it unintentionally, there should be no judgement. Rather, focus on what needs to happen to minimise harm and reduce the risk to other students. We want our young people to continue to tell us when things make them feel uncomfortable or unsafe online, and they are unlikely to talk to us if they fear negative repercussions.

## **Don't downplay or minimise responses to distressing content**

When a young person shares a distressing experience with an adult, it is often because the experience's impact is affecting themselves or their friends significantly. For that reason, ensure you focus not only on the content causing the harm but on its resulting impact.

## **Acknowledge impact and validate feelings**

It's essential to recognize that harm will look different to each individual, and outcomes can manifest in different ways for each student.

Take time to validate whatever emotions students present with, but avoid conflating a child's feelings by adding additional emotional responses. For example, don't say, "It's normal for people to feel anxious." if the child hasn't indicated they feel anxious or isn't showing signs of anxiety. This suggests to the child that they should be having a different emotional response to the one they are having.

Instead, use appropriate words to 'mirror' what the child is saying. For example, if a child says "I feel scared." an appropriate response would be, "It's very normal to feel scared." or "I can understand why you would feel scared when you saw that. Let's go for a walk."

## **Check the spread**

If one student has been exposed to disturbing or harmful content, you can almost guarantee that the content has already spread widely, with a potentially significant impact on the entire cohort, school, or district. Gather a team to strategize and develop a clear plan for support provision and implementation if needed.

## **Minimise harm**

Blocking and deleting content can help reduce its harmful impact, but removing technology entirely can have significant consequences. In addition, a young person who fears losing their device and access to their support networks is less likely to seek help.

While blocking content can be effective, it's also important to remember that if the incident requires evidence to be collected, such as screenshots and URLs, the content must be available while that information is being gathered.

## **Report the content to the platform**

Reporting to online content hosts and platforms is critical for the incident triage process. This alerts them to inappropriate behaviour online and prompts them to remove the content or shut down the account.

Most importantly, it enables them to begin removing the content as soon as it's reposted, using their system algorithms to detect and delete automatically. While not 100% effective, it does significantly reduce the spread of harmful content and its impact on others.

### **Connect with external support as needed**

Incidents that develop quickly and potentially impact a large number of students often require expertise and support beyond what a school or district can provide. Reach out promptly to support services who will be able to give guidance and advice around managing the incident, reducing harm, and putting in place support systems for those students impacted. Sometimes the content shared can be illegal, especially if it is graphic, violent, or explicit, so engage with the police in these instances.

Even if a child does not wish to engage regarding what they have seen or how they feel, it is important that staff involved have an opportunity to debrief with trained support staff.

### **Communicate with students and wider school or district community as needed**

When do you share? How much do you share? Who do you share it with? Each situation is different, as is each school or district's unique context. Rely on existing policies and seek guidance from boards, governance, and external support agencies before sharing any information. Mis-timed or misdirected communications can inflame an already volatile situation and increase harm.

Once a safe and informed approach has been agreed upon:

- Be honest without going into details.
- Share only with those who need to know.
- Share how the issue is being addressed and what is needed from families.
- Avoid sensationalising the content and creating FOMO. Young people are naturally curious, so avoid directly naming the content.
- Highlight the importance of not sharing the content with others and the reasons why.
- Unpack self-help strategies, including turning off notifications, blocking content, blocking users, deleting content, and talking to a trusted adult.
- Share access to additional support.

## Looking ahead

As long as we have the Internet, challenges with inappropriate content will continue. Schools and their communities should always remember that even if mistakes are made when responding to an incident, they have the opportunity to do things better next time.

- Incidents often prompt schools to reflect and reevaluate response systems. Take the opportunity to identify what went well and areas where processes need improvement.
- Provide opportunities for students to develop the digital citizenship skills and knowledge needed to identify risk and minimise harm, including recognizing fake or harmful content.
- Build confidence and capability in staff and families to respond effectively when online incidents occur.
- Ensure you have an updated list of support agencies and experts on hand who are available to provide support and guidance.