

# Bullying

## A guide for parents and carers



Scottish  
Government  
Riaghaltas  
na h-Alba

**SAMH**  
Scottish Action for Mental Health



# About respectme

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**Established in 2007, respectme is Scotland's Anti-Bullying Service.**

We work with all adults involved in the lives of children and young people to build their practical skills, competence and confidence to prevent and respond to bullying.

Our vision is of a respectful, just, equal, and inclusive Scotland, in which all children and young people can live free from bullying and harassment and are encouraged to reach their full potential. Our work is driven by a focus on children's rights.

We aim to build the capacity of adults to effect change and challenge bullying and stigma at an individual, school, family, community and societal level. We also campaign at a national level to raise awareness of the service and the impact bullying can have.

# Introduction

**Discovering your child is being bullied, or is involved in bullying others, can be an anxious time for everyone.**

When bullying is happening, either face-to-face or online, your reaction is vitally important. Bullying can evoke strong emotional responses from children and adults including anger, frustration, hopelessness, helplessness, feeling powerless, guilt and shame. It can for some adults also trigger difficult memories of personal experiences of bullying situations.

These memories can be difficult to deal with and can cause us to behave in ways that may not be helpful to our children who are seeking our support such as reacting in anger, or by getting upset. It can be tempting to want to fix things for the young person and take control of the situation.

You don't need to be a mental health expert to support your child's wellbeing. You can support children best by listening first and foremost and responding in a calm and non-judgmental manner whilst letting them know you are there to help them resolve things.

This guide has been created to support you to understand and respond to bullying. It has been designed to give you practical skills to increase your confidence to support your child.

## Learning about bullying matters

- Bullying is about behaviour and impact. When adults respond well to children who are experiencing or displaying bullying behaviour, it helps to minimise the harmful impacts of bullying on children's lives.
- Bullying violates children's rights, including rights to protection, participation, freedom from discrimination and an education.
- Adults have a duty to uphold children's rights and to keep children safe and protected.
- We all have a role to play in ensuring children and young people receive the support they need when it comes to bullying behaviour.
- Labelling children and young people as 'bullies' or 'victims' can be disempowering, or confer status, and are unhelpful in supporting them to change behaviour or to recover from the impacts of bullying.
- Register for respectme's free Anti-Bullying Learning Academy on our website to learn more.

## Scotland's definition of bullying

In Scotland, bullying is defined within the Scottish Government's guidance,

[Respect for All: The National Approach to Anti-Bullying for Scotland's Children and Young People](#):



**Bullying is face-to-face and/or online behaviour which impacts on a person's sense of physical and emotional safety, their capacity to feel in control of their life and their ability to respond effectively to the situation they are in. The behaviour does not need to be repeated, or intended to cause harm, for it to have an impact. Bullying behaviour can be physical, emotional or verbal and can cause people to feel hurt, threatened, frightened and left out."**

# Children's rights

**Bullying is a violation of children's rights. It is every child's right not to be bullied.**

Children's rights are unique in that many of them, although designed for the safety and protection of children, have to be provided for by adults and the government. In Scotland, on 16 July 2024, the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) was incorporated into law. Although children and young people are covered under the Human Rights Act 1998, their rights are more clearly specified under the UNCRC.

There are 45 articles in the Convention. They set standards in healthcare, education, and legal, civil and social services, covering four broad areas:

**Survival  
rights**

**Development  
rights**

**Protective  
rights**

**Participation  
rights**

A right is a basic need, rather than an entitlement or expectation. Children need to be protected from bullying behaviour so they can survive, develop and participate in a fulfilling life.

Although the 45 articles do not specifically mention bullying, bullying behaviour does breach a number of the articles. All adults are expected to respect and protect children's human rights in the planning of services, creating of policies and decision making.

As the UNCRC is now law in Scotland, this means that children's rights are respected, protected in law, and legally enforceable. You can find out more about children's rights on our website:

[www.respectme.org.uk/parents-childrens-rights/](http://www.respectme.org.uk/parents-childrens-rights/)

The United Nations  
Convention on the  
Rights of the Child



# What does bullying look like?

**Bullying behaviour can have short and long-term effects, harming people physically, mentally or emotionally. Although the actual behaviour might not be repeated, the threat that it might can be sustained over time.**

It can include:

- Being called names, teased, put down or threatened (face-to-face and/or online)
- Being hit, tripped, pushed or kicked
- Having belongings taken or damaged
- Being ignored, left out or having rumours spread about you (face-to-face and/or online).
- Sending abusive messages, pictures or images on social media, online gaming platforms or phones/tablets
- Behaviour which makes you feel like you are not in control of yourself or your life (face-to-face and/or online)
- Being targeted because of who you are or who you are perceived to be (face-to-face and/or online)
- Increasing the reach and impact of bullying or prejudice through the recruitment and/or involvement of a wider group

In some cases, children or young people may not be aware that their behaviour is actually bullying. They could be modelling the behaviour of adults or other children and young people, not understanding that what they are doing is wrong because they've never been taught otherwise.

Even when there is no intent to bully, it can still have an impact on the person being bullied.

## Bullying vs conflict

It is important for children and young people to discuss how they feel and to help them develop the social and communication skills needed to help them to manage their relationships.

We know that children and young people will fall out and disagree with each other as they form and build relationships. This is not considered to be bullying; this is a normal part of growing up.

It may be as simple as someone disagreeing with them or not wanting to do the same things. Or perhaps they didn't feel like playing that day.

We can help our children to understand and identify what is bullying behaviour and what is not.

Conflict is normal and can happen in healthy, happy, equal relationships. And it isn't restricted to just children and young people – conflict is normal in adult relationships too. Usually at least one party involved doesn't want the conflict to continue unresolved and will try to take early action to make amends and improve the situation.

Healthy relationship conflict is not the same as bullying and is unlikely to lead to bullying as the people involved have a vested interest in restoring usual friendship status and staying connected to each other.

## The impact of bullying

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We know that bullying takes something away from children and young people, and can:

- Affect their mental and physical health
- Make them feel less confident about themselves and harm their future
- Lead to them not wanting to participate in activities in and out of school
- Make them feel excluded from friendships and groups
- Make them feel they don't want to go to school or other places they enjoy
- Cause them to experience loss of control of their life or feel unsafe and disrespected

# If your child feels bullied

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**If your child has reached out for help because they feel they are being bullied, the response you give them is vitally important.**

It can be difficult to hear that your child is experiencing bullying, however it gives you the opportunity to intervene and support them towards bringing the bullying to an end.

There are a number of potential signs of bullying to look out for. If your child is being bullied, they may:

- Become withdrawn
- Have unexplained scratches and bruises
- Not want to go to school or attend a youth club
- Change their route to school
- Not want to go out or play with their friends
- Change their patterns of spending time online (more/less)
- Complain of headaches, stomach aches and other pains
- Become easily upset, tearful, ill-tempered or display other out-of-character behaviour

Not all of these signs necessarily indicate that your child is being bullied. Other factors could be present too.

As a parent or carer, you know your child better than anyone else and are in the best position to recognise an unexplained change in their behaviour that needs to be explored.

## How you can help

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Take time to consider what your next steps could be after learning about the bullying, rather than reacting immediately.

Your child might be reluctant to worry you, and be concerned about any over-reaction.

But it is important that they know they can talk to you. It allows you to find out what they would like to happen, what they may be worried about, and how you can best support them towards a good outcome, at a pace they are comfortable with.

## Exploring options together

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Children and young people can feel powerless in bullying situations, so it's important that they are given the opportunity to have their voice heard. This allows you to find out what they want to happen, what they are worried about happening, and how best you can support them, at their pace, towards a good outcome.

**Children and young people have told us that a common response from adults is to 'hit them back/hit them first'. However, this is not the safest option and does not take into account those who are unable to do so. The advice is often based on a parent or carer's own historical experience of bullying, where the circumstance is unlikely to be same. Role modelling responses to relationship conflict with violence is unhelpful and potentially dangerous.**

There is never one, single answer when it comes to bullying. It's about talking through options and making choices. Take time to consider your next steps. Children and young people can be reluctant to worry a parent or carer, and may not want to risk an over-reaction, however, it is important they know they have someone to talk to.

It's natural to want to take over the situation and try to 'fix it'. While you may be able to help, it's important to think about solutions which support your child but also gives them back their sense of being in control.

## Starting a conversation

It can be difficult to know how to start a conversation with your child or young person about bullying, we also might worry we say the wrong thing and make things worse.

This simple conversation starter could encourage your child to open up if you suspect bullying might be affecting them. You could ask about their experiences of bullying, in the following ways:

### **“What’s been happening/how is it making you feel?”**

These questions can be key to gathering information about the situation they are in and to quickly understand their wellbeing needs.

### **“What would you like to happen next/what would you like me to do to help you?”**

These questions are about restoring your child's sense of feeling in control by exploring options and involving them in decision-making, towards finding solutions that they are comfortable with.

## Things to remember

### **Don't panic**

Remaining calm supports good listening and is reassuring for your child. Make sure you are giving them your full attention. It shows a child or young person that you are taking them seriously. Clearly explain the reasons for your concern and sensitively share with them what you have noticed. This will allow them to understand how the bullying is impacting them and their daily lives.

### **Make yourself available**

If they are reluctant to talk straight away, remind them you're always there and check-in with them regularly.

### **Discuss what they want to do**

By taking time to discuss what your child would like to happen next, they will feel valued and listened to.

Listen carefully, not just to what they are saying, but also how they are saying it. Body language and facial expressions can tell you a lot too.

### **Keep an open mind**

Try not to judge what they tell you. Children and young people are still learning how to navigate friendships and relationships and can sometimes have poor judgement and make mistakes as they grow up. Adults can be good role-models for demonstrating what healthy, respectful relationships look like.



## Raising a concern

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Approaching a school or a youth organisation about a bullying incident may seem like a daunting prospect – but it's in everyone's best interests to help resolve the situation and reach a satisfactory outcome.

If you are concerned about a bullying incident in a school or a youth setting ask to see their anti-bullying policy. The policy should set out what you can expect from their response to any incidents of bullying, timescales and how you will be kept informed.

The next step would be to make an appointment to speak to the Class Teacher, Head Teacher or Senior Youth Worker. At this meeting, you should be given the opportunity to discuss your concerns, set out what you and your child would like to happen next, and how you can proceed together.

It is helpful to be prepared for these discussions, so be ready to discuss:

- The behaviour that concerns you and when/where it took place
- The impact it has had on your child
- What you are doing to support your child at home
- What immediate action is being put in place to support your child
- What plan the school/organisation has in place to respond to the situation going forward
- Whether there were any aspects of prejudice present which concern you

## Helpful tools

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Visit our website to find out more about advocating for and with your child to find a solution to bullying incidents. Discover our top tips and download our recording bullying template guides at [www.respectme.org.uk/parents-raising-concern/](http://www.respectme.org.uk/parents-raising-concern/) or scan the QR code. Our website has resources to support parents and carers to gather and record information about bullying behaviour.



We have created conversation guides to support conversations with a child who is experiencing bullying. Find them on our website at [www.respectme.org.uk/professionals-responding/](http://www.respectme.org.uk/professionals-responding/) or scan the QR code.



## Taking further action

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It is most helpful for everyone when bullying can be resolved locally, within the setting where it has taken place. If you are dissatisfied with the action which has been taken by a school or organisation, you can escalate your complaint to the Local Authority.

If you remain dissatisfied, you can contact the Scottish Public Services Ombudsman (SPSO) to log a complaint about a school or Local Authority if you have a serious concern that a bullying issue has not been fully addressed and remains unresolved.

# If your child is bullying someone

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**Discovering your child has been accused of bullying someone else can be highly emotive, deeply upsetting and difficult to accept.**

It's natural to feel angry and upset. Although you may feel this way, it's important to remain calm, take time to discuss the issue, and listen to your child's explanation to understand the situation.

Children and young people who exhibit bullying behaviour need adult support to understand the underlying thoughts and feelings that are driving their actions. This will help them to develop healthier responses and relationships.

It is crucial to help them recognise the harm their behaviour causes, repair relationships when possible and desired, and challenge prejudicial attitudes through open and honest conversations and by helping to build empathy.

Find out more on how to talk and listen to your child's thoughts and feelings, and support them to recognise the impact of their actions.

Visit [www.respectme.org.uk/parents-child-bullying/](http://www.respectme.org.uk/parents-child-bullying/) or scan the QR code to access more information.



## Help them to understand

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When you understand the reasons behind the bullying, you can help them to change their behaviour and recognise the impact it has had on others. Children who are bullying others need help to reflect on their behaviour, untangle what is causing them to be hurtful to others, and try to repair relationships where possible. They need to be supported to understand that what they have done is wrong.

### What might be behind the bullying behaviour?

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There are a number of highly complex reasons why children and young people take part in bullying behaviour. It could be that:

- They don't recognise their behaviour as 'bullying'
- They are unaware of the impact their behaviour is having on others
- They are displaying prejudiced attitudes or behaviours towards certain groups of people or individuals
- They feel scared and are trying to regain control over a person or situation
- They do not feel they will be identified or found out if they are posting online
- They are being encouraged to join in as part of a group and they're going along with it to save face or to 'fit in'
- They have experienced bullying themselves and are fearful of becoming a target again
- They are in a culture where bullying behaviour is seen as acceptable
- They have 'learned' bullying behaviour or prejudiced attitudes from a role model or peer

## ***“All behaviour communicates feelings, including bullying”***

Helping a child to understand what is causing them to use bullying behaviour provides a vital starting place. By helping them to reflect on the thoughts and feelings causing these behaviours, you can support them to find ways to manage difficult feelings and deal with these thoughts and feelings in ways that do not harm others.

Here is a simple conversation structure for talking to children about bullying behaviour:

- Describe the bullying behaviour that has taken place
- Explain how it could be making others feel
- Set out how the behaviour needs to change
- Address and challenge any negative attitudes, prejudices or stereotyping related to a child's appearance or identity

The behaviour behind the bullying might stem from racism, homophobia or ignorance about a different culture or religion. Addressing this can be difficult, challenging and emotive, but prejudiced attitudes must be explored and challenged through education and empathy.

Labelling a child as “a bully” is not helpful when trying to change their behaviour. We need to describe what positive behaviour we want to see instead at home, at school and with others both in-person and online.

## **Moving forward**

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Discuss and agree how you can support your child to stop the bullying behaviour. All behaviour carries consequences and your child can be helped to realise that they are accountable for their actions.

At school this might mean finding a way forward which gives them the chance to make amends or repair relationships with those involved. It's important to be clear that your child's behaviour is unacceptable and set out how you expect them to behave instead.

Depending on your relationship with the other parents involved, you might also want to make sure that they are aware of what's been happening. If the child's parents are unknown to you, or if it's unsafe or unwise to approach them directly, it might be helpful to seek support for the families from a third party, such as a teacher or youth leader.

Behavioural change takes time but role modelling positive behaviours is key to giving your child important relationship skills such as empathy, kindness and respect for the dignity of others. All bullying behaviour is unacceptable.



# Online bullying and safety

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**As a parent or carer, you play the key role in helping your child to stay safe online. Children and young people often don't see the difference between online and offline worlds. It's just another place to go and socialise or play.**

However, bullying that takes place online is still bullying. It can be even more challenging due to the potential for it to spread, or go viral.

Online bullying involves the use of digital technologies, such as social media, messaging platforms, gaming forums, and mobile devices to intimidate, isolate, or humiliate individuals.

## ***“Bullying is bullying – online is geography”***

Online bullying shouldn't be treated any less seriously - it is still, in essence, about behaviour and impact. The behaviour, usually on social media apps and online gaming platforms, can include a person being called names, left out, threatened or having rumours spread about them.

It's important to have regular conversations with your child about the online world and keep up to date with online safety measures. It gives you the opportunity to help them experience the online world as safely as possible, and allows you to keep an eye out for any warning signs that your child may be getting bullied.

## Responding to online bullying

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Your reaction is likely to be the same as with any other type of bullying. Learning about the online places that your child visits will help you gain knowledge and understand how important being online is to them.

Parents and carers can feel angry, sad, frustrated and disempowered to act, although aware that the safety and wellbeing of your child is the priority.

When bullying takes place online, there are some steps that you can take to support a young person:

### **Identify the bullying material**

Log on to the online platform and review messages, posts or images that your child has received. If you feel any of these messages or pictures could be illegal, you should share copies, dates, times and contact details with Police Scotland, who may examine digital devices to gather evidence or information related to a police investigation or incident.

Use parental controls where available in setting up online accounts and communities. Look at the end of this guide for helpful resources for safety settings and responding to, or reporting online bullying and serious online crimes.

## What is online bullying?

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Types of online bullying include:

- Sending threatening or abusive text messages
- Spreading rumours
- Shaming someone
- Excluding someone from online games, activities or friendship groups
- Sharing embarrassing images or videos
- Trolling – sending upsetting messages on social networks, chat rooms or online games
- Creating hate groups on social media or a website against a person

## Supporting your child

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It is important to validate your child's experience of being bullied online and offer them the same support as you would if they were experiencing any other type of bullying.

- Listen to what they have to tell you
- Take their concerns seriously
- Try to remain calm
- Ask them what they would like to happen next

Think also about whether the online bullying has any criminal aspect and discuss with your child what options are available to report it to whichever platform the bullying took place on, as well as Police Scotland. Don't expect online bullying to disappear on its own. Be alert and proactive to identify the warning signs, so you can help your child with online bullying before it escalates. Help them to understand the impacts of their online behaviour and how to show respect and kindness, rather than retaliating by bullying or ridiculing others online.

### Ask to see other messages

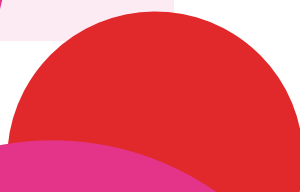
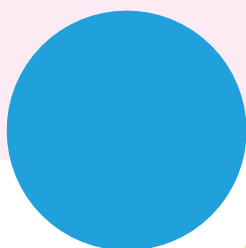
Reassure your child that you won't over-react and that you are not trying to invade their privacy. You are trying to work with them to help resolve the situation.

Although it might be tempting, you shouldn't reply to any of the messages, especially when you are unclear if you are replying to another child or an adult.

### Involve other agencies

When online bullying is by someone your child sees at school or other groups/clubs, it could be helpful to alert staff.

If both/all parties are at the same school or club, make the school/club aware of problems, and ask if they can help you with a resolution plan.



## Online relationships

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For most young people, the friends they have online are the same friends they have offline. However, they may also be connecting with people they don't know from around the world, who they share an interest with. For example, it could be an online game they enjoy playing, such as Fortnite or Minecraft.

### Screen time limits

Work with your child to create a set of ground rules for their online activity. Come to an agreement about what they can do, and what will happen if it is misused. It could be based on:

- Restrictions on screen time limits
- App usage
- Evening cut-offs
- Sharing images
- Off-limit websites

### If you wouldn't say it, don't send it!

People often act differently online. For some, this is because they think the rules are different. They may think they cannot be identified for their actions or what they say, not fully understanding how permanent their online communication is, or the damage it is doing.

To help your child realise the difference, ask them: "Would you say this if the person was sitting in front of you?" If they answer no, ask them to consider not sending it.

If they are receiving unwanted or abusive messages, make sure they know that it is unacceptable, and they could report, block, mute or unfriend anyone sending them messages they aren't comfortable with.

### Traceable communication

There is no such thing as anonymity online. Everything sent and posted can be traced. A fake email or social media account, for example, will have a unique IP address from the service provider, which can help identify you. A text message can be traced through the SIM card from which it was sent.

Make clear the consequences of posting messages online, and the legacy posts hold. Potential employers have rejected candidates based on the content they posted online in the past, often due to disclosed prejudices and choice of language.

### Being open

If a young person is being bullied online, they may be reluctant to share this with you.

One reason for that could be that they are afraid they will lose their internet access or that their phone/games consoles will be taken away. Be mindful of this and talk to your child about what will happen if they find themselves being bullied online, and how you will support them.

Bullying is a behaviour displayed by people; it is not simply a technology issue so removing access can only ever be a short-term answer.

### Show respect

Whether they know the person they are engaging with or not, people online should be treated with the same level of respect and consideration as any other relationship. It doesn't matter that they aren't in the same room, they should be treated as if they are.

### Online communication

When online, you usually can't see the person you are engaging with. This means you cannot read their gestures, facial expressions (even with emojis!) or their tone of voice. As a result, it can be easy to misinterpret what you have been sent online. For example, typing in capital letters can often be interpreted as shouting.

Support your child to help them understand the impact of not just what they write or say, but how they deliver it.

### Personal information

It is really important to make sure they understand not to share their private passwords with anyone, even if they think they can trust them. Keeping passwords safe ensures no third party can access your child's online accounts.

### Show an interest

Take an active interest and show positive curiosity towards how they use the internet. What do they like to do online? What apps and games are they downloading and using?

Having general conversations about interests and usage can open communication on deeper issues and provide you with a valuable insight into their online and mobile phone activity.

By creating a good baseline together, you could help prevent issues in the future.

## Reporting abuse

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Most social network platforms allow users to report communications they consider to be illegal, threatening, offensive, harassing or bullying in nature. The networks don't have capacity to monitor all profiles, so they rely on people using reporting tools as a way of policing the site.

## Parental settings

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You may also want to explore the use of available parental settings, to restrict internet usage and set limits on devices.

Managing parental settings can seem like a daunting task if you aren't used to them, and it can be tempting to let your child get on with it themselves. Take a look at the controls available on your home Wi-Fi, and any devices connecting to it, and talk them through with your child, so you can both be familiar with them.

Taking time to understand how you can make their online space safe is really important and it will help you feel more confident in responding to an issue if they arise.

## Online safety control apps

Apps such as Microsoft Family Safety allow you to create healthy, positive digital habits. The app allows you to track usage and set screen time limits, as well as age restrictions on certain content. The app will also allow you to block social media platforms, search engines and apps, and set restrictions when your child can access them.

Our website has information and resources to support you to discuss the online world with your child, what to look out for, and how to handle it if bullying does happen online, as well as some protections that you can put in place to monitor their online experiences.

Watch our five video guides on supporting your child or young person when they are online at [www.respectme.org.uk/parents-online-bullying/](http://www.respectme.org.uk/parents-online-bullying/) or scan the QR code.



# Helpful resources

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**The respectme website offers parents and carers tailored information and resources to help support children and young people and makes it easy for you to find the right information when you need it.**

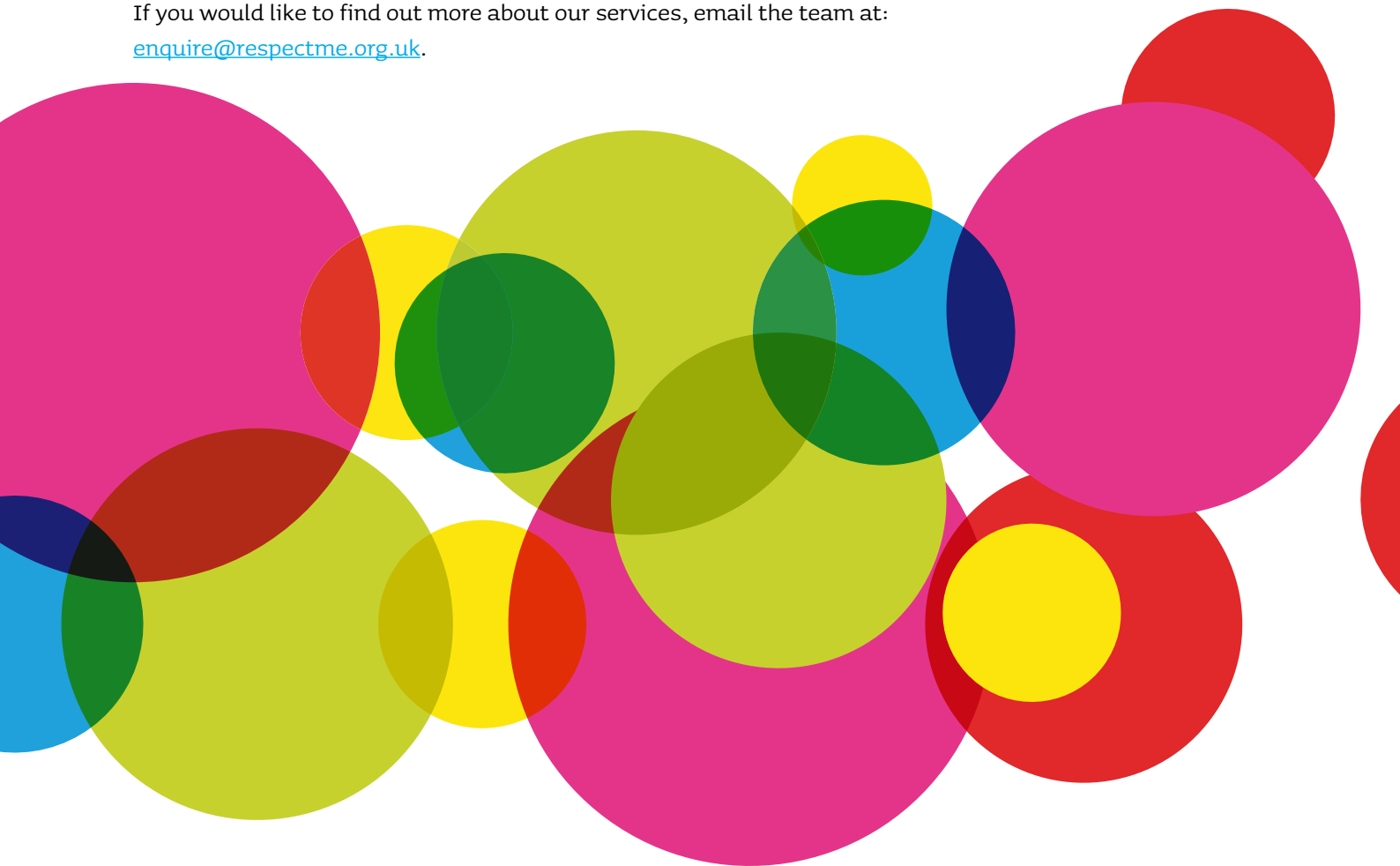
Our free Anti-Bullying Learning Academy online courses will help you gain the knowledge, skills and confidence to respond effectively to children and young people affected by bullying. Visit our website and register for a Learning Academy account.

Visit [www.respectme.org.uk](http://www.respectme.org.uk) for more information and sign up to our e-newsletter.

Our website features other helpful online resources and signposting offering further guidance on online bullying and safety and other useful supports for parents and carers. Visit [www.respectme.org.uk/resources-external-signposting/](http://www.respectme.org.uk/resources-external-signposting/).

We are not a helpline and don't offer support for individuals in schools/organisations, or one-to-one family support. We provide general practical advice and guidance on preventing and responding to bullying behaviour to all professionals/practitioners and parents/carers.

If you would like to find out more about our services, email the team at:  
[enquire@respectme.org.uk](mailto:enquire@respectme.org.uk).



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