

# The Excuse Interpreter

Discover the hidden meanings of common expressions that can excuse disrespectful behaviour



Australian Government

VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN  
**LET'S STOP IT**  
**AT THE START**

# Introduction

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As parents, guardians, carers, and family members, we want the best for our young people. We want them to understand right and wrong, to respect others and themselves. All adults, including teachers, coaches, employers, and role models, can have a positive influence on young people and set the standard for what is and isn't acceptable, right from the start.

## Together we can:

- Reflect on our own understanding of respect.
- Be more aware of situations when we may excuse other people's behaviour and say something when it happens.
- Take steps to understand the type of information young people are engaging with online and the disrespectful words and statements they may be exposed to. See the Hidden trends of disrespect discussion guide.
- Start having conversations about respect, values and behaviours with our young people, and continue to talk about these topics as they grow up.
- Model respect by being aware of what we do and say, and the impacts that can have on others.

## How to use this Interpreter

Sometimes our language can carry hidden meanings. The things we say in front of young people can be interpreted in ways we don't intend, giving the message that certain harmful behaviours or attitudes are OK.

The below excuses and interpretations are just examples to help us become more aware of the type of reactions or excuses used in these situations. How these phrases look and are perceived might be different based on your family, community, culture and young person's own circumstances and identity such as gender, sexuality, age, ability and maturity. If we can reflect and become more aware of this, it will help us avoid using seemingly harmless phrases that might send mixed messages to young people about respect and gender norms.



## Playing down disrespect

This is when we brush off or try to lessen the seriousness of disrespectful or aggressive actions. Responding in this way teaches young people that this behaviour is acceptable in certain circumstances and portrays it as a normal, even playful, aspect of boys' behaviour towards girls.

Have you ever thought or said ...	What a young person might think
<i>'He picks on you because he likes you'</i>	<b>Girl</b> I shouldn't get upset when he insults me. I should take it as a compliment.
	<b>Boy</b> It's okay to do it if you like them.
<i>'Lighten up, he didn't mean it like that'</i>	<b>Girl</b> I'm making a fuss about nothing.
	<b>Boy</b> She overreacted.
<i>'It's only a bit of fun'</i>	<b>Girl</b> I shouldn't take it so seriously.
	<b>Boy</b> If it's fun it doesn't matter if it's hurtful.
<i>'It's happening online, it can't actually hurt you'</i>	<b>Girl</b> My experiences don't matter.
	<b>Boy</b> I can get away with things online.

## Accepting aggression as just part of being a boy

When we excuse aggression from boys, it can imply that boys and men are expected to be dominant, are more important, and should have their needs and wants prioritised over women and girls. Responding in this way teaches young people that disrespectful or aggressive behaviour is acceptable.

Have you ever thought or said ...	What a young person might think
<i>'Give him a break! It's tough being a boy'</i>	<b>Girl</b> It's OK for boys to disrespect me.
	<b>Boy</b> It's not my fault if she makes me angry.
<i>'He's just going through a phase'</i>	<b>Girl</b> If I just accept it, he'll grow out of it and it'll stop.
	<b>Boy</b> I have the right to act this way.
<i>'Boys will be boys'</i>	<b>Girl</b> It's just what boys do—I should get used to it.
	<b>Boy</b> We're just like that, it's fine.
<i>'It's just locker room or gamer talk'</i>	<b>Girl</b> It doesn't matter if the disrespect isn't to my face.
	<b>Boy</b> I can say what I like in these situations and it won't hurt anyone.

## Blaming girls

Sometimes we shift the blame when a boy is disrespectful or aggressive towards a girl. Responding in this way teaches young boys that they won't be held responsible for this behaviour, and teaches young girls to question if they themselves are to blame.

Have you ever thought or said ...	What a young person might think
<i>'It takes two to tango'</i>	<b>Girl</b> I probably did something to start it.
	<b>Boy</b> She started it, so my actions are OK.
<i>'She probably provoked him'</i>	<b>Girl</b> I caused this.
	<b>Boy</b> She asked for it.
<i>'Well she shouldn't have given him that intimate picture'</i>	<b>Girl</b> It's my fault. I don't deserve my privacy.
	<b>Boy</b> I can do whatever I like with images online.

## Excusing violence

Sometimes we justify violence or aggression as being a normal response due to stress, drinking alcohol or some other factor. This implies that a violent person cannot be held responsible for the actions they have chosen.

Have you ever thought or said ...	What a young person might think
<i>'He must have been stressed, we shouldn't poke the bear'</i>	<b>Girl</b> If they're stressed, they can't be expected to control themselves.
	<b>Boy</b> Aggression is an acceptable way to express frustration or stress.
<i>'She shouldn't have been drinking with those boys, that's asking for trouble'</i>	<b>Girl</b> It's my fault if something terrible happens to me while I am drinking.
	<b>Boy</b> She was asking for it.
<i>'It's not his fault, he gets like that when he's drunk'</i>	<b>Girl</b> It's OK if they were drinking, it's not their fault.
	<b>Boy</b> I'm not responsible if I have had something to drink.

## Denying there is a problem

Sometimes we tolerate or deny disrespect or violence because we don't think it affects us. Family and domestic violence is a problem that affects all communities in Australia, even if this is not visible to you. Denying the issue shows our young people that they don't need to be respectful all the time, everywhere.

Have you ever thought or said ...	What a young person might think
<i>'Women are equal now, they need to stop complaining'</i>	<p><b>Girl</b> My problems aren't taken seriously, I should just keep quiet.</p> <p><b>Boy</b> She is overreacting.</p>
<i>'But it wasn't physical, so don't worry about it'</i>	<p><b>Girl</b> I should only speak up if I experience physical abuse.</p> <p><b>Boy</b> It can be excused if I am only being emotionally abusive, or aggressive or controlling online and through text messages.</p>
<i>'It doesn't happen in our neighbourhood so it's not our problem'</i>	<p><b>Girl</b> It's only a problem for the girls experiencing it.</p> <p><b>Boy</b> If people don't know about it they won't care.</p>

## Avoiding gender stereotypes

Gender stereotypes are labels that reinforce outdated ideas of how people should behave based on their gender and have the effect of restricting both girls' and boys' behaviour.

Gender stereotypes may also discourage boys from showing behaviours more traditionally associated with girls, because to some, these are seen as inferior. Traditional social norms are that boys should take control and suppress their emotions, and girls should be passive and accommodating.

While it may not be our intention, these types of comments often have a negative effect on the confidence and self-esteem of young people. They can also reinforce a strict gender stereotype. If we continue to use words and phrases like these, outdated ideas about gender roles will continue.

Have you ever thought or said ...	What a boy might think
<i>'Man up'</i>	Men need to be tough and dominant, like an alpha.
<i>'Stop acting like a girl'</i>	I can't be soft and/or emotional, or my friends will think I'm a beta* or simp**.
<i>'Who wears the pants?'</i>	I should be in control of the relationship.
<i>'Boys don't cry'</i>	I can't express my emotions.
<i>'She has you under the thumb'</i>	She's in control of me, I shouldn't let that happen.
<i>'You're so whipped'</i>	I shouldn't value what my girlfriend wants to do.

\* **Beta:** This term is used as an insult to describe a less dominant man. It promotes aggression, domineering behaviour, and reinforces harmful stereotypes about masculinity.

\*\* **Simp:** This term is used to describe a man who is 'subservient' to a woman in order to win her affection. It's often used to criticise a man for being attentive, respectful, or supportive of women.

Have you ever thought or said ...	What a girl might think
<i>'She's such a bossy boots'</i>	I shouldn't be assertive.
<i>'She's a feisty one'</i>	I shouldn't give my opinion / I shouldn't stand up for myself.
<i>'Why are you being so uptight?'</i>	I shouldn't have boundaries.
<i>'She can be a real know-it-all'</i>	I shouldn't say things that make me sound clever.
<i>'She's a bit of a tomboy'</i>	I shouldn't be myself / I shouldn't play the sports that I like / I should look more feminine / I shouldn't dress the way that I like / I am judged on my appearance.

## The hidden trends of disrespect

Social media and online platforms are a normal way to stay in touch with people, read news, watch videos, and play games.

Young people spend so much time online—especially during their teenage years, and the content they watch can influence and shape their views and behaviour.

As parents and carers, it can be difficult to censor or moderate the content young people may be exposed to online. However, it is our responsibility to better understand what they are seeing and hearing and the impact this may have on their perceptions of gender and violence.

Have you ever thought or said ...	What a young person might think
<i>'I don't have the time to learn about all the new apps and things kids get up to online'</i>	She's not interested / I'm in this alone / He wouldn't get it / I can get away with anything.
<i>'He won't show me what he gets up to online so why bother asking?'</i>	I can do and say whatever I like when I'm online / there are no rules.
<i>'Those are just silly words he picked up from social media. They don't actually mean anything'</i>	I can say what I like because my parents don't care.
<i>'I wouldn't know what to do if my child was being disrespected online'</i>	I shouldn't bother going to my parents for help.
<i>'I haven't seen or heard any behaviour that causes me concern'</i>	As long as I do the right thing in front of my parents, I can do what I like online.

# What you can do next

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Reflecting on our own attitudes, which might excuse disrespect, and being aware of the things we say to young people is the first step towards making a change. By talking to young people about respect, we can have a positive influence on their attitudes and behaviours as they grow into adults. It's important to be clear about what is acceptable, and model this ourselves.

## Resources

There are resources and tools available on the *Stop it at the Start* website, [www.respect.gov.au](http://www.respect.gov.au), to help you learn more about the issue, the type of information young people are engaging with online and ways you can talk about it.

### The Issue Explained

Understanding and talking about violence against women in Australia

### The Hidden Trends of Disrespect

A guide to help parents and carers understand the types of disrespectful and aggressive content young people may see and hear online.

### The Conversation Guide

A guide to having conversations with young people about respect.

### Generation Respect

This is a practical guide to help adults talk to other adults about raising respectful young people.

### Support Services

This page offers a range of support services that can be contacted if you need support or are at risk of experiencing violence.

## Find out more

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### The Line

The Line encourages healthy and respectful relationships by challenging and changing attitudes and behaviours that support violence. The Line is funded by the Australian Government Department of Social Services. It is delivered by Our Watch. [www.theline.org.au](http://www.theline.org.au)

### Student Wellbeing Hub

The Student Wellbeing Hub is a one-stop shop for information and resources on safe school strategies to assist teachers and school leaders, students, parents, specialist professionals supporting students and pre-service teachers. [www.studentwellbeinghub.edu.au](http://www.studentwellbeinghub.edu.au)

### eSafety Commissioner

eSafety is Australia's independent regulator for online safety, educating Australians about online safety risks and helping to remove harmful content such as cyberbullying, cyber abuse, and intimate images or videos shared without consent. The eSafety site has many resources and tips for keeping children safe online. You can also report online harm at [www.esafety.gov.au](http://www.esafety.gov.au)

### Say It Out Loud

Say It Out Loud encourages members of LGBTQ+ communities to have healthy relationships, get help for unhealthy relationships and support their friends. [www.sayitoutloud.org.au](http://www.sayitoutloud.org.au)