

Bullying at work

What bullying is

Although there is no legal definition of bullying, it can be described as unwanted behaviour from a person or group that is either:

- offensive, intimidating, malicious or insulting
- an abuse or misuse of power that undermines, humiliates, or causes physical or emotional harm to someone

Bullying might:

- be a regular pattern of behaviour or a one-off incident
- happen face-to-face, on social media, in emails or calls
- happen at work or in other work-related situations
- not always be obvious or noticed by others

It's possible someone might not know their behaviour is bullying. It can still be bullying even if they do not realise it or do not intend to bully someone.

Examples of bullying

Examples of bullying at work could include:

- constantly criticising someone's work
- spreading malicious rumours about someone
- constantly putting someone down in meetings
- deliberately giving someone a heavier workload than everyone else
- excluding someone from team social events
- putting humiliating, offensive or threatening comments or photos on social media

Upward bullying

Bullying can also happen from staff towards someone more senior, for example a manager. This is sometimes called 'upward bullying' or 'subordinate bullying'.

It can be from one employee or a group of employees.

Examples of upward bullying can include:

- showing continued disrespect
- refusing to complete tasks
- spreading rumours

- constantly undermining someone's authority
- doing things to make someone seem unskilled or unable to do their job properly

It can be difficult for someone in a senior role to realise they're experiencing bullying behaviour from their staff.

It's important to consider the real reasons for the behaviour. For example, there might be a wider issue with the culture of the organisation that can be identified and addressed.

When bullying might be harassment

Bullying and harassment are often confused. By law (Equality Act 2010), bullying behaviour can be harassment if it relates to any of the following 'protected characteristics':

- age
- disability
- gender reassignment
- race
- religion or belief
- sex
- sexual orientation

[Find out more about harassment](#)

Bullying that's not classed as harassment could still lead to other legal issues. For example, severe bullying might contribute towards [constructive dismissal](#).

Employer responsibilities

Employers and employees have a mutual duty to treat each other honestly and with respect.

This means employees have the right to:

- have trust and confidence in their employer
- expect not to be bullied at work

Employers have the right to:

- expect employees not to bully each other
- expect employees to treat their managers with respect and follow all reasonable instructions

Employers also have a legal duty of care to protect their employees from harm. This includes dealing with bullying issues.

Employers should:

- do all they can to try to prevent bullying happening
- take any bullying complaint seriously and look into it as soon as possible

[Find out how employers should handle a bullying complaint](#)

Contact the Acas helpline

If you need help with understanding bullying, you can [contact the Acas helpline](#).