

Guidance - Peer on Peer Abuse

Peer-on-peer abuse is when a child or young person is abused, bullied, or exploited by their peers who are of a similar age. It can include a range of behaviors, such as:

- **Bullying:** This can include online bullying, or bullying based on a person's race, religion, sexuality, disability, or trans status.
- **Sexual violence:** This includes rape, sexual assault, and sexual harassment.
- **Sharing of nude or semi-nude images:** This can include sharing photos or videos without permission.
- **Initiation or hazing:** This can involve rituals that are used to welcome newcomers to an organization, such as a sports team or private school. These rituals can include humiliation, embarrassment, abuse, and harassment.
- **Emotional abuse:** This can be a form of peer-on-peer abuse.
- **Financial abuse:** This can be a form of peer-on-peer abuse.
- **Coercive control:** This can be a form of peer-on-peer abuse.

Even if a police investigation is inconclusive, schools and colleges should continue to support the victim and alleged perpetrator until it's safe to do otherwise.

Children can experience peer-on-peer sexual abuse in a wide range of settings, including:

- at school
- at home or in someone else's home
- in public spaces
- online

It can take place in spaces which are supervised or unsupervised. Within a school context, for example, peer-on-peer sexual abuse might take place in spaces such as toilets, the playground, corridors and when children are walking home (Contextual Safeguarding Network, 2020).

As children develop healthily, it's normal for them to display certain types of sexualised behaviour. It's important that adults who work or volunteer with children can identify if any sexualised behaviour has become harmful or abusive and respond proportionally to keep all the children involved safe.

Recognising peer-on-peer sexual abuse

It can be difficult to work out if a child is displaying appropriate, inappropriate, problematic or abusive sexual behaviour.

Examples of sexually abusive behaviour may include:

- inappropriate or unwanted sexualised touching

- pressurising, forcing or coercing others to perform or take part in sexual acts
- pressuring, forcing or coercing someone to share nude images (**sexting**)
- sharing sexual images of a person without their consent

- taking a picture under a person's clothing, without their consent ('upskirting')
- sexual harassment
- sexual or sexist name calling

If you're concerned about a child's sexualised behaviour, you can use the below NSPCC resources to help work out whether the behaviour may be harmful or abusive.

- [Find out more about harmful sexual behaviour](#)
- [Read more about how to spot if a child may be displaying harmful sexual behaviour, and what action to take](#)
- [Find out more about the healthy sexual development of children and young people](#)

Signs that a child has experienced peer-on-peer sexual abuse

Indicators that a child has experienced peer-on-peer sexual abuse may be physical or behavioural. A child or young person may appear withdrawn, frightened or begin to act differently from usual.

They may also display physical signs such as noticeable discomfort in their genital or anal area.

- [Find out more about recognising the signs of sexual abuse](#)

Barriers to disclosure

Children do not always feel able to speak out about their experiences of peer-on-peer sexual abuse.

They may be afraid of:

- being considered a 'snitch'
- getting in trouble themselves
- how they will be perceived by others
- teachers or other adults not being discrete
- their parents being informed

(Contextual Safeguarding Network, 2020).

If a child is unsure about whether or not they have been sexually abused, they might be worried about causing a fuss or getting someone else in trouble for 'no reason'.

Children's understanding of peer-on-peer sexual abuse

Children may not always understand that they have experienced or carried out peer-on-peer sexual abuse. This might be because:

- they don't understand what constitutes appropriate, inappropriate, problematic or abusive sexualised behaviour
- they have experienced sexual abuse themselves and don't realise that what happened to them was wrong
- they don't know whether consent was given
- the abuse happened between friends or partners
- the abuse took place online
- they blame themselves for the abuse they received
- younger children lack knowledge of sex and sexuality as they are less likely to have received any relationships and sex education

(NSPCC, 2018).

Some children and young people who have viewed pornography may want to emulate what they have seen (Martellozzo et al, 2016).

Some children and young people who experience abuse may begin to understand that they have experienced abuse over time, as they grow older and learn more about sex and healthy relationships (NSPCC, 2018).

Responding to peer-on-peer sexual abuse

If a child experiences peer-on-peer sexual abuse or there are concerns a child might be displaying harmful sexual behaviour (HSB), you need to take child protection action.

Reporting

If you think a child is in immediate danger, contact the police on **999**. If you're worried about a child but they are not in immediate danger, you should share your concerns with your unit or Force Lead or the National Safeguarding Manager vpc.safeguarding@vpc.police.uk

- **Follow your organisational child protection procedures**, including sharing concerns with your nominated child protection lead. Nationally, the VPC has a safeguarding policy and safeguarding processes in place.
- **Report to the police as appropriate** (for example, if an allegation of rape, sexual assault or sexual offence is made). This should happen alongside a making a referral to children's social care, following local authority guidelines.
- **Contact the NSPCC Helpline** on [0808 800 5000](tel:08088005000) or by emailing help@nspcc.org.uk. Our trained professionals will talk through your concerns with you and give you expert advice.

Protecting all the children involved

You should balance the duty to safeguard the child who has experienced abuse with the need to support the child who has displayed harmful sexual behaviour.

Children who witnessed the abuse or are friends of those involved may also be affected and need support.

As unit leader or Force Designated Safeguarding Lead, each incident of or concern about peer-on-peer abuse will be different: you should gather all the facts, assess any risks and make decisions on a case-by-case basis. This will help you understand who needs to be involved to make sure all children are appropriately protected and supported.

Supporting the child who has experienced abuse

Every child who has experienced abuse should receive tailored support to meet their needs. There are things you can do to help make them feel safe and supported.

- Listen carefully to the child and reassure them that you are taking them seriously.
- Record the incident, noting all the relevant facts as fully as possible. Write down the language used by the child. This will help you record precisely what happened and understand how the child has been affected.
- Consider what support the child may need in the short-term, for example making sure they won't come into contact with the child who has displayed abusive behaviour.
- Consider what long-term support the child may need to help them recover from the trauma of what they have experienced. This may include therapeutic support.
- Understand the child's support network and consider what help they need to protect and care for the child.
- Include the child in any decisions that affect them.

Supporting the child who has displayed abusive or harmful sexual behaviour

It's important to protect and support children who have displayed abusive or harmful sexual behaviour.

- Consider any risks to the child's safety and what multi-agency responses are needed to support the child and their family.
- Talk calmly to the child. Remember that they may not realise they have behaved abusively and avoid using language that may make them feel judged or criminalised.
- Consider appropriate sanctions in light of your Force VPC behaviour policy.
- Work with the child and their support network to put measures in place that will help the child change their behaviour.
- Consider what targeted therapeutic support the child may need.

Multi-agency responses

Your nominated Designated Safeguarding Lead should work with relevant agencies to protect and support all the children involved in an incident of peer-on-peer sexual abuse. This includes children's social care and 'the police' if necessary.

Preventing peer-on-peer sexual abuse

Organisations and individuals that work with children have a responsibility to keep them safe. It's important to create a healthy and safe environment for all children and young people and challenge societal norms that may allow peer-on-peer sexual abuse to take place.

Policies, procedures and codes of conduct

The VPC safeguarding and child protection policies and procedures include information about peer-on-peer sexual abuse. You should share these with everyone in your organisation, as well as parents and carers. This will help adults understand what they need to do to prevent and tackle peer-on-peer sexual abuse.

You might find it helpful to create a version of policies and procedures that are suitable for children and young people.

Sharing this information may:

- help children and young people understand that any incidents of peer-on-peer sexual abuse will be taken seriously and responded to effectively
- help them know how to report anything upsetting that may happen
- encourage them to speak out if they are worried about their own or someone else's behaviour.

You should also have codes of conduct which clearly set out what behaviour is and is not appropriate for adults and children. This will help make sure young people know what behaviour is suitable for the VPC and what the consequences will be if they breach the rules.

Helping children speak out

Children might not feel able to talk to adults about peer-on-peer sexual abuse. But there are things you can do to make it easier.

- Children may feel more confident speaking out if they have a positive, trusting relationship with a trusted adult. This can be done by encouraging them to share their thoughts and opinions, responding to their concerns, and respecting and listening to them.
- If children can see a culture within the VPC that challenges inappropriate behaviour, they may feel more confident that any concerns they raise will be responded to appropriately.
- Having specialist staff in pastoral care or counselling roles can make it easier for children to share their concerns.

(Contextual Safeguarding Network, 2020).

Safe environments

The VPC Safeguarding training talks about a Safe Space and leaders should think about how you can make your own unit environment safe for children and young people. To start with, you could identify any locations where there are concerns about peer-on-peer sexual abuse taking place. This might include toilets, unsupervised corridors and areas that are poorly lit or hidden from adult view. Think about what you can do to make these places safer – for example, increasing supervision levels in certain areas or improving lighting.

[The NSPCC website gives more information on how you can create safer environments for children and young people](#)

Talking with children about abuse and harassment

It's important to talk with children and young people about peer-on-peer sexual abuse.

It's good practice for all organisations that work with children to have discussions about sex and healthy relationships. It is a good way of helping children learn about topics such as appropriate sexual behaviour, trust, consent, boundaries and responsibility.

Topics you could discuss include:

- what healthy sexual activity and respectful relationships look like (both online and offline)
- gender stereotypes and perceptions of gender roles
- pornography and how it presents sexual behaviour

- consent and withdrawing consent

(Department for Education (DfE), 2018; DfE, 2020).

Explain what peer-on-peer sexual abuse is and what it may look like. This may help children understand if they have seen or experienced abuse. Make sure they know who they can talk to if they are concerned about anything or have experienced something upsetting.

Childline has produced age-appropriate information and advice for children and young people about sexual abuse, which includes information about peer-on-peer sexual abuse. You may want to signpost children to Childline for support or use some of these examples to help start a conversation.

> [Childline's information about sexual abuse for children and young people](#)

> [Find out more about how to promote healthy relationships, from early years through to older children](#)