

No.14 Peer on Peer Abuse

What is peer on peer abuse and who is affected?

Children can abuse other children. This is generally referred to as peer on peer abuse and can take many forms. This can include (but is not limited to): bullying (including cyberbullying); sexual violence and sexual harassment; physical abuse such as hitting, kicking, shaking, biting, hair pulling, or otherwise causing physical harm; sexting and initiation/hazing type violence and rituals.

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Peer on peer abuse can happen in a wide range of settings wherever children attend be that school, a youth club, the park, their local neighbourhood; even online. But it very often goes unseen. The NSPCC announced a 29% increase in children seeking help from Childline due to peer-on-peer sexual abuse in autumn 2018. We know children with Disabilities and SEN are vulnerable to peer on peer abuse, that girls are more likely to be affected than boys and those on the periphery of social groups (wanting to 'belong'). Children and young people identifying with the LGBT+ communities are also vulnerable to peer on peer abuse, so too those from different communities. Children and young people who have experienced a recent bereavement (parent, sibling or friend) and those who live with domestic violence are vulnerable to this type of abuse, as well as those children who have experience other forms of intra familial abuse.

Abusers can be younger than their victim and boys and young men are more likely to be the abusers.

Peer on peer abuse is a complex situation, all involved are victims. Very often the abuser, the perpetrator is also the victim. Peer on peer abuse cannot be solved by just one single

What are the signs?

It is important that all staff in settings know and are aware of the signs and symptoms of peer on peer abuse and take disclosures seriously. It is wrong to dismiss peer on peer abuse as 'children just being children' or as 'banter'. Below is a list of possible signs and symptoms but like all forms of abuse, this list is not exhaustive and children may display all or none of the signs below.

- absence from school or disengagement from school activities
- physical injuries
- mental or emotional health issues
- becoming withdrawn – lack of self esteem
- lack of sleep
- alcohol or substance misuse
- changes in behaviour
- inappropriate behaviour for age
- abusive towards others
- going missing/staying out late
- change in peer groups

What can schools and settings do?

School can be proactive in challenging abusive behaviour amongst its cohort by listening to its young people, creating a child centred behaviour policy (which clearly identifies and describes peer on peer abuse). Settings can also promote and develop a culture of openness providing systems and ways to support pupils to share their worries, being clear about who they can go to, what will happen if they do share a worry. For all of the above gathering the pupil's views and opinions is vital.

Review your curriculum, does e.g. your RSE, PSHE, R.E., science, I.T. etc. reflect the needs of your children? Are you teaching and enabling your children to say no, are they aware of what consent is and means? Do they know what a healthy relationship is/looks like? Do they know the potential dangers when on line and using social media? Are they aware of the dangers of risk taking and most importantly could they spot the signs of peer abuse amongst their friends? All these reviews can and should be considered whatever the age range of the setting. All can be covered at an age appropriate level effectively.

To truly understand peer on peer abuse and how it may manifest itself amongst its pupil's schools need to be aware of their immediate locality as well as the local community and how these both influence young people and their actions. (Contextual Safeguarding.) Mapping school hotspots with pupils e.g. noting where children feel less safe, where incidents of aggression or bullying have taken place will provide insight when creating risk assessments and policies. Locality mapping will also support the identification of areas of concern. The use of self audit tools, ecomaps, genograms, and exploitation tool kits will enable professionals working with the child to identify the supportive factors in their lives as well as the negative influences, these supportive factors can be woven into action plans.

If school has been made aware of a peer on peer situation how the victim and the perpetrator are supported needs to be considered, e.g. are both in the same class? How can they be distanced? How will school support both and their families? School should take time to learn from previous situations and use its recording systems to identify and analyse trends in particular cohorts, groups and areas. This analysis will then inform responses to many of the questions mentioned above.

Useful Contacts:

Contextual Safeguarding Network <https://csnetwork.org.uk/>

KCSiE [Keeping Children Safe in Education](#)

DCFP Adolescent Safety Framework [DCFP ASF Safer Me Assessment](#)

Further Reading:

We will in the future be developing a Peer on Peer Abuse series of OMG's and Podcasts where we will be exploring the different ways children can abuse each other in more detail. These OMG will include –

- *bullying (including cyberbullying)*
- *sexual violence and sexual harassment*
- *physical abuse*
- *sexting*
- *initiation/hazing type violence and rituals*
- *exploitation (emotional, financial, criminal, online)*

