

# PROTECT AND SUPPORT VULNERABLE TEENAGERS 2019

## Identifying peer-on-peer abuse: examples for staff

All staff have a role to play in responding to allegations of peer-on-peer abuse. **Ann Marie Christian** shares a few examples for you to discuss with colleagues.

In late 2006, I saw an influx of referrals being made to the team I was managing in children's social care. Some of the referred incidents included girls performing oral sex, and a group of boys and girls coercing other girls into performing sexual acts on boys. These were escalated to child protection enquiries ('section 47s'). In some cases, the culprits were excluded permanently from school and the victims were given fresh starts in new schools.

It was a challenging time for our team, and cooperation with other agencies had to be at the heart of our work. Ten years later, schools and colleges have clearer guidance for child protection, as set out in the document *Keeping Children Safe in Education*. On page 19, in the section 'Allegations of abuse made against children', it is clearly established that children can abuse their peers.

Staff should be aware that peer-on-peer abuse does exist, and their school's child protection policy should include procedures for minimising risk and investigating incidents.

It's important to emphasise that nothing should be dismissed as 'banter' or a 'part of growing up' without proper investigation. Even seemingly innocuous 'jabs' could conceal instances of emotional, sexual or physical abuse. While the additions to statutory guidance are welcome, school staff still need to be able to recognise peer-on-peer abuse as it takes place.



## A discerning approach

Research carried out by Dr Carlene Firmin at the University of Bedfordshire examined the extent of peer-on-peer abuse in secondary schools, and found that many schools could be considered recruitment grounds for peer-on-peer child sexual exploitation (CSE). In addition to identifying and speaking out against unacceptable behaviour, teachers and parents have a responsibility to nurture the emotional wellbeing of victims, who in some cases may require specialist support.

In the past, I've been notified of serious cases of abuse that were subsequently referred to children's social care and the police. One alarming trend is the recording of sexual acts being performed on or by teenagers, and then shared via social media.

Sexting may well be the norm in most pupils' lives, but recording or sharing indecent images can carry significant legal consequences.

If a Year 9 pupil repeatedly harasses (physically, sexually and emotionally) a female classmate because he's attracted to her, or a Year 6 pupil kisses a boy in her class for the same reason, do we first consider the experience of the pupil being targeted, or the pupil causing the harm?

When vulnerable children are being coerced into being perpetrators and victims of these acts, online and in person, it's vital that staff take a discerning approach to investigating potential child abuse.

Below you'll find a few other hypothetical examples of peer-on-peer abuse, with little more contextual information than a member of staff is likely to have in the first instance. Under each one, I've included questions that must be kept in mind when deciding on a response.



## Peer-on-peer abuse at primary level

**A Year 4 pupil chases a female peer across the playground, pins her down and lifts her skirt.**

Key questions:

- Were there any adults in the playground when this took place?
- Is the school aware of any 'blind spots' on the school grounds, and what can be done to ensure that pupils are monitored in these areas?
- Did the female pupil consent to being chased? If so, is she old enough to make such a choice, especially as her skirt is being lifted?
- How can staff support the wellbeing of the girl? How does she feel?

**A boy in Reception follows another boy into a toilet cubicle and demands he pull down his underwear.**

Key questions:

- Were there any adults nearby when this took place?
- Why did the boy follow him into the cubicle?
- Are both sets of parents aware that the incident took place?
- Was the incident reported, and to whom?

**In a WhatsApp group chat, a group of Year 5 pupils mock and insult someone in their Year 5 class.**

Key questions:

- Is the school aware that this took place? Was it reported?
- Who initiated the negative discussion, and have they been spoken to?
- Is there a home-school agreement that covers the use of social media, and allows the school to act on instances of harmful online behaviour?



## Peer-on-peer abuse at secondary level

**A female Year 7 pupil is pressured by a group of friends into French kissing a male classmate.**

Key questions:

- Who initiated the pressure, and have they been spoken to?
- Does the female pupil have a voice? Does she need any specialist support?
- Was the incident reported, and to whom?

**A picture of a female Year 9 pupil wearing nothing but underwear is shared across the year group by a friend with whom she's fallen out of favour.**

Key questions:

- Was the female student aware that the images were being shared?
- Who do you need to talk to in order to find out what the images contained?
- How widely have the messages have been shared?
- Is this something to refer to the police?

**A pupil tells you that he is regularly verbally abused on the bus. He says that one boy in particular is the ringleader and calls out vulgar expressions.**

Key questions:

- Is the abuse confined to the bus, or does it continue in school?
- Are there witnesses to confirm the pupil's story?
- How can you discuss the issue appropriately with the 'ringleader'?

The headteacher, governing body and designated safeguarding lead (DSL) are responsible for keeping awareness of abuse high on the school's agenda. However, all staff have a duty



of care and should be prepared to respond to any disclosures a pupil could willingly or hesitantly come forward to make.

When responding to incidents, always start with the facts: who said, sent or did what to whom? All indicators of potential abuse should be viewed in the context of a pupil's background, and any unmet behavioural or developmental needs.

It is important that staff assure young people that they can report their concerns confidently, but not place themselves in a position where they promise not to share sensitive information.

Always consider the degree of aggression, the motivation for the behaviour and its characteristics (is it verbal, physical or sexual?) when assessing incidents between peers. Preventing harm and ensuring safety should always be immediate priorities, but be mindful of any longer-term emotional or psychological effects.

If the actions of a particular pupil amount to a significant incident, it's important to report to the police or a social care unit, as appropriate with the procedures of the school's Local Safeguarding Children Board.

Staff should also encourage parents to be alert to their children's wellbeing and encourage them to communicate their concerns with school staff. Multi-agency working will help you to keep peer-on-peer abuse out of the picture.

*Ann Marie has over 20 years experience as a practitioner and 10 years experience of social work management. She is passionate about ensuring schools and organisations are embedded and fully absorbed in their 'Duty to Safeguard' and provide a preventative service to young people and their families. She specialises in child protection training and consultancy and is passionate about thresholds and safeguarding. She supports organisations with vulnerable families that do not meet the child protection threshold by offering supervision, trouble shooting, training and consultancy.*