

It may be appropriate to regard a child's behaviour as abusive if:

- There is a large difference in power between the people involved.
- The perpetrator has repeatedly tried to harm one or more people.
- There are concerns about the intention of the alleged perpetrator.

If it is believed that the perpetrator intended to cause harm to the victim, this should be regarded as abuse even if severe harm was not actually caused.

Anyone who has a concern that a child might have been abused by another child and/or is displaying inappropriate sexualised behaviour should follow the school's safeguarding procedures. Allegations of peer abuse will be taken as seriously as allegations of abuse perpetrated by an adult. Separate enquiries and investigations will be pursued in respect of the victim and the abuser.

Peer on Peer Abuse

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Peer on peer abuse

There are four key definitions of peer-on-peer abuse:

- **Domestic abuse** – young people who experience physical, emotional, sexual and/or financial abuse, and coercive control, in their intimate relationships, as well as family relationships.
- **Child sexual exploitation** – those under the age of 18 who are sexually abused in the context of exploitative relationships, contexts and situations.
- **Serious youth violence** – any offence of most serious violence or weapon-enabled crime.
- **Harmful sexual behaviour** – young people displaying sexual behaviours that are outside of developmentally 'normative' parameters.

Children are vulnerable to physical, sexual and emotional bullying and abuse by their peers. Such abuse should always be taken as seriously as abuse perpetrated by an adult. It should be the same safeguarding children procedures as apply in respect of any child who is suffering or at risk of suffering **significant harm**.

A significant proportion of sex offences are committed by teenagers and, on occasion, such offences are committed by younger children.

Staff should not dismiss some abusive sexual behaviour as "normal" between young people and should not develop high thresholds before taking action.

Children and young people who abuse others should be held responsible for their abusive behaviour, while being identified and responded to in a way that meets their needs as well as protecting others.

The definition of **Sexual Abuse** by children is the same as sexual abuse by adults.

Abusive sexual activity is characterised by behaviour involving coercion, threats, aggression together with secrecy or where one participant relies on an unequal powerbase.

Signs of peer on peer abuse

The boundary between what is abusive and what is part of normal childhood or youthful experimentation can be blurred. The ability of professionals to determine whether a child's sexual behaviour is developmental, inappropriate or abusive will hinge around the related concepts of true consent, power imbalance and exploitation. This may include children who exhibit a range of sexually problematic behaviour such as indecent exposure, obscene telephone calls, fetishism, bestiality and sexual abuse against adults or children and downloading indecent images of children from the internet.

Sexual behaviour can be inappropriate socially, inappropriate to development or both. It is important to consider what negative effects the behaviour has on any of the parties involved and what concerns it raises about a child. It should be recognised that the behaviour may be motivated by information seeking but may cause significant upset, confusion physical damage etc. It may also be that the behaviour is acting out which may derive from other sexual situations which the child has been exposed to.

What are the impacts of abuse on a child? Peer-on-peer abuse can manifest itself and impact a child in many ways, including, but not limited to, the following:

- Causing physical injuries
- Encouraging drug and alcohol abuse
- Going missing/running away
- Compromising their sexual health
- Committing criminal offences
- Acting disengaged from school
- Affecting their mental health and emotional wellbeing

To an extent, there is no clear boundary between incidents that should be regarded as peer-on-peer abuse and incidents that are more properly dealt with as bullying, sexual experimentation, etc. For this reason, a staff member's professional judgement plays a vital role in the identification process.