

Peer Sexual Abuse



What is Peer Sexual Abuse

It's normal for children to display a range of sexual behaviours as they grow up, but sometimes their behaviour can be harmful to themselves and others. Around a third of child sexual abuse is committed by other children and young people. We call this peer sexual abuse.

Peer Sexual abuse includes, but is not limited to: *physical and sexual abuse / sexual harassment and violence / emotional harm / on and offline bullying / teenage relationship abuse*

Context

Peer sexual abuse can happen in a range of settings, including: at school / at home / in public spaces / at parties / at a friend's house / 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 and outdoor areas, corridors and when children are travelling to and from school.

It should be recognised that the behaviour in question is harmful to both the perpetrator (who is a child) and the victim. Behaviour may be intimate or non-intimate.

Why is it important?

Young people can be confused about whether or not they have experienced peer sexual abuse. Reasons for this include:

Confusion about what constitutes 'normal' sexual activity / they don't know whether they gave consent (N.B no-one can consent to being abused) / they were using substances when the abuse took place / the abuse was carried out by a friend or partner / the abuse took place online; and/or they blame themselves for what happened.

Parents & professionals don't always know the most appropriate way to respond to children who display harmful sexual behaviour and/or who have experienced peer sexual abuse.

What is the impact?

Experiencing peer sexual abuse can have a long-lasting negative impact on a child's wellbeing that can reach into adulthood. Effects can include:

- mental health issues – such as post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), anxiety, low self-esteem, depression, self-harming
- challenging behaviour – such as substance misuse, sexualised behaviour, offending
- relationship problems – for example intimacy issues, having unstable relationships, unable to form or sustain friendships

Spotting the signs and symptoms

- 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- becoming withdrawn – lack of self-esteem / lack of sleep / alcohol or substance misuse.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

As with all safeguarding issues, peer on peer abuse can impact on children and young people without these characteristics.

What should you do?

It's important that adults who work or volunteer with children can identify if sexualised behaviour becomes harmful or abusive, and respond proportionally to keep all the children involved safe.

This also includes knowing how to proactively:

- **Respond to disclosure or a concern raised**
- **Initiate a discussion with your safeguarding lead**
- **Take immediate action**
- **Make a referral when appropriate (for the victim and also perpetrator who may be a child in need of care and support)**

Further Reading:

- Practice guidance on Harmful Sexual Behaviour -Wales Safeguarding Procedures
- Guidance for education settings on peer sexual abuse, exploitation and harmful sexual behaviour
- Department for Education advice: Sexual violence and sexual harassment between children in schools and colleges - GOV.UK www.gov.uk