



## Safeguarding Children Peer abuse

### Purpose

Every organisation that works with children must have procedures about how to respond to allegations of abuse made against a child and concerns that a child or young person may pose a risk of abuse to others. The information on this page will help you to:

- ensure children who may have been abused by another child or young person are protected and supported
- provide the child or young person who may have carried out the abuse with the appropriate help
- make sure your organisation's response to any allegations is fair and consistent and any risks posed to children are managed appropriately

### Types of allegations

There are many ways that a child may be abusive towards others. A child who is displaying abusive behaviour may not realise they are doing so. When a child abuses another child, it is sometimes called 'peer on peer abuse' or 'peer abuse' (Department for Education, 2020; Department of Health, 2017). Allegations may involve:

- bullying or cyberbullying
- emotional abuse
- online abuse
- physical abuse
- sexting
- harmful sexual behaviour
- sexual abuse

### Identifying concerns

There are a range of ways concerns might be raised.

- A child or adult might make a direct allegation of abuse by a child or young person.
- A child or adult might tell you they're uncomfortable with a child or young person's behaviour. They may not realise the behaviour is abusive.
- A member of staff or volunteer might observe behaviour that gives cause for concern and make a report following your organisation's safeguarding procedures.
- Your organisation may be informed that a child or young person is the subject of an investigation.
- A child or young person might tell you they have harmed someone else or are at risk of doing so.



## Disclosure

It can be very hard for children and young people to speak out about abuse. Often, they fear there may be negative consequences if they tell anyone what's happening to them. Some may delay telling someone about abuse for a long time, while others never tell anyone, even if they want to. It's vital that children and young people are able to speak out and that whoever they tell takes them seriously and acts on what they've been told. Talking to a child who tells you they have behaved abusively Sometimes a child may tell you directly that they have behaved abusively towards someone else. If this happens:

- reassure the child that they've done the right thing by telling you about it
- listen carefully to the child and let them tell their whole story. Don't try to investigate or quiz the child, but make sure you understand what they're saying
- use non-judgmental language
- remember that a child who is telling you they've abused someone else is a child in need of support
- tell them that you now have to do what you can to keep them and the other children involved safe
- explain what you are going to do next and that you will need to speak to other people who can help
- reassure the child that they can get help to change their behaviour and move forward with their life
- you may want to suggest the child contacts Childline for support.

Never promise to keep what a child tells you a secret. Explain that you need to talk to other people who can help keep them and the other children involved safe

children involved

- the senior manager or trustee responsible for safeguarding
- any other agencies you know are working with the child
- the local child protection services if necessary

## Talking to a child who may be behaving abusively

If allegations have been made against a child you should speak to your nominated child protection lead, who can advise you on the best way to proceed. If you confront the child about the allegations before taking advice, it may make the situation worse. For more advice about speaking to a child who may be behaving abusively, contact the NSPCC

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Helpline on 0808 800 5000 or by emailing [help@nspcc.org.uk](mailto:help@nspcc.org.uk). Sometimes you may have noticed a child behaving inappropriately and you may need to talk to them about this immediately, in order to manage the behaviour. Remember that they may not realise their behaviour is unacceptable. Talk to them calmly and explain why their behaviour is unsuitable and what they can do to improve it. Be aware that a child who displays challenging behaviour may be doing so because they have experienced abuse or neglect. If you think this may be the case, follow our child protection procedures.

### **Making notes**

It's important to keep accurate and detailed notes on any concerns you have about a child. You will need to share this record with your nominated child protection lead. Include:

- the child's details (name, age, address)
- what the child said or did that gave you cause for concern (if the child made a verbal disclosure, write down their exact words)
- the details of any other children involved or impacted.

### **Deciding if a concern is a child protection issue**

When a child or young person behaves inappropriately towards another child, a decision needs to be made about whether there may be a child protection concern. Your organisation's nominated child protection lead should make this decision in consultation with:

- the volunteer, contractor or staff member who is responsible for the supervision/pastoral care of the children involved
- the senior manager or trustee responsible for safeguarding
- any other agencies you know are working with the child
- the local child protection services if necessary

### **When an allegation is a child protection concern**

An allegation becomes a child protection concern when:

- the behaviour involves sexual assault or physical assault
- the child who has experienced the abusive behaviour has suffered significant harm
- the behaviour forms part of a pattern of concerning behaviour by the child or young person who is being abusive
- the child carrying out the abuse is displaying harmful sexual behaviour
- you are concerned that the child carrying out the abuse may be doing so because they have experienced abuse or other upsetting experiences themselves.



It is also a child protection concern when there's a significant difference of power between the child who is displaying abusive behaviour and the person being abused, for example when:

- there's an age difference of more than two years
- there's a significant difference in terms of size or level of ability
- the child displaying abusive behaviour holds a position of power (such as being a helper, volunteer or informal leader)
- the child being abused is significantly more vulnerable than the other child or young person.

### **Taking action to keep all children and young people safe**

Depending on the nature of the allegation or concern, you may need to take action to protect and support children who have experienced peer abuse. You should also consider how best to support the child against whom the allegation was made.

### **Emotional support**

If peer abuse has taken place in your organisation, this may have an emotional impact on everyone in the group. Make sure children, young people and adult supervisors have access to the emotional support they need and know who they can talk to if they are worried about anything. Childline provides confidential help and advice for children and young people. Calls to 0800 1111 are free and children can also contact Childline online.

### **Multi-agency working**

If statutory agencies are investigating and assessing the situation you should stay in contact with them and share all relevant information with multi-agency partners.

### **Sexting**

If a young person in your organisation has been involved in sexting, it's important to respond appropriately and follow the right procedures. Please refer to our online safety policy for more information.

### **When you're not sure**

If you aren't sure whether a child or young person's behaviour is abusive, you could contact the NSPCC Helpline on 0808 800 5000 or by emailing [help@nspcc.org.uk](mailto:help@nspcc.org.uk). Their trained professionals will talk through your concerns with you, give you expert advice and take action to protect the child as appropriate. This may include making a referral to the local



authority. You should also discuss the matter with your local authority child protection services.

### **Telling parents that their child may have abused someone else**

The child's parents or carers should be told what has happened, as long as it doesn't increase the risk to the child. Ask the child how they would like their parents/carers to be told. You could suggest:

- talking to parents first without the child there, then summarising everything with the child present
- helping the child tell their parents in their own words, with you present for support.

It's important for parents and children to talk about what's happened and begin to come to terms with it as a family. When talking to parents or carers, remember that the news their child has behaved abusively may be a shock. Reassure them that support is available to help their child change their behaviour and move forward.

### **Support for parents**

You should also make sure that the parents/carers are offered appropriate support. Some organisations that may be helpful for parents/carers include:

- Family Lives which help parents/carers to deal with a range of challenges
- The Lucy Faithfull Foundation which provides support around child sexual abuse/harmful sexual behaviour

### **Reporting concerns**

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.

- Follow our child protection procedures.
- Contact the NSPCC Helpline on 0808 800 5000 or by emailing [help@nspcc.org.uk](mailto:help@nspcc.org.uk) their trained professionals will talk through your concerns with you and give you expert advice.
- Contact your local child protection services. Their contact details can be found on the website for the local authority the child lives in.
- Contact the police

Services will risk assess the situation and take action to protect the child as appropriate either through statutory involvement or other support. This may include making a referral to the local authority.

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