



Harmful Sexual Behaviour / Peer on Peer Abuse

What is harmful sexual behaviour?

Harmful sexual behaviour (HSB) is a term used to describe sexual actions that are outside what is safe for a young person's stage of development. It includes actions that can harm either the child or the young person themselves, or another person.

It can include:

- frequently and intentionally accessing age-inappropriate sexual material online;
- using inappropriate language;
- undertaking mutual sexual activity they are not ready for with peers;
- sending and receiving illegal images;
- sexual interactions where there are significant power differences, lack of consent, or through force or threats;
- engaging in abusive or sexually violent sexual behaviour online or offline.

Peer-on-peer sexual abuse is a form of HSB where sexual abuse takes place between children of a similar age or stage of development

What does research tell us?

- Under 18s are responsible for at least a third of recorded sexual offences against children and young people in the UK.
- Boys in early adolescence, around the time puberty starts, tend to display the most harmful sexual behaviour, although younger children and girls do sometimes engage in these behaviours too.
- Girls tend to be over-represented amongst the victims of harmful sexual behaviour.
- Those with learning disabilities and autism also tend to be over-represented amongst young people who have displayed harmful sexual behaviour.
- Around half of young people who have displayed harmful sexual behaviour have experienced sexual abuse themselves.

The vast majority of young people do not persist with these behaviours into adulthood. Parents and carers need to be able to consider the risks their own children and young people might pose to others, both online and in-person, and to be alert to the signs of harmful sexual behaviour that children and young people display.

Signs a child might be abusing

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A child or young person who is sexually harming another might display certain signs. For example:

- Seeks out the company of younger children and spends an unusual amount of time in their company?
- Takes younger children to 'secret' places or hideaways or plays 'special' games with them (e.g. doctor and patient, removing clothing etc.) especially games unusual for their age?
- Insists on hugging or kissing a child when the child does not want to?
- Tells you they do not want to be alone with a child or becomes anxious when a particular child or young person is coming to visit?
- Frequently uses aggressive sexual language about adults or children?
- Shows sexual material to younger children?
- Makes sexually abusive telephone calls?
- Shares alcohol or other drugs with younger children or teens?
- Views sexual images of children on the internet or elsewhere?
- Exposes their genitals to younger children?
- Forces sex on another adolescent or child?
- Becomes secretive about their online activity, shutting the door of the room where they are using the computer and changing the screen if someone enters the room
- Hides traces of their online activity and storage files
- Uses the new technology with children whilst excluding adults
- Meets up with children, young people and/or vulnerable adults in real life who they have initially met online.

Tips on how to talk to your children about sex and relationships

It can be difficult to talk to your children about sex and relationships, but in order to keep them safe from harm, it is vital that protective adults are able to have these challenging conversations, and that they know what warning signs look like.

How to talk to your children about sex and relationships:

- Start talking to your children from a young age about relationships, and staying safe.
- Think about what messages you want to convey to your children about sex, and sexuality.
- Consider how you conduct your own relationships and what messages young children in your life are learning from your behaviours. Children will take in more from actions and behaviours that they see, than from what they are told, especially if these messages are inconsistent.

- Think about using age-appropriate interactive resources that help children and young people learn about sex, relationships, consent, the law and staying safe.
- Children will be naturally curious about sex and relationships as they start to develop and mature, and will have questions that they might feel embarrassed to ask you as their parent or carer. You can make sure your children know about reputable sources online where they can get accurate and up-to-date information about these issues.

How to talk to your children about pornography:

- Speak with your child about sexualised content online, including pornography, particularly as they move towards adolescence. The reason for this is that many children and young people are exposed to this kind of content, and some may actively seek it out. This could involve talking in an age-appropriate way about what pornography is, why people look at it, what the dangers can be in looking at it, as well as how it differs from real-life relationships.
- Use reputable resources that help young people understand what healthy sexual relationships look like.
- It is illegal to show pornographic material to anyone under 18, but helping them make sense of what they may have already seen is really important.
- Talk to your child about how they feel about online sexual content they have seen, find out what it means to them, whether they value it or not and whether there are other ways to meet their needs.
- Some young people turn to pornography to learn about sex, as it is so easily accessible. Encourage them to instead visit websites to explore sex and relationships for themselves, such as the resources available on Brook.
- Inform yourself about what type of sexual images are illegal and explain the consequences of accessing illegal sexual material.
- Learn about pornography addiction. This might be helpful if your child has been viewing pornography regularly and is saying that they don't know how to stop.

Remember to give your child privacy as they grow into an adolescent so they have the space to explore and learn about their own body and sexual needs.

What is peer-on-peer abuse?

It is important to recognise and acknowledge that abuse is not always perpetrated by adults; children can abuse other children and it can happen both inside and outside of educational settings and online. This is referred to as 'peer on peer abuse' and can include:

- Bullying, including cyberbullying, prejudice-based and discriminatory bullying;



- Abuse in intimate personal relationships between peers;
- Physical abuse such as hitting, kicking, shaking, biting, hair pulling, or otherwise causing physical harm; this may include an online element which facilitates, threatens and/or encourages physical abuse;
- Sexual violence, such as rape, assault by penetration and sexual assault; this may include an online element which facilitates, threatens and/or encourages sexual violence;
- Sexual harassment, such as sexual comments, remarks, jokes and online sexual harassment, which may be standalone or part of a broader pattern of abuse;
- Causing someone to engage in sexual activity without consent;
- Consensual and non-consensual sharing of nude and semi-nude images and or videos (also known as sexting or youth produced sexual imagery);
- 'Upskirting' which involves taking a picture under someone's clothing without them knowing; this is usually with the intention of viewing their genitals or buttocks for sexual gratification, or cause the victim humiliation, distress or alarm. Upskirting is a criminal offence and anyone of any gender, can be a victim,
- Initiation/hazing type violence and rituals.

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, by a person of any age, including another young person.
- Serious youth violence – any offence of most serious violence or weapon-enabled crime, where the victim is aged 19 or younger, e.g. wounding with intent, rape, murder and grievous bodily harm.
- Harmful sexual behaviour – young people displaying sexual behaviours that are outside of developmentally 'normative' parameters.

Definition

Children can abuse other children. This is generally referred to as peer on peer/child on child abuse and can take many forms. It can happen both inside and outside of school/college and online. It is most likely to include, but may not be limited to: bullying (including cyberbullying, prejudice-based and discriminatory bullying); abuse in intimate personal relationships between peers; physical abuse; sexual violence, such as rape, assault by penetration and sexual assault; sexual harassment; non-consensual sharing of nudes and

semi nudes images and/or videos; causing someone to engage in sexual activity without consent; upskirting; and initiation/hazing type violence and rituals.

Keeping Children Safe in Education

Whom does it affect?

- Girls and young women are more frequently identified as those who are abused by their peers, reporting it as having a negative impact on their lives.
- Boys and young men are more likely to be identified as abusers, and less likely to say that partner abuse impacts them negatively.
- Peer-on-peer abuse tends to be experienced by children aged 10 and upwards, with those abusing them being slightly older; however, cases of eight year olds being abused, and inflicting abuse, have been reported.
- Children with intra-familial abuse in their histories, or those living with domestic abuse, are more vulnerable to peer-on-peer abuse.
- Children in care, or those that have experienced bereavement, are more at risk of abusing, or being abused by, their peers.
- Black and minority ethnic children are often under-identified as victims, and are over-identified as perpetrators instead.

It is important to remember that as with all safeguarding issues, peer on peer abuse can impact on children and young people without these characteristics.

Signs a young person may be experiencing peer abuse:

- Anxiety, depression, or suicidal thoughts.
- Constant or regular sickness.
- Eating disorders.
- Aggression or high tolerance of violence.
- Bullying and/or antisocial behaviour, like vandalism.
- Attention seeking or silent / withdrawn.
- Drug or alcohol use.
- Falling out with friends or family.
- Unexplained injuries.
- Self-conscious / lack of self-confidence.
- Changes in personality and decline in behaviour, performance and engagement.
- Early / unwanted pregnancy.



What are the impacts of abuse on a child?

Peer-on-peer abuse can manifest itself and impact a young person 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.

Prevention, Early Intervention and Support

At Lostock Hall Academy, we provide a healthy, safe environment based on equality and informed choices allowing students to know their rights and responsibilities, what to do if they are unhappy with something and what it means to give true consent.

Staff and students treat each other with respect and understand how their actions affect others.

Staff and students are encouraged to openly discuss issues that could motivate child on child abuse.

Staff receive regularly updated and appropriate safeguarding training that enables them to understand:

- How to identify the indicators of abuse.
- What to do if they have a concern about a child.
- How to respond to a report of abuse.
- How to offer support to students and where to go if they need support.

Staff understand the impact of peer/child on child abuse on children/young people's mental health as well as the additional needs/vulnerabilities of children/young people with special educational needs or disabilities, who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual and/or transgender; and/or have other perceived differences.

Staff will challenge all inappropriate behaviours, for example:



- Making it clear that sexual violence and sexual harassment is not accepted, will never be tolerated and is not an inevitable part of growing up.
- Not tolerating or dismissing sexual violence or sexual harassment as “banter”, “part of growing up”, “just having a laugh” or “boys being boys”.

A preventative curriculum programme addressing issues that are associated with peer-on-peer abuse and teaches students about safeguarding, including how to stay safe online is delivered to all students across the academy. The lifestudies curriculum also tackles issues such as healthy and respectful relationships, what respectful behaviour looks like, consent, gender roles, stereotyping and equality, body confidence, self-esteem, prejudiced behaviour, sexual violence and sexual harassment.

Opportunities will be made for students to weigh up risks and recognise that sometimes this means they will take risks we as adults and professionals disagree with. Our role is to influence and educate students to make healthy long-term choices, keeping them safe from harm in the short-term.

Tips on how to create a safe environment for your family

Open communication

Communicating openly with your children about a wide range of topics, including healthy relationships and staying safe can start from a young age.

Taking some time each day to ask how your children are, whether there is anything on their mind or anything they would like to talk about, can help children and young people to open up and communicate better. This could be when you say goodnight or when they get home from school.

Children and young people need to be able to trust you enough to reach out to you when things go wrong, or if they are worried about something. Fostering this from an early age will help your child know that you love and care for them even when they have made mistakes, and this may make it more likely that they would come to you when they are troubled.

Talking provides an opportunity to help your children understand what makes a safe and loving relationship, and to know what makes it unsafe and unhealthy. If no one helps them understand the difference, they will find it difficult to develop the skills to know if they are a victim or the one causing harm.



Create a safe environment and respond to concerns

Creating a home environment that is calm, where adult relationships are modelled in a healthy, loving way will help teach children and young people to respect others.

Reducing stress and conflict in the home can create a more stable environment where children are less likely to engage in harmful behaviours.

Young people need to feel like someone has their back even when things go wrong. You can correct your child's behaviour while also showing how much you love and care for them.

Expect that your children will make mistakes, you can guide them back on the right path.

It is important that your child knows you are always there to support them in life if ever they find themselves worried or pressured by anyone or any situation. This can give them the confidence to come to you at any time without fear of being judged.

When children come to you with concerns about what they may have experienced, seen or done, it is important to help them put things right and make positive changes.

It is okay to seek support if you are unsure how to respond.

Being overly restrictive of your children's internet use or responding to concerns by banning all technology can put them off coming to you with concerns in the future. Instead, help your children by talking them through their worries, helping them to navigate difficulties and setting realistic and healthy boundaries around their internet use.

Creating positive rules that the family understands and stick to, can prevent harmful behaviours. For example, keeping certain doors open, requiring privacy when bathing or changing clothes, charging devices in the kitchen overnight or playing in spaces that can be observed.

Providing education

Children and young people will naturally have questions about sex and relationships as they grow up and start to mature. They might want to seek these answers out online, so making sure that they have access to reputable sources to find these answers is important, as well



as knowing that they can talk to you. Starting these conversations off when they are young can make it easier to support your children's healthy sexual development.

Whilst your children's knowledge of technology might be better than yours, you do know how to initiate and maintain relationships. You can help your children to develop a healthy suspicion of others and help them understand 'red flags'. For example, someone who tries to get them to break the law, do things they don't want to do or isolate them from their friends and family.

You can educate yourself on understanding the dangers and risks related to child sexual abuse and harmful sexual behaviour, both online and offline. Understanding what this is, how it happens, and knowing some of the signs and indicators can help you become more aware of the behaviours you see within your own home, and addressing them if necessary.

When talking to your child about these issues, it is important to include information about risks, consequences, and the law. Using interactive resources available online to explore these issues in age-appropriate ways with your children can reinforce their understanding.

Balancing rights and responsibilities

You can help your children to understand their rights and responsibilities, especially when they are online. Encouraging them to think about how they can be kind online and reassuring them you will be there if they need any help. It is important to remember that a child is never responsible if an adult grooms and manipulates them online.

Respecting young people's privacy, especially as they move into adolescence, whilst still supporting and encouraging them. This helps them take responsibility for their own behaviours.

Useful Links

<https://learning.nspcc.org.uk/child-abuse-and-neglect/harmful-sexual-behaviour>

<https://www.stopitnow.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/>

[Stop_It_Now_harmful_sexual_behaviour_prevention_toolkit_Oct_2020.pdf](#)

https://www.barnardos.org.uk/sites/default/files/2021-06/Harmful%20Sexual%20Behaviour%20-%20Parent_s%20guide.pdf

<https://families.barnardos.org.uk/13-16-years/healthy-relationships>