

Child-on-Child Abuse Policy

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“One of the most consistently high-achieving independent schools in Britain” Sunday Times Schools Guide

This Policy should be read in conjunction with the School Safeguarding policy and will be reviewed annually.

Additional Welsh Government guidance relating to child-on-child sexual harassment in educational settings can be found here [Peer-on-peer sexual harassment in education settings: action plan \[HTML\]](#) | [GOV.WALES](#)

Introduction

The Executive Board, Senior Leadership Team, and all staff and volunteers at Westbourne School are committed to the prevention, early identification and appropriate management of child-on-child abuse (as defined below) both within and beyond the school. In particular, we believe that in order to protect all of our students, all of those who are members of the School community should:

- Be aware of the level and nature of risk to which our pupils are or may be exposed, and put in place a clear and comprehensive strategy which is tailored to their specific safeguarding context
- Take a contextual whole-school approach to preventing and responding to child-on-child abuse
- Regard the introduction of this guidance as a preventative measure, and do not feel it is acceptable merely to take a reactive approach to child-on-child abuse in response to alleged incidents of it
- Encourage parents to hold us to account on this issue, so that if their child is feeling unsafe as a result of the behaviour of any of their peers, they should inform the School so that it can ensure that appropriate and prompt action is taken in response.

This guidance sets out our strategy for preventing, identifying, reporting and appropriately managing child-on-child abuse.

Research has shown that many children who present with harmful behaviour towards others, in the context of child-on-child abuse, are themselves vulnerable and may have been victimised by peers, parents or adults in the community prior to their abuse of peers. Although the starting point is that the school's response to child-on-child abuse should be the same for all pupils regardless of age, there may be some additional considerations in relation to a pupil aged 18 or over in terms of how local agencies and/or partners respond.

Similarly, the School's response to incidents involving the exchange of youth produced sexual imagery will need to differ depending on the age of the students involved. The guidance is compliant with the statutory guidance on child-on-child abuse as set out in [Keeping Learners Safe \(April 2022\)](#)

What is child-on-child abuse?

Child-on-child abuse can be defined as “any form of physical, sexual, emotional and financial abuse, and coercive control, exercised between children and within children's relationships (both intimate and non-intimate).” (Firmin, C. 2017. Abuse Between Young People: A Contextual Account).

Child-on-child abuse can take various forms, including serious bullying/cyberbullying), relationship abuse, domestic violence, child sexual exploitation, youth and serious youth violence, harmful sexual behaviour, and/or gender-based violence. These types of abuse rarely take place in isolation and often indicate wider safeguarding concerns e.g., a teenage girl may be in a sexually exploitative relationship with a teenage boy who is himself being physically abused by a family member or by older boys. Equally, sexual bullying in schools and other settings can result in the sexual exploitation of children by their peers.

Any response to child-on-child abuse needs to consider the range of possible types of child-on-child abuse set out above and capture the full context of children's experiences. This can be done by adopting a Contextual Safeguarding approach and by ensuring that our response to incidents of child-on-child abuse takes into account any potential complexity.

This policy encapsulates a Contextual Safeguarding approach, which:

- is an approach to safeguarding children that recognises their experiences of significant harm in extra-familial contexts, and seeks to include these contexts within prevention, identification, assessment and intervention safeguarding activities. Extrafamilial harms take a variety of different forms and children can be vulnerable to multiple harms including sexual exploitation, criminal exploitation, and serious youth violence
- recognises that as children enter adolescence, they spend increasing amounts of time outside of the home in public environments (including on the internet) within which they may experience abuse
- considers interventions to change the systems or social conditions of the environments in which abuse has occurred. For example, rather than move a child from a school, professionals could work with the school leadership and student body to challenge harmful, gendered school cultures, thus improving the pre-existing school environment.

Prevalence

All staff and stakeholders should assume that child-on-child abuse takes place within our community. Research suggests that child-on-child abuse is one of the most common forms of abuse affecting children in the UK. (Firmin C Curtis, 2017).

The school is committed to:

- Educating all Senior Leaders, staff and volunteers, pupils, and parents about this issue. This includes training all Senior Leaders, staff and volunteers on the nature, prevalence and effect of child-on-child abuse, and how to prevent, identify and respond to it
- Educating pupils about the nature and prevalence of child-on-child abuse via PSHE lessons, assemblies, outside speakers and the wider curriculum. Pupils are frequently reminded to be upstanders rather than bystanders and know who to report to in school.
- Engaging parents on this issue by explaining the School's approach, advising them on local issues or areas of danger within the community and encouraging parents to hold the school to account on this issue
- Ensuring that all child-on-child abuse issues are fed back to the DSP so that they can identify and address any concerning trends and identify pupils who may be in need of additional support
- Challenging the attitudes that underlie such abuse (both inside and outside the classroom)



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- Working with Senior Leaders, all staff and volunteers, pupils and parents to address equality issues, to promote positive values, and to encourage a culture of tolerance and respect amongst all members of the School community
- Creating conditions in which our pupils can aspire to and realise safe and healthy relationships
- Allowing student voice to be heard through appropriate forums e.g., school council
- Creating a culture in which our pupils feel able to share their concerns openly, in a non-judgmental environment, and have them listened to without feeling they are creating a problem or that it will be dismissed as 'banter'
- Responding to cases of child-on-child abuse promptly and appropriately and liaising with external agencies as appropriate

Sexual behaviours

For the purpose of this policy, harmful sexual behaviours are defined as "Sexual behaviours expressed by children...that are developmentally inappropriate, may be harmful towards self or others, or be abusive towards another child or adult." (Hackett, 2014) Hackett proposed the following continuum model to demonstrate the range of sexual behaviours presented by children, which may be helpful when seeking to understand a pupil's sexual behaviour and deciding how to respond to it.



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Normal	Inappropriate	Problematic	Abusive	Violent
Developmentally expected	Single instances of inappropriate sexual behaviour	Problematic and concerning behaviour	Victimising intent or outcome	Physically violent sexual abuse
Socially acceptable				Highly intrusive
Consensual, mutual, reciprocal	Socially acceptable behaviour within peer group	Developmentally unusual and socially unexpected	Includes misuse of power	Instrumental violence which is psychologically and/or sexually arousing to the child responsible for the behaviour
Shared decision making	Context for behaviour may be inappropriate	No overt elements of victimisation	Coercion and force to ensure compliance	
	Generally consensual and reciprocal	Consent issues may be unclear	Intrusive	Intentionally inflicting pain and/or humiliation
		May lack reciprocity or equal power	Informed consent lacking or not able to be freely given	
		May include levels of compulsivity	May include elements of expressive violence	

Other behaviour

When dealing with other alleged behaviour which involves reports of, for example, emotional and/or physical abuse, staff can draw on aspects of Hackett's continuum to assess where the alleged behaviour falls on a spectrum and to decide how to respond. This could include, for example, whether it:

- is socially acceptable or socially acceptable within the peer group
- involves a single incident or has occurred over a period of time
- is problematic and concerning
- involves any overt elements of victimisation or discrimination e.g., related to race, gender, sexual orientation, physical, emotional, or intellectual vulnerability
- involves an element of coercion or pre-planning
- involves a power imbalance between the child/children allegedly responsible for the behaviour and the child/children allegedly the subject of that power
- involves a misuse of power

It should be understood that behaviour which is not abusive at first may potentially become abusive quickly or over time. Intervening early and addressing any inappropriate behaviour which may be displayed by a child is vital and could potentially prevent their behaviour from progressing on a continuum to become problematic, abusive and/or violent and ultimately requiring (greater/more formal) engagement with specialist external and/or statutory agencies.

For example, a physical fight between two children may not constitute child-on-child abuse where the fight is a one-off incident but may be abusive where the child's/children's behaviour subsequently deteriorates into a pattern of bullying behaviour and requires a safeguarding response

from a multi-agency partnership – including a statutory assessment of whether this has led, for example, to a risk of significant harm to a child. The importance of intervening early and addressing any inappropriate behaviour does not just apply on an individual student basis but could also apply across the student body.

Identifying a child who is being abused by their peers

All staff should be alert to the well-being of pupils and to signs of abuse, and should engage with these signs, to determine whether they are caused by child-on-child abuse. However, staff should be mindful of the fact that the way in which children will disclose or present with behaviour as a result of their experiences will differ. Signs that a child may be suffering from child-on-child abuse can also overlap with those indicating other types of abuse and can include:

- failing to attend school, disengaging from classes or struggling to carry out school related tasks to the standard ordinarily expected
- physical injuries
- experiencing difficulties with mental health and/or emotional wellbeing
- becoming withdrawn and/or shy; experiencing headaches, stomach aches, anxiety and/or panic attacks; suffering from nightmares or lack of sleep or sleeping too much
- broader changes in behaviour including alcohol or substance misuse
- changes in appearance and/or starting to act in a way that is not age appropriate
- abusive behaviour towards others.

Abuse affects children very differently. The above list is by no means exhaustive and the presence of one or more of these signs does not necessarily indicate abuse. Where a child exhibits any behaviour that is out of character or abnormal for his/her age, staff should always consider whether an underlying concern is contributing to their behaviour (for example, whether the child is being harmed or abused by their peers) and, if so, what the concern is and how the child can be supported going forwards.

The power dynamic that can exist between children is also very important when identifying and responding to their behaviour: in all cases of child-on-child abuse, a power imbalance will exist within the relationship. This inequality will not necessarily be the result of an age gap between the child responsible for the abuse and the child being abused. It may, for example, be the result of their relative social or economic status. Equally, while children who abuse may have power over those who they are abusing, they may be simultaneously powerless to others.

What makes children particularly vulnerable to being abused or abusing their peers?

Any child can be vulnerable to child-on-child abuse due to the strength of peer influence during adolescence, and staff should be alert to signs of such abuse amongst all children.

Individual and situational factors can increase a child's vulnerability to abuse by their peers.

For example, an image of a child could be shared, following which they could become more vulnerable to child-on-child abuse due to how others now perceive them.

Peer group dynamics can also play an important role in determining a child's vulnerability to such abuse. For example, children may be more vulnerable to child-on-child abuse:

- if they are likely to follow others and/or are socially isolated from their peers
- if they are suffering with mental health illness
- If they have physical or additional leaning needs
- if they are questioning or exploring their sexuality may also be particularly vulnerable to abuse by their peers.
- if they have experience of domestic abuse



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What to do if you suspect that a child may be at risk of, or experiencing abuse by, their peer(s), or that a child may be abusing their peer(s)?

If a pupil is in immediate danger, or at risk of significant harm, a referral to children's social care (if the pupil is aged under 18) and/or the police should be made immediately.

Anyone can make a referral. Where referrals are not made by the DSP, the DSP should be informed as soon as possible that a referral has been made. If a member of staff thinks for whatever reason that a child may be at risk of or experiencing abuse by their peer(s), or that a child may be at risk of abusing or may be abusing their peer(s), they should discuss their concern with the DSP without delay so that a course of action can be agreed.

If a child speaks to a member of staff about child-on-child abuse that they have witnessed or are a part of, the member of staff should listen to the child and use open language that demonstrates understanding rather than judgement. If a child makes a disclosure, staff must be aware of the need to pass on information even if the child concerned does not want the issue reported.

Responding to concerns or allegations of child-on-child abuse

It is essential that all concerns/allegations of child-on-child abuse are handled sensitively, appropriately and promptly. The way in which they are responded to can have a significant impact on our School environment. Any response should:

- Include a thorough investigation of the concerns/allegations and the wider context in which they may have occurred (as appropriate)
- Treat all children involved as being at potential risk - while the child allegedly responsible for the abuse may pose a significant risk of harm to other children, s/he may also have considerable unmet needs and be at risk of harm themselves. The School will ensure a safeguarding response is in place for both the child who has allegedly experienced the abuse, and the child who has allegedly been responsible for it, and additional sanctioning work may be required for the latter
- Take into account that the abuse may indicate wider safeguarding concerns for any of the children involved and consider and address the effect of wider socio-cultural contexts - such as the child's/children's peer group (both within and outside the school); family; the school environment; their experience(s) of crime and victimisation in the local community; and the child/children's online presence. Consider what changes may need to be made to these contexts to address the child's/children's needs and to mitigate risk
- Understand the potential complexity of child-on-child abuse and of children's experiences and consider the interplay between power, choice and consent. While children may appear to be making choices, if those choices are limited, they are not consenting
- Take into account the views of the child/children affected. Unless it is considered unsafe to do so (for example, where a referral needs to be made immediately), the DSP should discuss the proposed action with the child/children and their parents and obtain consent to any referral before it is made. The school will manage the child/children's expectations about information sharing, and keep them and their parents informed of developments, where appropriate and safe to do so.

Action

The DSP will discuss the concerns or allegations with the member of staff who has reported them and will, where necessary, take any immediate steps to ensure the safety of the child/all children affected. DSPs should always use their professional judgement to determine whether it is appropriate for alleged behaviour to be dealt with internally and, if so, whether any external specialist support is required. In borderline cases the DSP may wish to consult with children's social



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care and/or any other external agencies on a no-names basis to determine the most appropriate response. Where the DSP considers or suspects that the behaviour in question might be abusive or violent on a spectrum (as opposed to inappropriate or problematic), they should contact the relevant local authority (where the pupils reside) via MARF immediately, and in any event within 24 hours of the DSP becoming aware of it. The DSP will discuss the allegations/concerns with the local authority and agree on a course of action, which may include:

- Managing internally with help from external specialists where appropriate and possible
- Undertaking/contributing to an inter-agency early help assessment, with targeted early help services provided to address the assessed needs of a child/children and their family. These services may, for example, include CAMHS, a specialist harmful sexual behaviour team, and/or youth offending services
- Referring child/children to children's social care for a section 17 and/or 47 statutory assessment
- Reporting alleged criminal behaviour to the Police and refer to "when to call the police guidance" from the NPCC (Alleged criminal behaviour will ordinarily be reported to the Police. However, there are some circumstances where it may not be appropriate to report such behaviour to the Police. For example, where the exchange of youth produced sexual imagery does not involve any aggravating factors. All concerns/allegations will be assessed on a case-by-case basis, and in light of the wider context.)

Individual risk and needs assessment

Where there is an incident of child-on-child abuse, the School will carry out a robust risk and needs assessment in respect of each child affected by the abuse. These risk assessments will:

- Assess and address the nature and level of risks that are posed and/or faced by the child
- Engage the child's parents and draw upon local services and agencies to ensure that the child's needs are met in the long-term
- Consider whether any targeted interventions are needed to address the underlying attitudes or behaviour of any child
- Be reviewed at regular intervals considering the child's on-going needs to ensure that real progress is being made which benefits the child.

If at any stage the child's needs escalate, the DSP should consult with the local authority areas as appropriate to determine the appropriate course of action.

Multi-agency working

The School actively engages with its local partners in relation to child-on-child abuse, and works closely with, for example, Vale and Glamorgan County Council, children's social care, and/or other relevant agencies, and other schools. The relationships the school builds with these partners are essential to ensuring that the School is able to prevent, identify early and appropriately handle cases of child-on-child abuse. The school actively refers concerns/allegations of child-on-child abuse where necessary to the relevant agencies listed above. It considers this to be particularly important because child-on-child abuse can be a complex issue, and even more so where wider safeguarding concerns exist. It is often not appropriate for one single agency (where the incident cannot be managed internally) to try to address the issue alone – it requires effective partnership working.

Disciplinary action

The School will consider whether disciplinary action may be appropriate for any child/children involved – any such action should address the abuse, the causes of it, and attitudes underlying it.

Disciplinary action may sometimes be appropriate:

- to ensure that the child/children take(s) responsibility for and realise(s) the seriousness of their behaviour
- to demonstrate to the child/children and others that child-on-child abuse can never be tolerated
- to ensure the safety and wellbeing of other children. However, these considerations must be balanced against the child's/children's own potential unmet needs and any safeguarding concerns.
- Where a weapon has been brought into school without staff permission, even if this has not been used to hurt another student, or in the case of threatening behaviour with a weapon or dangerous implement.

Before deciding on appropriate action, the School will always consider its duty to safeguard all children from harm; the underlying reasons for a child's behaviour; any unmet needs, or harm or abuse suffered by the child; the risk that the child may pose to other children; and the severity of the child-on-child abuse and the causes of it.

The school will, where appropriate, consider the potential benefit, as well as challenge, of using managed moves or exclusion as a response, and not as an intervention, recognising that even if this is ultimately deemed to be necessary, some of the measures referred to in this policy may still be required. Exclusion will only be considered as a last resort and only where necessary to ensure the safety and wellbeing of the other children in the school. Disciplinary interventions alone are rarely able to solve issues of child-on-child abuse, and the school will always consider the wider actions that may need to be taken, and any lessons that may need to be learnt going forwards.

Anyone found to have made a false allegation will be sanctioned by the School.

On-going proactive work to a contextual whole-school approach

The school's response to concerns/allegations of child-on-child abuse should be part of ongoing proactive work by the School to embed best practice and take a contextual whole school approach to such abuse. As such the School's response can become part of its wider prevention work.

This response may include the School asking itself a series of questions about the context in which an incident of child-on-child abuse occurred in the School and the wider physical and online environment such as:

- What protective factors and influences exist within the School (such as positive peer influences, examples where child-on-child abuse has been challenged etc.) and how can the school improve these?
- How (if at all) did the School's physical environment contribute to the abuse, and how can the School address this going forwards, for example by improving the School's safety, security and supervision?
- Did wider gender norms, equality issues and/or societal attitudes contribute to the abuse?
- What was the relationship between the abuse and the cultural norms between staff and pupils, and how can these be addressed going forwards?
- Does the abuse indicate a need for staff training on, for example, underlying attitudes, a particular issue or the handling of particular types of abuse?
- How have similar cases been managed in the past and what effect has this had?
- Does the case or any identified trends highlight areas for development in the way in which the School works with children to raise their awareness of and/or prevent child-on-child abuse, including by way of the School's well-being curriculum and lessons that address underlying attitudes or behaviour such as gender and equalities work?
- Are there any lessons to be learnt about the way in which the School engages with parents to address child-on-child abuse issues?
- Are there underlying issues that affect other schools in the area, or other independent schools generally, and is there a need for a multi-agency response?
- Does this case highlight a need to work with certain children to build their confidence and teach them how to identify and manage abusive behaviour?
- Were there opportunities to intervene earlier or differently and/or to address common themes amongst the behaviour of other children in the school?

The School may wish to use answers to these questions to develop an action plan that can be reviewed by the Senior Leadership Team.