

## Peer-on-peer abuse

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## Introduction

The governors, senior leadership team, and all staff at St David's College (the school) are committed to the prevention, early identification, and appropriate management of peer-on-peer abuse (as defined below) both within and beyond the School.

In particular, we:

- believe that in order to protect children, all schools should (a) be aware of the nature and level of risk to which their students are or may be exposed, and put in place a clear and comprehensive strategy which is tailored to their specific safeguarding context; and (b) take a whole-school community Contextual Safeguarding approach to preventing and responding to peer-on-peer abuse,
- regard the introduction of this policy as a preventative measure. We (a) do not feel it is acceptable merely to take a reactive approach to peer-on-peer abuse in response to alleged incidents of it; and (b) believe that in order to tackle peer on-peer abuse proactively, it is necessary to focus on all four of the following areas: (i) systems and structures; (ii) prevention; (iii) identification; and (iv) response/intervention,
- recognise national and increasing concern about this issue, and wish to implement this policy in order to mitigate harmful attitudes and peer-on-peer abuse in the school setting, and
- 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 policy:

- is the School's overarching policy for any issue that could constitute peer-on-peer abuse. It relates to, and should be read alongside, the School's child protection policy and any other relevant policies.

- sets out our strategy for improving prevention, and identifying and appropriately managing peer-on-peer abuse.
- applies to all [governors, the senior leadership team, and staff]. It is reviewed annually, and updated in the interim, as may be required, to ensure that it continually addresses the risks to which students are or may be exposed. A number of staff and students are involved in each annual review which involves, and is informed by, an assessment of the impact and effectiveness of this policy over the previous year,
- recognises that abuse is abuse, and should never be passed off as ‘banter’, ‘just having a laugh’, or ‘part of growing up’,
- is compliant with the statutory guidance on peer on-peer abuse as set out in Keeping Children Safe in Education (April 2021),
- does not use the term ‘victim’ and/or ‘perpetrator’. This is because our School takes a safeguarding approach to all individuals involved in concerns or allegations about peer-on-peer abuse, including those who are alleged to have been abused, and those who are alleged to have abused their peers, in addition to any sanctioning work that may also be required for the latter. Research has shown that many children who present with harmful behaviour towards others, in the context of peer-on-peer abuse, are themselves vulnerable and may have been victimised by peers, parents or adults in the community prior to their abuse of peers,
- uses the terms ‘child’ and ‘children’, which is defined for the purposes of this policy as a person aged under 18. We have nonetheless chosen not to restrict our approach to peer-on-peer abuse under this policy to children but instead to adopt a wider interpretation of our safeguarding responsibilities so that they apply to all students, regardless of age. Although the starting point is that the School’s response to peer-on-peer abuse should be the same for all students, regardless of age, there may be some different considerations in relation to, for example, a child aged under 10, or a student aged 18 or over in terms of how local agencies and/or partners respond. This, for example, is likely to be different on the part of local authorities, given that their safeguarding duties are limited, in the case of children’s social care – save for a number of specific exceptions – to children and, in the case of adult social care services, to adults with care and support needs. Similarly, the School’s response to incidents involving the exchange of youth involved sexual imagery will need to differ depending on the age of the students involved. There is also likely to be a more significant criminal justice response in relation to any student responsible for abuse who is aged 18 or over,
- should, if relevant, according to the concern(s) or allegation(s) raised, be read in conjunction with the DfE’s advice on Sexual Violence and Sexual Harassment Between Children in Schools and Colleges (DfE’s Advice) (May 2018), and any other advice and guidance referred to within it, as appropriate, and
- should be read in conjunction with the Local Safeguarding Partnership’s Safeguarding Policy and Procedures, and any relevant Practice Guidance issued by it.

## Understanding peer on peer abuse

Peer-on-peer abuse is 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)’** (Abuse between young people: a contextual account (Routledge 2017)).

We recognise that peer-on-peer abuse can take various forms, including:

- serious bullying (including cyber-bullying).
- relationship abuse.
- domestic violence.
- child sexual exploitation.
- youth and serious youth violence.

- harmful sexual behaviour.
- gender-based violence.

We acknowledge that these types of abuse rarely take place in isolation and often indicate wider safeguarding concerns. Children’s experiences of abuse and violence are rarely isolated events, and they can often be linked to other things that are happening in their lives and spaces in which they spend their times.

We recognise the need to adopt a contextual safeguarding approach and to ensure that our response to incidents of peer-on-peer abuse takes into account any potential complexity. As a result, we:

- adopt 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.
- recognise that as children enter adolescence, they spend increasing amounts of times outside the home in public environments (including the internet) within which they may experience abuse.
- consider interventions to change the systems or social conditions of the environments where abuse has occurred.

We acknowledge that research suggests that peer-on-peer abuse is one of the most common forms of abuse affecting children in the UK. We therefore must adopt an approach of **‘it could happen here.’**

## Sexual behaviour

The NSPCC explains that *‘children’s sexual behaviours exist on a wide continuum, from normal and developmentally expected to highly abnormal and abusive. [Staff] should recognise the importance of distinguishing between problematic and abusive sexual behavior ... As both problematic and abusive sexual behaviours are developmentally inappropriate and may cause developmental damage, a useful umbrella term is Harmful Sexual Behaviours (or HSB).’* In the NSPCC’s and Research in Practice’s Harmful Sexual Behavior Framework, 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.’*

Simon Hackett, in the NSPCC’s and Research in Practice’s Harmful Sexual Behavior Framework, proposes the following continuum model to demonstrate the range of sexual behaviours presented by children. This model is helpful when seeking to understand a pupil’s sexual behaviour and in deciding how to respond to it.

<b>Normal</b>	<b>Inappropriate</b>	<b>Problematic</b>	<b>Abusive</b>	<b>Violent</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Developmentally expected</li> <li>• Socially Acceptable</li> <li>• Consensual, mutual, reciprocal</li> <li>• Shared decision making</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Single instances of inappropriate sexual behaviour</li> <li>• Socially acceptable behaviour within peer group</li> <li>• Context for behaviour may be inappropriate</li> <li>• Generally consensual and reciprocal</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Problematic and concerning behaviour</li> <li>• Developmentally unusual and socially unexpected</li> <li>• No overt elements of victimisation</li> <li>• Consent issues may be unclear</li> <li>• May lack reciprocity or equal power</li> <li>• May include levels of compulsivity</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Victimising intent or outcome</li> <li>• Includes misuse of power</li> <li>• Coercion and force to ensure compliance</li> <li>• Intrusive</li> <li>• Informed consent lacking or not able to be freely given</li> <li>• May include elements of expressive violence</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Physically violent sexual abuse</li> <li>• Highly intrusive</li> <li>• Instrumental violence which is psychologically and / or sexually arousing to the child responsible for the behaviour</li> <li>• Sadism</li> </ul>

## Other behaviour

When dealing with other alleged behaviour which involves, for example, emotional or physical abuse, Hackett's continuum is a useful tool to assess where behaviour falls on the spectrum and to decide how to respond. Criteria may include it:

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

The School recognises that issues rarely occur in isolation and that we may be required to deal with cases involving a range of alleged behaviours including sexual behaviour, emotional behaviour, physical behaviour and behaviour online.

The School recognises that behaviour which is not abusive at first (e.g. a one-off physical fight between two children), may 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 or more formal) engagement with specialist external or statutory agencies.

## Identifying peer on peer abuse

Any child can be vulnerable to peer-on-peer 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 peer-on-peer abuse due to how others now perceive them, regardless of any characteristics which may be inherent in them and/or their family. Peer group dynamics can also play an important role in determining a child's vulnerability to such abuse. For example, children who are more likely to follow others and/or who are socially isolated from their peers may be more vulnerable to peer-on-peer abuse. Children who are questioning or exploring their sexuality may also be particularly vulnerable to abuse by their peers.

Research suggests that:

- peer-on-peer abuse may affect boys differently from girls, and that this difference may result from societal norms (particularly around power, control and the way in which femininity and masculinity are constructed) rather than biological make-up. Barriers to disclosure will also be different. As a result, schools need to explore the gender dynamics of peer-on-peer abuse within their settings, and recognise that these will play out differently in single sex, mixed or gender- imbalanced environments,
- children with Special Educational Needs and/or Disabilities (SEND) are three times more likely to be abused than their peers without SEND, and additional barriers can sometimes exist when recognising abuse in children with SEND. These can include:
  - assumptions that indicators of possible abuse such as behaviour, mood and injury relate to a child's disability without further exploration,
  - the potential for children with SEND to be disproportionately impacted by behaviours such as bullying and harassment, without outwardly showing any signs, – communication barriers and difficulties, and
  - overcoming these barriers.
- some children may be more likely to experience peer-on-peer abuse than others as a result of certain characteristics such as sexual orientation, ethnicity, race or religious beliefs.

Signs that a child may be suffering peer-on-peer abuse can overlap with those indicating other types of abuse (see the school's Safeguarding and Child Protection Policy). Signs 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 appropriate for the child's age
- abusive behaviour towards others

## Responding to concerns or allegations of peer-on-peer abuse

It is essential that all concerns / allegations of peer-on-peer 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, he may also have considerable unmet needs and be at risk of harm himself. The School is committed to ensuring that 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(ren)'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(ren)'s online presence. The School must consider what changes may need to be made to these contexts to address the child's/children's needs and to mitigate risk.
  - the potential complexity of peer-on-peer 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.
  - the views of the child/children affected. Unless it is considered unsafe to do so (e.g. where a referral needs to be made immediately), the Designated Safeguarding Lead (DSL) should discuss the proposed action with the child(ren) and their parents and obtain consent to any referral before it is made. The School should manage the child(ren)'s expectations about information sharing, and keep them and their parents informed of developments, where appropriate and safe to do so.

### **What should you do if you suspect either 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)?**

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 DSL, the DSL 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 DSL without delay (in accordance with the procedures set out in the School's Safeguarding and Child Protection Policy) so that a course of action can be agreed. If a child speaks to a member of staff about peer-on-peer 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 (for further details please see the procedure set out in the School's Safeguarding and Child Protection Policy).

### **How will the School respond to concerns or allegations of peer-on-peer abuse?**

The DSL 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(ren) affected. DSLs 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 DSL may wish to consult with children's social care and / or any other external agencies on a 'no names' basis to determine the most appropriate response. Where the DSL considers or suspects that the behaviour in question might be abusive or violent on a spectrum (as opposed to inappropriate or problematic), the DSL should contact the local Safeguarding Children Partnership as well as the Safeguarding Children Partnership(s) in which the pupil(s) reside immediately, and in any event within 24 hours of the DSL becoming aware of it. The DSL will discuss the allegations / concerns with the local Safeguarding Children Partnership and the Safeguarding Children Partnership(s) in which the pupil(s) reside and agree on a course of action, which may include:

**A) Manage internally with help from external specialists where appropriate and possible.**

Where behaviour between peers is abusive or violent (as opposed to inappropriate or problematic), scenarios (b), (c) or (d) should ordinarily apply. However, where support from local agencies is not available, the School may need to handle allegations / concerns internally. In these cases, the School will engage and seek advice from external specialists (in the private and / or voluntary sector).

**B) Undertake / contribute to an inter-agency early help assessment, with targeted early help services provided to address the assessed needs of a child(ren) and their family.**

These services may, for example, include CAMHS, a specialist harmful sexual behaviour team, and / or youth offending services.

**C) Refer child(ren) to children's social care for a Section 17 (Child in Need) and / or Section 47 (Child Protection) statutory assessment.**

As a matter of best practice, if an incident of peer-on-peer abuse requires referral to and action by children's social care and a strategy meeting is convened, then the School will hold every professional involved in the case accountable for their safeguarding response, including themselves, to both the child who has experienced the abuse, and the child who was responsible for it, and the contexts to which the abuse was associated.

**D) Report alleged criminal behaviour to the Police 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 (see Appendix 1). 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 peer-on-peer 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 in light of 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 DSL should contact the local Safeguarding Children Partnership to determine the appropriate course of action.

## Disciplinary action

The School will consider whether disciplinary action may be appropriate for any child(ren) involved; any such action should address the abuse, the causes of it, and attitudes underlying it. Disciplinary action may sometimes be appropriate, including to:

- ensure that the child(ren) take(s) responsibility for and realise(s) the seriousness of their behaviour
- demonstrate to the child(ren) and others that peer-on-peer abuse can never be tolerated
- ensure the safety and wellbeing of other children. However, these considerations must be balanced against the child(ren)'s own potential unmet needs and any safeguarding concerns. 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 peer-on-peer abuse and the causes of it.

The School will take any disciplinary action in line with processes set out in the School's Behaviour Policy.

## **School environment**

The School is committed to ensuring that its response to concerns / allegations of peer-on-peer abuse is part of on-going proactive work by the School to embed best practice and take a contextual whole-school approach to such abuse. The School actively seeks to raise awareness of and prevent all forms of peer-on-peer abuse by:

- Educating all staff, governors, contractors and volunteers, parents and pupils about this issue. This includes:
  - training all Governors, members of the Senior Management Team (SMT), staff and volunteers on the nature, prevalence and effect of peer-on-peer abuse, and how to prevent, identify and respond to it. This includes (a) Contextual Safeguarding; (b) the identification and classification of specific behaviours; and (c) the importance of taking seriously all forms of peer-on-peer abuse (no matter how low level they may appear) and ensuring that no form of peer-on-peer abuse is ever dismissed as horseplay, teasing, 'boys will be boys' or 'banter'. Training includes case studies which the staff design themselves.
  - educating children about the nature and prevalence of peer-on-peer abuse via PSHE, assemblies, form time and the wider curriculum. Pupils are regularly informed about the School's approach to such issues, including its zero-tolerance policy towards all forms of peer-on-peer abuse.
  - engaging parents on this issue by: (a) talking about it with parents, both in groups and one to one; (b) asking parents what they perceive to be the risks facing their child and how they would like to see the School address those risks; (c) involving parents in the review of School policies and lesson plans; and (d) encouraging parents to hold the School to account on this issue.
  - ensuring that all peer-on-peer abuse issues are fed back to the DSL and Safeguarding team so that they can spot and address any concerning trends and identify pupils who may need additional support. This is done by sharing of pastoral and safeguarding information in MyConcerns and weekly team meetings.
  - challenging the attitudes that underlie such abuse (both inside and outside the classroom). This is done via PSHE, assemblies, form time and internal and external speakers.
  - working with Governors, the SMT, all staff and volunteers, pupils and parents to address equality issues, to promote positive values, and to encourage a culture of respect amongst all members of the School community. This is done via PSE, assemblies, form time and promotion of the schools ethos



- creating conditions in which pupils can aspire to and realise safe and healthy relationships. This is done through PSE, assemblies, form time, Parents' Forum and specific pastoral events for parents and pupils.
- creating a culture in which our pupils feel able to share their concerns openly, in a non-judgmental environment, and have them listened to. This is done via a culture of openness. There are pastoral offices for discussions with pupils, open door policies from Heads of Year and pastoral staff, three School Counsellors, the PSHE programme and Mindfulness courses.
- responding to cases of peer-on-peer abuse promptly and appropriately

### **Multi-agency working**

The School actively engages with its local partners in relation to peer-on-peer abuse, and works closely with, for example, Conwy Local Authority, children's social care, Early Help teams, CAMHS teams, other relevant agencies, and other schools.

The relationships the School has built with these partners are essential to ensuring that the School is able to prevent, identify early and appropriately handle cases of peer-on-peer abuse. They help the School to

(a) develop a good awareness and understanding of the different referral pathways that operate in its local area, as well as the preventative and support services which exist;

(b) ensure that pupils are able to access the range of services and support they need quickly;

(c) support and help inform our local community's response to peer-on-peer abuse;

(d) increase our awareness and understanding of any concerning trends and emerging risks in our local area to enable us to take preventative action to minimise the risk of these being experienced by our pupils.

The School actively refers concerns / allegations of peer-on-peer abuse where necessary to the relevant local authority, children's social care and / or other relevant agencies. This is particularly important because peer-on-peer 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.