



PEER ON PEER ABUSE POLICY

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Introduction

The Governors, Senior Leadership Team, and all staff and volunteers at Wexham 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. This policy relates to, and should be read alongside, the School's Child protection and Safeguarding Policy and any other relevant policies including, but not limited to, E-Safety and Behaviour.

The policy will refer to peer on peer abuse throughout which, for the purposes of this document, includes child on child abuse. The term child includes everyone under the age of 18.

We recognise there is a national and increasing concern about this issue, and wish to implement this policy in order to ensure that our students are safe. In order to protect our Students, we need to be aware (a) of the level and nature of risk to which they 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 approach to preventing and responding to peer-on-peer abuse. We encourage parents to contact and communicate with us if their child is feeling unsafe as a result of the behaviour of any of their peers. We ask them to inform the school so that it can ensure that appropriate and prompt action is taken in response.

We regard the introduction of this policy as a preventative measure, and do not feel it is acceptable merely to take a reactive approach to peer-on-peer abuse in response to alleged incidents of it.

This policy:

- Sets out our strategy for preventing, identifying and appropriately managing peer-on-peer abuse
- Applies to all Governors, Senior Leadership Team, staff and volunteers, will be reviewed annually, and updated in the interim, as may be required, to ensure that it continually addresses the risks to which pupils are or may be exposed.
- Is the School's overarching policy for any issue that could constitute peer-on-peer abuse.

This policy does not use the term 'victim' and/or 'perpetrator'. This is because the School takes a safeguarding approach to all persons involved in allegations of or concerns 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 that may also be required for the latter. We recognise 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.

Rationale

Children and young people may be harmful to one another in a number of ways which would be classified as peer on peer abuse.

It is necessary to consider:

- what abuse is and what it looks like
- how it can be managed
- what appropriate support and intervention can be put in place to meet the needs of the individual
- what preventative strategies may be put in place to reduce further risk of harm.

Statutory guidance

This policy is compliant with the statutory guidance on peer-on-peer abuse as set out in Keeping Children Safe in Education (September 2020) and is supported by the key principle of the Children's Act 1989, that the child's welfare is paramount. It should, if relevant according to the concerns/allegations 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.

Understanding peer-on-peer abuse

What is peer-on-peer abuse?

For these purposes, peer-on-peer abuse is 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), friendships and wider peer associations.

Peer-on-peer abuse can take various forms, including but not limited to: serious bullying (including cyber-bullying), relationship abuse, domestic abuse, child sexual exploitation, youth and serious youth violence, harmful sexual behaviour and/or prejudice-based violence including, but not limited to, gender-based violence.

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 time. Examples of online peer-on-peer abuse would include sexting, online abuse, peer-on-peer grooming, the distribution of youth involved sexualised content, and harassment.

Sexual violence/sexual harassment

Sexual violence and sexual harassment can occur between two children of any age and sex. It can also occur through a group of children sexually assaulting or sexually harassing a single child or group of children.

This must always be referred immediately to the Designated Safeguarding Lead. The DSL will follow the [DfE Guidance: Sexual violence and sexual harassment between children in schools and colleges 2018](#) with consideration of:

- Managing internally 65.1, page 27
- Early Help 65.2, page 28
- Referrals to Children’s Social Care 65.3. page 28
- Reporting to the police 64.4, Page 29

There may be many reasons why a young person engages in sexually harmful behaviour and it may be just as distressing to the young person who instigates it as to the young person it is intended towards.

Sexually harmful behaviour may include:

- inappropriate sexual language
- inappropriate role play
- sexual touching
- sexual violence and sexual harassment.

Staff should be aware of the importance of:

- making clear that sexual violence and sexual harassment is not acceptable, 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”; and
- challenging behaviours (potentially criminal in nature), such as grabbing bottoms, breasts and genitalia, flicking bras and lifting up skirts. Dismissing or tolerating such behaviours risks normalising them.

It should also be recognised that the context behind each incident should be considered. For example, an incident involving youth produced sexual imagery may be inappropriate in one context, for example, when exchanged between two children in a consenting relationship, and abusive in another, for example, when it is (a) shared without the consent of the child in the image; (b) produced as a result of coercion; or (c) used to pressure the child into engaging in other sexual behaviours.

Other Behaviour

When dealing with other alleged behaviour which involves reports of, for example, emotional and/or physical abuse, staff need to assess the alleged behaviour and to decide how to respond. This could include, for example, whether it:

- is socially acceptable
- involves a single incident or has occurred over a period of time
- is socially acceptable within the peer group
- 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

Early intervention

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 to become problematic, abusive and/or violent. This would ultimately require (greater/more formal) engagement with specialist external and/or statutory agencies.

Behaviour generally considered inappropriate may in fact indicate emerging concerning behaviour to which the school will need to take a whole-school approach in order to prevent escalation. For example, where multiple boys are making inappropriate comments about girls, one-off sanctions are unlikely to be effective and wider actions should be considered, such as arranging for educative approach through the school learning mentors or relevant external agencies.

It will also be important to consider the wider context in which the alleged behaviour is reported to have occurred, and which may trigger the need for a referral. For example, some behaviour that is considered inappropriate may be capable of being dealt with internally. However, if there are wider safeguarding concerns relating to the child/children in question, a referral to statutory agencies may be necessary. Where the behaviour which is the subject of the concern(s)/allegation(s) is considered or suspected by the DSL to constitute peer-on-peer abuse, the School will follow the procedures set out below.

Identifying Peer on Peer abuse

All staff should be alert to the wellbeing of students and to signs of abuse, and should engage with these signs, as appropriate, to determine whether they are caused by peer-on-peer abuse. However, staff should be mindful of the fact that the way(s) in which children will disclose or present with behaviour(s) as a result of their experiences will differ.

Signs that a child may be suffering from peer-on-peer abuse can also overlap with those indicating other types of abuse and can include:

1. failing to attend school, disengaging from classes or struggling to carry out school related tasks to the standard ordinarily expected;
2. physical injuries;
3. experiencing difficulties with mental health and/or emotional wellbeing;
4. 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;
5. broader changes in behaviour including alcohol or substance misuse;
6. changes in appearance and/or starting to act in a way that is not appropriate for the child's age;
7. 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. The behaviour that children present with will depend on their particular circumstances. Rather than checking behaviour against a list, staff are trained to be alert to behaviour that might cause concerns and, where appropriate, to engage with their parents/carers so that the cause(s) of their behaviour can be investigated. 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 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 peer-on-peer 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.

Vulnerability

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.

A WHOLE SCHOOL APPROACH

Raising awareness and preventing peer-on-peer abuse

Wexham School actively seeks to raise awareness of and prevent all forms of peer-on-peer abuse by:

1. Educating all staff, students and parents about this issue. This includes:
 - training all staff on the nature, prevalence and effect of peer-on-peer abuse, and how to prevent, identify and respond to it. This includes 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 or teasing;
 - educating our students about the nature and prevalence of peer-on-peer abuse via PSHCE and the wider curriculum
 - educating our students what to do if they witness or experience such abuse, the effect that it can have on those who experience it and the possible reasons for it, including vulnerability of those who inflict such abuse.
 - ensuring all stakeholders are 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 where required
 - (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.
2. Ensuring that all peer-on-peer abuse issues are fed back to the schools safeguarding team so that they can spot and address any concerning trends and identify students who may be in need of additional support. This is done through pastoral meetings and the CPOMS recording system.
3. Challenging the attitudes that underlie such abuse and promoting positive values, to encourage a culture of tolerance and respect amongst all members of the school community;

4. Creating conditions in which our students can aspire to and realise safe and healthy relationships.
5. Creating a culture in which our students feel able to share their concerns openly, in a non-judgmental environment, and have them listened to.
6. Responding to cases of peer-on-peer abuse promptly and appropriately.

Multi-agency Working

Wexham School actively engages with its local partners in relation to peer-on-peer abuse, and works closely with Slough Children Services, the police and/or other relevant agencies (in accordance with the Local Safeguarding Partnership's procedures) and other schools. We will actively refer concerns/allegations of peer-on-peer abuse to children's social care or other relevant agencies, where necessary.

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

General Principles

It is essential that all concerns/allegations of peer-on-peer abuse are handled sensitively, proportionately, appropriately and promptly. The way in which they are responded to can have a significant impact on the school environment.

Any response will be co-ordinated by the Safeguarding team and 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. We will aim to ensure a safeguarding response 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;

Any response could also take into account:

- the views of the child/children affected.
- that the abuse may indicate wider safeguarding concerns for any of the children involved, and consider and address the effect of:
 - a) wider socio-cultural contexts - such as the child's/children's peer group (both within and outside the School);
 - b) family;
 - c) the School environment;
 - d) their experience(s) of crime and victimisation in the local community;
 - e) 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; and 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;

Students at risk

If a student 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 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 follow the procedures set out in the Safeguarding and Child Protection policy.

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/all children affected.

The DSL will 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, the DSL will contact Slough Children First Family Front Door immediately, and in any event within 24 hours of the DSL becoming aware of it and agree on a course of action, which may include informing the police.

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, including (a) to ensure that the child/children take(s) responsibility for and realise(s) the seriousness of their behaviour; (b) to demonstrate to the child/children and others that peer-on-peer abuse can never be tolerated; and (c) 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.

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.

Disciplinary interventions alone are rarely able to solve issues of peer-on-peer 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, as set out above and below.