



Supporting our learners: peer-on-peer abuse, consent, & healthy relationships

Safeguarding is a topic we return to time and time again here at Parenta, because it is one of the most important things we do in our settings.

Safeguarding is everyone's concern, from the owner or manager, to the apprentices and the newest recruits.

We all have a statutory duty to safeguard the children and/or young people in our care, protecting them from harm so they can grow up safe, happy and healthy.

All staff should have read and understood "Keeping Children Safe in Education: Part 1" (KCSIE) which sets out the 4 elements of safeguarding as:

- Protecting children from maltreatment
- Preventing impairment of children's mental and physical health or development
- Making sure children grow up in circumstances consistent with the provision of safe and effective care
- Taking action to enable all children to have the best outcomes

We should already be aware of the main 4 types of abuse being:

- Physical abuse
- Sexual abuse
- Emotional abuse
- Neglect

And we and our colleagues should be trained already in how to spot the signs and symptoms of these and what to do in case of disclosures or concerns.

Obviously, in early years, we are concerned with the welfare of the young children in our care, but our safeguarding remit significantly extends to any young people that we employ, such as those aged 16 – 19 who may be on an apprenticeship or training programme with us. In some cases, we may have older, vulnerable young adults as well, and we need to safeguard them too.

Remember too that there are subsets of children and young people who are more vulnerable to certain types of abuse than others. These include looked after children, children with SEND, those with an EHCP, children frequently missing in education, and children from disadvantaged backgrounds but this is not an exhaustive list. You can read the lists in paragraph 19 of KCSIE.

Keeping children safe in education

Every year, KCSIE is updated, and new concerns or categories are often added that settings need to be aware of as a result of research or changes in legislation. In recent years, additional safeguarding categories have been added, such as county lines, upskirting, online abuse and FGM. Most of these relate to adults taking advantage of minors (under 18s) in some way and there is a clear power imbalance between the adults and the child. Significantly, this can also happen between children and young people who are around the same age.

Last September, KCSIE reflected growing concerns around this and had a focus on tackling peer-on-peer abuse, online bullying, sexual harassment and abuse within relationships between young people. This is the focus of this safeguarding guide, and we look at these areas in more detail and how you can best safeguard the young people in your setting. It is therefore mostly about safeguarding older young people, i.e. teenagers, although parts of it may also be relevant to other children too.

For other handy guides on different aspects of safeguarding and other relevant topics, please see <https://www.parenta.com/handy-guides/>.

And as with all safeguarding concerns, always remember, **“it could happen here”** and be vigilant to all safeguarding issues at all times.

Peer-on-peer abuse (child-on-child)

This type of abuse is not new; bullying has long been an issue that schools have had to tackle across all ages and areas of the country. As an early years setting, you should already have policies on how to deal with bullying and other negative behaviours which all staff are aware of. Up to the age of 18, people in the UK are still considered minors or children, and even if they are working at an apprenticeship, many of them are still vulnerable to this type of abuse.

Peer-on-peer abuse happens when children or young people abuse other children or young people. This can include abuse within intimate personal relationships or causing someone to engage in sexual activity without, but it can also include:



- Bullying
- Cyberbullying
- Discriminatory abuse due to a young person’s gender, ethnicity, sexual orientation or religion
- Physical abuse (kicking, pushing, hair pulling etc)
- Sexual abuse and sexual violence such as rape but it also includes things like forcing someone to strip, touch themselves sexually, or to engage in sexual activity with a third party
- Sharing nude and semi-nude images or videos is also known as sexting or youth-produced sexual imagery
- Abuse in intimate personal relationships which can include domestic abuse and physical, emotional, sexual or financial abuse
- Sexual harassment
- Causing someone to engage in sexual activity without consent
- Sharing nudes or semi-nudes
- Upskirting (taking photos under another person’s clothes without their permission, for sexual gratification or to cause the other person distress, humiliation or alarm)
- Initiation or hazing-type violence and rituals

A historical and cultural problem

One problem that a lot of sectors face, is that historically, some types of abuse have been ignored as “just banter”, “having a laugh” or “boys being boys” and in the past, were often not picked up or were dismissed as not serious enough to warrant investigation. This led to victims not being believed or their concerns and distress being missed or under-reported. If left unchallenged, this can lead to a “culture of unacceptable behaviours, and unsafe environment for children and in the worst-case scenarios, a culture that normalises abuse, leading to children accepting it as normal and not coming forward to report it.” This puts children at risk and can ultimately lead to an ‘acceptance of’ violence against women and vulnerable people. The public outcry and consternation at the way that some recent violent attacks on women going about their daily lives have been dealt with is testament to the fact that something more needs to be done.

Putting things into context

A lot of abuse happens outside of early years settings, colleges and school environments and all staff should consider the whole context of the young person's life when thinking about safeguarding issues. This is known as '**contextual safeguarding**'. However, even if the main risks to young people relate to safety risks that happen outside of your setting, they are still part of all staff's safeguarding responsibilities.

Review of sexual abuse in schools and colleges

A June 2021 Ofsted publication titled "Review of sexual abuse in schools and colleges" made concerning reading. It said:

"On our visits, girls told us that sexual harassment and online sexual abuse, such as being sent unsolicited explicit sexual material and being pressured to send nude pictures ('nudes'), are much more prevalent than adults realise. For example, nearly 90% of girls, and nearly 50% of boys, said being sent explicit pictures or videos of things they did not want to see happens a lot or sometimes to them or their peers.

Children and young people told us that sexual harassment occurs so frequently that it has become 'commonplace'. For example, 92% of girls, and 74% of boys, said sexist name-calling happens a lot or sometimes to them or their peers. The frequency of these harmful sexual behaviours means that some children and young people consider them normal."

[Ofsted report, June 2021](#)

All staff need to be made aware of their responsibilities towards peer-on-peer abuse, whether at school, a nursery workplace, at home or in the community. In KCSIE it says:

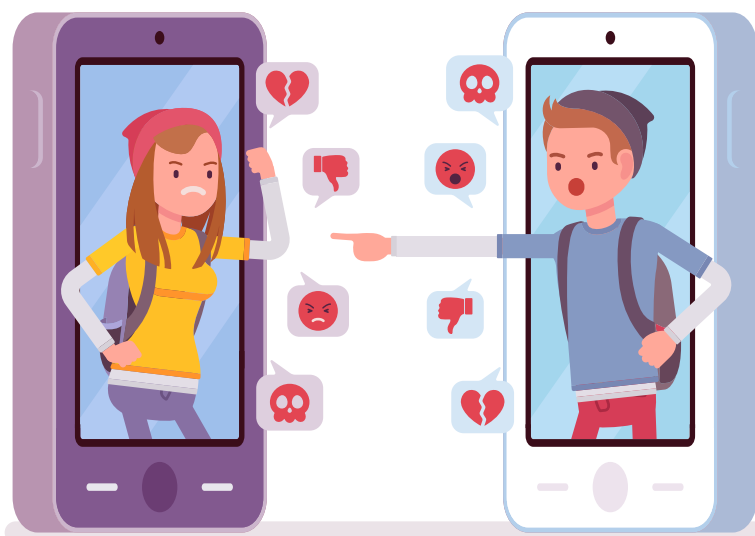
"All staff should understand, that even if there are no reports in their schools or colleges it does not mean it is not happening, it may be the case that it is just not being reported."

KCSIE, 2021

Although not specifically mentioned, nurseries will also have a duty to protect and report safeguarding issues about the young people in their care or employ too.

Online abuse

The growth of the internet and social media in the last 20 years has been phenomenal and there is a lot of good that has come out of it. But it also adds another layer of stress and pressure for many young people as they struggle to find their place in a virtual world full of people with seemingly 'perfect' lives of extra-ordinary experiences and adventures. Technology and social media are therefore significant components in many safeguarding issues and abuse can happen online, offline or both. The anonymity offered by many online platforms provide a significant risk to young people, whether from adults grooming children or catfishing (pretending to be someone they are not) or children 'hiding' behind a virtual shield whilst abusing their peers or others.



Online peer-on-peer abuse can include:

- Abusive messages and threats
- Bullying behaviour
- Setting up of fake identities to create a fake online presence
- Harassing or misogynistic messages
- Non-consensual sharing of indecent images (particularly in chat groups)
- Sharing of abusive images and pornography to those who don't want to receive such content

Online abuse is not a major problem for our society, not just our young people, and it needs to be taken seriously and reported.

It is important that staff understand that they should not view or download any indecent images of children or young people as this is a criminal offence. Staff remit is to report to the DSL and the DSL will report to the police. Any investigation of the alleged incidents should be left to the police.

Healthy relationships and consent



We all yearn for healthy intimate relationships that are based on mutual respect, love and consideration. However, as with all things, sometimes they can be the opposite of what we want and can become toxic, controlling or abusive. Young people who may not have a lot of experience in intimate relationships, or who may feel insecure in them, are at risk of becoming involved in these types of relationships.

Abuse in intimate personal relationships between peers, and engaging in sexual activity without consent, were added to KCSIE as types of peer-on-peer abuse in September 2021.

What is abuse in personal intimate relationships?

This type of abuse can involve things like:

- Insults and name calling
- Controlling where the victim goes and what they wear
- Checking up on the victim all the time
- Isolating the victim from friends and family
- Making the victim feel responsible for the abuse
- Belittling them in front of friends or peers
- Physically abusing the victim
- Forcing the victim to have sex or take part in sexual activity
- Pressuring the victim not to use contraception

What is important to remember here is that these types of behaviours are unhealthy and abusive, and at the more extreme end of the spectrum, are crimes. It is important that any young person in this situation is taken seriously, given support, care and understanding.

Recognising signs of abuse

Depending on the type of abuse that a young person is suffering, you may see a range of different signs and symptoms that alert staff that there is a potential problem. Whilst individual safeguarding issues have their own set of signs and symptoms that are outside the remit of this article, there are some general signs to look out for which can alert staff to a possible concern. These include:

- Difficulty in concentrating or not doing well in work or a training program
- Becoming withdrawn or having mood or behaviour changes
- Tiredness
- Decreasing mental health, anxiety or depression
- Poor resilience
- Self-harm or negative talk
- Risk-taking behaviour
- Using drugs or alcohol excessively
- Physical marks and signs



The most important factors to look out for are changes in a young person's behaviour.

Supporting victims

Part 1 of KCSIE now says that "all staff should be able to reassure victims that they're being taken seriously and that they will be supported and kept safe."

A victim should never be given the impression that they are creating a problem by reporting abuse, sexual violence or sexual harassment. Nor should a victim ever be made to feel ashamed for making a report. This is a culture known as 'victim blaming', where the victim is made to feel like they are the one at fault. All staff need to be trained in this aspect of safeguarding so that they understand how to support a young person who is a victim.

In order to do this, staff should be trained to focus on the perpetrator's behaviour rather than that of the victim, so sexual harassment and violence is seen as preventable, not an inevitable part of life for young people, especially girls.

How to challenge victim blaming and sexual harassment in the workplace

Hopefully, the culture of your setting is already one which does not allow or promote sexual harassment in your workplace, but you might find that some people are less confident about tackling it than others. This can be overcome by undertaking some training and a concerted and consistent effort to eradicate it.

Here are some tips to help:

1. Challenge it when it occurs rather than later, but 'later' is better than 'never'
2. Challenge the behaviour, not the person, by using phrases like "that is inappropriate" or "do you realise that that is sexist language?"
3. Explain what the problem is
4. Support the victim and show empathy, letting them know it is not their fault
5. Challenge gender bias and stereotypes across the board at all levels and ages
6. Focus on the perpetrator's behaviour rather than the victim's

By doing these simple things, we can move away from seeing sexual harassment and violence as 'inevitable' or 'normal' as it is anything but. It also helps the young person see that society is shifting the blame towards the perpetrator too.

Disclosures

If a young person does make a report of sexual violence or harassment, all staff should know how to respond and record the information. This needs detailed training in its own right. However, staff should be aware that it is not their role to investigate any incidents, but to listen and record any disclosures, and pass the information to the DSL as soon as possible.

When talking to the child or young person, they should avoid asking leading questions but should listen attentively. They can ask the young person if they've been harmed, and what kind of harm it was. As with any kind of disclosure, the staff member must know that they cannot agree to keep anything secret and they should tell the victim that they will have to pass the information on, and immediately report it to their DSL, with special care to the victim so that they feel supported and believed.

Notes should be written up as soon as possible using facts, quotes from the victim and should not include any personal assumptions or deductions from the staff member.

All types of abuse whether in the setting, online or outside of your setting should be taken just as seriously and should not be downplayed.



Key points

As an early years setting, you have a statutory duty to safeguard the children and young people in your setting, so staff should be trained in safeguarding issues and this training should be regularly reviewed and updated.

- To effectively safeguard children, all staff need to know about other safeguarding issues beyond the 4 main types of abuse
- Even if it happens outside of an early years setting, it's still part of your safeguarding remit
- Know the signs, but be particularly alert to changes in a young person's behaviour
- Abuse can happen in relationships between young people wherever they live, socialise and work
- A lot of abuse happens online
- Inappropriate behaviour and sexual harassment should always be challenged
- If a young person reports an incident, it should always be taken this seriously
- Victim blaming should be challenged and not accepted as 'normal'

It is essential that all victims are reassured that they are being taken seriously and that they will be supported and kept safe

REMEMBER:

**Always act immediately and report concerns to the DSL if you have concerns about sexual violence or harassment and you believe a child or young person needs help.
If you think a child or young person is in immediate danger, call 999.**

Sources and further information:

[Barnardo's, Child sexual abuse far more widespread than people believe, says Barnardo's Bold Voices](#)

[Contextual Safeguarding Network, Beyond Referrals: a briefing on harmful sexual behaviour in schools](#)

[GOV.UK – Department for Education, Children missing education, Equality Act 2010: advice for schools, Keeping Children Safe in Education, Protecting children from radicalisation: the Prevent duty, Sexual violence and sexual harassment between children in schools and colleges](#)

[Education Scotland, Young people's attitudes to pornography, sex and relationships report: he's the stud and she's the slut](#)

[EqualiTeach](#)

[GOV.UK – Ofsted, Review of sexual abuse in schools and colleges, Overview: Female genital mutilation \(FGM\)](#)

[NSPCC, Sexual behaviour in children, What to do if a child reveals abuse](#)

[UK Parliament, Sexual harassment and sexual violence in schools and The scale and impact of sexual harassment and sexual violence in schools](#)

[Victim Focus, Portrayals and prevention campaigns: sexual violence in the media](#)

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0800 002 9242



hello@parenta.com

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www.parenta.com

Parenta, S02 Second Floor Knightrider House, Knightrider Street, Maidstone, Kent, ME15 6LU
Reg No 05249690

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