Child-on-Child Abuse Policy

More Than Ed | Independent School

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Keeping Children Safe in Education (2026) refers to abuse between children as 'child-on-child abuse'. This policy uses that term throughout.

1. Introduction

Our school recognises that children are vulnerable to, and capable of, abusing their peers. We take such abuse as seriously as abuse perpetrated by an adult. This includes verbal as well as physical abuse. Child-on-child abuse will not be tolerated or passed off as part of 'banter' or 'growing up'.

We are committed to a whole-school approach to ensure the prevention, early identification and appropriate management of child-on-child abuse within our school and beyond. Where child-on-child abuse is identified, we will follow our child protection procedures, taking a contextual approach to support all children and young people affected.

We recognise that child-on-child abuse can take many forms, such as:

- Child sexual exploitation
- Sharing of nude or semi-nude images ('sexting' or youth-produced sexual imagery)
- Upskirting
- Bullying, including cyberbullying
- Radicalisation
- Abuse in intimate relationships
- Children who display harmful sexual behaviour
- Gang association and serious violence (county lines)

Some of these behaviours will need to be handled with reference to other school policies, such as the Relational (Behaviour) Policy, Anti-Bullying Policy, Safeguarding and Child Protection Policy, E Safety Policy, and Ending a Placement Policy and Statement.

This policy concentrates on child-on-child abuse in the context of sexual harassment and sexual violence. It is compliant with the statutory guidance in Keeping Children Safe in Education (2026) and should be read in conjunction with the local safeguarding partnership's safeguarding policy and procedures, and any relevant practice guidance issued by it.

2. Aims

This policy will:

- Set out our strategies for preventing, identifying and managing child-on-child abuse.
- Take a contextual approach to safeguarding all children and young people involved, acknowledging that children who have allegedly abused their peers, or displayed harmful sexual behaviour, are themselves vulnerable and may have been abused by peers, parents or adults in the community.
- Acknowledge that, due to the vulnerabilities and prior experiences of our particular students, all allegations must be taken extremely seriously, and the police or Social Care informed.

3. Understanding Child-on-Child Abuse

Sexual violence and sexual harassment can occur between two children of any age and sex, or be carried out by a group of children against a single child or group of children.

The impact of this behaviour on children can be very distressing and can affect academic achievement and emotional health and wellbeing. Sexual harassment and sexual violence may occur both online and offline.

4. The Context

All behaviour takes place on a spectrum. Understanding where a child's behaviour falls on that spectrum is essential to being able to respond appropriately.

In this policy we recognise the importance of distinguishing between problematic and abusive sexual behaviour (harmful sexual behaviour, or HSB). We adopt the NSPCC definition of HSB as sexual behaviours expressed by children that are developmentally inappropriate, may be harmful towards themselves or others, or may be abusive towards another child or an adult.

We also use Simon Hackett's continuum model to demonstrate the range of sexual behaviours (see Appendix 1).

5. Vulnerable Groups

We recognise that all children can be at risk; however, we acknowledge that some groups are more vulnerable. All young people within our setting can be identified as extremely vulnerable, and many fall into one or more of the following categories:

- Experience of abuse within their family
- Living with domestic violence
- Young people in care
- Children who go missing
- Children with additional needs (SEN and/or disabilities)
- Children who identify, or are perceived, as LGBTQ+ and/or have other protected characteristics under the Equality Act 2010

While research tells us that girls are more frequently identified as being abused by their peers, and are more likely to experience unwanted sexual touching in schools, this is not confined to girls. Boys are less likely to report intimate relationship abuse and may display other behaviour, such as antisocial behaviour, and report high levels of victimisation in areas affected by gangs. We recognise that both boys and girls experience child-on-child abuse, but they do so in gendered ways.

All staff should be aware of indicators that children may be at risk from, or involved with, serious violent crime. These may include increased absence from school, a change in friendships or relationships with older individuals or groups, a significant decline in performance, signs of self-harm or a significant change in wellbeing, or signs of assault or unexplained injuries. Unexplained gifts or new possessions could also indicate that children

have been approached by, or are involved with, individuals associated with criminal networks or gangs.

6. Responding to Reports

Every report of child-on-child abuse is assessed immediately by the DSL. Where it meets the threshold, or where a criminal offence may have been committed, it is referred to children's social care or the police the same day. Reports below that threshold are handled under our Relational (Behaviour) Policy with DSL oversight, and are kept under review.

The immediate response to a report

- The school will take all reports seriously and reassure the victim that they will be supported and kept safe.
- All staff are trained to manage a report.
- Staff will not promise confidentiality, as the concern will need to be shared further (for example with the DSL or Social Care); they will, however, only share the report with those who need to know in order to progress it.
- A written report will be made as soon after the conversation as possible, recording the facts as presented by the child. This may be used as part of a statutory assessment if the case is escalated later.
- Where the report includes an online element, the school will contact the police and follow their advice on searching, screening and confiscation. Staff will not view or forward images under any circumstances, but will pass this responsibility to the police.
- The DSL will be informed as soon as possible.

Risk assessment

Where there has been a report of sexual violence, the DSL (or a deputy) will make an immediate risk and needs assessment. Where there has been a report of sexual harassment, the need for a risk assessment will be considered on a case-by-case basis. The risk and needs assessment should consider:

- The victim, especially their protection and support.
- The alleged perpetrator.
- All the other children and staff at the school, especially any actions appropriate to protect them.

Risk assessments will be recorded electronically and kept under review. The DSL (or a deputy) will ensure they are engaging with the police and Social Care.

Action following a report

Following an incident, we will consider:

- The wishes of the victim in terms of how they want to proceed. This is especially important in the context of sexual violence and sexual harassment.
- The nature of the alleged incident(s), including whether a crime may have been committed and whether there has been harmful sexual behaviour.

- The ages and developmental stages of the children involved.
- Any power imbalance between the children — for example, whether the alleged perpetrator is significantly older, more mature or more confident, or whether the victim has a disability or learning difficulty.
- Whether the alleged incident is a one-off or part of a sustained pattern of abuse.
- Any ongoing risks to the victim, other children or staff, and any other related issues or wider context.

Follow-up actions

While the school establishes the facts of the case and begins liaising with children's Social Care and the police:

- The alleged perpetrator will be removed from any classes they share with the victim.
- We will consider how best to keep the victim and alleged perpetrator a reasonable distance apart on school premises.
- These actions are in the best interests of both children and should not be perceived as a judgement on the guilt of the alleged perpetrator.

Options to manage the report

We view both the alleged victim and the alleged perpetrator as extremely vulnerable, given the nature of our students. All incidents will be managed by the DSL alongside appropriate external agencies. No assumption of guilt will be made, but both parties must be supported by relevant agencies and professionals immediately. Collaborative working will help ensure the best possible package of coordinated support for the victim and, where appropriate, the alleged perpetrator and any other children who require support.

Child-on-child abuse is not a ground for ending a placement, and it does not appear in the list of grounds at sections 7 and 8 of our Ending a Placement Policy and Statement. Where one student abuses or is alleged to have abused another, the response is a safeguarding response, not a contractual one: no assumption of guilt is made, both children are treated as vulnerable, the DSL carries out an immediate risk and needs assessment, and the police and children's social care are involved as required. Where, following that process, the outcome is that a placement cannot safely continue, it is ended under the relevant ground in that policy in the ordinary way. An assault on a member of staff or a visiting professional remains an automatic ground under that policy. An assault between students is dealt with through the safeguarding process first, and any ending follows from that process rather than automatically.

7. Physical Abuse

While a clear focus of child-on-child abuse is around sexual abuse and harassment, physical assaults and initiation violence or rituals between students can also be abusive. These are equally not tolerated, and if it is believed that a crime has been committed, it will be reported to the police and Social Care.

The principles from the Anti-Bullying Policy will be applied in these cases, recognising that any police investigation will take priority. When dealing with reports of, for example, emotional and/or physical abuse, staff can draw on Hackett's continuum (Appendix 1) to

assess where the alleged behaviour falls on the spectrum and decide how to respond. This includes considering whether it:

- Is 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, for example related to race, gender, sexual orientation, or physical, emotional or intellectual vulnerability
- Involves an element of coercion or pre-planning
- Involves a power imbalance between the children responsible for the behaviour and others
- Involves a misuse of power

8. Online Behaviour

Many forms of child-on-child abuse have an online element, including behaviours such as cyberbullying and the sharing of nude or semi-nude images. Policies and procedures concerning this type of behaviour can be found in our Anti-Bullying Policy, E Safety Policy and Child Protection Policy.

9. Prevention

Our school actively seeks to raise awareness of, and prevent, all forms of child-on-child abuse by:

- Educating all staff, the Senior Leadership Team, students and parents about this issue, including training on the nature, prevalence and effect of child-on-child abuse, and how to prevent, identify and respond to it. This includes contextual safeguarding, the identification and classification of specific behaviours, and the importance of taking seriously all forms of child-on-child abuse — no matter how low-level they may appear — ensuring that none is ever dismissed as horseplay or teasing.
- Educating children about the nature and prevalence of child-on-child abuse through PSHE and the wider curriculum.
- Frequently telling students what to do if they witness or experience such abuse, the effect it can have, and the possible reasons for it, including the vulnerability of those who inflict it.
- Regularly informing students about the school's approach, including its zero-tolerance stance towards all forms of child-on-child abuse.
- Ensuring that all child-on-child abuse issues are fed back to the school's safeguarding team, so they can spot and address concerning trends and identify students who may need additional support.
- Challenging the attitudes that underlie such abuse, both inside and outside the classroom.

- Working with the Senior Leadership Team, all staff, students and parents to address equality issues, promote positive values, and encourage a culture of tolerance and respect.
- Creating conditions in which our students can aspire to, and realise, safe and healthy relationships.
- Creating a culture in which students feel able to share their concerns openly, in a non-judgemental environment, and have them listened to.
- Responding to cases of child-on-child abuse promptly and appropriately.

10. Appendix 1: Hackett's Continuum

Simon Hackett (2010) proposed a continuum model to describe the range of sexual behaviours presented by children and young people. It runs across five points: normal, inappropriate, problematic, abusive and violent. Staff use it to locate the behaviour before deciding on a response, and the DSL confirms that judgement.

NSPCC Treating Harmful Sexual Behaviour