

Child-on-Child Abuse Policy

More Than Ed | Independent School

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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 “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.

Child-on-child abuse can manifest in many ways, such as:

- child sexual exploitation;
- sexting or youth-produced sexual imagery;
- upskirting;
- bullying;
- radicalisation;
- abuse in intimate relationships;
- sexually harmful behaviour;
- gang association and serious violence (county lines); and
- the use of technology for bullying and other abusive behaviour.

Some of these behaviours will need to be handled with reference to other policies, such as the Behaviour and Relational Policy, Anti-Bullying Policy, Safeguarding and Child Protection Policy, and Online Safety Policy.

This policy concentrates on child-on-child abuse in the context of sexual harassment and sexual violence. It complies with the statutory guidance in Keeping Children Safe in Education (2025) and should be read alongside the local safeguarding partners' safeguarding policy and procedures, and any relevant practice guidance issued by them.

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; and
- acknowledge that, due to the vulnerabilities and prior experiences of our students, all allegations must be taken extremely seriously and the police or children's 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 involve a group of children sexually assaulting or sexually harassing a single child or

group of children. The impact of this behaviour can be very distressing and can affect academic achievement and emotional health and wellbeing. Sexual harassment and sexual violence may occur 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 responding appropriately. In this policy we recognise the importance of distinguishing between problematic and abusive sexual behaviour (harmful sexual behaviour, HSB).

We adopt the NSPCC definition of HSB 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. 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, some groups are more vulnerable. All young people within our setting can be identified as extremely vulnerable, and may fall into one of the following categories:

- experience of abuse within their family;
- living with domestic violence;
- children in care;
- children who go missing;
- children with additional needs (SEN and/or disabilities); and
- children who identify or are perceived as LGBTQ+, and/or who have other protected characteristics under the Equality Act 2010.

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 school, but 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. Both boys and girls experience child-on-child abuse, but they do so in gendered ways.

All staff should be aware of indicators that may signal that children are 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 of Sexual Violence and Sexual Harassment

All reports of child-on-child abuse will be reported immediately to children's social care or the police, as required.

The immediate response to a report

- The school takes all reports seriously and reassures 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); staff will only share the report with those necessary to progress it.
- A written report is 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 contacts the police and follows their advice on searching, screening and confiscation. Staff will not view or forward images under any circumstances, but pass this responsibility to the police.
- The DSL is informed as soon as possible.

Risk assessment

When there has been a report of sexual violence, the DSL (or a deputy) makes an immediate risk and needs assessment. Where there has been a report of sexual harassment, the need for a risk assessment is considered on a case-by-case basis. The assessment considers:

- the victim, especially their protection and support;
- the alleged perpetrator; and
- all other children (and, if appropriate, adult students and staff), especially actions appropriate to protect them.

Risk assessments are recorded electronically on KIT (OneDrive) and kept under review. The DSL (or a deputy) ensures they are engaging with the police and children's 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 (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 consideration of 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 a sustained pattern of abuse; and
- any ongoing risks to the victim, other children, adult students or staff, and other related issues and wider context.

Follow-up actions – children sharing a classroom

While the school establishes the facts 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 consider how best to keep the victim and alleged perpetrator a reasonable distance apart on school premises; and
- these actions are in the best interests of both children and are not 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, due to the nature of our students. All incidents are managed by the DSL alongside appropriate external agencies. No assumption of guilt is made, but both parties must be supported by relevant agencies and professionals immediately. Collaborative working helps ensure the best possible package of coordinated support for the victim and, where appropriate, the alleged perpetrator and any other children who require support.

7. Physical Abuse

While a clear focus of child-on-child abuse is sexual abuse and harassment, physical assaults, and initiation or hazing violence and rituals between students, can also be abusive. These are equally not tolerated and, if it is believed that a crime has been committed, will be reported to the police and children's social care. The principles of the Anti-Bullying Policy will be applied in these cases, with recognition that any police investigation takes priority. When dealing with alleged behaviour involving, for example, emotional and/or physical abuse, staff can draw on Hackett's continuum (Appendix 1) to assess where the behaviour falls on a spectrum and decide how to respond – for example, whether it:

- is socially acceptable;
- 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; or
- 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 sexting. Policies and procedures concerning this type of behaviour can be found in the Anti-Bullying Policy, Online Safety Policy, and Safeguarding 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 the Senior Leadership Team, staff, students and parents about this issue. This includes training all leaders and staff on the nature, prevalence and effect of child-on-child abuse, and how to prevent, identify and respond to it, covering:

- 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.

We also:

- educate children about the nature and prevalence of child-on-child abuse through PSHE and the wider curriculum;
- frequently tell 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 inform students about the school's approach, including its zero-tolerance position on all forms of child-on-child abuse;
- ensure all child-on-child abuse issues are fed back to the school's safeguarding team so that concerning trends can be identified and students needing additional support are supported;
- challenge the attitudes that underlie such abuse, both inside and outside the classroom;
- work with leaders, staff, students and parents to address equality issues, promote positive values, and encourage a culture of tolerance and respect;
- create conditions in which our students can aspire to and realise safe and healthy relationships; and
- create a culture in which students feel able to share concerns openly, in a non-judgemental environment, and have them listened to, responding to cases promptly and appropriately.

10. Related Policies

This policy should be read alongside the school's other policies, including:

- Safeguarding and Child Protection Policy
- Anti-Bullying Policy
- Behaviour and Relational Policy
- Online Safety Policy and Acceptable Use Policy
- PSHE & RSHE Policy
- Attendance Policy

11. Legislation and Guidance

In drawing up this policy, the school has had regard to the following:

- Keeping Children Safe in Education (DfE, 2025)
- Sexual violence and sexual harassment between children in schools and colleges (DfE)
- Working Together to Safeguard Children (2023)
- Children Act 1989 and Children Act 2004
- Equality Act 2010
- Sexual Offences Act 2003
- Voyeurism (Offences) Act 2019 (upskirting)

Appendix 1 – Continuum of Sexual Behaviours

Simon Hackett (2010) proposed a continuum model to demonstrate the range of sexual behaviours presented by children and young people, from those that are developmentally normal to those that are highly deviant. The NSPCC harmful sexual behaviour framework is available at: <https://www.nspcc.org.uk/globalassets/documents/publications/harmful-sexual-behaviour-framework.pdf>