Child-on-Child Abuse Policy

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Child-on-Child Abuse Policy

Policy

Introduction

Bedfordshire Schools Trust (BEST) 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 abuse as well as physical and sexual abuse. Child on child abuse will not be tolerated or passed off as part of "banter" or part of "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.

Keeping Children Safe in Education (KCSIE) states that -

'All staff should be aware that children can abuse other children (often referred to as child on child abuse). And that it can happen both inside and outside of school or college and online.'

'All staff should be clear as to the school's or college's policy and procedures with regard to child on child abuse and the important role they have to play in preventing it and responding where they believe a child may be at risk from it.'

In cases where child on child abuse or bullying is identified we will follow our child protection procedures, taking a contextual approach to support all children and young people who have been affected by the situation.

We recognise that child on child abuse can manifest itself in many ways such as:

- Bullying (including cyberbullying, prejudice-based and discriminatory bullying)
- Abuse in intimate personal relationships between peers
- Physical abuse such as hitting, kicking, shaking, biting, hair pulling, or otherwise causing physical harm (this may include an online element which facilitates, threatens and/or encourages physical abuse)
- Physical assault and harm, or the threat of harm with a weapon,
- Harmful sexual behaviour, sexual violence and sexual harassment – which may include misogyny/misandry. Part five of this guidance sets out how schools and colleges should respond to reports of this nature,
- Consensual and non-consensual making or sharing of nudes and semi-nudes, including those generated using AI.
- Causing someone to engage in sexual activity without consent, such as forcing someone to strip, touch themselves sexually, or to engage in sexual activity with a third party
- Upskirting (which is a criminal offence44), which typically involves taking a picture under a person's clothing without their permission, with the intention of viewing their genitals or buttocks to obtain sexual gratification, or cause the victim humiliation, distress, or alarm
- Initiation/hazing type violence and rituals (this could include activities involving harassment, abuse or humiliation used as a way of initiating a person into a group and may also include an online element).

Some of these behaviours will need to be handled with reference to other policies in school such as the behaviour policy, anti- bullying policy, safeguarding/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 is compliant with the statutory guidance on child-on-child abuse as set out in Keeping Children Safe in Education and should be read in conjunction with the BEST Safeguarding Policy, and any relevant Practice Guidance issued by it.

Policy Development

The policy has been developed in consultation with the following groups; Trust Board, Central Team, Principals and Designated Safeguarding Leads.

Aims

The 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 peer, parents or adults in the community.

Understanding Child on Child abuse

Child on child abuse can manifest itself in many ways as outlined above.

Harmful sexual behaviours, sexual harassment and sexual violence can occur between two children of any age and sex or a group of children sexually assaulting or sexually harassing a single child or group of children.

The impact of this behaviour on children can be very distressing and have an impact on academic achievement and emotional health and wellbeing.

Harmful sexual behaviours, sexual harassment and sexual violence may also occur online and offline.

The Context

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

In this policy we recognise the importance of distinguishing between normal, inappropriate, problematic, abusive and violent behaviours (See Hackett's continuum, Appendix 1)

We are adopting 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."

Vulnerable groups

We recognise that all children can be at risk, however, we acknowledge that some groups are more vulnerable. This can include children or young people who:

- have experience of abuse within their family
- are living with domestic violence

- are young people in care
- are children who go missing
- are children with additional needs (SEN and/or disabilities)
- are children who identify or are perceived as LGBT and/or have other protected characteristics under the Equalities Act 2010.

Whilst research tells us girls are more frequently identified as being abused by their peers, and girls 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. Boys report high levels of victimisation in areas where they are 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, which may signal that children are at risk from, or are 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
- 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.

Responding to Alleged Incidents

Responding to reports of sexual violence and sexual harassment

All reports of child-on-child abuse will be assessed on a case-by-case basis, with the designated safeguarding lead or their deputy taking a leading role using their professional judgement. Support will be sought from other agencies such as social care or the police as required.

An assessment of an incident between peers should be completed and consider:

- Chronological and developmental ages of everyone involved
- Difference in their power or authority in relation to age, race, gender, physical, emotional or intellectual vulnerability
- All alleged physical and verbal aspects of the behaviour and incident
- Whether the behaviour involved inappropriate sexual knowledge or motivation
- What was the degree of physical aggression, intimidation, threatening behaviour or bribery?
- The effect on the victim
- Any attempts to ensure the behaviour and incident is kept a secret
- The child or young person's motivation or reason for the behaviour, if they admit that it occurred
- Whether this was a one-off incident, or longer in duration

It is important to deal with a situation of peer abuse immediately and sensitively. It is necessary to gather the information as soon as possible to get the true facts. It is equally important to deal with it sensitively and think about the language used and the impact of that language on both the children and the parents when they become involved. Avoid language that may create a 'blame' culture and leave a child labelled.

Staff will talk to the children in a calm and consistent manner. Staff will not be prejudiced, judgmental, dismissive or irresponsible in dealing with such sensitive matters.

The immediate response to a report

- The school or college will take all reports seriously and will reassure the victim that they will be supported and kept safe
- All staff will be trained to manage a report
- Staff will not promise confidentiality as the concern will need to be shared further (for example, with the Designated Safeguarding Lead or social care) staff will, however, only share the report with those people who are necessary to progress it
- A written report will be made as soon after the discussion as possible recording the facts as presented by the child. These may be used as part of a statutory assessment if the case is escalated later
- Assess the needs of the victim and child alleged to have caused harm
- Where the report includes an online element the school will follow advice on searching, screening and confiscation. The staff will not view or forward images unless unavoidable and only if another member of staff (preferably the Designated Safeguarding Lead) is present
- The Designated Safeguarding Lead will be informed as soon as possible and consider a referral to the police and social care
- The Designated Safeguarding Lead must complete a risk assessment (Appendix 1) whereby sexual violence has occurred. This must be shared with the Multi Agency Safeguarding Hub (MASH).
- The Crime and Policing Act 2026 places a duty on all working in schools to report all suspected cases of sexual assault to the Police.

When Recording sexualised behaviour, it is essential that:

- Record as soon as possible, as you can quickly forget or confuse detail
- Be clear, explicit and non-avoidant, and avoid vague statements or euphemisms
- Follow the prompts on your safeguarding and child protection recording form
- Make use of the body map section on the Incident Form in CPOMS if needed
- Use proper names for body parts but record exactly any language or vocabulary used by the child.
- Use the child's exact words in quotation marks.
- Note where and when the incident happened and whether anyone else was around.

Gather the Facts

Speak to all the young people involved separately and gain a statement of facts from them. Use consistent language and open questions for each account. Ask the young people to tell you what happened. Use open questions, 'where, when, why, who'. (What happened? Who observed the incident? What was seen? What was heard? Did anyone intervene?). Do not interrogate or ask leading questions.

Consider the Intent

Has this been a deliberate or contrived situation for a young person to be able to harm another?

Decide on your next course of action

If you believe any young person to be at risk of significant harm you must report to the Designated Safeguarding Lead immediately; they will follow the school's Safeguarding and Child Protection Policy.

If Social Care and the police intend to pursue this further, they may ask to interview the young people in school or they may ask for parents to come to school to be spoken to. It is important to be prepared for every situation and the potential time it may take.

Informing parents/carers

The best way to inform parents/carers is face to face. Although this may be time consuming, the nature of the incident and the type of harm/abuse a young person may be suffering can cause fear and anxiety to parents/carers whether their child is the child who was harmed or who harmed another.

Is the pupil[1] 13+ and does not want to share with parents? Use the 'Gillick' test and the 'Fraser' guidelines.

https://www.nspcc.org.uk/preventing-abuse/child-protection-system/legal-definition-child-rights-law/gillick-competency-fraser-guidelines/

In all circumstances where the risk of harm to the child is evident, the school should encourage the young person to share the information with their parent/carer (they may be scared to tell parents/carers that they are being harmed in any way).

Points to consider:

- What is the age of the children involved?
- How old are the young people involved in the incident and is there any age difference between those involved? In relation to sexual exploration, children under the age of 5, in particular 1-4 year olds who are learning toileting skills may show a particular interest in exploration at around this stage. This, however, should not be overlooked.
- Where did the incident or incidents take place?
- Was the incident in an open, visible place to others? If so, was it observed? If not, is more supervision required within this particular area?
- What was the explanation by all children involved of what occurred?
- Can each of the young people give the same explanation of the incident and also what is the effect on the young people involved? Is the incident seen to be bullying for example (regular and repetitive)? Is the version of one young person different from another, and if so, why?
- What is each of the children's own understanding of what occurred? Do the young people know/understand what they are doing? E.g. do they have knowledge of body parts, of privacy and that it is inappropriate to touch?
- Is the young person's explanation in relation to something they may have heard or been learning about? Has that has prompted the behaviour?
- Is the behaviour deliberate and contrived?
- Does the young person have understanding of the impact of their behaviour on the other person?
- Intra familial harms and any necessary support for siblings following incidents

Repetition

Has the behaviour been repeated to an individual on more than one occasion? In the same way it must be considered has the behaviour persisted to an individual after the issue has already been discussed or dealt with and appropriately resolved?

Risk Assessment

When there has been a report of sexual violence, the Designated Safeguarding Lead (or a deputy) will make an immediate risk and needs assessment. Where there has been a report of sexual harassment, a risk assessment must be completed and submitted to Social Care. The risk and needs assessment should consider:

[1] For the purposes of this policy, 'pupil' refers to all young people educated in the BEST settings

- The victim, especially their protection and support
- The child alleged to have caused harm; and
- All the other children (and, if appropriate, adult students and staff) at the school, especially any actions that are appropriate to protect them.

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

Follow up Actions

Children sharing a classroom

Whilst the school establishes the facts of the case and starts the process of liaising with children's social care and the police:

- The child alleged to have caused harm will be removed from any classes they share with the victim.
- We will consider how best to keep the victim and child alleged to have caused harm a reasonable distance apart on school or college premises and on transport to and from the school or college.

These actions are in the best interests of both children and should not be perceived to be a judgment on the guilt of the child alleged to have caused harm.

Options to manage the report

Manage internally

1. In some cases of sexual harassment, for example, one-off incidents, it may be appropriate to handle the incident internally, perhaps through utilising the behaviour and bullying policies and by providing pastoral support, this could be one of the more formal pastoral interventions, like ELSA or Hamish and Milo or a less formal pastoral check in depending on the child and the situation. This decision is considered on the outcome of contact with Social Care and submission of a completed risk assessment.

   This decision will be made based on the principle that sexual violence and sexual harassment is never acceptable and will not be tolerated. All decisions, and discussions around making these decisions will be recorded, stored and made by the Principal.

   It is important to ensure that details of sanctions for the child alleged to have caused harm are not shared with any other persons other than those providing care for them. This is to maintain confidentiality and privacy for the child involved.

2. In line with point 1 above, we may decide that the children involved do not require statutory interventions but may benefit from early help. Early help means providing support as soon as a problem emerges, at any point in a child's life. Providing early help is more effective in promoting the welfare of children than reacting later. Early help can be particularly useful to address non- violent harmful sexual behaviour and may prevent escalation of sexual violence.

3. Where a child has been harmed, is at risk of harm, or is in immediate danger, we will make a referral to Social Care following locally agreed protocols.

   Where statutory assessments are appropriate, the Designated Safeguarding Lead or a deputy will be working alongside, and cooperating with, the relevant lead social worker. Collaborative working will help ensure the best possible package of coordinated support is implemented for the victim and, where appropriate, the child alleged to have caused harm and any other children that require support.

Schools and colleges, as relevant agencies, should be part of discussions with statutory safeguarding partners to agree the levels for the different types of assessment and services to be commissioned and delivered, as part of the local arrangements. Safeguarding partners should publish a local threshold document which includes the process for the local Early Help assessment and the type and level of early help services to be provided, and Designated Safeguarding Leads (and their deputies) will need to familiarise themselves with this document.

Reporting to the Police

Designated Safeguarding Leads and Senior Leaders will follow the guidance issued to schools and colleges by the National Police Chiefs' Council on when to report an alleged crime to the police (linked below).

When to call the police guidance for schools and colleges

The Designated Safeguarding Lead (and their deputies) will also follow local processes for safeguarding referrals.

All allegations of sexual assault will be reported to the police.

Where an incident has occurred outside of school, the parents or carers are responsible for informing the police and should evidence any report to the school. If the school feel that the incident has not been reported and should have been, they will consult the police.

Where a report of rape, assault by penetration or sexual assault is made, this will be passed on to the police immediately. Whilst the age of criminal responsibility is ten, if the child alleged to have caused harm is under ten, the starting principle of reporting to the police remains. The police will take a welfare approach, rather than a criminal justice approach.

Where a report has been made to the police, the school will consult the police and agree what information can be disclosed to staff and others, the child alleged to have caused harm and their parents or carers. They will also discuss the best way to protect the victim and their anonymity.

Where there is a criminal investigation, we will work closely with the relevant agencies to support all children involved (including potential witnesses). Where required, advice from the police will be sought in order to help us.

Whilst protecting children and/or implementing any appropriate sanctions against the child alleged to have caused harm, we will work closely with the police (and other agencies as required), to ensure any actions the school take do not jeopardise the police investigation.

The end of the criminal process

If a child is convicted or receives a caution for a sexual offence, Gothic Mede Academy will update its risk assessment, ensuring relevant protections are in place for all children. We will consider any suitable action following our behaviour policy. If the child alleged to have caused harm remains at Gothic Mede Academy we will be very clear as to our expectations regarding the child alleged to have caused harm now they have been convicted or cautioned. This could include expectations regarding their behaviour and any restrictions we think are reasonable and proportionate about the child alleged to have caused harm's timetable.

Any conviction (even with legal anonymity reporting restrictions) is potentially going to generate interest among other pupils in the school. We will ensure all children involved are protected, especially from any bullying or harassment (including online).

Where cases are classified as "no further action" (NFA'd) by the police or Crown Prosecution Service, or where there is a not guilty verdict, we will continue to offer support to the victim and the child alleged to have caused harm for as long as is necessary. A not guilty verdict or a decision not to progress with their case will likely be traumatic for the victim. The fact that an allegation cannot be substantiated does not necessarily mean that it was unfounded. We will continue to support all parties in this instance.

It is also important to note that by law, every child has the right to an education.

Support for Children Affected by Sexual-Assault

What support they require depends on the individual young person. It may be that they wish to seek counselling or one to one support via a mentor. It may also be that they feel able to deal with the incident(s) on their own or with support of family and friends; in which case it is necessary that this young person continues to be monitored and offered support should they require it in the future. If the incidents are of a bullying nature, the young person may need support in improving peer groups/relationships with other young people, or some restorative justice work with all those involved may be required.

Other interventions that could be considered may target a whole class or year group for example a speaker on online bullying, relationship abuse etc. It may be that through the continued curriculum of Relationship and Sex Education (from 2020), PSHE and SMSC that certain issues can be discussed and debated more frequently.

If the young person feels particularly vulnerable it may be that a risk assessment can be put in place for them whilst in school so that they have someone named that they can talk to, support strategies for managing future issues and identified services to offer additional support.

Support for victims of sexual assault is available from a variety of agencies.

We will support the victim of sexual assault to remain in school but if they are unable to do so we will enable them to continue their education elsewhere. This decision will be made only at the request of the child and their family.

If they are moved, we will ensure the new school is aware of the ongoing support they may need. The Designated Safeguarding Lead will support this move.

Where there is a criminal investigation, the child alleged to have caused harm will be removed from any shared classes with the victim and we will also consider how best to keep them a reasonable distance apart on the school premises or on school transport. This is in the best interest of the children concerned and should not be perceived to be a judgement of guilt before any legal proceedings. We will work closely with the police.

Where a criminal investigation into a rape or assault by penetration leads to a conviction or caution, we may take suitable action, if we have not already done so. In all but the most exceptional of circumstances, the rape or assault is likely to constitute a serious breach of behaviour and lead to the view that allowing the child

alleged to have caused harm to remain in the same school would seriously harm the education or welfare of the victim (and potentially other pupils).

Where a criminal investigation into sexual assault leads to a conviction or caution, we may, if we have not already done so, consider any suitable sanctions using our behaviour policy, including consideration of permanent exclusion.

Where the child alleged to have caused harm is going to remain at the school, the principle would be to continue keeping the victim and child alleged to have caused harm in separate classes and continue to consider the most appropriate way to manage potential contact on school premises and transport. The nature of the conviction or caution and wishes of the victim will be especially important in determining how to proceed in such cases. Reports of sexual assault and sexual harassment will, in some cases, not lead to a report to the police (for a variety of reasons). In some cases, rape, assault by penetration, sexual assault or sexual harassment are reported to the police and the case is not progressed or are reported to the police and ultimately result in a not guilty verdict. None of this means the offence did not happen or that the victim lied. The process will have affected both victim and child alleged to have caused harm. Appropriate support will be provided to both as required and consideration given to sharing classes and potential contact as required on a case-by-case basis.

All the above will be considered with the needs and wishes of the victim at the heart of the process (supported by parents and carers as required). Any arrangements should be kept under review.

For the young person who has displayed harmful behaviour

It is important to find out why the young person has behaved in such a way. It may be that the young person is experiencing their own difficulties and may even have been harmed themselves in a similar way. In such cases support such as one to one mentoring or counselling may also be necessary.

Specific support from identified services may be necessary through an early help referral and the young person may require additional support from family members.

Once the support required to meet the individual needs of the young person has been met, it is important that the young person receives a consequence for their behaviour. This may be in the form of restorative justice e.g. making amends with the young person they have targeted if this has been some form of bullying. In the cases of sexually harmful behaviour it may be a requirement for the young person to engage in one-to-one work with a particular service or agency (if a crime has been committed this may be through the police or youth offending service). If there is any form of criminal investigation ongoing it may be that this young person cannot be educated on site until the investigation has concluded. In which case, the young person will need to be provided with appropriate support and education elsewhere.

It may be that the behaviour that the young person has displayed may continue to pose a risk to others, in which case an individual risk assessment may be required. This should be completed via a multi- agency response to ensure that the needs of the young person and the risks towards others are measured by all agencies involved including the young person and their parents. This may mean additional supervision of the young person or protective strategies if the young person feels at risk of engaging in further inappropriate or harmful behaviour.

The school may also choose a punishment as a consequence such as exclusion or internal exclusion/inclusion/seclusion for a period of time to allow the young person to reflect on their behaviour.

After care

It is important that following the incident the young people involved continue to feel supported and receive help even if they have stated that they are managing the incident. Sometimes the feelings of remorse, regret or unhappiness may occur at a much later stage than the incident. It is important to ensure that the young people do not engage in any further harmful behaviour either towards someone else or to themselves as a way of coping (e.g. self-harm). For this reason, regular reviews with the young people following the incident(s) are imperative.

Physical Abuse

While a clear focus of child-on-child abuse is around sexual abuse and harassment, physical assaults and initiation violence and rituals from pupils to pupils 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.

The principles from the anti-bullying policy will be applied in these cases, with recognition that any police investigation will need to take priority.

When dealing with other alleged behaviour which involves reports of, for example, emotional and/or physical abuse, staff can draw on aspects of Hackett's continuum (Appendix 1) to assess where the alleged behaviour falls on a spectrum 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
- involves a power imbalance between the child/children allegedly responsible for the behaviour
- involves a misuse of power

Online Behaviour

Many forms of child-on-child abuse have an element of online behaviour including behaviours such as cyberbullying, sexting, sextortion and AI generated images.

Policies and procedures concerning this type of behaviour can be found Anti-Bullying policy, Positive Relationship policy and Online safety policy.

Prevention

Gothic Mede Academy actively seeks to raise awareness of and prevent all forms of child-on-child abuse by:

- Educating all Governors, Senior Leadership Team, staff and volunteers, pupils, and parents about this issue. This will include training all Governors, Senior Leadership Team, staff and volunteers 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.

- The importance of taking seriously all forms of child-on-child abuse (no matter how low level they may appear) and ensuring that no form of child-on-child abuse is ever dismissed as horseplay or teasing.
- Educating children about the nature and prevalence of child-on-child abuse via PSHE and the wider curriculum.
- Pupils are frequently told 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.
- They are regularly informed about the school's approach to such issues, including its zero-tolerance policy towards all forms of child-on-child 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; and
  (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 child-on-child abuse issues are fed back to the school's safeguarding lead(s) so that they can spot and address any concerning trends and identify pupils who maybe in need of additional support. This is done through cpoms, our secure electronic recording system.
- Challenging the attitudes that underlie such abuse (both inside and outside the classroom).
- Working with Governors, Central Executive Team, Senior Leadership Team, all staff and volunteers, pupils and parents to address equality issues, to promote positive values, and to encourage a culture of tolerance and respect amongst all members of the school community.
- Creating conditions in which our pupils can aspire to and realise safe and healthy relationships.
- Creating a culture in which our pupils feel able to share their concerns openly, in a non-judgmental environment, and have them listened to.
- Responding to cases of child-on-child abuse promptly and appropriately.

Multi-agency working

The school actively engages with its local partners in relation to child-on-child abuse and works closely with the Local Authority's children's social care, and/or 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 child-on-child abuse. They help the school:

(a) To 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) To ensure that our pupils can access the range of services and support they need quickly.

(c) To support and help inform our local community's response to child-on-child abuse.

(d) To 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 child-on-child abuse where necessary to the Local Authority's children's social care, and/or other relevant agencies.

Children residing out of county but attending a school within the LA will be reported to their home authority social care team.

In cases involving children who are subject to risk, harm and abuse and who have LAC status, the children's social worker must be informed and a coordinated approach to address any incidents or concerns will be required.

Guidance Notes

This policy applies to all settings within Bedfordshire Schools Trust and has been written in line with the statutory guidance contained within Keeping Children Safe in Education 2026 and Working Together to Safeguard Children 2026. Useful definitions can be found on page 19.

What is Child on Child Abuse?

Unfortunately, child-on-child abuse can and does happen in a whole range of settings that children attend, however it often goes unseen. It might take place online, for example, or away from the school or setting. Therefore, training for professionals to help them recognise the signs, and know what to do, is essential. All children are capable of abusing their peers, and this is most likely to include, but may not be limited to:

- bullying (including cyber bullying);
- physical abuse such as hitting, kicking, shaking, biting, hair pulling, or otherwise causing physical harm;
- Physical assault and harm, or the threat of harm with a weapon,
- sexual violence, such as rape, assault by penetration and sexual assault;
- sexual harassment, such as sexual comments, remarks, jokes and online sexual harassment, which may be stand-alone or part of a broader pattern of abuse;
- upskirting, which typically involves taking a picture under a person's clothing without them knowing, with the intention of viewing their genitals or buttocks to obtain sexual gratification, or cause the victim humiliation, distress or alarm;
- sexting (also known as youth produced sexual imagery); and
- initiation/hazing type violence and rituals.

All schools need to include child on child abuse in their schools' policies and procedures and all staff need to be aware of these and ensure they are part of their everyday practice. It should be clear that child-on-child abuse will never be accepted or dismissed as 'children being children'.

Settings should not wait until an incident of child-on-child abuse happens before taking action. We expect any provider educating or caring for children to create an environment in which children and staff show respect for one another. They should know what language and behaviour are acceptable and what to do and who to speak to if they are worried or feel unsafe.

All settings should take a whole-establishment approach to keeping children safe. They should set expectations that violence and harassment of any kind will not be tolerated, support children to have a good understanding of consent and healthy relationships and provide immediate support for victims of abuse.

All schools need to consider:

- Procedures to minimise the risk of child-on-child abuse
- What is in place to encourage/support/facilitate disclosures of child-on-child abuse
- How allegations are recorded, investigated and dealt with

- Clear processes as to how victims, the child alleged to have caused harm and any other children affected will be supported
- Recognition of the gendered nature of child-on-child abuse but recognising that all forms of this behaviour are unacceptable and will be taken seriously

It is important that schools see this guidance as a framework that will need to be adapted to fit the age and developmental stage and understanding of their pupil group.

Additional information can be found in Keeping Children Safe 2026.

Keeping Children Safe in Education September 2026

Prevention

As well as having strategies for dealing with incidents, schools and colleges should consider what they can do to foster healthy and respectful relationships between boys and girls including through Relationship and Sex Education and Personal Social Health and Economic education. The most effective preventative education programme will be through a whole-school approach that prepares pupils for life in modern Britain. The school will have a clear set of values and standards, and these will be upheld and demonstrated throughout all aspects of school life. This will be underpinned by the school's behaviour policy and pastoral support system, and by a planned programme of evidence-based content delivered through the whole curriculum. Such a programme should be developed to be age and stage of development appropriate (especially when considering SEND children and their cognitive understanding), and may tackle such issues as:

- Healthy and respectful relationships
- What respectful behaviour looks like
- Consent
- Gender roles, stereotyping and equality
- Body confidence and self-esteem
- Prejudiced behaviour
- That sexual violence and sexual harassment is always wrong; and
- Addressing cultures of sexual harassment.

Schools often deliver this through planned, high-quality, Relationships, Sex and Health Education (RSHE) and Personal, Social, Health and Economic (PSHE) education.

Compulsory Relationships Education for primary pupils and Relationships and Sex Education (RSE) for secondary pupils came into force from September 2020. Also, from September 2020 it is compulsory for all schools to teach Health Education.

Additional considerations for schools

When considering harmful sexual behaviour, ages and the stages of development of the children are critical factors to consider. Sexual behaviour between children can be considered harmful if one of the children is much older, particularly if there is more than two years difference or if one of the children is pre-pubescent and the other is not.

A younger child can, however, abuse an older child, particularly if they have power over them, for example if the older child is disabled or smaller in stature. Schools and colleges should ensure that their response to sexual violence and sexual harassment between children of the same sex is equally robust as it is for sexual violence and sexual harassment between children of the opposite sex.

A further consideration that must be made is that RSHE should be considered on a 1:1 basis for children whom schools are aware have been sexually abused. This work should be delivered on a 1:1 basis prior to the whole class RSHE sessions so that anything the child wishes to explore, given their own experiences, can be done safely and without fear of judgment.

A Whole School Policy

While schools cover many aspects of child-on-child abuse in other policies such as the whole school behaviour policy, the anti-bullying policy and the online safety policy (cyberbullying and sexting) schools need to be robust and clear about their strategies around wider behaviours including sexist and sexual bullying, sexual harassment, sexual violence and how such behaviour will be managed and addressed. It is recommended that schools introduce a separate child-on-child abuse policy to fully encapsulate the management of such issues – *see attached policy*.

It's important that all schools familiarise themselves with the statutory guidance. Individual professionals should know, understand and, most importantly, use the BEST child-on-child abuse policy to make sure that children are protected.

Multi-agency Approach

Child-on-child abuse that involves sexual assault and violence must always result in a multi-agency response. As well as supporting and protecting the victim, professionals need to consider whether the child alleged to have caused harm could be a victim of abuse too. We know that children who develop harmful sexual behaviours have often experienced abuse and neglect themselves.

We need to make sure that the children affected are getting the help they need. A typical response will involve:

- children's social care
- the police
- any specialist services that support children who demonstrate harmful sexual behaviour
- the family
- any other professionals who know or have had contact with the child

If the children involved are in the same class, the school will need to consider carefully whether to separate them while the concerns are being investigated. In situations of alleged rape and assault by penetration, the statutory guidance is clear that the child alleged to have caused harm should always be removed from classes they share with the victim.

Schools and colleges need to consider how best to keep the victim and child alleged to have caused harm a reasonable distance apart while they are on the same premises, as well as on transport to and from school or college, where appropriate.

The school will need to consider how long these measures should be in place, especially if any police investigation is inconclusive. Lack of a conviction is not the same as the allegation being unfounded. The school or college must continue to provide support to the victim and the child alleged to have caused harm for as long as necessary. Therefore, any separation arrangements must also be continued with for as long as is necessary to make sure the children are safe.

The importance of context

Professionals also need to consider risks to other children. If there's an incident in a school, has this put other children at risk? Have other children witnessed the incident? Could any siblings of the child alleged to have

caused harm be at risk? There may well be a need for a range of assessments and interventions for different children. A multi-agency approach is needed. No school or college can deal with this issue alone.

In addition, schools need to consider the potential vulnerabilities of the victims and any risks to them, including their potential abuse by others. Extra consideration should be given for pupils who may have additional vulnerabilities due to protected characteristics. Schools and colleges should consider how they are supporting their pupils with regard to their sex, sexuality, and if relevant, gender reassignment.

Schools and colleges should assess any potentially unsafe spaces on the premises, based on where incidents have occurred, and consider what can be done to make that environment safer.

It's equally important that schools and colleges think about children's safety outside of the school gates and any extra-familial risks. Things to consider include:

- Are they aware of any unsafe spaces in their local area?
- Do the children attend the same clubs or activities outside of school?
- Are schools and colleges aware of incidents of sexual harassment or violence involving children in the local park or other places where young people congregate?

Contextual information like this needs to be assessed and shared in a multiagency forum so risks can be fully assessed outside of the school.

Useful definitions

Sexual Harassment

This can be defined as 'unwanted conduct of a sexual nature' that can occur online and offline. In the context of this guidance this means in the context of child-on-child sexual harassment. Sexual harassment is likely to: violate a child's dignity, and/or make them feel intimidated, degraded or humiliated and/or create a hostile, offensive or sexualised environment.

It can include:

- Sexual comments, such as: telling sexual stories, making lewd comments, making sexual remarks about clothes and appearance and calling someone sexualised names
- Sexual "jokes" or taunting.

Sexting

Sexting is when someone shares sexual, naked or semi-naked images or videos of themselves or others or sends sexually explicit messages. They can be sent using mobiles, tablets, smartphones, laptops - any device that allows you to share media and messages. This is also known as youth produced sexual imagery

The UK Council for Internet Safety (UKCIS) Education Group has published Advice for Schools and Colleges on Responding to Sexting Incidents

Sexting: how to respond to an incident

Sextortion

Otherwise known as sexual extortion is a form of blackmail that can force any individual into paying money to an offender who is threatening to share nude or semi-nude images of them. This can also include forcing them to provide further intimate content or agreeing to do something against their will.

Sextortion incidents can happen through a variety of different ways which can often start by perpetrators masking themselves as other children or by hacking accounts and pretending to be children known by the individual.

UK Safer Internet Centre - Sextortion

Upskirting

This typically involves taking a picture under a person's clothing without them knowing, with the intention of viewing their genitals or buttocks to obtain sexual gratification, or cause the victim humiliation, distress or alarm. It is now a criminal offence and may constitute sexual harassment. Cases of 'up skirting' have a mandatory requirement for being reported.

Rape

A person (A) commits an offence of rape if: he intentionally penetrates the vagina, anus or mouth of another person (B) with his penis, B does not consent to the penetration and A does not reasonably believe that B consents.

Assault by Penetration

A person (A) commits an offence if: s/he intentionally penetrates the vagina or anus of another person (B) with a part of her/his body or anything else, the penetration is sexual, B does not consent to the penetration and A does not reasonably believe that B consents.

Causing someone to engage in sexual activity without consent

A person (A) commits an offence if: s/he intentionally causes another person (B) to engage in an activity, the activity is sexual, B does not consent to engaging in the activity, and A does not reasonably believe that B consents.

Sexual Assault

A person (A) commits an offence of sexual assault if: s/he intentionally touches another person (B), the touching is sexual, B does not consent to the touching and A does not reasonably believe that B consents.

Consent

Consent is about having the freedom and capacity to choose. Consent to sexual activity may be given to one sort of sexual activity but not another, e.g. to vaginal but not anal sex or penetration with conditions, such as wearing a condom. Consent can be withdrawn at any time during sexual activity, and each time activity occurs. Someone consents to vaginal, anal or oral penetration only if s/he agrees by choice to that penetration and has the freedom and capacity to make that choice:

It is important to know that:

- The age of consent is 16
- A child under the age of 13 can never consent to any sexual activity
- Sexual intercourse without consent is rape.

It is also important to differentiate between consensual sexual activity between children of a similar age and that which involves any power imbalance, coercion or exploitation. Due to their additional training, the Designated Safeguarding Lead (or deputy) should be involved and leading the school or college response. If in any doubt, they should seek expert advice.

It is important that schools and colleges consider sexual harassment in broad terms. Sexual harassment (as set out above) creates an atmosphere that, if not challenged, can normalise inappropriate behaviours and provide an environment that may lead to sexual violence.

Harmful Sexual Behaviour (HSB)

Children's sexual behaviour exists on a wide continuum, from normal and developmentally expected to inappropriate, problematic, abusive and violent. Problematic, abusive and violent sexual behaviour is developmentally inappropriate and may cause developmental damage. A useful umbrella term is "harmful sexual behaviour". The term has been widely adopted in child protection and is used in this advice. Harmful sexual behaviour can occur online and/or offline and can also occur simultaneously between the two. Harmful sexual behaviour should be considered in a child protection context.

Useful guidance can be found in:

NSPCC's and Research in Practice's Harmful Sexual Behaviour Framework:

NSPCC - Harmful Sexual Behaviour Framework

The Brook Sexual Behaviours Traffic Light Tool can also be very helpful in identifying sexual behaviours by children
www.brook.org.uk/our-work/the-sexual-behaviours-traffic-light-tool

Initiation/hazing

Hazing or initiation ceremonies refers to the practice of rituals, challenges, and other activities involving harassment, abuse or humiliation used as a way of initiating a person into a group. Hazing is seen in many different types of social groups, including gangs, sports teams and school groups. The initiation rituals can range from relatively low-level pranks, to protracted patterns of behaviour that rise to the level of abuse or criminal misconduct. Hazing may include physical or psychological abuse. It may also include nudity or sexual assault.

Contextual Safeguarding

All staff, but especially the Designated Safeguarding Lead (or deputy) should be considering the context within which incidents and/or behaviours occur. This is known as contextual safeguarding, which simply means assessments of children should consider whether wider environmental factors are present in a child's life that are a threat to their safety and/or welfare.

Keeping Children Safe in Education 2024

Keeping children safe in education - GOV.UK (www.gov.uk)

Human Rights Act 1998

It is essential to note that this guidance adheres to and encourages all persons to ensure that they are adhering to the Human Rights Act 1998, specifically the right to an education, the right to a Fair trial and protection from discrimination.

https://www.equalityhumanrights.com/en/human-rights/human-rights-act

Equalities Act 2010

This guidance is designed to ensure that the Equalities Act is adhered to at all times. The Equalities Act 2010 provides a basic framework for protection against direct and indirect discrimination, harassment and victimisation in education as well as other sectors.

https://www.gov.uk/guidance/equality-act-2010-guidance

Central Bedfordshire Safeguarding Children Partnership

https://www.safeguardingbedfordshire.org.uk/about-us/central-bedfordshire-safeguarding-children-partnership

Bedford Borough Safeguarding Children Partnership

https://www.safeguardingbedfordshire.org.uk/p/about-us/bedford-borough-safeguarding-children-partnership

Appendix 1 – Harmful Sexual Behaviour Framework / Simon Hackett Continuum

Simon Hackett (2010) has proposed a continuum model to demonstrate the range of sexual behaviours presented by children and young people, from those that are normal, to those that are highly deviant:

https://learning.nspcc.org.uk/media/1657/harmful-sexual-behaviour-framework.pdf

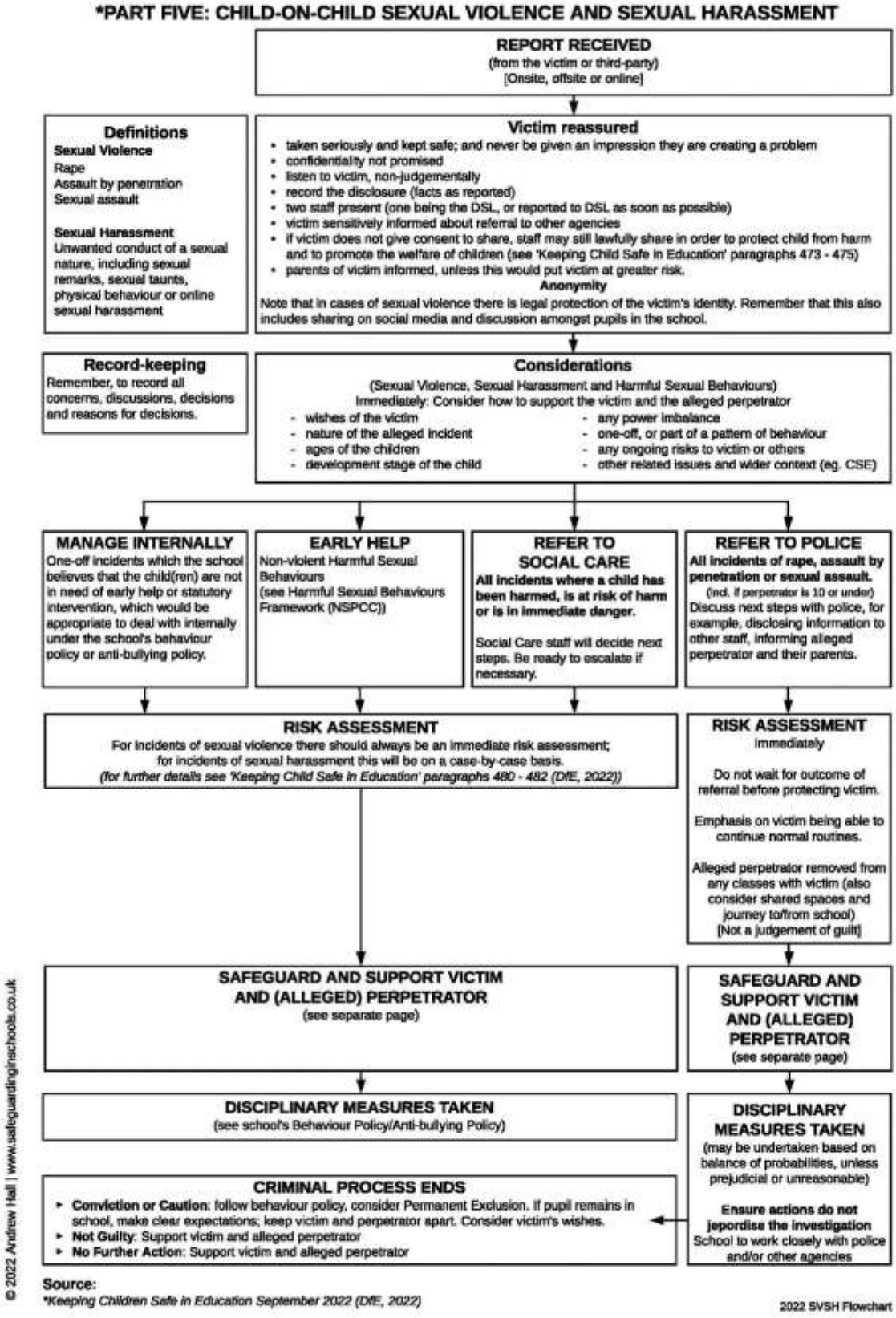


Normal	Inappropriate	Problematic	Abusive	Violent
Developmentally expected Socially acceptable Consensual, mutual, reciprocal Shared decision making	• Single instances of inappropriate sexual behaviour • Socially acceptable behaviour within peer group • Context for behaviour may be inappropriate • Generally consensual and reciprocal	• Problematic and concerning behaviours • Developmentally unusual and socially unexpected • No overt elements of victimisation • Consent issues may be unclear • May lack reciprocity or equal power • May include levels of compulsivity	• Victimising intent or outcome • Includes misuse of power • Coercion and force to ensure victim compliance • Intrusive • Informed consent lacking, or not able to be freely given by victim • May include elements of expressive violence	• Physically violent sexual abuse • Highly intrusive • Instrumental violence which is physiologically and/or sexually arousing to the perpetrator • Sadism

Audit Tool:

https://learning.nspcc.org.uk/media/1149/harmful-sexual-behaviour-framework-audit-tool.pdf

Appendix 2 – Flowchart



Appendix 3 – Risk Assessment Template

Risk Assessment for Child on Child Sexual Abuse/ Harmful Sexual Behaviour

The terms victim and child alleged to have caused harm are used to identify the children involved. NB: there should be no assumption of guilt on the part of the alleged perpetrator, pending investigation.

Each section/question will be considered from the perspective of both pupils. Considerations will be given for the impact on, and needs of, the wider school community. All concerns and proposed actions will be recorded.

The school will work with the local multi-agency safeguarding hub (MASH) and other agencies as necessary when completing this risk assessment. This document should be reviewed frequently to ensure it is fit for purpose.

***A risk assessment should be completed for all cases relating to sexual violence or alleged sexual violence. Sexual violence is defined by the sexual offences act 2002 as "criminal acts: rape, assault by penetration and sexual assault".**

***This risk assessment should be completed with reference to Keeping Children Safe In Education**

Basic information		
Referrer Name		
Referrer Contact details		
Name of school for victim		
Name of school for child alleged to have caused harm		
Did incident occur on school premises?		

Considerations	RISK (consider victim, child alleged to have caused harm, other pupils and staff)	Risk Level (High, Medium or low)	Actions to reduce risk	Revised Risk Level (High, Medium or low)
• What was the nature of the incident?				
• Was it a crime?				
• Is it necessary to limit contact between the children involved? *Refer to KCSIE*				
• Is there an actual or perceived threat from the child alleged to have caused harm to the victim and/or others?				
• Is either the victim or the child alleged to have caused harm at risk of physical harm as a result of this incident (for example, bullying or 'retribution' by peers)?				
• Do they share classes?				
• Do they share break times?				
• Do they share transport to/from school?				

Considerations	RISK (consider victim, child alleged to have caused harm, other pupils and staff)	Risk Level (High, Medium or low)	Actions to reduce risk	Revised Risk Level (High, Medium or low)
• Are they likely to come into contact with each other (or anyone else involved in/with knowledge of the incident) outside of school?				
• How can such contact be limited?				
• Is there a risk of harm from social media and gossip?				

Appendix 4 – Support and National Charities

Support for Young People:

If you think that a child has been harmed or is being neglected, contact the Access and Referral Hub on 0300 300 8585, or out of hours 0300 300 8123.

The Police are also there to offer support and guidance to both alleged victims and children alleged to have caused harm, they can be contacted on 101.

- Internet Watch Foundation (to potentially remove illegal images) www.iwf.org.uk
- Childline - https://www.childline.org.uk/ or 0800 1111
- NSPCC – Report Abuse in Education helpline - 0800 136 663 or email help@nspcc.org.uk https://www.nspcc.org.uk/about-us/news-opinion/2021/sexual-abuse-victims-schools-helpline/

National charities:

Victim Support
A national charity dedicated to helping anyone affected by crime – not just victims and witnesses, but friends, family and anyone else caught up in the aftermath.

Rape Crisis
A national charity offering confidential help, advice and a range of Rape Crisis Centres around the UK.

Galop
A national charity providing advice and support to members of the LGBT community.

Survivors UK
A national charity supporting men who have been raped or sexually assaulted.

Crimestoppers
A national charity with a free helpline for reporting crime anonymously.

Refuge
Refuge supports women, children and men with a range of services, including refuges, independent advocacy, community outreach and culturally specific services.

Women's Aid

Women's Aid is a national charity working to end domestic abuse against women and children.

Men's Advice Line: 0808 801 0327
Confidential helpline for men experiencing domestic violence from a partner or ex-partner (or from other family members).

Appendix 5 - Useful Publications and Websites

Government Publications

- Keeping Children safe in Education - Keeping children safe in education - GOV.UK (www.gov.uk)
- Preventing youth violence and gang involvement - Advice to schools and colleges on gangs and youth violence - GOV.UK (www.gov.uk)
- Preventing bullying in schools - www.gov.uk/government/publications/preventing-and-tackling-bullying
- DfE: Statutory guidance: Working together to safeguard children, 2023- https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/working-together-to-safeguard-children--2
- DfE: Searching, screening and confiscation at school, July2022 - https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/searching-screening-and-confiscation
- DfE: Statutory guidance School exclusion September 2023 - https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/school-exclusion
- DfE: Teaching Online Safety in Schools, January 2023 - https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/teaching-online-safety-in-schools
- DfE: Relationship Education and Relationship and Sex Education- https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/relationships-education-relationships-and-sex-education-rse-and-health-education#full-publication-update-history
- DfE: Behaviour in schools February 2024- Behaviour in Schools guidance
- DfE: Mental health and behaviour in schools - https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/mental-health-and-behaviour-in-schools--2
- DfE: Cyberbullying: Advice for headteachers and school staff, November 2014 - https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/1069987/Cyberbullying_Advice_for_Headteachers_and_School_Staff_121114.pdf
- Sharing nudes and semi-nudes: advice for education settings working with children and young people, March 2024 – https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/sharing-nudes-and-semi-nudes-advice-for-education-settings-working-with-children-and-young-people
- UKCIS: Tackling race and faith targeted bullying face to face and online. May 2017 - https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/tackling-race-and-faith-targeted-bullying-face-to-face-and-online-a-guide-for-schools
- UKCIS: Education for a connected world, June 2020 - https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/education-for-a-connected-world
- Gov.uk: Equality Act 2010: advice for schools - https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/equality-act-2010-advice-for-schools

Other useful documents

- The Safeguarding Network – Child-on-child abuse
  https://safeguarding.network/content/safeguarding-resources/peer-peer-abuse/

- Preventing abuse among children and young people-guidance from Stop it Now
  stop_booklets_childs_play_preventing_abuse_among_children_and_young_people01_14.pdf (stopitnow.org.uk)

- What is Age appropriate?
  http://www.stopitnow.org/ohc-content/what-is-age-appropriate

- Brook Traffic lights
  https://www.brook.org.uk/our-work/using-the-sexual-behaviours-traffic-light-tool

- NSPCC-Harmful sexual behaviour
  Protecting children from harmful sexual behaviour | NSPCC Learning

- NCB Harmful sexual behaviour
  Workforce perspectives on harmful sexual behaviour | National Children's Bureau (ncb.org.uk)

- NSPCC – Is this sexual abuse?
  "Is this sexual abuse?" | NSPCC Learning

- Online sexual harassment
  Project deSHAME- Digital Exploitation and Sexual Harassment Amongst Minors in Europe
  Understanding, Preventing, Responding
  https://www.childnet.com/our-projects/project-deshame

- Equality and Human Rights Commission: Public Sector Equality Duty Guidance for Schools in England
  Equality Duty Guidance for Schools in England (equalityhumanrights.com)

- Key messages from research on children and young people who display harmful sexual behaviour (PDF)
  Key messages from research on children and young people who display harmful sexual behaviour - CSA Centre

- National Police Chiefs Council- When to call the police (PDF)
  When to call the police - guidance for schools and colleges

- London Grid for Learning's Undressed
  https://undressed.lgfl.net/

- UK Safer Internet Centre - sextortion
  https://saferinternet.org.uk/online-issue/sextortion