



Learning from young people: How schools and universities can protect students from peer-on-peer abuse

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Authors: Katie Rigg and Dr. Jenny Lloyd

Contributors: Will Gardner, Nunana Nyomi, Ann Straub, Allison Tombros Korman

A series of conversations with students since 2018 about different forms of peer-on-peer abuse provides the first-hand context and a strong foundation for the guidance in this post.

We have outlined ways that schools and universities can prevent and respond to this form of harm, specifically looking at some of the challenges and strengths facing institutions that serve geographically mobile and culturally diverse student bodies.

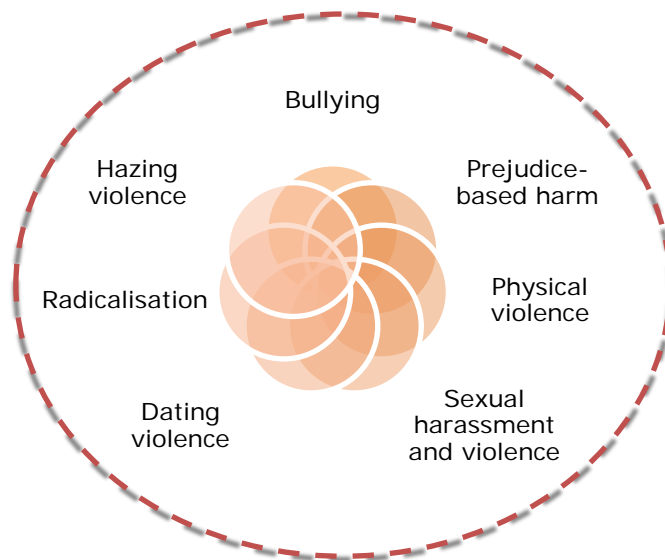
We've also been careful to reflect on the Coronavirus, anti-racism and diversity and how these may also have an impact on peer-on-peer abuse.

We hope that the information and links to resources will help to support you in your roles as you work to protect students.

What is peer-on-peer abuse?

Peer-on-peer abuse is the 'physical, sexual, emotional and financial abuse, and coercive control, exercised within young people's relationships, including their intimate relationships, friendships and wider peer associations.'¹

Figure one: forms of peer-on-peer abuse



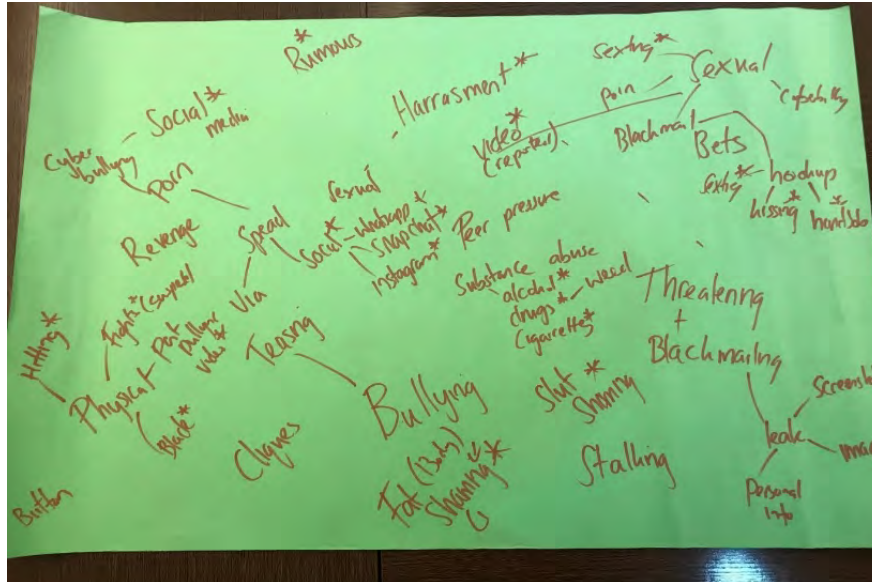
Students from multiple countries and diverse cultural contexts have spoken about their experiences of peer-on-peer abuse including:

- ✓ Being blackmailed to engage in sexual activities
- ✓ Being threatened by knife point in the locker rooms and bathrooms
- ✓ Having sexual images taken of them without their consent
- ✓ The rape of students, including on campus, at parties and on trips

¹ Firmin, C. *Abuse between Young People: A Contextual Account*. 2017, Oxon, Routledge.

- ✓ Being excluded from social groups because of where they come from or the languages that they speak, or don't speak
- ✓ Having rumours and 'gossip' spread about them and other students

Figure two: students' experiences of peer-on-peer abuse in a school setting²



Prevention and identification

Here are some actions you can take to prevent and identify peer-on-peer abuse at an early stage.

Ensure that your policies address all forms of peer-on-peer abuse

Young people often experience multiple forms of harm that can intersect and overlap with each other. Having policies that address all forms of peer-on-peer abuse can be helpful. We have heard from counsellors, whose schools only had an anti-bullying policy in place, that they were ill-equipped to respond when other forms of harm occurred.

Provide on-going education that enables students to identify and report harm

Providing ongoing, evidence-based social emotional skills and prevention education, tailored appropriately to the audience, is critical to helping students identify and report peer-on-peer abuse.³ We have heard from a survivor of peer-on-peer abuse that no one had ever spoken to her about different types of harm before her abuse, which meant that she didn't have a framework to understand what was happening to her, or a language to describe it. As she explained:

"Too many children and adolescents suffer these things in silence. After the most severe rape incident I found myself searching Google looking for the right word. It wasn't a male, so could it really be rape? Sexual assault was too vague and didn't encompass the actual act. But this was a peer so could it even be child abuse? It is important to me to keep telling this story so that the next teenager to go through this at least knows how to talk about it and has someone who will listen."

² Student engagement session, 2019

³ Culture of Respect CORE Blueprint: <https://www.naspa.org/book/culture-of-respect-core-blueprint-2nd-ed> The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention: <https://www.cdc.gov/violenceprevention/pdf/sv-prevention-technical-package.pdf>



Sessions about sexting

"They teach you not to send images in the first place. So, if your photo gets shared around, you're not going to speak to a teacher because they are the ones that told you not to send it" (student engagement session, 2019)

Rather than leading with the message "it's wrong to send a photo of yourself to others", focus on the abusive and harmful aspects of image sharing. For example, that it's wrong to put pressure on another person to send images of themselves, and to share any images of others.

Identify and address the risks presented by the Coronavirus, and build on any protective factors that might have emerged

We are still learning about the impact of the Coronavirus on young people's experiences of peer-on-peer abuse. Many organizations have issued warnings that with more young people online more often and for more time, the exposure to online risk is likely to be increased (UNICEF, NCA-CEOP, NSPCC, IWF, Europol).⁴

Our conversations with counsellors over the past few months indicate that some students are reporting less peer pressure and bullying, and increased time for self-reflection. A key question for schools and universities will be to ascertain what protective factors may have emerged during lockdown, and how these can be carried forwards as campuses start to reopen.

Embed values of equity, diversity and inclusion throughout your institution

Inequalities and discrimination provide fertile breeding grounds for peer-on-peer abuse. We know that socio-economic inequality within a school can increase bullying rates, that young people experience peer-on-peer abuse in gendered ways, and that racial or ethnic minority status can be a risk factor for peer victimisation.⁵

Our discussions with students in some institutions suggest that where a school or university has been able to embed values of diversity and equity throughout its institution, this can help to protect students from harm.

"I think in our school we have a sort of culture of acceptance. It's really part of the values to accept difference, so I think we support each other perhaps more" (student engagement session, 2019)

This is consistent with research studies which suggest that a school culture which is underpinned by values based on equity, diversity and inclusion, and is open and supportive, can foster a caring environment and improve reporting rates.⁶ Equally, when students feel that they belong in and are

4 UNICEF: <https://www.unicef.org/southafrica/press-releases/children-increased-risk-harm-online-during-global-covid-19-pandemic-unicef>. Europol: <https://euobserver.com/coronavirus/148404>

5 Espelage, D. and Swearer, S. *Research on School Bullying and Victimization: What Have We Learned and Where Do We Go From Here?* 2003. Mouttapa, M., Valente, T et al. *Social network predictors of bullying and victimization*, 2004, *Adolescence*, 39(154), pp. 315–335. Chaux, E., Molano, A. et al. *Socio-economic, socio-political and socio-emotional variables explaining school bullying: a country-wide multilevel analysis*, 2009, *Aggressive Behavior*, 35(6), pp. 520–529. Hong, J. and Espelage, D. *A review of research on bullying and peer victimization in school: An ecological system analysis*, 2012, *Aggression and Violent Behavior*, 17(4), pp. 311–322.

6 Dobson, A. and Ringrose, J. *Sext Education: Pedagogies of Sex, Gender and Shame in the Schoolyards of "Tagged" and "Exposed."* 2016; McLeod, D., Jones, R. et al. *An Evaluation of a School-Based, Peer-Facilitated, Healthy Relationship Program for At-Risk Adolescents*. 2015; Storer, H., Casey, E. et al. *Developing "whole school" bystander interventions: The role of school-settings in influencing adolescents responses to dating violence and bullying*, 2017

connected to their school, this can reduce levels of peer aggression and violence, and the converse is also true.⁷

Embed anti-racism and consider intersectionality⁸

While racism is one way in which young people can harm each other, the ways that schools respond to peer-on-peer abuse are often embedded within systems that prioritize certain groups. For example, while schools may seek to respond to peer-on-peer abuse through the use of sanctions, evidence suggests that behaviour policies often disproportionately impact black students.⁹ In order to tackle both individual and structural racism, institutions will need to look not only at the considerations set out in this article, but also at deeper social, cultural and systemic structures which have privileged voices of some groups over others, and have perpetuated inequalities. At CIS, we are hearing and learning from the personal experiences of people who are suffering from racism, in order to frame the systemic and structural challenges we need to address in international education. We are deep into listening and learning mode as we consider how we can use all the tools available to us to address systemic racism in international education.¹⁰

Intersectionality invites us to think about how people can experience multiple and overlapping forms of discrimination based on different aspects of their identity. For example, someone may experience racism, sexism and ageism collectively or individually at different times and in different environments.¹¹ Intersectionality can be a helpful lens through which to understand how different forms of prejudice and discrimination play out in education, and how we can seek to tackle these forms harm.¹²

Ensure you offer culturally and ethnically representative support and educate your community on the role of culture

For institutions with diverse student bodies, having culturally relevant and ethnically representative psychological support is important. An Asian student attending a US College in a predominantly white environment told us the story of not seeking much-needed counselling as she could not locate any Asian counsellors, the only people she felt could understand her.

A young person's behaviour and perceptions are informed by their cultural background and experiences. When young people from different cultural contexts come together, this can sometimes lead to misunderstandings and peer pressure to, for example, drink alcohol or engage in casual sex. Some professionals have helped students navigate these differences by creating spaces to have conversations about nuanced areas such as identity, peer pressure and consent, why someone might not want to do something but might feel pressured into doing it, and how cultural difference may play a role in someone's understanding of how they should behave. Training in intercultural competence can also help young people to understand their own culture and strengthen their conviction to their own core values and behaviours.¹³ We have heard from professionals in schools about the positive impact of staff

⁷ You You, S., Furlong, M et al. *Relations among school connectedness, hope, life satisfaction, and bully victimization*, Psychology in the Schools. 2008

⁸ Ibram X. Kendi defines an antiracist person as someone who is expressing an antiracist idea or supporting an antiracist policy with their actions, and an antiracist idea as any idea that says the racial groups are equal. Kendi, I, *How to be an anti-racist*, 2019

⁹ Lloyd, J., Walker, J. et al. *Harmful sexual behaviour in schools: a briefing on the findings, implications and resources for schools and multi-agency partners*. Contextual Safeguarding Network. 2020

¹⁰ For more information about the work that CIS has been doing, please see: Nunana N., [International education perpetuates structural racism and anti-racism is the solution](#), 2020. Nunana N., and Larsson J., [A conversation on anti-racism in international education](#), and CIS webinars *Anti-racist diversity, equity, and inclusion approaches in schools and universities*, in the [community portals](#).

¹¹ March, N. and David, J. *Intersectionality: race, gender and other aspects of identity in social work with young people*,

¹² Crenshaw, K. [What is intersectionality?](#) National Association of Independent Schools, 2018 and Crenshaw, K. *Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence against Women of Color*, 1991.

¹³ Middleton, J. *Core compromises that which defines you and you cannot easily change: behaviours, habits, values and beliefs*. 2014.



training that focused on identifying and addressing harm across cultures and on supporting students with the impact of culture shock. Understanding how the influence of peers in adolescence differs between cultures, with it being more pronounced in some countries, for example, than in others, can also help staff to identify and manage peer dynamics.¹⁴

Provide multiple avenues for students to report

Providing multiple avenues for students to share concerns and prominently displaying posters around your institution can help to provide students with a language to use and can encourage reporting. Engage students in all stages of this process to ensure messages are student-led.

Counsellors

“We would never tell our counsellors because they were asked to find out who was involved [in drinking alcohol] so they started bringing everyone in to question them.” (student engagement session, 2019)

“The counsellors are great but they are not well represented by the school. Their office is hidden and far away, you have to make an appointment and it feels like something is wrong with you or you are sick if you go to a counsellor, it should be normal” (student engagement session, 2020)

Learn from your students

If schools want to ensure that their responses to peer-on-peer abuse are relevant and effective, it is critical that they learn from students. This can take many forms. For example, small group sessions with students can help you to understand the forms of harm that are most prevalent in your setting. Administering student well-being surveys can enable you to spot trends over time. Carrying out a location mapping exercise with students can help you to identify the safe and unsafe areas. This can also be carried out in relation to social media platforms, online games and websites.

Figure four: School safety mapping¹⁵



Any consultation with students should be done safely and ethically, with the appropriate policies and procedures in place. The [International Taskforce on Child Protection](#) is carrying out research and preparing guidance on this topic, and will be consulting directly with students as part of this.

¹⁴ Warr, M. *Companions in Crime*. 2002

¹⁵ Stein, N., Mennemeier, K., et al. *School Mapping*. 2010. Shifting Boundaries



Review the ways in which you record concerns

There should be secure and confidential ways for all staff to report concerns, and for these to be recorded. Digital systems which allow for the triangulation of data, tracking trends and recording locations and times, are helpful. A small number of senior staff should have oversight of safeguarding and behaviour records in order to identify patterns at an early stage and understand when behaviour may indicate a safeguarding issue. Reviews of records can include consideration of the following:

- ✓ what types of harm are being recorded?
- ✓ is the threshold for recording harm set at the right level?
- ✓ is there evidence of victim-blaming, racist or stigmatising language, or a lack of clear descriptions of the behaviour or incident?
- ✓ how are incidents responded to?
- ✓ how can this inform prevention?

Implement effective transitions programmes

Transitions are periods of change and can bring with them a range of challenges as students leave one life behind and start another.¹⁶ Effective transition programmes are critical and can support new students to integrate into their environments and help existing students to manage the grief that can arise from their friends moving on.¹⁷ Information sharing between the institutions that students move between can also be critical in ensuring that the new institution can safeguard the incoming student. This is a complex area involving legal and ethical considerations, and CIS will be providing further guidance on this issue.

Response

Handling allegations of peer-on-peer abuse in a way that safeguards all young people involved can be difficult. Your policies should allow you flexibility so that each allegation can be handled on a case by case basis, while at the same time ensuring that there is enough consistency that individuals have confidence in the process and an understanding of how it will be applied.

Conduct a local mapping exercise and learn about your legal context

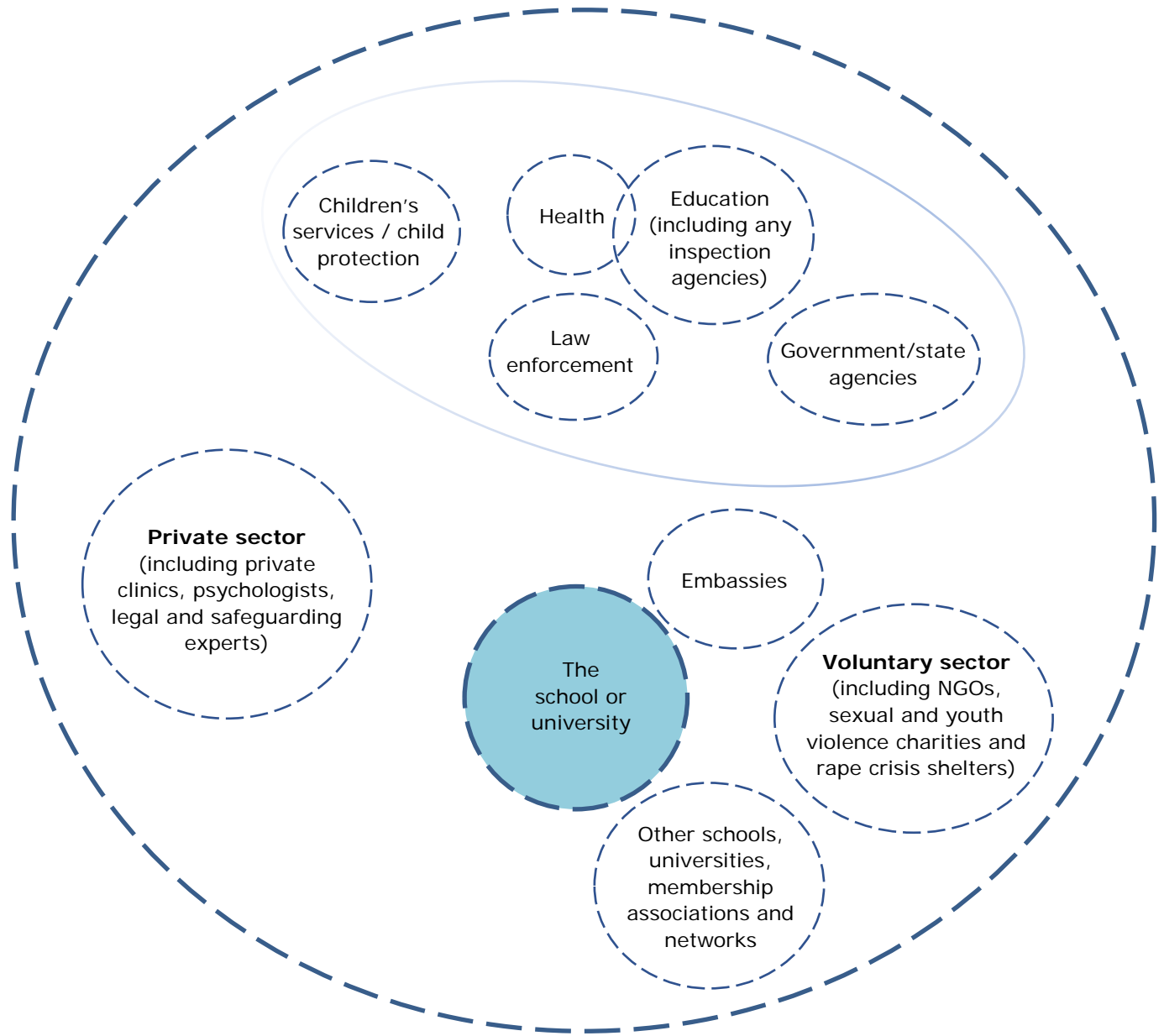
In order to respond effectively to peer-on-peer abuse, institutions need to understand the legal obligations for reporting abuse to external agencies in their country, and the support services available. A local mapping exercise whereby you identify and build relationships with external agencies can help.

¹⁶ Parker, E., March, S. et al. [Student well-being and high school transitions: Five big ideas in the context of the Coronavirus](#). 2020 and Rigg, K. [Student mental health and well-being: Supporting students in transition from school to university](#). 2019.

¹⁷ Ota, D. *How mobility affects people and what international schools should do about it*. 2014



Figure five: Example of a local mapping exercise



Intervene early to prevent escalation

It is critical to address inappropriate and problematic behaviours before they escalate.

"When we are worried about something we normally talk to a houseparent or a teacher"

[Interviewer: *"And how do they usually respond?"*]

"Their response is always excellent. They always listen to us and tell us what they are going to do. They are very discreet, and they usually solve the problem." (student engagement session, 2019)

Case reviews of institutional abuse consistently highlight that when these 'lower level' behaviours are present in an institution and go unaddressed, this normalises harm in the environment and creates conditions that are conducive to further harm.¹⁸

"I told my counsellor about the bullying, but not the assault. He assured me that there was nothing he could do without making it worse for me. I told him that it was more than I could handle and that it was contributing to my suicidal feelings. He told me to just have thicker skin. I never felt comfortable expressing the assault due to this assumption that there was nothing anyone could do."

(young person, 2019)

Intervene with the contexts and not just the individuals, and be wary of zero tolerance approaches

Evidence suggests that when young people encounter harm from their peers it is often in contexts beyond their families, for example at school or university, or online. It is important therefore that professionals recognise the relationship between the harm and the context it is happening within. For example, in an instance of bullying between a group of boys at school it would be important to understand the dynamics of the peer group—the leader and followers—and how this informs interventions. If a sexual assault occurs on campus, the university should consider the physical environment, systems and structures alongside support to students affected. To support these approaches, schools and universities can consider Contextual Safeguarding approaches, which support educators, social workers and families to assess and intervene with the contexts, and not just individuals.¹⁹ Similarly, zero tolerance policies that require institutions to take punitive actions without allowing professionals to exercise judgment or seek to understand how wider contexts might be driving certain behaviours, can be very damaging.²⁰

Do not dismiss peer-on-peer abuse that takes place away from campus, online and during the holiday

Students talked to us about the pervasive nature of online harm, and the difficulty escaping from it. Some students told us that they would be less inclined to report abuse that took place online or away from campus, because they didn't think that their institution would do anything about it.

¹⁸ Lloyd, J. *Abuse through sexual image sharing in schools: response and responsibility*, Gender and Education. 2018.

¹⁹ Contextual Safeguarding Network, CSNetwork.org.uk. 2020

²⁰ Lloyd, J. [Why zero tolerance doesn't work](#), Contextual Safeguarding Network. 2019

"We would never tell a teacher if someone was sexually assaulted at a party. Our teachers tell us all the time that if something happens outside of school it's not their problem" (student engagement session, 2020)

All allegations of peer-on-peer abuse, regardless of where and when the alleged abuse took place, raise questions about the safety and well-being of students on campus and, as such, should be responded to. Policies should make this clear.

Identify where the behaviour falls on a continuum: examine the power dynamics and think carefully about consent

Not all sexual behaviour between young people is harmful and when responding to instances of peer-on-peer sexual harm it is important to understand if the behaviour is developmentally appropriate and acceptable or potentially harmful or abusive. The following continuum can help.

Figure three: Simon Hackett's continuum of sexual behaviours²¹



(Hackett, 2011)

it is also important to ask:

- ✓ Is there is a difference in power between the young people involved?


Much of young people's power comes from their social and cultural capital and understanding the power dynamics therefore requires professionals to understand what gives young people capital in their context.²²

- ✓ Are students consenting freely?

²¹ Hackett, S. *Children and Young People with Harmful Sexual Behaviours*. Children Behaving Badly?: Peer Violence between Children and Young People. 2011. 121-135.

²² Age, gender, ability, sexual orientation, minority racial or ethnic background within a group, socio-economic status and previous trauma are all relatively common factors that can influence social and cultural capital in education settings. Economic capital is our financial resources. Social capital is our social networks and relationships around us. Cultural capital is our understanding of, and ability to follow, the rules and norms at play in a social setting or context. Firmin, C. *Abuse between Young People: A Contextual Account*. 2017, Oxon, Routledge.





It is important to consider not only whether the young person made an active choice, but also whether they had the freedom and capacity to make that choice. For example, where a young person is being pressured or blackmailed into certain activities, or where the culture of the institution facilitates or condones harm, their ability to consent freely is likely to be constrained.

Consider your duty to refer allegations externally

You should always seek to comply with mandatory reporting obligations to refer allegations of abuse to external agencies. Even where there is no legal obligation to report, you should always give any alleged victims the opportunity to report allegations of criminal behaviour to law enforcement directly. It may be necessary for institutions to report to law enforcement even where the young people involved do not want to report. For example, where the allegation indicates that a young person poses a risk of harm to the wider community. These cases need to be handled with care, and expert advice should always be sought.

There may be some instances where reporting an allegation to local agencies could lead to members of the community being put at risk of significant harm. For example, in some countries there may be a real risk of harm for the victim for cultural reasons, or a risk of significant human rights abuses in the legal system.²³ It is helpful in these cases to carry out and document a risk and benefits assessment whereby the risks of reporting are weighed up against the risks of not reporting.

²³ [Charity Commission Guidance](#), 2019

Resources

Policies and prevention

- ✓ CIS resources on intercultural competence: <https://www.cois.org/about-cis/news/post/~board/perspectives-blog/post/cultural-responses-to-a-worldwide-pandemic-five-things-we-can-learn-from-one-another>
- ✓ Farrer & Co. Peer-on-peer abuse toolkit: <https://www.farrer.co.uk/globalassets/clients-and-sectors/safeguarding/farrer-co-safeguarding-peer-on-peer-abuse-toolkit-2019.pdf>
- ✓ Farrer & Co. Safeguarding children from racism: <https://www.farrer.co.uk/news-and-insights/safeguarding-children-from-racism-and-creating-an-anti-racist-culture/>
- ✓ NASPA assessing and Improving campus sexual violence policies: <https://www.naspa.org/book/culture-of-respect-core-constructs-toolkit-bundle-of-6-guides>

Audit tools

- ✓ Contextual safeguarding Network, Beyond Referrals: levers for addressing harmful sexual behaviours in schools. <https://www.csnetwork.org.uk/en/beyond-referrals-levers-for-addressing-harmful-sexual-behaviour-in-schools>
- ✓ NASPA audit tool: [Culture of Respect CORE Constructs Toolkit](#) Culture of Respect CORE Evaluation: <https://www.naspa.org/book/culture-of-respect-core-evaluation-3rd-ed>

Student education and voice

- ✓ Childnet's Digital leaders programme: <https://digital-leaders.childnet.com/>; Crossing the line toolkit: <https://www.childnet.com/resources/pshe-toolkit/crossing-the-line> and Myth v Reality, covering online pornography, healthy relationships online and body image: <https://www.childnet.com/resources/pshe-toolkit/myth-vs-reality>.
- ✓ Contextual safeguarding surveys <https://www.csnetwork.org.uk/en/publications/beyond-referrals-levers-for-addressing-harmful-sexual-behaviour-in-schools>; guidance on engagement group sessions with students: <https://www.csnetwork.org.uk/en/publications/beyond-referrals-levers-for-addressing-harmful-sexual-behaviour-in-schools>. Talking to students about sexting: <https://vimeo.com/380753371>
- ✓ Girlguiding advocates have written about the importance of [talking about the Black Lives Matter movement](#).
- ✓ NASPA Planning and Strategy for Campus Prevention Education: <https://www.naspa.org/book/culture-of-respect-core-constructs-toolkit-bundle-of-6-guides>
- ✓ Young Minds have written about experiencing and witnessing [racism and mental health](#).

Staff training

- ✓ CIS, Child Protection Workshops: <https://www.cois.org/about-cis/child-protection/workshops>
- ✓ NASPA Culture of Respect CORE Constructs Toolkit: Training, Compliance, and Engagement for Campus Employees: <https://www.naspa.org/book/culture-of-respect-core-constructs-toolkit-bundle-of-6-guides>

Response

- ✓ Universities UK guidance on how to handle alleged sexual misconduct in universities: <https://www.universitiesuk.ac.uk/policy-and-analysis/reports/Documents/2016/guidance-for-higher-education-institutions.pdf>

Reporting

- ✓ ICMEC national laws: <https://www.icmec.org/education-portal/international-national-law/>
- ✓ Inhope: Details of national hotlines for reporting child sexual abuse material that is online, see www.inhope.org
- ✓ [Report Harmful Content](#) is a reporting centre designed to assist anyone in reporting harmful content online. This includes online abuse, harassment, impersonation and violent content.

Education Portal

Further resources, training materials and tools in support of institutional safeguarding and child protection programs may be found at the International Centre for Missing & Exploited Children EdPortal.ICMEC.org.

Authors:

Katie Rigg, Head of Safeguarding and Student Well-being at the Council of International Schools (CIS) and Dr. Jenny Lloyd, Senior Research Fellow at the University of Bedfordshire.

Contributors:

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- ❖ Will Gardner, CEO of Childnet International
- ❖ Nunana Nyomi, Associate Director of Higher Education Services, CIS
- ❖ Ann Straub, International Advisor, CIS
- ❖ Allison Tombros Korman, Culture of Respect at NASPA - Student Affairs Administrators in Higher Education