



Peer-on-Peer abuse: Morecambe Bay Academy's Policy and Guidance

This Policy should be read in conjunction with the Academy's:

Anti-bullying policy

Safeguarding Policies.

The Policy will be reviewed annually.

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Introduction

The Leadership Team, and all staff and volunteers at Morecambe Bay Academy are committed to the prevention, early identification and appropriate management of peer-on-peer abuse (as defined below) both within and beyond the Academy.

In particular, we believe that in order to protect all of our students, all of those who are members of the Academy community should:

- Be aware of the level and nature of risk to which our pupils are or may be exposed, and put in place a clear and comprehensive strategy which is tailored to their specific safeguarding context;
- Take a contextual whole-school approach to preventing and responding to peer-on-peer abuse;
- Regard the introduction of this guidance as a preventative measure, and do not feel it is acceptable merely to take a reactive approach to peer-on-peer abuse in response to alleged incidents of it;
- Recognise national and increasing concern about this issue, and wish to implement this policy in order to ensure that our pupils are safe;
- Encourage parents to hold us to account on this issue, so that if their child is feeling unsafe as a result of the behaviour of any of their peers, they should inform the Academy so that it can ensure that appropriate and prompt action is taken in response.

This guidance sets out our strategy for preventing, identifying and appropriately managing peer-on-peer abuse. It applies to all members of the Academy community and will be reviewed annually to ensure that it continually addresses the risks to which pupils are or may be exposed. This policy deliberately does not use the term 'victim' and/or 'perpetrator'. This is

because the Academy takes a safeguarding approach to all individuals involved in allegations of or concerns about peer-on-peer abuse, including those who are alleged to have been abused and those who are alleged to have abused their peers, in addition to any sanctioning work that may also be required for the latter.

Although the starting point is that the Academy's response to peer-on-peer abuse should be the same for all pupils regardless of age, there may be some additional considerations in relation to a pupil aged 18 or over in terms of how local agencies and/or partners respond.

Similarly, the Academy's response to incidents involving the exchange of youth produced sexual imagery will need to differ depending on the age of the students involved (see information on sexual imagery).

The guidance is compliant with the statutory guidance on peer-on-peer abuse as set out in Keeping Children Safe in Education (September 2021) and, if relevant according to the concerns/allegations raised, be read in conjunction with the DfE's advice on Sexual Violence and Sexual Harassment Between Children in Schools and Colleges (December, 2017

What is peer-on-peer abuse?

Peer-on-peer abuse can be defined as "any form of physical, sexual, emotional and financial abuse, and coercive control, exercised between children and within children's relationships (both intimate and non-intimate)." (Firmin, C. 2017. Abuse Between Young People: A Contextual Account).

Peer-on-peer abuse can take various forms, including: serious bullying (including cyberbullying), relationship abuse, domestic violence, child sexual exploitation, youth and serious youth violence, harmful sexual behaviour, and/or gender-based violence.

These types of abuse rarely take place in isolation and often indicate wider safeguarding concerns. For example, a teenage girl may be in a sexually exploitative relationship with a teenage boy who is himself being physically abused by a family member or by older boys. Equally, sexual bullying in schools and other settings can result in the sexual exploitation of children by their peers. For 16 and 17 year olds who are in abusive relationships, what may appear to be a case of domestic violence may also involve sexual exploitation. Children's experiences of abuse and violence are rarely isolated events, and they can often be linked to other things that are happening in their lives and spaces in which they spend their time. Any response to peer-on-peer abuse therefore needs to consider the range of possible types of peer-on-peer abuse set out above and capture the full context of children's experiences.

This can be done by adopting a Contextual Safeguarding approach and by ensuring that our response to incidents of peer-on-peer abuse takes into account any potential complexity. This policy encapsulates a Contextual Safeguarding approach, which:

- Is an approach to safeguarding children that recognises their experiences of significant harm in extra-familial contexts, and seeks to include these contexts within prevention, identification, assessment and intervention safeguarding activities. Extrafamilial harms take a variety of different forms and children can be vulnerable to

multiple harms including sexual exploitation, criminal exploitation, and serious youth violence;

- Recognises that as children enter adolescence they spend increasing amounts of time outside of the home in public environments (including on the internet) within which they may experience abuse;
- Considers interventions to change the systems or social conditions of the environments in which abuse has occurred. For example, rather than move a child from a school, professionals could work with the school leadership and student body to challenge harmful, gendered school cultures, thus improving the pre-existing school environment.

When does behaviour become problematic or abusive?

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.

Sexual behaviours

As the NSPCC explains "children's sexual behaviours exist on a wide continuum, from normal and developmentally expected to highly abnormal and abusive. Staff should recognise the importance of distinguishing between problematic and abusive sexual behaviour. As both problematic and abusive sexual behaviours are developmentally inappropriate and may cause developmental damage, a useful umbrella term is harmful sexual behaviours or HSB."

For the purpose of this policy, harmful sexual behaviours are defined 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." (Hackett, 2014)

Staff should always use their professional judgment and discuss any concerns with the DSL. Where an (alleged) incident involves a report of sexually harmful behaviour.

When dealing with other alleged behaviour which involves reports of, for example, emotional and/or physical abuse, staff should report this to the appropriate pastoral leader via CPOMs

The importance of intervening early and addressing any inappropriate behaviour does not just apply on an individual student basis, but could also apply across the student body. Behaviour generally considered inappropriate may in fact indicate emerging concerning behaviour to which the Academy may need to adopt a whole-school approach in order to prevent escalation. For example, where multiple boys are making inappropriate comments about girls, one-off sanctions are unlikely to be effective and wider actions should be considered, such as arranging for an external person to deliver a year group intervention exercise or a house-based discussion with a tutor.

If there are wider safeguarding concerns relating to the child/children in question, a referral to statutory agencies may be necessary. Where the behaviour which is the subject of the concern(s)/allegation(s) is considered or suspected by the DSL to constitute peer-on-peer abuse, the Academy will follow the procedures set out below.

How can a child who is being abused by their peers be identified?

All staff should be alert to the well-being of pupils and to signs of abuse, and should engage with these signs, as appropriate, to determine whether they are caused by peer-on-peer abuse.

However, staff should be mindful of the fact that the way(s) in which children will disclose or present with behaviour(s) as a result of their experiences will differ. Signs that a child may be suffering from peer-on-peer abuse can also overlap with those indicating other types of abuse (please see Appendix 2 of the Safeguarding Policy for indicators of abuse).

- failing to attend school, disengaging from classes or struggling to carry out school related tasks to the standard ordinarily expected;
- physical injuries;
- experiencing difficulties with mental health and/or emotional wellbeing;
- becoming withdrawn and/or shy; experiencing headaches, stomach aches, anxiety and/or panic attacks; suffering from nightmares or lack of sleep or sleeping too much;
- broader changes in behaviour including alcohol or substance misuse;
- changes in appearance and/or starting to act in a way that is not appropriate for the child's age;
- abusive behaviour towards others.

Abuse affects children very differently. The above list is by no means exhaustive and the presence of one or more of these signs does not necessarily indicate abuse. Rather than checking behaviour against a list, staff should be alert to behaviour that might cause concerns, to think about what the behaviour might signify, to encourage children to share with them any underlying reasons for their behaviour, and, where appropriate, to engage with their parents/carers so that the cause(s) of their behaviour can be investigated.

Where a child exhibits any behaviour that is out of character or abnormal for his/her age, staff should always consider whether an underlying concern is contributing to their behaviour (for example, whether the child is being harmed or abused by their peers) and, if so, what the concern is and how the child can be supported going forwards.

The power dynamic that can exist between children is also very important when identifying and responding to their behaviour: in all cases of peer-on-peer abuse, a power imbalance will exist within the relationship. This inequality will not necessarily be the result of an age gap between the child responsible for the abuse and the child being abused. It may, for example, be the result of their relative social or economic status. Equally, while children who abuse may have power over those who they are abusing, they may be simultaneously powerless to others.

Are some children particularly vulnerable to abusing or being abused by their peers?

Any child can be vulnerable to peer-on-peer abuse due to the strength of peer influence during adolescence, and staff should be alert to signs of such abuse amongst all children.

Individual and situational factors can increase a child's vulnerability to abuse by their peers.

For example, an image of a child could be shared, following which they could become more vulnerable to peer-on-peer abuse due to how others now perceive them, regardless of any characteristics which may be inherent in them and/or their family.

Peer group dynamics can also play an important role in determining a child's vulnerability to such abuse. For example, children who are more likely to follow others and/or who are socially isolated from their peers may be more vulnerable to peer-on-peer abuse.

Children who are questioning or exploring their sexuality may also be particularly vulnerable to abuse by their peers.

Research suggests that peer-on-peer abuse may affect boys differently from girls, and that this difference may result from societal norms (particularly around power, control and the way in which femininity and masculinity are constructed) rather than biological make-up.

A whole Academy approach:

The Academy actively seeks to raise awareness of and prevent all forms of peer-on-peer abuse by:

- Educating all Governors, Senior Leadership Team, staff and volunteers, pupils, and parents about this issue. This includes: - training all Governors, Senior Leadership Team, staff and volunteers on the nature, prevalence and effect of peer-on-peer abuse, and how to prevent, identify and respond to it.
- Educating pupils about the nature and prevalence of peer-on-peer abuse via assemblies, and the LIFE 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 Academy's approach to such issues, including its zero-tolerance policy towards all forms of peer on-peer abuse.
- Engaging parents on this issue by
- Communication via the website, Principal's newsletter and other communication
- Ensuring that all peer-on-peer abuse issues are fed back to the DSL and SLT link so that they can spot and address any concerning trends and identify pupils who may be in need of additional support.
- Challenging the attitudes that underlie such abuse (both inside and outside the classroom);
- Working with Governors, 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 peer-on-peer abuse promptly and appropriately.

Multi-agency working

The Academy actively engages with its local partners in relation to peer-on-peer abuse, and works closely with, for example, MASH team, children's social care, and/or other relevant agencies, and other schools. The relationships the Academy has built with these partners are essential to ensuring that the Academy is able to prevent, identify early and appropriately handle cases of peer-on-peer abuse.

The Academy actively refers concerns/allegations of peer-on-peer abuse where necessary to the relevant agencies listed above. It considers this to be particularly important because peer-on-peer abuse can be a complex issue, and even more so where wider safeguarding concerns exist. It is often not appropriate for one single agency (where the incident cannot be managed internally) to try to address the issue alone – it requires effective partnership working.

Responding to concerns or allegations of peer-on-peer abuse:

It is essential that all concerns/allegations of peer-on-peer abuse are handled sensitively, appropriately and promptly. The way in which they are responded to can have a significant impact on our Academy environment. Any response should:

- Include a thorough investigation of the concerns/allegations and the wider context in which they may have occurred (as appropriate);
- Treat all children involved as being at potential risk - while the child allegedly responsible for the abuse may pose a significant risk of harm to other children, s/he may also have considerable unmet needs and be at risk of harm themselves. The Academy will ensure a safeguarding response is in place for both the child who has allegedly experienced the abuse, and the child who has allegedly been responsible for it, and additional sanctioning work may be required for the latter.

Take into account that:

The abuse may indicate wider safeguarding concerns for any of the children involved, and consider and address the effect of wider socio-cultural contexts - such as the child's/children's peer group (both within and outside the Academy); family; the Academy environment; their experience(s) of crime and victimisation in the local community; and the child/children's online presence. Consider what changes may need to be made to these contexts to address the child's/children's needs and to mitigate risk.

The potential complexity of peer-on-peer abuse and of children's experiences and consider the interplay between power, choice and consent. While children may appear to be making choices, if those choices are limited, they are not consenting.

The views of the child/children affected. Unless it is considered unsafe to do so (for example, where a referral needs to be made immediately), the DSL should discuss the proposed action with the child/children and their parents and obtain consent to any referral before it is made. The Academy will manage the child/children's expectations

about information sharing, and keep them and their parents informed of developments, where appropriate and safe to do so.

If a pupil is in **immediate danger**, or at risk of significant harm, a referral to children's social care (if the pupil is aged under 18) and/or the police should be made immediately. Anyone can make a referral. Where referrals are not made by the DSL, the DSL should be informed as soon as possible that a referral has been made. If a member of staff thinks for whatever reason that a child may be at risk of or experiencing abuse by their peer(s), or that a child may be at risk of abusing or may be abusing their peer(s), they should discuss their concern with the DSL without delay so that a course of action can be agreed.

If a child speaks to a member of staff about peer-on-peer abuse that they have witnessed or are a part of, the member of staff should listen to the child and use open language that demonstrates understanding rather than judgement

The DSL will discuss the concerns or allegations with the member of staff who has reported them and will, where necessary, take any immediate steps to ensure the safety of the child/all children affected. DSLs should always use their professional judgement to determine whether it is appropriate for alleged behaviour to be dealt with internally and, if so, whether any external specialist support is required. In borderline cases the DSL may wish to consult with children's social care and/or any other external agencies on a no-names basis to determine the most appropriate response. Where the DSL considers or suspects that the behaviour in question might be abusive or violent on a spectrum (as opposed to inappropriate or problematic), the DSL should contact the MASH team immediately, and in any event within 24 hours of the DSL becoming aware of it. The DSL will discuss the allegations/concerns with the MASH team and agree on a course of action, which may include:

- Manage internally with help from external specialists where appropriate and possible
- Undertake/contribute to an inter-agency early help assessment, with targeted early help services provided to address the assessed needs of a child/children and their family These services may, for example, include CAMHS, a specialist harmful sexual behaviour team, and/or youth offending services
- Refer child/children to children's social care for a section 17 and/or 47 statutory assessment
- Report alleged criminal behaviour to the Police and refer to "when to call the police guidance" from the NSPCC
- (Alleged criminal behaviour will ordinarily be reported to the Police. However, there are some circumstances where it may not be appropriate to report such behaviour to the Police. For example, where the exchange of youth produced sexual imagery does not involve any aggravating factors. All concerns/allegations will be assessed on a case by case basis, and in light of the wider context.)

Where there is an incident of peer-on-peer abuse, the Academy will carry out a robust risk and needs assessment in respect of each child affected by the abuse. These risk assessments will:

- Assess and address the nature and level of risks that are posed and/or faced by the child
- Engage the child's parents and draw upon local services and agencies to ensure that the child's needs are met in the long-term
- Consider whether any targeted interventions are needed to address the underlying attitudes or behaviour of any child
- Be reviewed at regular intervals in light of the child's on-going needs to ensure that real progress is being made which benefits the child.

If at any stage the child's needs escalate, the DSL should contact the MASH team to determine the appropriate course of action.

The Academy will consider whether disciplinary action may be appropriate for any child/children involved – any such action should address the abuse, the causes of it, and attitudes underlying it. Disciplinary action may sometimes be appropriate, including

- (a) to ensure that the child/children take(s) responsibility for and realise(s) the seriousness of their behaviour;
- (b) to demonstrate to the child/children and others that peer-on-peer abuse can never be tolerated; and
- (c) to ensure the safety and wellbeing of other children. However, these considerations must be balanced against the child's/children's own potential unmet needs and any safeguarding concerns.

Before deciding on appropriate action the Academy will always consider its duty to safeguard all children from harm; the underlying reasons for a child's behaviour; any unmet needs, or harm or abuse suffered by the child; the risk that the child may pose to other children; and the severity of the peer-on-peer abuse and the causes of it. The Academy will, where appropriate, consider the potential benefit, as well as challenge, of using managed moves or exclusion as a response, and not as an intervention, recognising that even if this is ultimately deemed to be necessary, some of the measures referred to in this policy may still be required. Exclusion will only be considered as a last resort and only where necessary to ensure the safety and wellbeing of the other children in the Academy.

Disciplinary interventions alone are rarely able to solve issues of peer-on-peer abuse, and the Academy will always consider the wider actions that may need to be taken, and any lessons that may need to be learnt going forwards.

The Academy's response to concerns/allegations of peer-on-peer abuse should be part of ongoing proactive work by the Academy to embed best practice and take a contextual whole school approach to such abuse. As such the Academy's response can become part of its wider prevention work. This response may include the Academy asking itself a series of

questions about the context in which an incident of peer-on-peer abuse occurred in the Academy and the wider physical and online environment - such as:

- What protective factors and influences exist within the Academy (such as positive peer influences, examples where peer-on-peer abuse has been challenged etc.) and how can the Academy improve these?;
- How (if at all) did the Academy's physical environment contribute to the abuse, and how can the Academy address this going forwards, for example by improving the Academy's safety, security and supervision?;
- Did wider gender norms, equality issues and/or societal attitudes contribute to the abuse?;
- What was the relationship between the abuse and the cultural norms between staff and pupils, and how can these be addressed going forwards?;
- Does the abuse indicate a need for staff training on, for example, underlying attitudes, a particular issue or the handling of particular types of abuse?;
- How have similar cases been managed in the past and what effect has this had?;
- Does the case or any identified trends highlight areas for development in the way in which the Academy works with children to raise their awareness of and/or prevent peer-on-peer abuse, including by way of the Academy's well-being curriculum and lessons that address underlying attitudes or behaviour such as gender and equalities work?;
- Are there any lessons to be learnt about the way in which the Academy engages with parents to address peer-on-peer abuse issues?;
- Are there underlying issues that affect other schools in the area, or other independent schools generally, and is there a need for a multi-agency response?;
- Does this case highlight a need to work with certain children to build their confidence and teach them how to identify and manage abusive behaviour?;
- Were there opportunities to intervene earlier or differently and/or to address common themes amongst the behaviour of other children in the Academy?

Answers to these questions can be developed into an action plan that is reviewed on a regular basis by Academy leadership Pastoral Team and the DSL.

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