

Peer Abuse

Signs that a child may be experiencing peer abuse.

Understanding Peer Abuse

Peer Abuse is a broad term encompassing a range of abusive behaviours both perpetrated and experienced by children. It includes, but is not limited to:

- **sexual harassment** and violence
- **bullying** (including by distribution of sexual / indecent images)
- **teenage relationship abuse** (the abuse may be physical, emotional, sexual, or psychological, including by coercive and controlling behaviour (see **factsheet on domestic abuse**)
- **grooming** children for sexual and criminal exploitation (see **factsheet on CSE / CCE**)
- **stalking** by a current or previous partner, or by wider peers

All forms of peer abuse can happen face-to-face or online / electronically. It can happen in school, as well as in the children's wider communities.

It is important to remember that children who perpetrate abuse may also be victims of abuse themselves.

Young people who are not a direct victim of peer abuse can still be exposed to wider practices of bullying or sexual harassment within schools, and to the reinforcement of harmful gender norms and stereotypes.

These create cultures conducive to peer abuse.

It is important that all staff **challenge** such harmful practices and stereotypes in their daily interaction with pupils and other staff, and to **promote a positive school culture** which does not tolerate any form of abuse.

Some children may face barriers to disclosing abuse, including those for whom English / Welsh is not their first language. Children with disabilities or additional learning needs, including autism, may be overlooked, as any behaviour is misinterpreted as being related to their impairment.

All school personnel should become familiar with signs that may indicate a child is perpetrating, or experiencing, peer abuse.

If you observe signs and/or hear information suggesting that the child may be perpetrating or experiencing some form of peer abuse, **raise these concerns with your DSP.**

- Anxiety, depression, or suicidal thoughts;
- Constant or regular sickness;
- Eating disorders;
- Aggression or high tolerance of violence;
- Bullying and/or antisocial behaviour, like vandalism;
- Attention-seeking OR silent / withdrawn;
- Evidence of being monitored by family / other adults;
- Problems in school and trouble learning;
- Drug or alcohol use
- Falling out with friends or family;
- Unexplained injuries;
- Self-conscious / lack of self-confidence; receiving constant texts / calls;
- Changes in personality and decline in behaviour, performance and engagement;
- Early / unwanted pregnancy.

Want to seek specialist advice?

Live Fear Free National VAWDASV Helpline

0808 80 10 800 / info@livefearfreehelpline.wales

BAWSO Helpline (specialist BME organisation)

0800 73 18 147 / info@bawso.org.uk

Peer Abuse: Early Intervention and Prevention

In addition to schools' safeguarding 'duty to report' (see *Wales Safeguarding Procedures* and *Keeping Learners Safe* guidance), there are actions schools can take to **prevent** peer abuse from happening / escalating, and to offer holistic **support** to children who experience and perpetrate abuse. In particular:

1. Educating pupils about different forms of peer abuse and their right to be safe and live free from abuse.

Some pupils may believe that abusive behaviour is normal. It's imperative therefore that schools ensure that all children understand what different forms of abuse look like; that they have a right to be safe and get support if they want it; and how to access that support.

2. Creating a school culture which actively challenges sexual harassment, bullying, sexism, and harmful gender stereotypes, promoting instead an ethos of rights-based gender equity.

The school culture can have a significant impact on the behaviour of children and young people, as well as the likelihood of those who are suffering abuse to disclose and seek support. Tackling harmful and pervasive stereotypes and norms about 'masculinity' and 'femininity' which underlie sexual harassment, bullying, and exploitation, will help to ensure that the learning about VAWDASV is reinforced by a whole-school approach. See the Welsh Government's **Good Practice Guide: A Whole Education Approach to Violence against Women, Domestic Abuse & Sexual Violence in Wales** for advice and examples of good practice.

Prevention, Early Intervention and Support

There are numerous organisations, including specialist domestic abuse services, who offer a range of services to children and young people, as well as directly to schools. Specialist domestic abuse services can take referrals through schools. Examples of the services include:

Prevention / Education:

- **Safety, Trust and Respect (S.T.A.R.) education groups** - inform young people (11-25) about healthy relationships, coercive control, consent, and where to seek support.
- **Spectrum Project** and **School Beat** - both raise awareness and educate schools about domestic abuse.

Early Intervention and Support

- **One to one support** for young people who have experienced abusive behaviour in their own relationship.
- **Mentoring programmes** - either for small groups or individuals. Children are matched with a trained mentor who spends problem-free time with them, having fun and working towards goals set by the child.
- **Adolescent to parent violence support groups** - behaviour change programme that supports young people who are using abusive behaviours with their parents.
- **Therapeutic support** - such as counselling.

*Note that not all domestic abuse services will offer all the services above.
You can contact your local domestic abuse service to find out what services they offer.*

Useful resources for young people:

Healthy Relationships Poster Series - Find on **Hwb** or on Welsh Women's Aid's website **here**.
Welsh Women's Aid's Bystander Toolkit - this is useful for anybody who is concerned about a friend / family member who may be experiencing abuse, advising them how they can help safely.