

Abuse by Children and Young People

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Pages 199-201)**

Peer Abuse

Children, particularly those living away from home, are also vulnerable to physical, sexual and emotional bullying and abuse by their peers. Such abuse should always be taken as seriously as abuse perpetrated by an adult. It should be subject to the same safeguarding children procedures as apply in respect of any child who is suffering, or at risk of suffering significant harm from an adverse source. A significant proportion of sex offences are committed by teenagers and, on occasion, such offences are committed by younger children. Staff and carers of children living away from home need clear guidance and training to identify the difference between consenting and abusive, appropriate or exploitative peer relationships. Staff should not dismiss some abusive sexual behaviour as 'normal' between young people and should not develop high thresholds before taking action.

Work with children and young people who abuse others – including those who sexually abuse/offend – should recognise that such children are likely to have considerable needs themselves, and also that they may pose a significant risk of harm to other children. Evidence suggests that children who abuse others may have suffered considerable disruption in their lives, been exposed to violence within the family, may have witnessed or been subject to physical or sexual abuse, have problems in their educational development, and may have committed other offences. Such children and young people are likely to be children in need, and some will in addition be suffering or at risk of significant harm, and may themselves be in need of protection. Children and young people who abuse others should be held responsible for their abusive behaviour, whilst being identified and responded to in a way which meets their needs as well as protecting others.

Three key principles should guide work with children and young people who abuse others:

- there should be a co-ordinated approach on the part of youth justice, children's social care, education (including educational psychology) and health (including child and adolescent mental health) agencies;
- the needs of children and young people who abuse others should be considered separately from the needs of their victims; and
- an assessment should be carried out in each case, appreciating that these children may have considerable unmet developmental needs, as well as specific needs arising from their behaviour.

In Telford & Wrekin a protocol has been agreed by the Safeguarding Children Board and Youth Offending Service. The protocol is deposited in the Document Library of these procedures. It provides a clear operational

framework within which assessment, decision-making and case management can take place. This has been designed to ensure that neither child welfare nor criminal justice agencies embark upon a course of action that has implications for the other without appropriate consultation.

In assessing a child or young person who abuses another, relevant considerations include:

- the nature and extent of the abusive behaviours. In respect of sexual abuse, there are sometimes perceived to be difficulties in distinguishing between normal childhood sexual development and experimentation and sexually inappropriate or aggressive behaviour. Expert professional judgement may be required, within the context of knowledge about normal child sexuality;
- the context of the abusive behaviours;
- the child's development, and family and social circumstances;
- needs for services, specifically focusing on the child's harmful behaviour as well as other significant needs; and
- the risks to self and others, including other children in the household, extended family, school, peer group or wider social network. This risk is likely to be present unless: the opportunity to further abuse is ended, the young person has acknowledged the abusive behaviour and accepted responsibility and there is agreement by the young abuser and his/her family to work with relevant agencies to address the problem.

Decisions for local agencies (including the Crown Prosecution Service where relevant), according to the responsibilities of each, include:

- the most appropriate course of action within the criminal justice system, if the child is above the age of criminal responsibility;
- whether the young abuser should be the subject of a child protection conference; and
- what plan of action should be put in place to address the needs of the young abuser, detailing the involvement of all relevant agencies.

A young abuser should be the subject of a child protection conference if he or she is considered personally to be at risk of continuing significant harm. Where there is no reason to hold a child protection conference, there may still be a need for a multi-agency approach if the young abuser's needs are complex. Issues regarding suitable educational and accommodation arrangements often require skilled and careful consideration.