



# Practitioner Briefing #1: What is peer-on-peer abuse?

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## Introduction

“Sometimes the people that you chill with want you to do certain things that you don’t want to do, but you have to do it because you’re part of that crew, you’re part of it”

(Participant, 13 years old) (Firmin 2011:46)

In recent years practitioners and policymakers have become increasingly concerned about the levels of violence and abuse between young people evidenced in UK research (Home Office 2011a, Home Office 2011b, Beckett et al 2014). The UK’s first study into teenage relationship abuse and exploitation found that one in three girls surveyed had experienced sexual violence from a partner before they turned 18 and 25% had been in physically abusive relationships (Barter et al 2009). Young people have reported physical, sexual and emotional abusing, and being abused, by their peers as a means of survival in gang affected neighbourhoods (Beckett et al 2013, Firmin 2011, Pitts 2008). A growing interest in child sexual exploitation has evidenced that a quarter of cases in many areas are peer-on-peer as opposed to adult on child (Berelowitz et al 2012, Barnardo’s 2011), with some areas suggesting that it is their most frequently identified model of exploitation (Beckett et al 2014). Most recently a European study found that more than four in ten teenage schoolgirls aged between 13 and 17 in England have experienced sexual coercion (Barter et al 2015).

Amidst this expanding evidence base, local practitioners and national policymakers are seeking solutions. This briefing outlines what current research tells us about the nature of peer-on-peer abuse, and considers what this might mean for building a response.

## Definitions

Despite the current focus on child sexual exploitation, peer-on-peer abuse is captured in four key definitions (Firmin 2013a):

- The definition for domestic abuse (Home Office 2013) relates to young people aged 16 and 17 who experience physical, emotional, sexual and/or financial abuse, and coercive control, in their intimate relationships
- The definition for child sexual exploitation (DCSF 2009) captures young people aged under-18 who are sexually abused in the context of exploitative relationships, contexts and situations by a person of any age – including another young person
- The definition for young people who display harmful sexual behaviour refers to any young person, under the age of 18, who demonstrates behaviour outside of their normative parameters of development (this includes, but is not exclusive to abusive behaviours) (Hackett 2011, NICE 2014)
- Serious youth violence is defined with reference to offences (as opposed to relationships/contexts) and captures all those of the most serious in nature

including murder, rape and GBH between young people under-18 (London Safeguarding Children Board 2009)

The first thing to note, therefore, is that the term peer-on-peer abuse can refer to all of these definitions. Any response to this phenomenon needs to cut across these definitions and capture the complex web of young people's experiences. It is possible, after all, that a young person could be sexually exploited by a partner who is gang-associated, of a similar age to them, and who has also been physically abusive.

## Who does it affect?

Research consistently tells us that any young person can be impacted by peer-on-peer abuse, but that some are more vulnerable than others:

- Research consistently finds that peer-on-peer abuse is experienced by young people **aged 10 upwards**, with those being abused generally being slightly younger than those who are abusing them (Firmin forthcoming 2015), although some services have identified young people aged 8 who have been affected (Berelowitz et al 2012)
- Girls and young women are more frequently identified as those who are abused by their peers, and report it having a negative impact on their lives, whereas boys and young men are more likely to be identified as abusers and less likely to say that partner abuse impacts them negatively (Barter 2011, Firmin 2011). However, boys and young men report high levels of victimisation in gang-affected neighbourhoods (Pitts 2008, Beckett et al 2013) and there is an increasing evidence base emerging on the sexual exploitation of boys and young men (although this is by adults as well as by peers) (Barnardo's 2014). The most important message to take from the research is that while young men and young women experienced peer-on-peer abuse they do so in **gendered** ways
- Black and minority ethnic children are often under-identified as victims (Berelowitz et al 2013) and over-identified as perpetrators (Palmer and Pitts 2006); during the Office of the Children's Commissioner's Inquiry into sexual exploitation many black and ethnic minority young people were hidden in youth justice services as offenders rather than being supported for their victimisation (Berelowitz et al 2012). Yet studies and services devoted to the experiences of this group routinely identify their extensive experiences of abuse, albeit often unreported (Gohir 2013).
- Young people with **intra-familial abuse in their histories**, or those living with **domestic abuse**, are also said to be more vulnerable to peer-on-peer abuse (Berelowitz et al 2012, Catch 22 2013)
- Young people **in care**, and those who have experienced a loss of a parent, sibling or friend through **bereavement**, also feature as those who have abused, or been abused by, their peers (Berelowitz et al 2012).

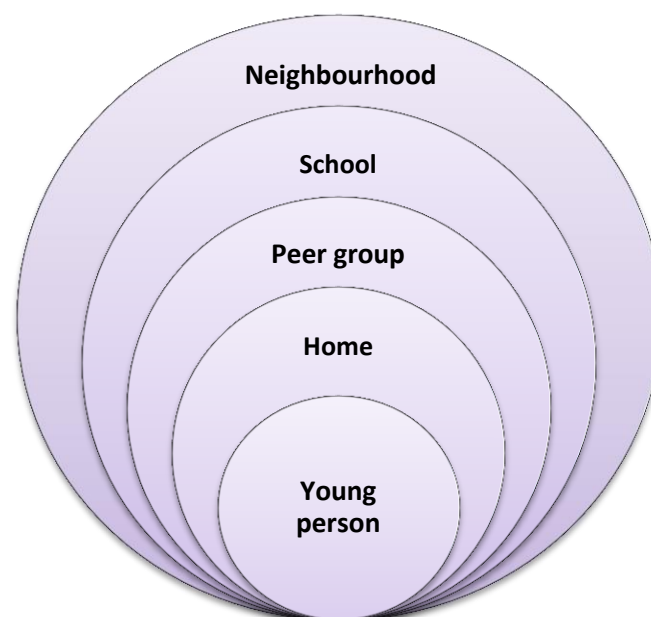
However many of these factors make young people more visible to professionals, as well as those who abuse them, and as such it may be that those without characteristics that bring them into contact with professionals are vulnerable as a result of invisibility. For example, when a young person goes missing from care (even for a small amount of time) a professional will know about it, whereas not all parents know to notify services when their child comes home later than a set curfew.

In all of these cases **it is important to remember that peer-on-peer abuse can occur to young people without these characteristics, and these alone do not *cause* abuse.** For peer-on-peer abuse to occur there has to be someone who abuses these vulnerabilities to harm a young person, and they need to have the opportunity or be in an environment where this is possible.

## Environmental influences

Increasingly research is evidencing associations between young people's experiences of peer-on-peer abuse and the environments in which they spend their time. In addition to abuse in their homes:

- Violence in young people's peer groups has been linked to the abuse of their partners and peers (Barter et al 2009, Chung 2005, Letourneau and Borduin 2008)
- Young people experience violence and sexual harassment in schools (EVAW 2010, Girlguiding 2014), where they are exposed to harmful social norms related to gender, relationships and consent (Frosh et al 2002)
- Exposure to violence on the streets has been routinely linked to young people's involvement in street gangs (Beckett et al 2013, Hallsworth and Young 2011, Pitts 2008), and young people have been sexually exploited in parks, transport hubs, shopping centres and other public spaces (Berelowitz et al 2012)



(Firmin 2013)

When they encounter harm in these public environments, young people with, and without, pre-existing vulnerabilities can be affected by peer-on-peer abuse. **As young people grow up and spend increasing amounts of time with their friends, at school and in their local neighbourhood, what happens in these environments will be reflected in the nature of the abuse they experience.**

## **Consent**

Finally, concepts of abuse are built upon notions of 'power' and therefore 'consent', not to be confused with the age of consent to sexual activity:

- Young people over the age of consent (16 and 17 year olds) can be abused by their peers
- Many young people who abuse their peers are themselves below the age of consent

The definition of child sexual exploitation is particularly helpful in this regard in acknowledging that the abuse is 'characterised in the main by the child's limited availability of choice'.

The abuse of children is often constructed around an age differential between the abuser and the abused, but in cases of peer-on-peer abuse this may not be the case. In such circumstances power imbalances can manifest in other ways sometimes related to gender, in other cases social status within peer groups, intellectual ability, economic wealth, social marginalisation and so on.

It is also important to note that while young people who abuse their peers have power over the young person they are harming they may be simultaneously powerless in relation to some peers who are encouraging their behaviour or in the home where they are being abused. As children themselves we have to recognise the risk they pose to others as well as the risk they may face, and resist the urge to apply rigid victim/perpetrator divides that may not accurately reflect young people's experiences or our responsibilities towards them.

It is important for practitioners to interrogate how they understand choice and consent, and what this means for the young people they are working with. While young people may appear to be making choices, if those choices are limited they are not consenting.

## **Conclusion – considerations for practice**

This briefing has highlighted that peer-on-peer abuse:

1. features physical, emotional, sexual and financial abuse of young people by their peers, captured by multiple policy and practice definitions currently in use
2. can impact any young person, although the characteristics/experiences of some can be exploited by their peers, or missed by services, making them more vulnerable to abuse than others

3. is influenced by the nature of the environments in which young people spend their time
4. hinges upon young people's experiences of power, and ultimately the notion of consent

Given these findings it is important to consider whether:

- Your response to peer-on-peer abuse is focused on child sexual exploitation or covers all of the forms highlighted in this briefing
- Your assessments of risk, and interventions with young people, recognise that individual experiences do not cause the abuse that they experience, but may be used by others who have power over them
- A focus on individual risk factors is resulting in some young people being under-identified by your service or multi-agency partnership
- Environmental influences are sufficiently accounted for in both your risk assessments and interventions – do you intervene with contexts or just individuals?
- You and your colleagues are confident in your understanding of consent, and recognise the ways in which environments, contexts and relationships can limit the safe choices available to young people
- Your interventions attempt to control young people's choices or open up safer choices for them to consider

If you have any queries on this briefing, or the training that accompanies it, please contact [london@msunderstood.org.uk](mailto:london@msunderstood.org.uk).

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