



Support for Young People
Affected by Crime

Experiences of Peer-on-Peer Abuse in the Thames Valley

SAFE! May 2020

Plain English Summary

What is 'Peer-on-Peer Abuse'?

'Peer-on-Peer abuse' is abusive behaviour between people who are around the same age. They might be friends or in a relationship. It can happen at school, online, on the bus or other transport, in parks or on the streets: anywhere where groups of young people are.

No one agrees on exactly what 'peer-on-peer' abuse is, but people have said it includes lots of different types of behaviour like using words to hurt other people or put them down; peer pressure; forcing someone to have sex; physical violence; blackmail; controlling money; controlling who someone spends time with; and sharing private photos or spreading rumours online. Many of these things are illegal and can be reported to the Police. We know that lots of these behaviours are very common, young people are used to seeing them at school or online and often don't think they are a problem.

We wanted to find out how services like SAFE!, the Police and schools can help young people who are being abused by their friends or partners, and those who abuse them.

What we did

We asked lots of people about what they thought peer-on-peer abuse was and how they thought services could help young people. We spoke to young people and parents who had experienced abuse and also asked people from the Council, schools, the probation service, the Police, mental health services and charities supporting victims, in Oxfordshire, Buckinghamshire and Berkshire.

They told us about experiences at home, with families, in school, in the areas people live and online. We listened to their stories and used them to write this report.

What we found out

The people we spoke to had lots of ideas. We summarised these into eight things that services should understand, to provide support that is useful to young people:

1. **Mobile:** Support should be wherever young people are, not just when they're in school or at home;
2. **Contextual:** Organisations need to understand where young people are coming from - how they think friends and partners should behave, where they live and where they spend their time;
3. **No blame:** Don't blame victims;

4. **Respect:** Encourage respect and positive relationships between young people, parents and the people supporting them;
5. **Vulnerable perpetrators:** Understand that you're not just one or the other - people who abuse others are often abused themselves and need support;
6. **Online:** Support needs to work online as well as in real life;
7. **Complex:** Your gender, where you come from, your background, your family, your sexuality and whether you have a disability are examples of things that can have a big impact on your life. Difficult experiences when you're a child don't automatically mean that bad things will happen to you later;
8. **Collaborative:** Professionals need to work together, and with young people and families.

Collective language Collective learning Collective practices

Solutions will work if everyone can agree on what 'peer-on-peer abuse' means, they can share their knowledge by training each other (including young people training adults) and work together to provide the same kind of support.

SAFE! believes that Protective Behaviours and restorative justice will be really important in bringing these eight factors into support for young people.

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Preface

At the time of writing, we are experiencing unprecedented levels of social upheaval and change due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Social distancing measures and school closures have already made a dramatic impact on the way young people interact and where they spend their time. This is likely to change again and again and last for some time - potentially increasing the amount of time young people spend in their own homes and reducing the amount of time they spend face-to-face in peer groups.

The pandemic is also having an enormous impact on the ability of statutory and voluntary sector support services to work with and intervene in abusive situations, with services having to immediately and radically change their practice. We are yet to see what the full implications of this will be on the safety and wellbeing of young people in the Thames Valley.

However, once the immediate crisis has passed, we will find ourselves able to reset and transform what we do and how we do it, in a way we may never see again. Now is the moment to reconsider structures and practices that we have taken for granted, and build new services for the future that will better support and protect young people.

This consultation offers an insight into the experiences of peer-on-peer abuse from young people, professionals and parents. Listening to their stories will help to guide us in the rebuilding work that will come.

Introduction

SAFE! Support for Young People Affected by Crime is an Oxford-based charity providing support services to children and families across the Thames Valley. Our core service is to provide one-to-one support to children aged 8 to 18 who are struggling to cope following an experience of victimisation. Through this service we have provided support to many children and young people following an experience of peer-on-peer abuse in all its many forms. SAFE! first became interested in commissioning this research after noticing an increase in referrals of young people experiencing peer-on-peer abuse.

During 2019 SAFE! received 785 referrals for young people looking for some support following an experience of victimisation. Almost half of these cases involved a crime where another young person was known to have been the 'perpetrator' of a range of different offences including sexual offences, intimate partner abuse, cyber-crime, harassment & intimidation, theft, physical assault and bullying. Almost a quarter (191) of all referrals were for young people who had experienced some form of sexual offence including sexual abuse, rape and sexual assault. 48% of these referrals were known to be a peer-on-peer offence, 34% an adult offender. 18% were unknown.

In many of the cases involving peer-on-peer sexual offences, SAFE! comes across experiences of intimate partner abuse including physical and emotional abuse, and coercive control. However, we also often find that these offences are not being recognised and recorded by professionals, some of whom had a dismissive attitude towards abusive behaviours that occur within teenage relationships. At times this has led to a lack of appropriate action to safeguard children at risk of harm through peer-on-peer abuse.

SAFE! also supports children who have been victimised through bullying, where the behaviours experienced could be classified as a criminal offence. In 2019 bullying was known to be an issue in 162 referrals. We have found that for many young people the impact of bullying can be more severe than a one-off experience of a more 'serious' criminal offence. Our work with young people tells us that pervasive and sustained abuse through bullying can be brushed off by schools and other professionals as 'friendship issues' or 'just' bullying and seems to be accepted by many as a standard part of childhood.

What is PPA?

Peer-on-peer abuse (PPA) is a broad term that can encompass many different forms of abuse. To date there is not a broadly agreed definition. The lack of consistency in policy and therefore in practice has caused problems for services designing collaborative responses.

In the academic community, criminologists, psychologists, social work academics and geographers have all contributed to research and development of policies on PPA (Firmin 2017). Whilst they have brought with them diverse and valuable perspectives, they have also been guided separately by different and distinct definitions of abuse between young people.

Physical, sexual, emotional and financial abuse, and coercive control, exercised within young people's relationships

(Firmin 2017)

Carlene Firmin's broad definition encompasses many different forms of abuse, but remains clear that it happens *between* young people and does not include abuse of young people by adults nor young people's abuse of much younger children. Firmin's definition of 'relationships' encompasses friendships, or colleague relationships, not just sexual or dating relationships.

Oxfordshire County Council offer a similar, comprehensive definition:

Peer-on-peer abuse is any form of abuse (physical, sexual, emotional, financial, coercive control, exploitation) that happens between children or within children's relationships, friendships and wider peer associations. Peer-on-peer abuse can take different forms. Abuse can happen online or by using technology as well as in school, home or community contexts. Children may be victims, perpetrators, or both. (Oxfordshire County Council, 2020)

Tri.x also provide a comprehensive description of PPA in their 2017 policy briefing (Tri.x, 2017) but, unlike others, limit their definition to participants under the age of 18:

Peer-on-peer abuse occurs when a young person is exploited, bullied and / or harmed by their peers who are the same or similar age; everyone directly involved in peer-on-peer abuse is under the age of 18. (Tri.x, 2017)

How common is it?

Whilst the working definitions are broad and in many cases, unspecific, we do know that many many young people are having experiences that fall under the umbrella of 'peer-on-peer abuse'.

A Department of Education survey of Year 10 students in 2014 estimated that 36% of young people in England in Year 10 had experienced some form of **bullying** in the previous 12 months. This figure did not include cyber-bullying. 14% had experienced threats of physical violence and 10% actual physical violence (Department of Education, 2016).

A report from NSPCC (Barter, McCarry et al, 2009), which surveyed 1300 young people aged 13-17 found that a quarter of girls and 18% of boys reported some form of **physical partner violence**, nearly three-quarters of girls and half of boys reported some form of **emotional partner violence** and 1:3 girls and 16% of boys reported some form of **sexual partner violence**.

There is also evidence that abuse of many kinds is widely normalised amongst young people:

Girls aged 17-21 say...

% of young women who believe that girls are coerced into sex acts because if they don't they...



Figure 1: 'Coercion and control'. Data from the Girls' Attitudes Survey (Girlguiding, 2015)

Coercive or controlling behaviour of intimate partners is also often deemed ok within intimate relationships. 39% of young women surveyed by Girlguiding said that boyfriends 'making you tell them where you are all the time' is acceptable; 21% said that 'shouting at you or calling you names because of what you may have done' could sometimes be OK; 22% said that 'checking up on you and reading your phone' could sometimes be OK (Girlguiding, 2013).

These statistics are concerning. The incidence and normalisation of these behaviours show that they are not just down to the actions of individuals - they represent cultural norms that are part of young peoples' everyday lives. New ways of approaching safeguarding have begun to move interventions beyond changing individual behaviours towards understanding and transforming the contexts in which these behaviours develop and become normal.

Contextual Safeguarding

The published literature on peer-on-peer abuse is dominated by the work of Carlene Firmin. Firmin developed the concept of 'contextual safeguarding' in an effort to strengthen professional and multi-agency responses to peer-on-peer abuse amongst young people.

Firmin and her colleagues identified three key failings in traditional organisational responses to PPA:

1. failing to consider public/social risks when assessing young people;
2. intervening with familial environments when risk is extra-familial;

3. overlooking the vulnerability of those who were abusive. (Firmin 2017)

In contrast, a contextual safeguarding approach recognises that through adolescence, family and parents have less and less direct influence over the actions and safety of their young person and the young person is increasingly likely to experience harm outside of the home, rather than within it.

In a review of nine rape and murder cases committed by adolescents against their peers, Firmin found that:

In files, risks faced by suspects, some of which may have influenced their offending, were evidently unaddressed during investigations. While waiting for their trials to commence, suspects in six cases were returned to homes where they had been exposed to domestic abuse, neglect or other child protection issues (Firmin 2017).

Thinking about 'victims' and 'perpetrators' as two very distinct categories fails to recognise and address the experiences of 'perpetrators' who are also victims of abuse, bullying and grooming. The contextual safeguarding approach aims to:

- Target the contexts in which that abuse occurs, from assessment through to intervention;
- Offer a framework to address extra-familial risk through the lens of child welfare, as opposed to crime reduction or community safety;
- Utilise partnerships between children's services and agencies who have a reach into extra-familial contexts (such as transport providers, retailers, youth workers, residents associations, parks and recreation services, schools and so on), and;
- Measure success with reference to the nature of the context in which harm has been occurring, rather than solely focusing on any behaviour changes displayed by young people who were at risk in those contexts. (Firmin, 2019)

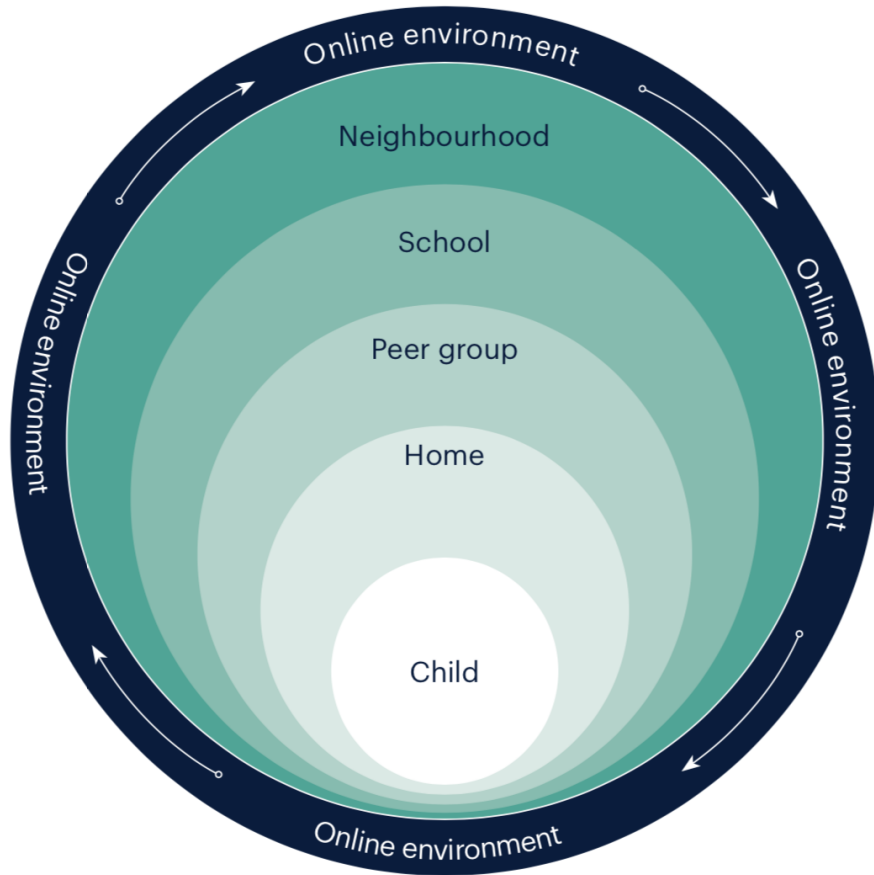


Figure 2 above is drawn from Firmin’s Contextual Circles of Adolescent Vulnerability (2017) showing the young person (Child), situated within the many contexts in which they live their daily lives and play out relationships with others. The ‘online environment’ encircles it all, rather than belonging to one place.

Following our experiences on the ground, this consultation was designed to explore the experiences of other stakeholders in the Thames Valley area, including those working with young people involved in peer-on-peer abuse, both ‘victims’ and ‘perpetrators’ and young people themselves.

We hoped that such a consultation would raise awareness, start a conversation about appropriate responses and better understand how services can help meet the needs of young people.

The scale of this consultation is small and families’ needs so varied that we inevitably cannot extrapolate our findings here to everyone we work with. However, the messages that we can hear in this report can challenge accepted practices and theories, and highlight how we might better support families and communities in our area. The messages also highlight areas for future research.

Methods

The methods we used for the consultation aimed to strike a balance between being rigorous and manageable in scale. The following groups of participant stakeholders were recruited through the SAFE! 2019 Conference and our charity networks: Young people (including young people with experience of peer-on-peer abuse); parents; SAFE! Practitioners; Youth Workers; front line youth workers in the criminal justice system; front line and senior police officers; front line social workers; teachers; mental health practitioners; service commissioners; practitioners working in charities that provide services for those with experience of peer-on-peer abuse and sexual violence.

In order to gather this wide range of perspectives, we used a variety of methods, both face-to-face and remote. Focussing on qualitative methods (interviews and focus groups that aimed to answer the why? and how? questions), allowed us to collect more detailed, personalised information from the small number of participants appropriate to a consultation of this size.

We collected information about PPA in three ways:

1. An **online survey** with local professionals from the Thames Valley area. The survey received 31 responses from Local Authority Children's Services (n=4), education (n=2), Youth Justice (n=7), Police/OPCC (n=2), Mental Health services (n=4) and the voluntary sector organisations (n=11) in Oxfordshire (n=23), Buckinghamshire (n=5) and Berkshire (n=5). It explored professionals' understanding, experiences and training in PPA. Data from the online survey informed the development of interview schedules and topics for focus groups.
2. Eleven **one-to-one telephone interviews** with stakeholder professionals in Local Authority Children's Services (n=1), education (n=4), Youth Justice (n=2), Police/OPCC (n=2) and Mental Health services (n=2). Interviews were recorded and detailed notes were taken with many quotes written verbatim and checked for accuracy using the recordings. The two independent researchers and the Director of SAFE! discussed and agreed the analysis and themes.
3. Three **focus groups**: two with a total of 28 young people and one with parents. Focus group topics were informed by the survey results and interviews. An independent researcher and SAFE! Practitioners facilitated these groups. We asked young people and parents "what does peer-on-peer abuse mean to you?" and about their experiences of people and services' responses to peer-on-peer abuse. This included schools, parents, the criminal justice system, youth work and victim support services. Young people were facilitated in small groups to discuss their ideas and summarise their own discussions onto flip chart paper. These notes were analysed for key themes through discussion with the two independent researchers.

Defining ‘Peer-on-peer abuse’

We asked young people and professionals how they defined PPA. The diversity of their responses reflected the uncertainty in the wider community.

Young people did not use, nor recognise, the term ‘peer-on-peer abuse’, but identified it instead as ‘bullying’. They defined ‘bullying’ broadly, including ‘comments to put you down’, ‘anything verbal that can hurt someone else’, pressure (including peer pressure), passive aggressive behaviour, hitting, mean words, emotional abuse, relationship abuse, cyber bullying, sexual assault and rape. They recognised that many of these things happen between ‘friends’ or what they termed ‘fake-friends’. Not being able to trust others was characteristic of their experiences.

For most professionals, ‘peer-on-peer abuse’ was not a term they frequently used, but they recognised that it encompassed many different types of damaging behaviour between people with “no great diversity in demographic between individuals” (Police 2).

Some recognised a problem with a lack of a collective, agreed, definition:

‘People are vague on what peer-on-peer abuse is and what they can do to deal with it. Schools are funny in their mindset around ‘bullying’ as a term that is bandied around in the wrong way – it would be more helpful to talk about ‘unacceptable behaviours’. We need a better understanding or clarity around the jargon: this is massively missing.’ (Education Practitioner 1)

Professionals’ definitions were skewed by the type of work they did and who they encountered in practice. For example, a Police manager described ‘low level common assaults to ABH, robberies – [the] majority is boy-on-boy work with 11 – 18 year olds. More recently girl-on-girl violence is more prevalent’ (Police 3). Someone working on sexual assault and harmful sexual behaviour felt that:

‘PPA isn’t taken seriously as a term because the perception is that it is deemed less serious and is associated with younger people and bullying, which is often wrongly thought of as less serious.’ (Sexual Violence Worker 1)

The definition of ‘abuse’ was broad, but so was the definition of a ‘peer’. Whilst Firmin includes all young people; Tri.x limits them to under 18s. Our respondents were less concerned with age, but focussed on the social status of the people involved: ‘a similar age, similar cohort, on [the] same level as you’ (Education Practitioner 1), or their relationships: ‘for it to be peer on peer I would assume it is not stranger related and they would know each other’ (Police 4).

Professionals suggested alternative terms such as ‘harmful behaviour’ or ‘problematic behaviour’. These types of phrases might have another advantage of moving language away from a binary ‘victim’ and ‘offender’ in a context where the reality is likely to be more nuanced.

The professionals we spoke to were very concerned with the impact of what they saw as the normalisation of violence, for some at home and for many on the streets. They felt that abusive behaviour is accepted by young people and their experiences at home and elsewhere proves to them that this is the usual way of being with others:

‘For some this is their “norm” due to what is happening at home’. (Education worker 1)

‘PPA is when kids are enacting the difficulties they have experienced or witnessed on their peers’ (Mental Health worker 2)

These norms almost certainly have an impact on what young people perceive as appropriate behaviour within intimate relationships and friendships. However, it is important to recognise that most people who experience abuse do not go on to abuse. Furthermore, social expectations to be hypermasculine - to ‘stand up for yourself’, hide emotion and so on - is almost universal, and not just experienced by boys and young men who grow up in abusive families.

Our contemporary society has, in many ways stopped normalising violence, especially against young people: a good example of this is the criminalisation of corporal punishment at home and in schools and the withdrawal of National Service. The rate of violent crime has also steadily declined since the mid 1990s. It may not be appropriate to draw a straight line between domestic violence or violence and peer-on-peer abuse, without considering the nuance and complexity of people’s everyday lives in the context of wider societal changes.

‘Victim vs perpetrator’

The young people we spoke to had a nuanced understanding of the blurriness between ‘victim’ and ‘perpetrator’ that closely matched the literature:

“Peer-on-peer’ abuse can relate to various forms of abuse (not just sexual abuse and exploitation), and crucially it does not capture the fact that the behaviour in question is harmful to the child perpetrator as well as the victim’. (Tri.x 2017: 1)

Some professionals had a similar perspective. For example, this education practitioner said:

'Sometimes there are still people out there who are wrongly labelling children. Kids seen as 'perpetrators' are also the abused. For those that don't know they are doing it, professionals need to be careful in how they go about things. [They] always need to look beyond. There are still schools that aren't doing this, and that are doing things like 'zero tolerance'. [They] need to move away from the dichotomy of black or white, look at the root causes of unacceptable behaviour and help children to move forward positively.' (Education 1)

And a Probation Officer:

'In the wing of the probation service that I work in there is a youth justice vibe; people are child-centred in their practice and try to understand the child. The language in youth justice is a lot less negative; we tend not to talk about criminals'. (Probation Officer 1)

A sexual abuse project worker also gave a helpful example of how a 'victim' might become a 'perpetrator':

'We also get referrals for one off behaviours for a serious incident such as bringing a knife into school which might happen at the tail end of experiences of bullying'. (Sexual abuse worker 1)

In contrast, some professionals offered definitions of PPA that included distinct 'victim' and 'perpetrator' roles:

'Abuse is something done by one person or a group that causes significant harm to one person or a group. Could be bullying. Physical, verbal, emotional, sexual; indirect, online. Something inflicted on another that causes significant harm'. (Education 1) [our emphasis]

'Abuse' is something done to someone. It is active rather than passive. "Peer-on-peer abuse" is abuse perpetrated by someone under 18 toward someone under 18. (Education 3) [our emphasis]

The influence of the CJS or more broadly jurisprudence, has meant that services have been set up from the perspective that every misdemeanour must involve a perpetrator and a victim, who are two people with different levels of social power. PPA, in contrast, happens between two people who have largely similar social statuses and so it can go back and forth and not simply from 'perpetrator' to 'victim' or 'above' to 'below'.

Experiences

Here we use the Contextual Safeguarding model as a useful framework to structure what young people and the professionals we spoke to told us.

Home

The first circle in the model is the home, which includes the family. The ‘weight of influence’ of parents in young peoples’ lives fades through adolescence (Firmin, 2018) and the young people we spoke to felt that parents had little power to influence, or act positively, especially once abusive patterns had taken hold:

‘Parents can’t do nothing about it’

‘They can talk to you and why you are feeling down but they can’t stop a bully from being a bully’

‘There’s not a lot parents can do’

Universal, early interventions could be an important way to prevent abusive patterns becoming entrenched, by which time adults may have little opportunity to intervene effectively.

Despite young people’s physical and emotional distancing from their homes at this time (Covid-19 aside), professionals felt that the financial and emotional resources of the family still influenced how young people interacted outside the home:

‘I am not an expert but so often the parents cannot regulate their own emotions and are displaying very similar behaviours to their young person’. (Sexual abuse project worker 1)

‘If things are harder for families then things are harder for the children in those families – either as victims or perpetrators of abuse. Some of the students are enrolled at college so that families can continue to get tax credits – there is massive poverty. Hard times in families have implications for children growing up, both in and out of the home’. (Education 2)

In practice, as well as their parents’ experiences, young people also carry with them their broader socio-economic background, and their educational history, all of which shape how they view themselves and others around them. The professionals’ responses reflect a deficit model, which does not so easily allow positive solutions to develop.

Parents’ experiences

The parents we spoke to had both experienced services’ variable responses to the sexual abuse of their daughters. The Police, CAFCASS and SAFE! all received positive feedback:

‘[The Police] did everything right’

‘I had a really supportive experience [with CAFCASS]’

'Working [through emotional support] with SAFE! really helped. I can now speak about it without being sick'.

'SAFE! gave me support when I needed it...they couldn't get support to me quick enough'

'SAFE! helped my daughter to come out of her shell'

In contrast they reported negative experiences of the CPS: 'it never went to court' and GPs who one found 'dismissive and unhelpful'. One parent felt that '[Social Services] were biased against me and my child'.

The parents we spoke to took a punitive view of justice, looking for more cases to go to court, more prisons and more sentencing; 'banning the CPS' who they viewed as ineffective, and with that increased funding for private prosecutions.

They felt that solutions would come from more support more quickly, for longer and tailored more closely to their families' needs, rather than those they perceived as driven by budgets. They looked for access to talking therapies, better resources from schools and peer-to-peer support. More broadly, they wanted support that helped their children to feel safe, that was available when they needed it and responsive to special educational needs. It would be interesting to look further into whether or not parents' solutions would be an effective way to support their families' needs, if current practices aren't assumed to be driven solely by decreased budgets.

Peer networks including social media

The next layer in Firmin's model is the peer network. Young people had a broad definition of a 'peer' that wasn't just confined to being a similar age. In some cases, young people saw sharing space as more of a driver of a peer relationship than age: '[a peer is] anyone around you... at school, at work, in class. You could have a peer in work who is ten years older than you but is still a peer' [Youth Ambassador].

Peer relationships included friendships, 'fake' friendships (those who you may think of as friends but who mistreat you in some way) and sexual or intimate relationships. Young women in particular experienced sexual violence or shaming and were regularly sent nude images to their smartphones both by people they knew, and those that they don't know. To some extent these images were normalised and the young women didn't feel that the people sending them were doing so to hurt or harm them or anyone else. However, the feelings of 'abuse' came if images were leaked and sent around a school.

It's difficult to overstate how pervasive social media is in young people's lives. 91% 16-24 year olds use the internet for social networking (Royal Society for Public Health, 2017) and 24% reported using the Internet outside of school for more than 6 hours per day on a typical weekday in 2015 (OECD average: 16%) (OECD, 2017).

Image-driven Instagram and Snapchat were the most commonly used platforms amongst our respondents. The young people recognised that social media made them vulnerable to abusive use. Nude texts and other personal information or rumours could spread quickly through screenshotting and social networks, even when they were intended to be private or temporary. Social media also created what they called 'fake ideals' which others may have felt pressure to live up to.

Professionals' comments on the internet suggested a persistent generation gap between young people and those who were supporting them:

'It [PPA] has always been there, but it now seems worse and they seem to have access to much nastier stuff. The technology makes it so much easier – they are constantly entertained; they need to be bored'. (Mental Health Worker 2)

'I think that a lot happens online and so much bad comes from misusing the internet. People don't know what they are talking about; like you can't have me talk about the internet because I don't know anything about it. People need to be qualified to know how to deliver information on it. The majority of the grown ups don't know anything about what the young people are going through. I don't understand it all either!' (Sexual Abuse Project Worker 1)

The overriding message was that professionals or other adults did not always understand the nature of young people's relationships, especially online. Collective training that brings together young people and adults to learn about the internet and social media, including opportunities for young people to train adults, may promote better understanding and e-safety for all parties.

Schools and colleges

After peer networks comes schools and colleges, who play a crucial role in both the prevention of and response to PPA. Young people spend a lot of their time inside, or travelling to or from, school. The reports from the young people we spoke to suggested that experiences of abuse from peers at the same school were commonplace both at school itself and on journeys to and from home.

The research and policy literature on schools suggests that there is a lot of variability in schools' responses to PPA. A survey of headteachers and school safeguarding leads, looking at online abuse across England and Scotland, reported variation in the content and delivery of training for teachers, education for students and involvement of the police in response to instances of bullying and abuse (Phippen, Bond et al 2018), despite an increase in the prevalence of online abuse in the previous three

years. The authors blamed the inconsistent response on the lack of a cohesive strategy, with 61% of respondents feeling that they did not receive sufficient guidance and support from government and local authorities to tackle online peer-on-peer abuse.

The evidence on what responses work is unclear, with some studies and systematic reviews finding that only 50% of interventions had any significant impact on bullying in school (e.g. Evans et al, 2014). This was likely down to the variation in the type of interventions, with few studies giving enough detail about what their interventions actually involved. Another rare systematic review on school-based interventions to reduce bullying found that ‘whole-school interventions, which included multiple disciplines and complementary components directed at different levels of the school organization, more often reduced victimization and bullying than the interventions that only included classroom-level curricula or social skills groups’. However they still lacked detail about what each intervention involved in practice (Vreeman and Carroll, 2007).

Prevention

This education professional we spoke to explained the role of schools in preventative work:

‘Schools have a responsibility to celebrate respectful relationships, kindness, honesty, and also naming what is not okay and be really straight on what is unacceptable behaviour in order to prevent this escalating. What I say is, “the behaviour that you walk past is the behaviour that you expect”’. (Education Practitioner 1)

But young people identified specific gaps in their PSHE education around acceptable behaviour within relationships.

Reporting PPA

Shame was pervasive across all the young peoples’ accounts and prevented young people from reporting PPA: ‘it’s embarrassing innit...the thing you’re being bullied for isn’t something you’re proud of is it?’ (Young Person).

Those who were brave enough to report found an insensitive response. Two young women told their stories:

‘It was the worst experience of my life. The police came into schools and everyone saw. The meeting was in a room with windows in the door which everyone could see through. Then nothing really happened to the boy. He’s still doing the same thing to other girls. I didn’t get a positive impact, just victim blaming, even though loads of other girls came forward and said the same thing had happened to them.’ (Young Person)

‘I met with the police at home. The detective came and they took items away. They took my phone. The police were not understanding. They wanted to get the information but they didn’t seem to care about me. Later I had a really good police officer who was caring. I was pushed to

return to school too soon. Everyone knew. I saw things written about me on social media, even by people who I thought were my friends. I felt different. I was constantly being asked about what happened. The rumours keep going, even 18 months later.’ (Young Person)

Response

Many of the young people we spoke to had had a negative experience of mainstream school, including permanent exclusion and were likely to have had experiences as both a perpetrator and a victim of PPA.

Comments such as these were representative:

‘They don’t do much about it’

‘The things they do don’t help the person being bullied’

‘You just get kicked out [of class]’

‘[Teachers] make people feel people insecure and anxious...like they’re [the teachers are] judging you’

Professionals agreed that teachers were ill-equipped to identify PPA: ‘if it is a safeguarding issue they will follow it up but these constant low level stuff they do not deal with it ... they might think they are friends’ (Education 2). Others reported a lack of training amongst school staff on handling ongoing peer abuse, with secondary schools lacking ‘time or the relationships or capacity that sometimes primary schools do...primary schools have more access to families and so have the ability to build relationships and address problems – they can do more holistic work’. (Education Practitioner 1)

Both groups of young people spoke about victim blaming in school - where during preventive interventions, staff emphasised educating students about how to keep themselves safe, rather than education around healthy relationships. A good example of this was e-safety education, where students were taught how to prevent or stop online abuse as victims. Whilst learning how to protect yourself from being exploited online is very important, students appeared to have received these messages as victim-blaming and saw no obvious consequences for a bully.

Some young people wanted a zero tolerance approach to poor behaviour at school, but others - often those with experience of being labelled “naughty” in the classroom - preferred a more nuanced and tolerant approach. This was reflected in the thoughts of a Probation Officer:

‘It would also be good to know what support there is with helping them adjust afterwards. For example, if the peer abuse had happened at school, what kind of restorative justice or relationship work could be explored to help both peers continue in the same setting if that’s suitable? Or if that is not appropriate, how to be able to draw some sort of line under it afterwards’. (Probation Officer 1)

Without national or regional collective training and a cohesive strategy to address bullying and abuse, individual schools are left to work with the often poor resources they have available to them. These experiences highlight the need for specialist support for schools, including consistency in how schools and the police jointly respond to reports of PPA.

Neighbourhoods

Young people talked about their relationships with people: parents, friends, teachers, more often than they spoke about physical places in their neighbourhoods. Neighbourhoods weren't mentioned except when it was a place of transition, passing through to and from school, to part time jobs and always with their phones with them. This was primarily because they weren't explicitly asked about neighbourhoods, not because they weren't likely to be important - although it is possible that young people are socialising online more often than going out. Analysing the data we collected, especially in the light of the literature on contextual safeguarding, has highlighted the use of future research on young peoples' experiences of their neighbourhoods as sites of PPA, in their own words.

Despite this absence, the young people we spoke to talked about their friendships (one-on-one and groups of friends) and the internet *as if* they were spaces. Instead of being physical places like homes or schools, these spaces moved with the person, but this made them hard to escape from. You can leave your home (including just to go out for the day, pandemic measures permitting), you can leave your school, but you can't easily leave your friends or social media.

Suggested solutions

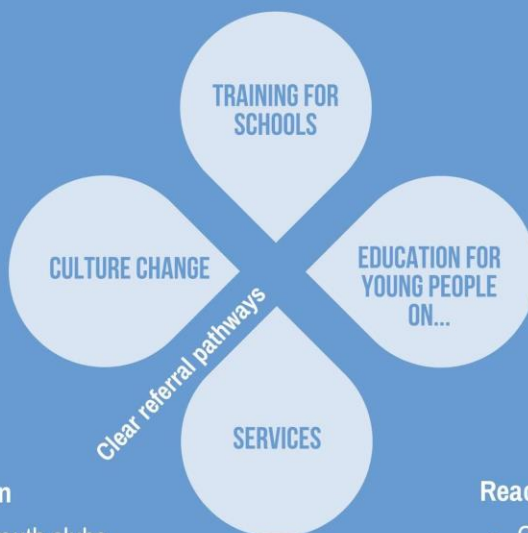
We asked thirty-one professionals working in services such as education, the police, social work and sexual violence support the question:

'If you had a magic wand what services, solutions, public messages would you like to see around peer-on-peer abuse?'

If I had a magic wand...

- Challenging sexism & gender-based violence
- Respect between peers
- Positive high profile media & political role models

- Support & facilitation from external orgs
- Social media & e-safety for adults
- Spotting the signs of PPA & disclosures
- Challenging assumptions



- What PPA is
- Who to call
- Healthy & safe relationships
- Healthy & safe friendships

Prevention

- More youth clubs & activities
- PSHE

Early intervention

- For families with difficult relationships
- For YP exposed to DV

Reaction

- Counselling for victims
- Long term support for YP experiencing abuse of all kinds

As the figure shows, their responses fell into four themes:

1. Culture change within wider society
2. Provision of services
3. Training for schools
4. Education for young people

Many respondents recognised that at root, PPA was a cultural problem. Violence has always been present, alongside abuse, within friendships and intimate relationships. This normalisation made it difficult for young people to identify abusive actions. They felt that interventions to address this should focus on challenging violence, especially sexual and gender-based violence and promoting respect between peers. They suggested that this could be done through education for young people on healthy and safe relationships, as well as guidance on identifying PPA and how to get support. Training for schools would be supported by expert external organisations. Respondents suggested expanding support services at all three levels: preventions, early intervention and response.

It is notable that none of the solutions suggested by respondents were new, despite their access to ‘a magic wand’. This shows how difficult it can be to imagine creative, but hypothetical, solutions beyond what you already have - especially when services are usually tightly restricted by legislation and budget.

Discussion

Beyond contextual safeguarding

People perceive the risk and safety of places differently depending on many factors, including their ethnicity, gender, age, the stories they may have heard about previous incidents involving others, or their own past experiences. Perceptions of risk often don’t match up to the evidence of how risky something probably is: for example the contradiction between parents’ fears for the safety of their children (or womens’ fears for themselves) at the hands of strangers - and the statistical evidence that women and children are most at risk within their own homes (Drakulich 2015).

Long standing campaigns around ‘stranger danger’, targeted at small children, may have had the unintended consequence that young people and their parents later continued to fear and protect against the risks of strangers (by, for example, advising young people, especially girls, to avoid parks at night), when, outside the home they are far more likely to come to harm from peers, including those they consider to be friends.

Safeguarding services have primarily been developed to protect children from risks to them from known people within the home. This has often failed to recognise the many ways in which young people experience harm in other places. Initiatives outside of the home are vital as young people spend an increasing proportion of their time away from their families as they move towards adulthood. This has placed a responsibility on institutions such as schools to take effective action against peer-on-peer abuse, including bullying and Harmful Sexual Behaviour.

The young people we spoke to describe traditional responses to PPA as putting the responsibility on them as a victim to change their behaviour to protect themselves. They also appeared to aim to isolate both victims and perpetrators by restricting social media use, their movements in school or through temporary or permanent exclusions.

Neighbourhoods shape young people’s movements (for example how often they need to leave to shop or go to school) and their sense of belonging and ownership, which is likely to be different in an area that has a high footfall of outsiders, as compared to an estate that is largely enclosed.

Our own local history has shown us the importance of understanding the individual *context* of PPA: communities and neighbourhoods, in keeping young people safe:

‘The serious case review into child sexual exploitation (CSE) in Oxford, where a group of adult men sexually exploited children over 16 years, highlighted how lack of awareness and understanding of the communities and neighbourhoods young people lived within by professionals, reinforced judgments made about the young people which acted as a barrier to professionals preventing and stopping the exploitation happening (Bedford 2015). (...) As young people get older, judgements made about their individual (constrained) choices, behaviour and characteristics may overshadow the multiple ways environments intersect to shape abuse’.
(Lloyd, 2019: 3-4)

The contextual safeguarding model highlights these spaces outside of the home, where PPA (as opposed to familial abuse) is more likely to occur, but it doesn’t so obviously take account of the spaces between these and the ‘mobile spaces’ of friendships and social media that move with a young person.

Any initiatives that come out of schools or workplaces, or that are directed at the home, can only have influence so far beyond those (fixed) places. Peer-on-peer abuse continues to occur beyond their reach, *between* physical buildings or institutions (schools, workplaces etc), such as on public transport and the streets, and also those that move with the young person: their friendship groups and the internet, especially social media.

What do we need?

This consultation has highlighted some of the ways existing services are fulfilling the needs of stakeholders and where they are falling short. More than anything, it shows the complexity inherent in the cultural, geographical, social and economic contexts in which peer-on-peer abuse takes place.

Fundamentally, stakeholders called for collaborative approaches that included:

Collective language used to describe peer-on-peer abuse

Collective learning between young people and adults

Collective practices, providing a cohesive strategy for prevention and response across the community

In response to what they told us, we have identified eight needs for any intervention to have the most likelihood of success. Solutions need to:

1. Be **mobile** (they follow the young person and are not limited to any one setting)
2. Be **contextual** (to recognise the influence of far reaching social norms, the neighbourhood or school in which abuse takes place and are flexible according to variable contexts)
3. **Not blame victims** or put the burden entirely on victims to protect themselves
4. Actively **encourage respect** and positive relationships within and between all groups of stakeholders: young people, social work and professionals, schools, the police and parents.
5. **Recognise the vulnerability of perpetrators**
6. Be **relevant to the online environment** (and its all-pervasiveness)
7. **Embrace complexity** and nuance in how gender, social class, ethnicity, sexuality and disability combine to reproduce inequalities and privilege, especially when predicting or addressing the consequences of adverse life events
8. **Include multi-agency collaboration**, and between young people and adults

The experiences of the young people we spoke to point in particular, point to the need for a focus on preventative work that is based on relationships between young people, parents and others responsible adults in their community based on mutual respect, trust and communication. The young people believed that there isn't much parents and teachers can do to stop established bullying, showing the value of pre-emptive interventions.

For young people to have got to the stage of telling adults or seeking help is the tip of the iceberg. Telling relies on them having developed self-respect, the ability to recognise abuse and trusted relationships with adults. Respectful relationships with others are also needed if young people are to resolve or prevent problems safely on their own or within friendship groups.

In the conclusion to this consultation, we highlight how Protective Behaviours encompasses all of these eight requirements.

Mobile solutions: safeguarding that moves with the young person

Although originally a strategy to prevent abuse, Protective Behaviours has evolved to be used in a wide range of settings, including bullying interventions, crime prevention, crisis intervention, counselling, mentoring, assertiveness training, parent support work, mediation and conflict resolution.

Protective Behaviours offers a wide range of strategies which are centred around two core themes:

- We all have the right to feel safe all of the time;
- We can talk with someone about anything, even if it feels awful or small.

With its emphasis on the right to safety, support networks and problem-solving strategies, this pragmatic approach is an ideal basis for interventions designed to help young people to cope and recover from the impact of victimisation or abuse.

<p style="text-align: center;">Mobile</p> <p>Protective Behaviours gives children the tools to feel complete ownership of their bodies, emotional literacy, and an understanding of their right to safety. It shows children how to recognise and respond to unsafe situations, including abuse, wherever and whenever it occurs.</p>	<p style="text-align: center;">Contextual</p> <p>Protective Behaviours encourages young people to consider risk and their safety in context - empowering young people to recognise that they have the tools to assess risk and take action wherever they may be.</p>	<p style="text-align: center;">Not blaming victims</p> <p>Protective Behaviours emphasises the balance between the responsibilities we all have for our own safety and the injustice suffered when it is violated by another. Protective Behaviours aims to empower children through understanding their absolute right to safety, and complete ownership of their physical and emotional space.</p>	
<p style="text-align: center;">Positive relationships & respect</p> <p>Protective Behaviours encourages children to talk to a trusted adult and relies on supporting trusted and respectful relationships. SAFE! uses PBs with parents whose children were identified as at risk of exploitation and with families who are experiencing Child on Parent Violence.</p>	<p>Protective Behaviours</p>		<p style="text-align: center;">Complexity & nuance</p> <p>Protective Behaviour challenges us to understand 'unwritten rules': the social norms that young people feel they have to adhere to or that they accept as unchangeable. Protective Behaviours takes the first steps to challenging these by recognising them and the importance of risk taking in building emotional intelligence.</p>
<p style="text-align: center;">Recognises vulnerability of perpetrators</p> <p>Protective Behaviours can be delivered to the whole community and is beneficial in helping perpetrators recognise their feelings too.</p>	<p style="text-align: center;">Relevant to online environment</p> <p>Early Warning Signs can be triggered by online as well as offline abuse. Young people can use Protective Behaviours techniques as effectively online as they can offline.</p>	<p style="text-align: center;">Collaborative between young people & adults</p> <p>Protective Behaviours promotes a shared language and common understanding around safety, encouraging professionals to work together to understand risk in a contextual framework and share responsibility for safeguarding.</p>	

What is already happening?

Cross-sector collaborations are promoting shared intelligence and partnership work locally around responses to and prevention of peer-on-peer abuse. SAFE! is a founding member of the Sexual Violence and Exploitation Network (SVEN), set up in Oxfordshire in 2017. SVEN brings together voluntary and statutory sector partners working with young people who have experienced sexual harm and/or any form of child exploitation, including SAFE!, CAMHS Horizon, local authority Exploitation teams, and other third sector organisations working with young people around these issues - including Oxfordshire's Rape Crisis (OSARCC), Elmore Community Service and Donnington Doorstep Step Out Project.

The network was set up to increase communication between agencies, avoid duplication and encourage holistic and varied services for young people in Oxfordshire. It supports collaboration and joint work; sharing best practice; and works together to provide learning opportunities around sexual violence and exploitation to young people and to other professionals working with young people.

SVEN takes a contextual approach and safely shares information regarding concerns around individuals, peer groups, schools and settings in order to identify local concerns and share solutions. Over the past two years the network has identified local trends and issues and has sought to build services through collaborative bids to funders and seeking to influence local authority decision making. SVEN has also led to much closer working on individual care for young people, ensuring that each service user can access appropriate, timely and joined up support, at times across more than one agency.

Outside of the Thames Valley, other organisations provide information and examples of good practice. Service development relies on high quality data collection that can identify patterns of incidents. The Contextual Safeguarding Network has produced [multi-agency data collection methods](#) that include data on school absences, use of transport networks (in particular young people's use of certain bus routes at night - see also Firmin and Abbot 2018) and visits to local hospital Emergency Departments with injuries that could have been sustained by physical assault by peers.

The [Contextual Safeguarding Network](#) has also published information and comprehensive guidance on responding to peer-on-peer abuse and contextual safeguarding. Another example of helpful resources available to practitioners is Waltham Forest Council's [comprehensive guide](#) on safeguarding adolescents, which offers practical examples within a contextual safeguarding framework.

Community police officers in plain clothes attached to schools can facilitate a whole-community response to PPA using Protective Behaviours and restorative justice approaches. The [All Wales School Liaison Core Programme](#) – also known as SchoolBeat is already in place across Wales, with embedded

Police Officers working alongside parents, teachers and students. A restorative justice approach may also be valuable for parents by supporting them to think through strengths based, community solution approaches to PPA with others. This would also provide a space for them to discuss their family's experience of 'injustice' and the pain they've experienced as parents unable to protect their child/ren.

These examples of best practice point to the promise of collaborative, multi-agency work. This practice could be extended by the recognition that PPA is a public health issue and is therefore deserving of multi-agency, young people centred, sustained and comprehensive interventions at national, regional, local and individual levels.

Covid-19 and the impact of social distancing

Since we spoke to the young people and professionals, the spaces in which young people spend time have suddenly (if temporarily) changed. The social distancing measures brought in response to the Covid-19 pandemic will be having a significant impact on where young people spend their time - with them likely to be spending more than usual amounts of time at home and online, than in face to face contact with peers. We have yet to fully understand the impact of this situation on young people, on their relationships, and on their experiences of peer-on-peer abuse, but initial information from national charities paints a picture.

On 9th April, the charity Refuge reported a 700% increase in access to their National Domestic Abuse Helpline website in one day. It is likely that young people are experiencing more than usual levels of domestic violence between adults in the home and against themselves. They are also more vulnerable to online abuse by both adults and peers.

In March 2020, lawyers Farrer & Co (2020) produced a list of the increased safeguarding risks posed by the Covid-19 pandemic, which includes "risk of online peer-on-peer abuse through the absence of normal face to face contact and heightened use of social media" and "risks related to youth produced sexual imagery".

Local services are also continuing to provide support to young people and anticipating the long-term implications of the pandemic. Future research would be valuable to find out more about the implications for services and service users. SAFE!'s experiences to date raise useful starting points.

Covid-19 on the ground

The new restrictions, that were brought in so rapidly, have presented services such as SAFE! with multiple challenges. They have had to quickly adapt how they work - changing safeguarding and data protection processes, rapidly learning new technologies and adapting their usual approaches for remote work in order to continue providing meaningful support.

This change in how young people are supported has been relatively smooth for some. For young people whose main triggers for anxiety were school or community spaces, not having to have contact is a real positive. For others, isolation has exacerbated their difficulties. Remote video link support sessions have not been possible for some children and families, and we are struggling to reach the most vulnerable.

We have concerns around an increase in self-harm locally and, in light of reports coming out of other countries, we expect a similar increase in domestic, sexual and familial abuse, as well as online grooming and exploitation.

We fear an increase in demand for SAFE! services once the lockdown ends and we are beginning to consider how the organisation will move into, and respond, during the next phase of this crisis and to plan for the anticipated long-term impact.

Chloe Purcell, Director, SAFE!

Further research needs

Through this project, we have identified five key future research needs:

- 1. The current and potential role of schools in preventing and intervening in PPA**
- 2. The value of different approaches to e-safety training**
- 3. Service evaluation:** Investment in consultations and future service evaluations to make sure the right interventions are helping the right people at the right time. This is even more important following the rapid redesign of services in response to the Covid-19 pandemic. Immediate monitoring, plus plans for ongoing evaluation, will enable services to understand the impact of the pandemic and its aftermath on young people, families and services. Using that information they will be able to respond with support that continues to be meaningful to service users in this new context and beyond.

4. **Current good practice in Thames Valley** and how this work could be rolled out - including mapping of local provision.
5. **Identify best practice in past and current Public Health campaigns**

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