



Children and Learning Directorate

Child on child abuse: guidance for staff

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Child-on-child abuse

1 Introduction

- Child on child is where a child or young person is bullied, abused or exploited by children of a similar age and where the victim and perpetrator are both under 18. It involves deliberate, harmful behaviour targeted at the victim that can put them at risk of significant harm.
- Research shows that children who harm other children are likely to be victims of abuse or have considerable needs themselves and may require a social care service to help them recover from their experiences and address their behaviour. Sometimes the abusive behaviour may constitute a criminal offence and the perpetrator will also be dealt with via the criminal justice system.

2 Purpose and scope

- All staff have a duty to safeguard and promote the welfare of children, including perpetrators who may have considerable needs themselves. In the context of child-on-child abuse, this means ensuring a balanced response that considers the needs of the victim and the perpetrator whilst ensuring the safety of all children.
- Camden's policy is that victims and perpetrators of child-on-child abuse receive a social care response so that their welfare is safeguarded and promoted and that where perpetrators have entered the criminal justice system, there is a high level of inter-agency working.
- This protocol sets out the framework for a multi-agency strategy that:
 - protects the victim and other children from harm
 - meets the needs of the victim and the perpetrator
 - helps the perpetrator take responsibility for their behaviour
 - sets out the roles of agencies in responding to child-on-child abuse.

3 Recognising child-on-child abuse

- Bullying and other forms of harmful behaviour by children against their peers can range from low-level, problematic behaviour to abusive behaviour that can put victims at risk of significant harm.
- It is important that professionals are able to recognise the form that harmful behaviour can take, including the following:

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- Physical abuse including hitting, kicking, shaking, biting, hair pulling, or otherwise causing physical harm to another person;
 - Emotional abuse through bullying including name-calling, making threats, spreading rumours, verbal abuse or deliberate social exclusion;
 - Cyber bullying; the use of the internet and mobile devices to post threatening, intimidating or malicious messages/images on social media sites; more information on this is available in the online safety policies: https://cscb-new.co.uk/?page_id=95
 - Hazing; a form of initiation rite involving physically and/or emotionally abusive behaviour towards the person being initiated into a group, often as part of a “trial”;
 - Relationship abuse; abuse within teenage intimate relationships that can involve physical and emotional abuse or threats and/or control or coercion and where the perpetrator tries to gain power over the victim;
 - Bullying or harassment based on a child or young person’s ethnicity, religion, disability or sexual orientation. Professionals should be aware of the heightened vulnerability of some groups to bullying and abuse based on discrimination.
 - Involvement in gang activity and youth violence;
 - Exploitation of peers through sexual exploitation or criminal exploitation on the county lines model for example (which are often linked to gang involvement).
- This protocol covers incidents involving physically or emotionally harmful behaviour.
 - Where child-on-child abuse involves sexually harmful behaviour such as inappropriate touching or sexual language, sexting or any form of sexual assault, this should be dealt with under the CSCP *Harmful sexual behaviour protocol* available at: [CSCP-harmful-sexual-behaviour-protocol-2022.pdf](#)

4 Roles and responsibilities

- All services have a role in recognising child-on-child abuse and making appropriate referrals to children’s social care services and the police where a criminal offence has taken place in line with this protocol.

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- Early Help Services, Children’s Safeguarding and Social Work, the police and Youth Justice Services have a duty to provide services and support to victims and perpetrators to safeguard and promote their welfare and reduce offending behaviour.

4.1 Integrated Youth Support Service (IYSS)

- IYSS has lead responsibility for working with young people who exhibit anti-social or offending behaviour of a harmful nature in order to reduce the risk of re-offending and ensure general community safety.
- IYSS also has a duty to safeguard and promote the welfare of perpetrators through appropriate referrals to CSFH where there are safeguarding concerns for the perpetrator or for other children and young people with whom they are in contact.

4.2 Early Help Services

Camden has a range of early help services available from early years provision to youth services providing preventative interventions that can help tackle emerging issues and provide children and families with support to help avoid problems escalating and can work with victims and perpetrators.

4.3 Children’s Safeguarding and Family Help (CSFH)

- CSFH has lead responsibility for providing social care services to the victim and the perpetrator under the Children Act 1989 and will respond to all allegations of child-on-child abuse where the threshold for a statutory social work service has been reached.
- Cases will be dealt with under child protection procedures where the victim and/or perpetrator is thought to be at risk of significant harm and will follow Chapter 15 of the London Safeguarding Children procedures. [PG21. Harmful Behaviour](#)
- Cases involving sexual exploitation will be dealt with under the CSCP extra-familial harm and child exploitation guidance: [CSCP-extra-familial-harm-and-child-exploitation-guidance.pdf](#)

4.4 Police

Police responsibilities are:

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- investigating and assisting in prosecutions where an offence has taken place
- gathering and sharing intelligence with agencies on perpetrators who may pose a risk to the wider community
- making appropriate MERLIN referrals to CSFH and IYSS.

5 Levels of harm and intervention

- Some behaviour exhibited by children may be **problematic** but not harmful to other children. These behaviours will not meet child protection thresholds but may be indicative of other needs. In these cases, the child may require an **early help service** or may be **in need** and requiring a statutory social work service.
- **Harmful behaviour** that is abusive, directed at other children and likely to place them at risk of significant harm will be dealt with under **child protection procedures**.

The following factors should be taken into consideration when deciding on whether the behaviour is harmful:

- there is a significant difference between the age or developmental stage of the victim and perpetrator, suggesting that the behaviour is more likely to be defined as abusive;
- the alleged perpetrator is supported or joined by other children;
- the perpetrator appears to have more power or authority over the victim, for example related to age, race, gender or physical, emotional or intellectual development; for sexual abuse, this could allow them to force the victim to consent;
- the behaviour, both physical and verbal, involves a degree of physical aggression, intimidation or bribery;
- the behaviour is not age appropriate;
- the perpetrator has attempted to prevent the victim from reporting the incident or tried to ensure secrecy;
- the behaviour has taken place on a number of occasions where there is a single victim or there is a developing pattern of behaviour in relation to multiple harmful behaviours;
- the perpetrator shows a pattern that seems to focus on a particular type of victim based on common features such as age, gender or vulnerability;
- there are concerns about the perpetrator's health, emotional development or attachments or historical neglect and abuse;
- the victim and the perpetrator live in the same household or have regular contact, for example at school;

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- the victim's experience of the behaviour and the impact it is having on their routines and lifestyle (e.g. not attending school)
- the perpetrator and their parents do not take the concerns seriously.

6 Referrals

- All referrals for a social care services should be made to the Children and Families Contact Service.
- Prior to any referral, the matter should be discussed with the designated safeguarding lead within the agency to decide whether this is the best course of action. Agencies may also contact the Contact Service social worker for advice on a "no names" basis.
- A referral must be made for both the victim and the perpetrator using an e-CAF referral and should contain as much information as possible.
- Urgent child protection referrals can be made by telephone but must be followed up in writing within 48 hours.
- If a child lives in another local authority area, the referral should be made to the home authority but Camden should be notified of the referral.
- The police will send a MERLIN notification to IYSS and the Contact Service when a young person comes to their attention because of their harmful behaviour or is arrested for a criminal offence.
- Cases will be dealt with under MASH procedures and a decision made on whether to refer on for an early help or social work service. Generally, the case will be referred on to CSFH for a social work service where:
 - there are concerns about the safety and welfare of younger siblings living in the perpetrator's household and/or:
 - there are concerns that the perpetrator may be a victim of abuse themselves.

On receipt of the referral, the Contact Service will consider the information and decide on the most appropriate response:

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- Where the victim or perpetrator requires a preventative, early help response the case will be passed to the **Early Help First Stop team** who will allocate the case to the most appropriate early help service.
- Where the victim or perpetrator is a child in need, the case will be passed to **CSFH** for a **child in need service**.
- If there are concerns that the victim has suffered or is at risk of significant harm, other children may be at risk from the perpetrator or the perpetrator is the victim of abuse, the case will be passed to the MASH team to gather relevant information and the case passed to **CSFH** for a **child protection response**.

7 CSFH response

All children referred to CSFH for a social work service will have a child and family assessment that sets out their needs and decides the most appropriate response.

7.1 Child protection response

- Where there are child protection concerns, chapter 15 of the pan London child protection procedures will be followed and a **strategy discussion** will be convened. The meeting will be chaired by a CSFH social work manager or IRO and attended by:
 - the allocated social worker
 - the Police
 - a representative from the child's school
 - a health representative
 - a representative from the IYSS where the service is involved
 - for looked after children, a representative from the Fostering Service or Resource team.

The purpose of the meeting will be to:

- decide whether the threshold for carrying out a child protection investigation under section 47 of the Children Act 1989 has been reached
- identify any other children who may be at risk and look at any immediate action needed to protect them
- plan any criminal investigation;
- for the perpetrator, decide:

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- whether they pose a significant risk of harm to their siblings or other children
 - what their own needs are
 - whether they may also be or have been the victim of abuse and in need of protection.
- A **child protection case conference** held if there is a risk of significant harm to the victim and a **child protection plan** may be needed to reduce the risk of harm. A separate conference should be convened if it is thought that the perpetrator is also a victim of abuse who is in need of protection.
 - Where there are concerns about possible offending behaviour by the perpetrator, a representative from IYSS should be invited to attend. Therapeutic interventions that help the perpetrator to address issues causing their harmful behaviour will be part of any child protection plan agreed at the conference.

7.2 Child in need response

- If there is no risk of significant harm but concerns remain regarding the impact of the incident on the victim or the perpetrator still exhibits harmful behaviour, they will be children in need.
- The first **child in need review meeting** will be the forum for developing a child in need plan. The review should be chaired by the manager or IRO and attended by:
 - the allocated social worker
 - health representatives
 - Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS)
 - the school
 - any other professionals with relevant knowledge of the child and their parents.
- For the victim, the plan will look at how they can be kept safe and deal with any issues arising from the incident or other identified needs.
- For the perpetrator, the meeting will gather information on the level of risk the child poses to any siblings, extended family members or children in school or the wider community. The meeting should also consider the likelihood of current behaviour becoming more serious over time.

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- If information shared at the meeting indicates possible significant harm to the victim or perpetrator, an outcome may be to convene a strategy meeting and use child protection procedures as appropriate.

7.3 Looked after children

Unless the strategy meeting establishes that there are child protection concerns requiring a child protection conference, all planning for the child will take place within the Looked After Children care planning process, including their statutory review.

7.4 Outcomes

Any agreed actions taken to safeguard the victim or provide help and support for perpetrators to address their behaviour will be detailed in their child protection, child in need or care plan. The following actions should be considered for all cases of harmful behaviour:

- referral to CAMHS to provide consultation on any necessary risk assessment or therapeutic intervention and referral on to relevant agencies
- agreed strategies for schools to monitor the victim or perpetrator and reduce risk within the school environment
- any services and support needed to address other identified needs
- referral to IYSS
- referral to other forums for monitoring or services.

8 IYSS response

- The IYSS will carry out assessments of the young person's anti-social and offending behaviour and draw up an intervention plan aimed at diverting the young person from this behaviour.
- Where the young person enters the criminal justice system, the Youth Justice Service (YJS) will carry out a statutory youth offending service and liaise with the courts.
- Where appropriate, the YJS may refer to young person to the following:
 - High Risk and Vulnerability Panel where the young person's behaviour may pose a risk of serious harm to the community or if the young person is perceived to be highly vulnerable.

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- The Gangs strategy group where the young person is involved in gang activity in order to reduce the risk posed by gang activity by the management of their involvement.

9 Confidentiality and information-sharing

- The Children Act 2004 places a safeguarding duty on agencies working with children and young people and emphasises the need to share information in order to safeguard their welfare. The Act also provides agencies with a legal basis to share information in order to safeguard and promote the welfare of children and support multi-agency working.
- However, agencies should aim to obtain parental consent to making a referral unless this puts the child at risk of harm. If consent is refused professionals should consider whether a referral should be made in order to safeguard the child. If professionals are in any doubt, they can contact the MASH social worker for advice on a “no names” basis.

Parental consent to making a referral should not be sought where this would:

- place the child or young person at further risk
- interfere with a criminal investigation
- cause undue delay to safeguarding a child or young person.

When seeking consent to share information, the following should be taken into account:

- Where a child is under 12 years old, parents must consent to disclosure.
- Young people aged between 12 and 15 years old may be able to give their own consent if they are able to understand the issues and make an informed decision; otherwise, their parents must be asked to give consent.
- Young people aged over 16 are legally able to give consent to disclosure where they are judged to have mental capacity.

Referrals can be made without consent in child protection cases where there is reasonable cause to believe that the child is suffering or at risk of suffering significant harm

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- Before sharing any information, professionals should consider the proportionality of disclosure against non-disclosure; is the duty of confidentiality overridden by the need to safeguard the child?
- When sharing information, professionals should only disclose relevant information to those professionals who need to know and for the purpose it is needed.
- Within schools, information sharing should be limited to the head teacher and the designated safeguarding lead and any member of staff involved in implementing a risk management plan or monitoring the young person's behaviour. Decisions on disclosure should be made by the head teacher on a case by case basis.

Information to be shared includes the following:

- Schools and other agencies will notify CSFH and IYSS of any incidents of harmful behaviour and report on any monitoring that is being undertaken on a child. Schools will also notify other agencies if a child is to be excluded due to their behaviour.
- Early Help Services and CSFH will notify other agencies when the service becomes involved with the victim or perpetrator, and any interventions taken under the Children Act 1989, for example, convening a child protection case conference or applying for a care order.
- The police will notify the Contact Service and IYSS of any incidents or arrests via the MERLIN system.
- IYSS will notify other agencies when they become involved with the perpetrator and any court decisions in relation to the perpetrator.

10 Joint working

To ensure the needs of victims and perpetrators are met at the most appropriate level of intervention, there must be a co-ordinated, multi-agency response to incidents and concerns.

- Joint assessment is a key part of ensuring all the needs of children are met. The principles to be followed are:
 - each agency should contribute information to all Early Help, CSFH and IYSS assessments

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- strategy meetings and other multi-agency planning meetings should be used to plan assessments and delegate tasks to agencies.
 - all assessments should incorporate an assessment of the level of risk posed to other children
 - assessments carried out by individual agencies should be shared with partners.
- All agencies involved with the victim and perpetrator should ensure that a representative will attend any strategy meeting, child protection conference or other multi-agency planning meeting to share information and to be part of the planning and decision-making process. Where an agency is unable to attend, a written report should be made available for the meeting. Minutes of all meetings should be shared with all partner agencies.
 - Agencies should maintain regular contact, particularly where there is a high level of risk to children and where an individual child's behaviour is being monitored as part of a child protection plan or court ordered intervention.

11 Working with parents

- When working with the perpetrator's parents, professionals will ensure that they remain sensitive at all times. Many parents are likely to be shocked on hearing about the allegations, but it is important that they are involved in any agreed strategies for monitoring their child's behaviour and in ensuring appropriate boundaries are set at home. Parents may also be a useful source of information regarding the child's behaviour and development.
- However, professionals also need to be aware of the possibility that parents may be implicated in the abusive behaviours. Where this is thought to be the case, professionals should discuss the matter with the Contact Service social worker to decide whether parents should be notified of any referral.