



# PREVENTING PEER TO PEER SEXUAL ABUSE

≡ SAFETY & SECURITY N.C. ≡

## Preventing Peer-to-Peer Sexual Abuse

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Children demonstrate a range of sexual behaviors as they mature, but sometimes they may behave in a sexual way that is inappropriate for their age and developmental stage. This is referred to as harmful sexual behavior because it is detrimental for the children who initiate it, as well as to whom it is directed. Research has shown that exposure to trauma may be a key factor behind harmful sexual behavior.

Harmful sexual behavior may be understood as socially inappropriate behavior with victimization or violence. This may include unwanted or inappropriate touching; forcing or coercing someone else to watch or take part in sexualized activity; and sexual violence.

One out of three sexual abuse cases involve peer-to-peer abuse by other children or young people considered as minors. There has been a 300% increase of reported cases in the United States over the last five years. According to Ministry Safe, adult male offenders typically begin abusing at approximately 13-14 years old.

Puberty is a confusing time. Peer relationships change as children grow. Our society has become so sexualized—especially in the entertainment industry—that many do not know what is normal sexual behavior or a healthy relationship. Peer-to-peer sexual abuse can take place in various locations, including at school, home, social events, a friend's house and online. Some who display harmful sexual behaviors may not even know their actions are wrong. Those being victimized may know they feel unsafe and unhappy but allow abuse for a variety of reasons, such as their desire to fit in, to not be made fun of, their fear of being bullied or feeling threatened to keep a secret.

Many will not report abuse because they gave consent for sexual activity and feel guilty or think they are to blame. One reason victims do not report sexual abuse is they feel they will not be believed, especially if alcohol or sexting was involved. Often, students think sending explicit images and texts (sexting) is expected whether or not they are in a relationship.

**Harmful sexual behavior can be displayed towards peers, younger children or older children. Some identifying factors of peer-to-peer sexual abuse are:**

- Aggressive and non-aggressive behavior
- A significant difference in physical size
- A child forcing unwanted behavior on another child
- Social status differences
- Economic differences
- Intellectual differences
- Peer-to-peer sexual abuse happens most often when:
  - Clothes are removed for any reason, such as swimming, bathing, changing clothes or preparing for bed
  - A child can remain unseen in a secluded area of a larger space
  - Children are unsupervised

**Warning signs of an aggressor:**

- Persists in physical contact when someone says no
- Does not accept normal boundaries
- Incapable of stopping particular behaviors
- Seems to prefer associating with younger children
- Ongoing secret games, clubs and locations
- Plays touching games wrapped in secrecy
- Peer-bullying behavior has a high percentage of becoming sexual abuse
- Signs of the victim:
  - Does not want to be alone with a particular child
  - Does not want to participate in an activity they used to enjoy
  - Child complains of being bullied

### **How to reduce the risk of peer-to-peer abuse:**

- Understand this risk is real and can happen in ministry settings
- Make sure all adults and volunteers understand signs of abuse
- Many adults are unclear which behaviors are part of normal sexual development and which are harmful and/or abusive. Many do not know how to respond to either the abused or abuser.
- Young people can be confused when trying to decide whether or not they have experienced peer sexual abuse. Some reasons may include:
  - Confusion about what is normal sexual activity
  - Failure to know if they gave consent
  - They were intoxicated or drugged and do not remember the events
  - The abuse was caused by a friend or dating partner
  - The abuse took place online
  - They blame themselves for what happened
- Young people are reluctant to tell anybody about peer sexual abuse due to the following:
  - Worry they will not be taken seriously
  - Fear they will be blamed or bullied about what happened
  - Fear of retribution if they speak out
  - Underestimation of the severity of the event

**Peer sexual abuse can have a long-term impact in teens, such as post-traumatic stress and substance addictions to deal with the painful memory of abuse. The primary places where abuse happens are church or camp settings. In order to reduce the risk of sexual abuse in these places, consider the following:**

- Develop a written policy
- To prevent opportunity for abuse to occur in the restroom, have multiple adults escort teens to the bathroom and patrol the halls
- Do not allow different ages to room together
- Do not allow closed doors
- Common signs of sexual abuse:
  - Children using developmentally inappropriate or sexually explicit language
  - Sexualized roleplay/games
  - Children exposing genitals to other children
  - Inappropriate sexual touching
  - Children simulating sexual acts
  - Older children persuading younger children to perform/watch sexual acts
  - Creating and sharing sexually explicit images
  - Sexual assault, including rape

Parents may witness their own child displaying sexual behavior or using sexualized language. When this occurs, a conversation needs to be had. The child may say someone older told them what to do or showed them things and encouraged them to participate. Some children will share that they didn't like what was done to them. They thought it was just a game and were told to keep it a secret. This may confuse the child as to whether they should tell their parents. Sometimes adults equate sexual behavior among children and teens as being normal curiosity. More questions must be asked to determine if this falls into harmful sexual abuse.

Young people who have been molested have concerns about peer sexual abuse. Many are confused about what happened to them. They may have been uncomfortable with what took place between them and a peer, but did not realize it was abuse. Sadly, due to lack of general knowledge about sexuality, many do not realize that it was wrong until later in life and engage in healthy relationships.

### **Other reasons for young people's confusion:**

- Thinking what happened to them was not serious enough to be abuse
- Thinking it was not sexual abuse because they did not experience penetrative sex
- Blaming themselves for what happened because they had given consent or agreed to meet with the other person involved
- Thinking it was not sexual abuse because they were in a relationship with the other person or the person involved was a friend
- No clear remembrance of sexual activity because alcohol or drugs were involved
- Lack of personal worth
- Fearing the loss of a relationship or friendship
- Fear that refusal to participate will lead to violence from the other person involved
- Sense they are trapped in an abusive relationship

### **Online Abuse**

Since more and more teens have access to cell phones, sexting has been increasingly occurring. Many of those who ask for sexual images are forceful in their demands, using bullying and pressure tactics. Once the sexual images are sent, young people are often asked to send more. This may lead to coercion to perform sexual acts. Threats may be made about sharing the images with others. Some sexually explicit texts and images are shared without knowledge or consent from the person in the image. When the person discovers their image has been shared, they feel shame, anger, judgement or blame for what has happened.

Abusers are often engaged in pornography. With the easy accessibility on smartphones, it has become common for pornography addictions to begin as young as age nine. Many boys are sent pornography by friends and teased if they do not watch. Viewing the images may make them feel uncomfortable at first but leads to desensitization.

### **Seeking Help After Experiencing Abuse**

- Many young people do not want to report abuse to their parents or police due to:
- Fear their parents will be disappointed and ashamed of them
- Fear there is not enough evidence to support their claim
- Fear they will not be believed
- Fear of denial of abuse by perpetrator
- Reluctance of sharing the experience with a parent or police officer
- Responding to Peer Sexual Abuse
- What adults can do to prevent sexual abuse:
- Provide education on healthy relationships
- Model healthy relationships within the family
- Acknowledge the seriousness of sexual abuse
- Engage in purposeful conversations with young people about sexual abuse
- Seek follow-up counseling for the abused
- Maintain and support policies in place to adequately supervise teens and children
- Train all volunteers and parents about peer-to-peer sexual abuse tendencies, including warning signs that indicate abuse