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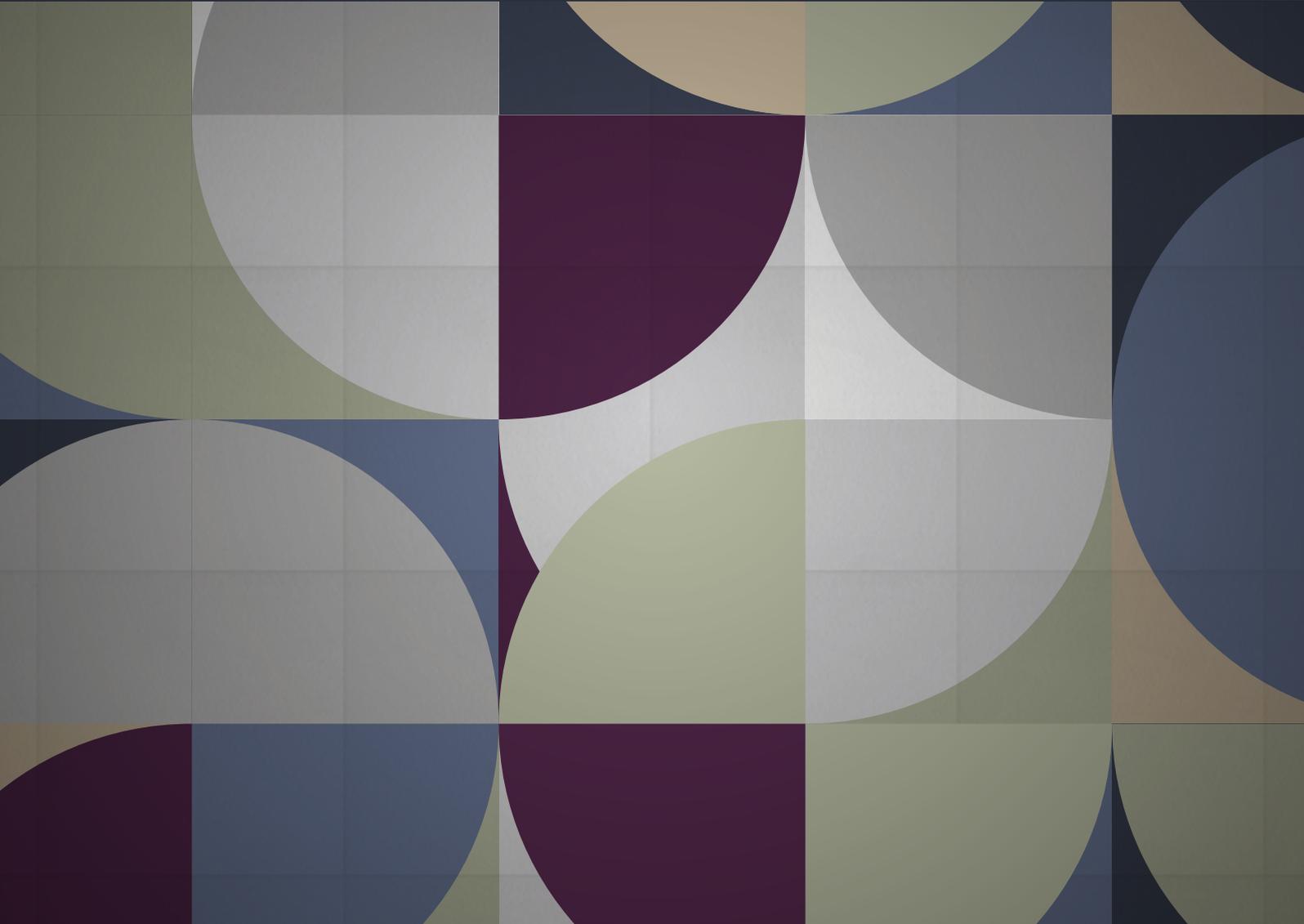R E S E A R C H   G R O U P

Practice considerations when responding to peer-on-peer abuse

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Summary

This research briefing provides an overview of the evidence relating to interventions, frameworks and approaches relevant when responding to peer-on-peer abuse among children and young people. It focuses on both those who cause harm and those who experience harm, recognising the overlaps in young people's experiences. The briefing draws on findings from a rapid review of academic databases and grey literature from government and third sector organisations in Scotland. The aim of the review is to inform practice within Bairns' Hoose Pathfinder programme for change in Aberdeen City and Aberdeenshire and other developing Bairns' Hooses in Scotland. It maps a range of possible responses and frameworks, highlighting shared principles, benefits and tensions in practice for practitioners to consider. Given the nature of available evidence, it does not claim to identify 'what works' or recommend replicable practice.

Key points

- Most known interventions and studies on peer-on-peer abuse focus on bullying and harmful sexual behaviours (HSB) with limited evidence on peer-initiated adolescent domestic abuse, child sexual exploitation (CSE), and child criminal exploitation (CCE).

- A number of Scottish interventions reflect promising practices aligned with national child protection guidance.

- Strengths-based, well-being-focused and child-centred practice are considered as alternatives to risk-focused and behaviour management models by promoting young people's agency and resilience.

- Trauma-informed and person-centred approaches recognise the intersecting needs and vulnerabilities of all young people involved and avoid potentially unhelpful binary labels such as victims and perpetrators, since these inadvertently stigmatise them.

- Applying these approaches and interventions in practice brings benefits and tensions which practitioners must navigate through training and reflective practice.

- Involvement of children and young people in research and co-designing policy and programmes is crucial in ensuring interventions are relevant and based on their lived experiences.

1. Introduction

Violence and abuse between children and young people are increasingly recognised as urgent safeguarding concerns across the UK. These include different forms of harm (defined below): harmful sexual behaviours, sexual violence, child sexual exploitation, bullying, child criminal exploitation, and adolescent domestic abuse. Anecdotal data from Bairns' Hoose partners in Aberdeen and Aberdeenshire indicates the prevalence of verbal abuse, online abuse, harmful sexual behaviours and racially motivated bullying among young people. The *Domestic Abuse in Scotland Statistics* (Scottish Government, n.d.), indicate that in 2021-2022 there were 302 incidents of domestic abuse recorded by the police where both the victim and accused were under the age of 16 years old (Murphy, 2023). Available data on harmful sexual behaviours in the UK estimate that around a third of child sexual abuse is by other children and young people (NSPCC, 2024).

Complexities in definitions and understanding of peer-on-peer abuse

There is no consensus definition or scope of peer-on peer abuse across research and policy in the UK. In this review, the term peer-on-peer abuse will be used to capture broadly violence and abuse occurring between children and young people. The National Guidance on Child Protection in Scotland (2021, updated 2023) and Scottish legislation Redress for Survivors (Historical Child Abuse in Care) (Scotland) Act 2021 (updated 2025) use the term 'peer-on-peer abuse'. Meanwhile, recent England policy documents (Keeping Children Safe in Education 2024 and Working Together to Safeguard Children) use the term 'child-on-child abuse'. The shift in terminology in English policy documents responds to recommendations to change the language from peer to child because of concerns that the term peer may obscure power imbalances between the young people involved (Safeguarding Network, 2022).

While this review uses the term 'peer', the power imbalances between the children and young people involved are acknowledged. These may occur due to intersecting factors such as age, ability, economic status, or social dynamics. A child who has been harmed may harm another child in another situation. It is crucial to understand and support the child who causes harm, recognising potential unmet needs rather than focusing on criminal responsibility (Scottish Government, 2020). This situation presents challenges for practitioners who must adapt safeguarding and child protection frameworks that were traditionally designed for adult-perpetrated harm or intervening in families (Firmin, 2018; Lloyd and Bradbury, 2023). Without a shared understanding, children and young people who cause harm may not receive appropriate support for their needs or related experiences of abuse.

In this review, harm is understood through both statutory child protection thresholds and the lived experiences and perspectives of children. This includes recognising that peer-on-peer abuse may have a substantial impact even when it does not meet formal criteria for significant harm. This review focuses on all children under 18, including those below the age of criminal responsibility.

Situating the briefing paper in the context of the wider programme of work

This review is anchored in the Scottish approach to Barnahus ('Bairns' Hoose'), which upholds the values of being child-centred, trauma-informed, and always respecting the rights and well-being of the child. This rapid review was developed by the University of Edinburgh, in partnership with Bedfordshire University, to support practitioners in Aberdeen City and Aberdeenshire as part of the Bairns' Hoose Pathfinder programme and other developing Bairns' Hoose in Scotland. Based on the Icelandic model, Barnahus, it brings together multiple agencies spanning the core 'four-rooms' of the Barnahus model: justice, health, child protection, and recovery. It aims to deliver integrated multiagency support to best meet the needs of children and young people who are victims of abuse or have witnessed violence as well as children under the age of criminal responsibility whose behaviour in Scotland (currently 12 years of age) has caused significant harm to others. Bairns' Hooses in Scotland supports the Scottish Government's vision: *all children in Scotland who have been victims of or witnesses to abuse or violence, as well as children under the age of criminal responsibility whose behaviour has caused significant harm or abuse, will have access to trauma-informed recovery, support and justice* (Scottish Government, 2025).

2. Methodology

The rapid review of literature used a streamlined but systematic process, including a focused search of selected academic databases and grey literature from government[1] and third sector organisations[2]. It focused on policy and practice relevant to Scotland. It applied clear inclusion and exclusion criteria.

Search strategy

- Peer harm (e,g "peer-on-peer abuse" or "child on child abuse)

- Types of harm (e.g. "child sexual exploitation" or "dating violence" or "harmful sexual behaviour" or bullying")

- Settings (e.g. "school" or "community" or "justice")

Overview of studies included

- Publications (49 total): 36 academic studies and 13 practitioner resources.

- Methods: mixed (16), quantitative methods (8), and qualitative (5). Other sources include reports, toolkits, literature reviews, and evidence syntheses (20).

- Geography: England (27), with thirteen (13) in Scotland, one in Wales, and thirteen (13) UK-wide.

- Forms of harm: Bullying (12); forms of sexual violence, including harmful sexual behaviours (17), child sexual exploitation (3); adolescent domestic abuse (2), online harm (1), and child criminal exploitation (1). Definitions are discussed in the next section.

- The review included studies on extra-familial harm (6) and youth violence (7), recognising that peer-on-peer abuse occurs in these broader contexts. These concepts capture different forms of harm beyond family settings such as violence between peers in communities and schools.

- Settings included education (28), community (14), and justice (7).

Limitations

Few interventions identified in the studies have been formally evaluated for impact. Most available evidence consisted of anecdotal feedback, small-scale and qualitative evaluations, or practitioners' reflections on the process and observed outcomes. While some programmes are cited as examples of good practice in studies, detailed evaluation findings are often una-

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1. Government websites: Scottish Government; Care Inspectorate Scotland; Education Scotland; Children and Young People's Commissioner Scotland; NHS Scotland
2. Third sector organisations: CELCIS – Centre for Excellence for Children's Care and Protection; Scottish Violence Reduction Unit; Scottish Centre for Crime and Justice Research (SCCJR); Children and Young People's Centre for Justice (CYCJ); IRISS; Children First; Barnardo's Scotland; Children in Scotland

vailable or only referenced on project websites, which were beyond the scope of this review. Website links are signposted in the appendix for further reading. There is also limited representation of children and young people's perspectives on the outcomes and impact of the interventions on them.

To capture practice insights, the review adopted a broad definition of 'intervention' to include formal programmes, practice-based approaches and frameworks. This briefing paper does not claim to identify 'what works' or recommend replicable practice. Instead, it maps existing approaches and explores the principles embedded within them. It aims to provide Bairns' Hoose partners and practitioners with a range of possible responses and considerations for their practice.

3. Overview of types of harm: Definitions and evidence available

This section defines key forms of harm, based on Scottish policy, and summarises evidence from the review. Further details and website links are provided in the appendix.

3.1 Bullying

Definition: "Bullying refers to both behaviour and its impact. It can make people feel hurt, threatened, frightened and left out. It can happen face-to-face and online." (Respect for All, 2017).[3]

Evidence reviewed suggests that:

- In Scotland, interventions on bullying focus on empathy-building and social-emotional development with students. Examples cited in White (2019) and Russell (2021) include:

  - *Mentors in Prevention* (*education settings*): Peer mentoring programme in schools using a bystander approach to promote healthy, respectful relationships

  - *Roots of Empathy* (education settings): This programme aims to develop students' awareness and management of emotions; teacher ratings suggest reductions in aggressive behaviours while children report improvements in emotional empathy but these are limited to informal feedback.

  - *Promoting Alternative Thinking Strategies* (*education settings*): Involves a social and emotional development programme with reported impact on aggression, violent behaviours

- In England, interventions in the education setting include *Learning Together* (Warren et al.,2019), *KiVA* (Bowes et al., 2024), and *Cross-Age Teaching Zone* (Boulton and Macaulay, 2024) that focus on developing students' social and emotional skills and empathy. Formal evaluations of *Learning Together* and *KiVA* reported reductions in bullying and increased empathy. *KiVA-SEND* (Badger et al., 2023) adapted the programme for students with autism, severe and complex learning disabilities, recognising their distinct experiences of bullying.

- Most Scottish interventions described in the studies did not have detailed evaluation data. There is more evidence of effectiveness for English programmes.

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3. The review did not identify physical abuse as a specific category since there were no studies that met this category of harm yet it is recognised that it can occur as part of bullying.

3.2 Harmful sexual behaviours (HSB)

Definition: HSB refers to sexual behaviour by children and young people under the age of 18 years that are developmentally inappropriate, may be harmful towards self or others and/or may be abusive towards others (National Guidance on Child Protection in Scotland, 2023; Hackett, 2014). Sexual behaviour by children can be framed to exist on a continuum ranging from normal to serious sexual violence (Hackett, 2014).

Evidence reviewed suggests that:

- Scottish programmes on HSB embed well-being approaches guided by the Getting it Right for Every Child (GIRFEC) principles. Examples include:

  - *Interventions for Vulnerable Youth Project* (community organisations): Provides risk management support to young people to avoid unnecessary secure care, using psychological and social work approaches (Scottish Government, 2020)

  - *Safer Lives* (community organisations): Adapted from the Good Lives Model (implemented in Manchester), uses a strengths-based and person-centred approach (Simpson and Vaswani, 2015).

- In England, most interventions focus on enhancing professional capacity including engaging in multi-agency collaboration to address HSB. Examples include:

  - *Brooks' Traffic Light Tool* (community organisations): Multi-agency training enables professionals to improve knowledge and consistency in assessing sexual behaviour (King-Hill, 2021; Brook, n.d)

  - Toolkits for schools (education setting): Provides practical guidance for addressing child-on-child sexual abuse (Farrer and Co, 2024; Morgan, 2025).

  - *Keep Safe* (community organisations): Manualised programme to support young people (12 years and older) with intellectual disabilities who display HSB. Anecdotal observations suggest positive changes in young people's emotional regulation (Malovic, Rossiter and Murphy, 2018)

Scottish and English programmes report positive practitioner feedback. However, there are no formal evaluations.

3.3 Child sexual exploitation

Definition: CSE is a form of child sexual abuse where an individual or group exploits an imbalance of power to coerce, manipulate or deceive a person under 18 into sexual activity in exchange for something the victim needs or wants, or for the perpetrator's financial gain. Exploitation can occur even if the sexual activity appears consensual (National Guidance on Child Protection in Scotland, 2023).

Evidence reviewed suggests that:

- No specific intervention addressing peer-on-peer CSE were identified in this review.

- In a practice briefing for the police, insights suggest that young people may be involved in CSE due to association with peers who are already exploited and thus they may be unintentionally introduced to exploitative situations. This suggests that peer-initiated exploitation may be less explicit or pre-meditated than adult-initiated exploitation (Firmin, 2016).

3.4 Adolescent domestic abuse

Definition: Abuse between adolescents under 16 does not fall within the statutory definition of domestic abuse. Literature uses terms such as 'teen dating violence', 'teenage relationship abuse', 'adolescent intimate partner violence'. This review adopts the term adolescent domestic abuse to encompass this form of harm occurring between young people (Weir et al., 2025).

Evidence reviewed suggests that:

- No named or evaluated intervention specifically addressing adolescent domestic abuse were identified. Relevant insights from literature reviews can inform practice.

- A literature review conducted by Barter and Stanley (2016) indicated that most of the robust evaluated interventions relating to domestic abuse are focused on young people's experiences of interpersonal violence and abuse in their parents' relationships, rather than their own intimate relationships.

- The systematic review on education policy on intimate partner violence among young people in the UK conducted by Sheng, (2020) mentioned the Zero Tolerance Respect Pilot project (Reid Howie Associates Ltd, 2001) that promoted respectful and health relationships among young people in educational settings. Anecdotal views of the interventions from the students were positive, helping them understand about gender stereotypes and healthier relationships.

- There appears to be a gap in services and interventions in the UK for adolescents experiencing abuse in their relationship.

3.5 Child criminal exploitation (CCE)

Definition: CCE occurs when an individual or group exploits an imbalance of power to manipulate a child into any criminal activity, in exchange for something the victim needs or wants, for the financial or other advantage of the perpetrator or facilitator, Exploitation can occur even if the activity appears consensual (National Guidance on Child Protection in Scotland, 2023).

Evidence reviewed suggests that:

- No specific interventions for peer-on-peer CCE were identified.

- Frameworks from organisations such as the Children and Young People's Centre for Justice, and Action for Children (ADD references) highlights the need to treat children who perpetrate harm as rights-holders and victims first despite their involvement in offending.

Cross-cutting frameworks

This review included consideration of two broader frameworks that do not focus on a single type of harm but hold particular relevance for responding to peer-on-peer abuse: youth justice and contextual safeguarding. These provide principles and strategies that can inform practice.

Contextual safeguarding

Definition: Contextual safeguarding addresses harm that young people experience outside the home, including peer-on-peer abuse, by focusing on environmental and social contexts where harm occurs (Firmin and Lloyd, 2023).

Evidence reviewed suggests that:

- This approach can support practitioners to make places safer instead of making individual safety plans (Lloyd et al, 2023)

- Key strategies include:

  - *Peer mapping:* understanding a young person's peer relationships considering risk and protective factors (Firmin, 2019)

  - *Hotspot mapping:* understanding places where young people spend time and may encounter harm (Lloyd *et al*, 2023).

  - *Direct engagement with young people:* collaboratively identifying the types and prevalence of harm (Lloyd *et al*, 2023)

  - *Multi-agency partnerships:* reviewing current responses and developing action plans (Firmin, 2018)

  - *Relationship-based practice:* Embedding care, trust, respect and non-judgement in practitioner relationships with young people to promote feelings of relational safety among young people.

- Limitations in available evidence are that these are drawn from case studies and practice guidance rather than formal evaluations of effectiveness.

Youth justice

Definition: Youth justice responses in Scotland are framed within a welfare-oriented system guided by the principle of 'needs, not deeds'. This approach seeks to avoid unnecessary criminalisation of children and young people and to prioritise the child's best interests (Armstrong, 2022; Dyer, 2019).

Evidence reviewed suggests that:

- While youth justice literature rarely explicitly refers to peer-on-peer abuse, its strategies can be applied to these situations.

- Key features include a whole-systems approach, early intervention, prevention, and a holistic assessment using the Getting it Right for Every Child (GIRFEC) framework that emphasises well-being instead of risks (Armstrong, 2022; Dyer, 2019).

- Examples of strategies in Scotland include:

  - *Restorative practice*: Facilitates conflict resolution and communication between young people, supported by teachers, parents and community members (Hobson et al, 2022; Vaswani & Brown, 2022)

  - *Early and effective intervention (EEI)*: Multi-agency decision-making process to address low-level offended and prevent future offending whilst focusing on well-being (Gillon, 2021)

  - *Intervention planning approach: Works collaboratively with children in conflict with the law using a strengths-based model (Dyer, 2019)*

- Limitations in available evidence are that these are mostly descriptive and based on practitioner feedback with no formal evaluation of effectiveness or impact.

Synthesis

Current evidence, while limited, indicates that:

- Youth justice and contextual safeguarding frameworks offer approaches that can inform peer-on-peer abuse responses.

- Interventions are often designed around specific types of harm but share common principles such as empathy-building, collaboration between multi-agency professionals, and trauma-informed care.

- Some studies note overlapping patterns of harm and dynamics. For instance, young people who engage in harmful sexual behaviours might also engage in other forms of violence and those who engage in in-person bullying and physical abuse may also cause harm in online spaces (Murphy, 2021; Ibrahim, 2021).

- Several studies recommend broader harm reduction and prevention approaches that address a range of behaviours (Lloyd, Walker and Firmin, 2020; Simpson and Vaswani, 2020; Murphy, 2021).

- There are significant gaps in responses tailored to peer-on-peer abuse in these contexts such as designing specific interventions for peer-on-peer abuse instead of being subsumed under broader categories of harm, despite recognising that harm occurs between young people.

- While there is limited evidence available on 'what works' for some forms of harm like child criminal exploitation and adolescent domestic abuse, practitioners may draw on good practices from interventions for bullying and harmful sexual behaviours, which have stronger evidence bases.

4. Principles for practice

Studies examined in this review suggest that effective responses to peer-on-peer abuse often share common principles. These include being evidence-based, holistic, multi-modal, strengths-based, supportive, proportionate, resilience-focused, goal-oriented, trauma-informed, child-centred, and adopting a multi-agency approach (Hackett et al., 2016; Lewis, 2018; Murphy, 2021). These principles also underpin the ethos of Bairns' Hoose, aligning with evidence on available responses to different contexts of peer-on-peer abuse.

4.1 Strengths-based

This principle broadly entails recognising young people's strengths, resilience, available resources and wider positive factors rather than solely focusing on their problems or deficits and seeing them as a risk (Anderson and Parkinson, 2018; Hall, 2020; Murphy, 2021).

Examples include:

- When working with young people who display HSB, practitioners emphasised seeing and responding to the whole person, with their autonomy, needs, and life experiences while still challenging their past harmful behaviour. Awareness of these aspects can inform support work in understanding the root of the harmful behaviour and addressing future risks (Hall, 2020)

- The intervention planning approach in youth justice uses solution-focused and collaborative approaches in working with the young person to move toward their imagined future and their goals rather solely focused on moving away from harmful behaviour (Murphy, 2021)

4.2 Child-centred

This principle recognises young people's agency, voice, and autonomy in shaping interventions and in being involved in the decision-making process (Firmin, Warrington & Pearce, 2016).

Examples include:

- A school-based anti-bullying programme promoted student agency by enabling young people's choice and control in shaping the programme design and activities (Boulton & Macaulay, 2023)

- A collaborative anti-bullying model in schools ensured responses were led by the young person who was harmed such as through identifying how they want to manage the situation, supporting the emotional safety and respect for their preferences (Hart and O'Reilly, 2022)

4.3 Trauma-informed

This principle involves recognising that young people who cause harm may have also experienced harm. Their needs, potentially arising from experiences of abuse, should be addressed separately from their harmful behaviour (Anderson and Parkinson, 2018; Dyer, 2019). Effective responses consider the intersecting vulnerabilities and needs of all young people involved, avoiding binary labels such as victim or perpetrator (Simpson and Vaswani, 2015; Firmin,

2016). Applying a trauma-informed approach aligns with a rights-based response that recognises how all young people involved are rights-holders such that their rights to participation, protection, and development must be upheld.

Practical strategies include therapeutic services such as cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT). However, for some young people who display HSB, traditional CBT may be challenging because the impact of trauma may make it difficult to talk about and manage their thoughts and impulses related to their behaviour (Allardyce and Yates, 2018).

Examples include:

- Research with practitioners suggests that supporting young people who display harmful sexual behaviours involves working with them in understanding the potential causes of their behaviour, disrupting shame they might feel and conveying understanding and non-judgement (Lewis, 2018).

- Evidence from a trauma-informed approach on therapeutic support sessions with young people who experienced bullying highlights the significance of establishing safety and helping young people process the trauma using cognitive behavioural therapy and person-centred strategies (Noret et al., 2025).

- When addressing HSB, some schools took steps to ensure that their safeguarding interventions targeted both those who caused and experienced harm, recognising they often had intersecting vulnerabilities (Lloyd, 2019).

- In a practice briefing for police on CSE, it was suggested that the police must make a social care referral first instead of just focusing on the offending behaviour to identify potential safeguarding issues that may be driving the young person's behaviour (Firmin, 2016).

4.4 Well-being focused

Research suggests that interventions may address well-being needs alongside supporting the young person in dealing with their harmful behaviours.

Examples include:

- In working with adolescents with intellectual disabilities who display HSB, Keep Safe focused on enhancing young people's well-being, exploring how they could support young people to meet their needs in a 'prosocial' way (Malovic, Rossiter & Murphy, 2018).

- A Scottish community-based programme with young people involved in HSB adapted the Good Lives model implemented in England that focuses on young people's self-regulation coping strategies and social skills. Professionals remarked that they appreciated the shift to a more positive and person-centred approach instead of the dominant risk management approach of working with young people (Simpson and Vaswani, 2015).

- The 'improvement approach' of working with young people involved in youth justice suggested strategies aligning with the Getting it Right for Every Child well-being outcomes. For instance, 'safe' means supporting restorative approaches, 'active' involves building young people's strengths and interests while 'included' entails embedding young people's knowledge and experience into the planning (Dyer, 2019).

4.5 Collaborative and multi-agency approach

Evidence shows that this principle in practice promotes collaboration across multi-disciplinary services, aligning with the Bairns' Hoose model. It connects with the ecological approach which recognises that responding to harm may involve intervention at multiple 'levels': individual, family, community. A whole systems approach involves close collaborations across disciplines such as education, mental health, community, youth work, social work and police. These partnerships share information and coordinate support (Lloyd, 2019; Ibrahim, 2021; Hobson *et al.*, 2022).

Examples include:

- A multi-agency consultation model, called the HSB Forum addresses HSB by supporting practitioners through skill building and tools in identification, assessment, and intervention. This approach enhanced their confidence in working with young people by providing support and knowledge from diverse perspectives (Ibrahim, 2021).

- Research shows how addressing bullying in schools requires proactive collaboration between schools and mental health services, such that when bullying is disclosed by a young person, the intervention should involve them, school staff and child and adolescent mental health service practitioners (CAMHS). Dialogue between different professionals enables the sharing of information and targeted support since young people may not disclose mental health needs to school staff (Hart and O'Reilly, 2022).

- In addressing youth violence and restorative practices, research has shown the significance of an integrated and collaborative approach between different groups such as students, schools, community members and police. These often have a positive effect on reducing incidents of violence and addressing mental health issues and well-being (Hobson *et al.*, 2022).

5. Practice considerations when responding to peer-on-peer abuse

This review indicates that responding to peer-on-peer abuse may involve areas of consensus and tensions that practitioners must consider when designing and implementing effective responses to peer-on-peer abuse.

5.1 Areas of consensus

Enhancing the capacity of practitioners

There appear to be two broad areas where messaging from the review indicates a strong degree of consensus. These are focused on approaches to enhance practitioner capacity and relational work with young people.

Effective responses can:

- Improve multi-agency coordination and shared understanding of thresholds for assessment and referrals (King-Hill, 2021; Ibrahim, 2021)

- Help practitioners understand young people's range of needs and a continuum of behaviour, from inappropriate to abusive, and respond proportionally (Allardyce and Yates, 2018)

- Support practitioners to address victimisation of those who harm, including making social care referrals when needed and not just focusing on addressing offending behaviour (Firmin, 2016; Anderson & Parkinson, 2018; Lloyd, 2019)

- Reduce isolation and professional anxiety through collaborative forums and tools supporting consistent, facilitating interdisciplinary assessment and planning (King-Hill, 2021)

Enhancing collaborative relational practice with young people

Effective responses can:

- Strengthen engagement by involving young people in decision-making (Owens *et al.*, 2020)

- Promote wellbeing outcomes based on the views of children and young people, parents and practitioners (Simpson and Vaswani, 2015; Dyer, 2019)

- Safeguarding all young people, recognising the need to protect victims and of those instigating harm (Firmin, 2016; Anderson and Parkinson, 2018; Lloyd, 2019)

- Support young people in understanding their behaviour, process trauma, and develop emotional regulation skills (Allardyce and Yates, 2018)

- Promote choice, collaboration, trust, and safety in relationships with practitioners (Firmin, 2018; Murphy, 2021)

- Prevent escalation by addressing inappropriate behaviours early and prioritising holistic and proportionate interventions (Scottish Government, 2020; Gillon, 2021)

5.2 Tensions in practice

Three areas were identified where particular challenges or tensions were noted. These were: restorative practice, practitioner confidence and capacity and system level challenges.

Restorative practice

Evidence indicates that:

- Restorative approaches can empower young people involved to find meaningful resolutions to harm, promote accountability and help victims feel a sense of justice (Vaswani and Brown, 2022). However, challenges associated with these approaches are also identified.

- Challenges include reluctance of young people who were harmed to participate and concerns about offender-focused practices (Armstrong, 2022).

- Appropriateness of its application for sexual violence and HSB remains debated, reflecting broader concerns when applying restorative practice in these contexts (Anderson & Parkinson, 2018)

Capacity and confidence

Evidence indicates that:

- Practitioners often were required to balance welfare and punitive approaches. However, some school policies may focus on addressing behaviour management through punitive approaches like zero-tolerance policies. Research shows how zero-tolerance policies have little impact on school safety and may cause more harm to young people such as hindering disclosure and reporting (Lloyd and Bradbury, 2023). This indicates unintended consequences of policies that put more emphasis on punitive rather than welfare-oriented interventions.

- Professionals report professional anxiety and capacity associated with the emotional work entailed in dealing with HSB which may constrain practice (Lloyd, 2025).

- There is some evidence that professionals may respond differently depending on the form of harm with clearer responses to racist incidents but overlook gendered dynamics that underpin sexual violence, contributing to the normalisation of abuse (Lloyd, 2020; Lloyd, Walker and Firmin, 2020)

- Limited confidence, and training on addressing different forms of peer-on-peer abuse can lead to professional anxiety and inconsistent responses. For example, teachers in Scotland report inadequate training to respond effectively to racist bullying (Hay, Davies and Sapouna, 2024).

- Developing relationships of trust with young people takes time which may conflict with other professional demands (Hall, 2020; Owens *et al.*, 2020)

System-level challenges

Evidence indicates that:

- Principles such as well-being focused and strengths-based approaches may be difficult to apply in systems that prioritise risk reduction and behaviour management (Allardyce and Yates, 2018; Firmin, 2018; Owens and Lloyd, 2023).

- Institutional policies and management decisions influence practice. For example, on HSB, managers may ask practitioners to close cases early (Ibrahim, 2021) or focus on referrals from schools to social care instead of addressing contextual factors within school spaces that enable harm to occur (Lloyd, 2019).

- Responses can be fragmented with challenges in communicating and sharing information across agencies. In some areas, social care and policing organisations felt challenged in requesting data from other services (Firmin and Hancock, 2017).

- Relatedly, the lack of statutory duty in Scotland to record racist incidents limits consistent responses to racism when it occurs (Hay, Davies and Sapouna, 2024).

6. Moving forward within the Bairns' Hoose approach

Findings from the reviewed studies suggest a number of potential recommendations for enhancing policy, practice, and research to address peer-on-peer harm and abuse. These may help to inform Bairns' Hoose practice in Aberdeen and Aberdeenshire and other developing Bairns' Hoose when responding to peer-on-peer abuse.

Policy

- Review institutional policies to address tension between victim-focused and criminal justice-oriented approaches.

- Promote frameworks based on Scottish child protection principles.

- Provide specialised multi-disciplinary training for professionals on peer-on-peer abuse including applying trauma-informed, rights-based and ecological principles in practice.

- Support whole-system reform that facilitates integrated responses across education, community, and justice systems, improving coordination.

Practice

- Develop interventions and responses to peer-initiated harm in lesser-addressed areas such as adolescent domestic abuse, child sexual exploitation, and child criminal exploitation.

- Promote integrated responses to overlapping forms of peer-on-peer abuse.

- Apply ecological approaches like Contextual Safeguarding to address the environments that facilitate harm instead of focusing solely on individual behaviours.

- Adapt programme development and implementation to meet the distinct needs of young people with minoritised identities including those related to ethnicity, sexuality, neurodivergence, and disability.

- Work closely with children and young people to understand their experiences of harm and co-develop interventions, ensuring responses are sensitive and child-centred.

- Promote multi-agency coordination to improve shared language, understanding of peer abuse, and responses to complex cases.

- Avoid stigmatising labels like perpetrator and offender when referring to young people who cause harm.

- Recognise and address rights and needs of all young people involved, including those who have caused harm and those who have experienced it.

- Support practitioners' reflective practice to manage professional anxiety and the emotional impact of cases involving peer-on-peer abuse.

Research

- Document good practices and feedback on Scottish programmes and interventions to build a stronger evidence base.

- Evaluate interventions in Scottish settings, including their impact on children's safety and well-being.

- Involve children and young people in evaluating interventions, ensuring their views shape practice.

- Explore Scottish practitioners' views on barriers and opportunities in current practice in addressing peer-on-peer abuse.

7. Conclusion

This review highlights that peer-on-peer abuse is a complex child protection issue that requires shifts in practice. Moving from individual-based and behaviour management approaches to ecological, multi-agency responses is essential. Evidence suggests that these responses should be child-centred, strengths-based, rights-based, and trauma-informed. The findings from this review aim to support practitioners in enhancing understanding of peer-on-peer abuse, adapting interventions, and working collaboratively across agencies.

The reviewed evidence suggests potential outcomes and benefits of implementing a number of different strategies and frameworks. However, practitioners may encounter systemic and practical challenges including limited training and knowledge, fragmented responses with limited support from partner agencies, and policy tensions between welfare and criminal justice models. These challenges echo the findings of a survey with Bairns' Hoose professionals in Aberdeen and Aberdeenshire revealing barriers to responding effectively to reports or disclosures of peer-on-peer abuse (Duncan *et al.*, 2025). Addressing these challenges entails reflective practice and collaborative working with young people. Child protection, justice, and recovery systems should consider the rights and needs of all young people involved in peer-on-peer abuse, while ensuring that they are listened to and kept informed throughout the process.

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Annex

Intervention name	Author	Description	Type of harm	Location	Setting	Audience	Reported outcomes/ Anecdotal feedback
Intervention name	Author	Description	Type of harm	Location	Setting	Audience	Reported outcomes/ Anecdotal feedback
Brooks' Traffic Light Tool	King Hill (2021)	Training on a traffic light system that enables professionals to assess and categorise sexual behaviour that presents in CYP	HSB	England	Community	Practitioners	Feedback: Learning and behaviour change in practice Impact on identification and response to HSB, confidence levels Increased confidence in multi-agency discussions
HSB Forum	Ibrahim (2021)	A model that offers supervision and a reflective space around safety planning, assessment, formulation, intervention and victim support	HSB	England	Community	Practitioners	Feedback: Improved confidence to work with young people who display HSB and provided practitioners with multi-agency perspectives
Keep Safe	Maovic, Rossiter & Murphy (2018)	A manualised group intervention for young people (12 years and older) with ID who display HSB	HSB	England	Community	Young people (who caused harm)	Feedback: Practitioners noticed positive changes in young people's ability to identify emotions and their emotional regulation

Intervention name	Author	Description	Type of harm	Location	Setting	Audience	Reported outcomes/ Anecdotal feedback
Safer Lives	Simpson and Vaswani (2016)	Training course for professionals involving a research-based intervention framework and tools for working with young people on risk reduction and safety planning	HSB	Scotland	Community	Practitioners	Feedback: Positive anecdotal feedback but no opinion on the effectiveness; positive outcomes in often small caseloads
Intervention for Vulnerable Youth (IVY) Project	Scottish Government (2020)	Multi-disciplinary, tiered approach to provide risk assessment, formulation and management for high-risk young people aged 12 to 18 years who present with complex needs and high risk, violent behaviour.	HSB	Scotland	Community	Young people (who caused harm)	Informal and formal evaluation results4: Reduction of the violent tendencies of these young people Made decision-makers' assessments more informed Promoted capacity building and knowledge sharing among different professionals

4. https://justiceinnovation.org/project/intervention-vulnerable-youth-ivy-project

Intervention name	Author	Description	Type of harm	Location	Setting	Audience	Reported outcomes/ Anecdotal feedback
Learning Together	Warren et al (2019)	Whole-school intervention comprising AGs as well as restorative practice and a student social and emotional competencies curriculum	Bullying	England	Education	Young people (general population)	Process evaluation: intervention impact on improving relationships, student voice, and using restorative practice with institutional support
Mentors in Violence Prevention	Mentioned in White (2019)	Peer mentoring leadership programme using a bystander approach on building healthy, respectful relationships	Bullying	Scotland	Education	Young people (general population)	Evaluated within 3 secondary schools in Scotland Reported outcomes: Staff reporting strong improvements in recognition of healthy and unhealthy relationships as well as likelihood to take bystander action
Roots of Empathy	Mentioned in White (2019)	Classroom delivered, social and emotional programme for children aged 5 to 13 years old	Bullying	Scotland	Education	Young people (general population)	Reported outcomes5 Increased prosocial behaviour and decreased aggression, which was led by an increase in empathy

5.   https://www.rootsofempathy.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/02/Scotland-Annual-Programme-Evaluation-Report-2022-Roots-of-Empathy.pdf