



# PEER ABUSE

## Guidance for the Education Sector

Peer abuse occurs between students of a similar age or stage of development. The abuse can occur in person or through digital media and includes sexual assault, physical or emotional abuse, bullying, and sextortion. When incidents occur outside of school, they sometimes negatively impact the school setting and also require a school response.

**When there is a disclosure of peer abuse, the school has a responsibility to address the concern and to ensure the safety of all students, which should start with assessing the situation to identify any safety concerns. These are guidelines the school can follow when addressing a concern about peer abuse.**

### Talking to students about peer abuse :

- Explain your role to the youth involved and the steps you plan to take
- Protect confidentiality, only involve people on a need-to-know basis
- Listen carefully and let students talk without interruption
- Ask open-ended questions if you need more information but do not investigate
- Once you are reasonably confident that peer abuse has occurred, report it to police
- Reassure students that they have done the right thing by telling school staff, that you are there to help
- Document what students say verbatim
- Consider Duty to Report obligations and report accordingly
- Communicate calmly, at the student's level of understanding, and repeat so that information is retained
- Address the behaviour of the person who acted inappropriately by clearly explaining why the behaviour is not acceptable
- Use your school code of conduct and follow your district's progressive discipline policy
- Implement a safety plan that involves all stakeholders, students, caregivers, and staff

### Call the police immediately when:

- The situation involves an adult, content that depicts a crime, or behaviour that is malicious
- There is an age difference beyond the laws of consent
- A sexual or physical assault has occurred
- There is a possible relationship of trust, authority, or dependency
- Factors make the relationship potentially exploitative
- There is a risk of coercion or violence



### When responding to peer abuse:

- Use the terms student or youth rather than 'victim' and/or 'perpetrator' to describe those involved
- Avoid viewing any image(s)/video(s) as a description of the content is sufficient for reporting
- Apply a school consequence that aligns with your progressive discipline policy

**Don't assume that once the police are involved the school should not respond. If the police decide not to intervene, this does not mean nothing wrong has occurred.**

### Non-verbal indicators of Peer abuse

- Changes in a student's baseline presentation or attendance patterns
- Students might express discomfort with how another person acts toward them
- A classmate or staff member's observation of behaviour between peers

Appropriate response demonstrates that peer abuse will not be tolerated and ensures the safety and well-being of students.

Support the student and family by checking in throughout the process and ensuring that they have access to emotional support.

### After a report is made:

Thank you for playing an important role in keeping children and youth safe by reporting suspected abuse; rest assured that you did the right thing. If you have any questions or concerns regarding the report, please speak to your school supervisor or School Resource Officer, where one is available.



# DOCUMENTING

Disclosures and incidents should be carefully documented as soon as possible. Be clear and explicit.

## Include:

- Student demographics, learning, and/or behavioural profile
- Date, time, and location of the occurrence
- A factual description of the event(s) in the student's words
- Did this behaviour occur spontaneously or was it planned?
- Initial response by school personnel
- Who is involved with this student? Note the school, district, and all relevant agencies
- How and when others were contacted, school leadership, law enforcement, caregivers, and or child protection?

## Safety Planning:

### Implement Safety plans for students who:

- Have behaved in a way that is abusive or violent
- Have been abused or impacted by the abusive or violent behaviour of another student
- May be at risk due to the behaviour of another student

## Consider

- Relevant information from agencies, Police, Children and Family Services, Alberta Health Services, and school district leadership
- How to separate the students involved
- If the student who experienced abuse is at risk of bullying by others
- If there is a risk of retaliation against the student who carried out the abuse

## Communicating with Caregivers

- Consider the caregivers' cultural or religious perspectives
- Be specific and clear about what happened and the impact
- Offer contact information for community resources and support
- Respect confidentiality, ask that details not be shared on social media
- Record the caregiver's responses
- If you have concerns with the parent's response/reaction, alert Children and Family Services

A consistent response to peer abuse demonstrates the seriousness of this behaviour. Failure to acknowledge and respond may lead to an unsafe school environment that normalizes sexual abuse.

**Support the student and family by checking in throughout the process to ensure they have access to emotional support.**

Students depend on staff for their safety and well-being. If you suspect abuse, make the call. It's your legal duty.

Ask the student how they would like their parents to be told.

### You may suggest:

1. Talking to caregivers first without the student there, then summarizing with the child present
2. Helping the student tell their parents in their own words, with you present for support.

### Informing Caregivers:

A student's caregivers should be informed if doing so does not increase risk to the student.

### Resources and References:

- [Managing Allegations Of Abuse NSPCC Learning](#)
- [Canadian Centre for Child Protection](#)
- [Luna Child & Youth Advocacy Centre](#)

