WALTHAMSTOW MONTESSORI SCHOOL

Child on Child Abuse Policy

The School's Responsibilities

Introduction

The school's advisory board, senior leadership team, and all staff (which term shall apply to all volunteer staff members) at WMS are committed to the prevention, early identification, and appropriate management of child-on-child abuse (as defined below) both within and beyond the School.

In particular, we:

- believe that in order to protect children, all schools should (a) be aware of the nature and level of risk to which their pupils are or may be exposed, and put in place a clear and comprehensive strategy which is tailored to their specific safeguarding context; and (b) take a whole-school community contextual safeguarding approach to preventing and responding to child-on-child abuse,
- regard the introduction of this policy as a preventative measure. We (a) do not feel it is acceptable merely to take a reactive approach to child-on-child abuse in response to alleged incidents of it; and (b) believe that in order to tackle peer on peer abuse proactively, it is necessary to focus on all four of the following areas:
    - systems and structures;
    - prevention;
    - identification
    - response/intervention,
- recognise national and increasing concern about this issue, and wish to implement this policy in order to mitigate harmful attitudes and child-on-child abuse in the school setting,
- encourage parents/carers to hold us to account on this issue, so that if their child is feeling unsafe as a result of the behaviour of any of their peers, they should inform the School so that it can ensure that appropriate and prompt action is taken in response.

This Policy

- is the School's overarching policy for any issue that could constitute child-on-child abuse. It relates to, and should be read alongside, the School's child

protection policy and any other relevant policies including, but not limited to, Anti-bullying (including cyber-bullying), Behaviour, Lost Child, Intimacy, GDPR, E-Safety, Health and Safety, Safeguarding, PSHE, SMSC, Medication, First Aid and Whistleblowing,

- sets out our strategy for improving prevention and identifying and appropriately managing child-on-child abuse,
- applies to all governors, the senior leadership team and staff
- is reviewed annually, and updated in the interim, as may be required, to ensure that it continually addresses the risks to which pupils are or may be exposed. Members of staff and pupils are involved in each annual review which involves, and is informed by, an assessment of the impact and effectiveness of this policy over the previous year,
- recognises that abuse is abuse, and should never be passed off as 'banter', 'just having a laugh', or 'part of growing up',
- is compliant with the statutory guidance on child on child abuse as set out in Keeping Children Safe in Education (September 2026),
- does not use the term 'victim' and/or 'perpetrator'. This is because our School takes a safeguarding approach to all individuals involved in concerns or allegations about child-on-child abuse, including those who are alleged to have been abused, and those who are alleged to have abused their peers, in addition to any sanctioning work that may also be required for the latter. Research has shown that many children who present with harmful behaviour towards others, in the context of child-on-child abuse, are themselves vulnerable and may have been victimised by peers, parents/carers or adults in the community prior to their abuse of peers,
- uses the terms 'child' and 'children', which is defined for the purposes of this policy as a person aged under 18,
- should, if relevant, according to the concern(s) or allegation(s) raised, be read in conjunction with the DfE's advice on Sexual Violence and Sexual Harassment Between Children in Schools and Colleges (DfE's Advice) (September 2022) and any other advice and guidance referred to within it, as appropriate
- should be read in conjunction with the Local Safeguarding Partnership's Safeguarding Policy and Procedures, and any relevant Practice Guidance issued by it.

Understanding Child on Child Abuse

What is child-on-child abuse?

For these purposes, child-on-child abuse is any form of physical, sexual, emotional and financial abuse, and coercive control, exercised between children, and within children's relationships (both intimate and non-intimate), friendships and wider peer associations.

Child-on-child abuse can take various forms, including (but not limited to): serious bullying (including cyberbullying), relationship abuse, domestic violence and abuse, child sexual exploitation, youth and serious youth violence, harmful sexual behaviour and/or prejudice-based violence including, but not limited to, gender-based violence and religion-based violence.
Examples of online child-on-child abuse would include sexting, online abuse, child-on-child grooming, the distribution of youth involved sexualised content, and harassment.

What is Contextual Safeguarding?

This policy:
(a) encapsulates a Contextual Safeguarding approach, which is about changing the way that professionals approach child protection when risks occur outside of the family, thereby requiring all those within a Local Safeguarding Partnership to consider how they work alongside, rather than just refer into, children's social care, to create safe spaces in which children may have encountered child-on-child abuse,

(b) adopts a whole-school community Contextual Safeguarding approach, which means:

- being aware of and seeking to understand the impact that these wider social contexts may be having on the School's pupils,
- creating a safe culture in the School by, for example, implementing policies and procedures that address child-on-child abuse and harmful attitudes; promoting healthy relationships and attitudes to gender/sexuality; hotspot mapping to identify risky areas in the School; training on potential bias and stereotyped assumptions,
- being alert to and monitoring changes in pupils' behaviour and/or attendance, and
- contributing to local child protection agendas by, for example, challenging poor threshold decisions and referring concerns about contexts to relevant local agencies (see section entitled 'multi-agency working')

Research suggests that:

- child-on-child abuse may affect boys differently from girls, and that this difference may result from societal norms (particularly around power, control and the way in which femininity and masculinity are constructed) rather than biological make-up.
- children with Special Educational Needs and/or Disabilities (SEND) are three times more likely to be abused than their peers without SEND and additional barriers can sometimes exist when recognising abuse in children with SEND.
- These can include:
    - assumptions that indicators of possible abuse such as behaviour, mood and injury relate to a child's disability without further exploration
    - the potential for children with SEND to be disproportionately impacted by behaviours such as bullying and harassment, without outwardly showing any signs,

    - communication barriers and difficulties, and
    - overcoming these barriers.
- some children may be more likely to experience child-on-child abuse than others as a result of certain characteristics such as sexual orientation, ethnicity, race or religious beliefs

Child on child - *A* whole school approach

School environment
The School actively seeks to raise awareness of and prevent all forms of child-on-child abuse by:

- educating its senior leadership team, staff, students, and parents/carers about this issue. This includes: training the senior leadership team and staff on the nature, prevalence and effect of child-on-child abuse, and how to prevent, identify, and respond to it. Including; Contextual Safeguarding, the identification and classification of specific behaviours, including digital behaviours, the importance of taking seriously all forms of child-on-child abuse (no matter how 'low level' they may appear) and ensuring that no form of child-on-child abuse is ever dismissed as horseplay or teasing, and social media and online safety, including how to encourage children to use social media in a positive, responsible and safe way, and how to enable them to identify and manage abusive behavior online.
- educating children about the nature and prevalence of child-on-child abuse, positive, responsible and safe use of social media, and the unequivocal facts about consent, via PSHE and the wider curriculum in an age appropriate way. Pupils are frequently told what to do if they witness or experience such abuse, the effect that it can have on those who experience it and the possible reasons for it, including vulnerability of those who inflict such abuse. They are regularly informed about the School's approach to such issues, including its zero-tolerance policy towards all forms of child-on-child abuse.
- engaging parents on these issues by:
    - talking about them with parents/carers, both in groups and one to one,
    - asking parents/carers what they perceive to be the risks facing their child and how they would like to see the School address those risks,
    - involving parents/carers in the review of School policies and lesson plans, and
    - encouraging parents/carers to hold the School to account on this issue, in part as a result of visibility of this policy.
- working with governors, senior leadership team, and all staff, pupils and parents/carers to address equality issues, to promote positive values, and to encourage a culture of tolerance and respect amongst all members of the School community,
- creating conditions in which our students can aspire to, and realise, safe and healthy relationships fostering a whole-school culture:

    - which is founded on the idea that every member of our School community is responsible for building and maintaining safe and positive relationships, and helping to create a safe School environment in which violence and abuse are never acceptable,
    - in which pupils are able to develop trusting relationships with staff, and in which staff understand, through regular discussion and training, the importance of these relationships in providing pupils with a sense of belonging, which could otherwise be sought in problematic contexts,
    - in which pupils feel able to share their concerns openly, in a non-judgmental environment, and have them listened to,
    - which proactively identifies positive qualities in pupils; nurtures these qualities; teaches and encourages pupils to think about positive hopes for the future; and supports pupils in developing small-scale goals that enable realistic ambitions, and
    - which provides supervised activities to pupils that give them the experience of having their needs met that might otherwise apparently be met in abusive circumstances. These can include experiencing status; excitement and a degree of risk,
- responding to cases of child-on-child abuse promptly and appropriately, and
- ensuring that all child-on-child abuse issues are fed back to the School's safeguarding Lead so that they can spot and address any concerning trends and identify pupils who may be in need of additional support.

Multi-agency working

The School actively engages with its Local Safeguarding Partnership in relation to child-on-child abuse, and works closely with, for example, children's social care, the police, MASH and local authority safeguarding team and other schools.

The relationships the School has built with these partners are essential to ensuring that the School is able to prevent, identify early, and appropriately handle cases of child-on-child abuse.
They help the School to:

- develop a good awareness and understanding of the different referral pathways that operate in its local area, as well as the preventative and support services which exist;
- ensure that its pupils are able to access the range of services and support they need quickly;
- support and help inform the School's local community's response to child-on-child abuse;
- increase the School's awareness and understanding of any concerning trends and emerging risks in its local area to enable it to take preventative action to minimize the risk of these being experienced by its pupils.

The School actively refers concerns and allegations of child-on-child abuse where necessary to children's social care and the police. This is particularly important because child-on-child abuse can be a complex issue, and even more so where wider safeguarding concerns exist. It is often not appropriate for one single agency (where the alleged incident cannot appropriately be managed internally by the School itself) to try to address the issue alone – it requires effective partnership working.

Responding to concerns or allegations of child-on-child abuse

General principles

It is essential that all concerns and allegations of child-on-child abuse are handled sensitively, appropriately and promptly. The way in which they are responded to can have a significant impact on our School environment.

Any response should:

- include a thorough investigation of the concern(s) or allegation(s), and the wider context in which it/they may have occurred (as appropriate) – depending on the nature and seriousness of the alleged incident(s), it may be appropriate for the police and/or children's social care to carry out this investigation,
- treat all children involved as being at potential risk– while the child allegedly responsible for the abuse may pose a significant risk of harm to other children/he may also have considerable unmet needs and be at risk of harm themselves. The School should ensure that a safeguarding response is in place for both the child who has allegedly experienced the abuse, and the child who has allegedly been responsible for it, and additional sanctioning work may be required for the latter,
- take into account:
    - that the abuse may indicate wider safeguarding concerns for any of the children involved and consider and address the effect of wider sociocultural contexts – such as the child's/children's peer group (both within and outside the School); family; the School environment; their experience(s) of crime and local community; and the child/children's online presence. Consider what changes may need to be made to these contexts to address the child/children's needs and to mitigate risk, and
    - the potential complexity of child-on-child abuse and of children's experiences, and consider the interplay between power, choice and consent. While children may appear to be making choices, if those choices are limited they are not consenting,
    - the views of the child/children affected. Unless it is considered unsafe to do so (for example, where a referral needs to be made immediately), the DSL should discuss the proposed action with the child/children and their parents/carers, and obtain consent to any referral before it is made. The School should manage the child/children's expectations about

information sharing, and keep them and their parents/carers informed of developments, where appropriate and safe to do so. It is particularly important to take into account the wishes of any child who has allegedly been abused, and to give that child as much control as is reasonably possible over decisions regarding how any investigation will be progressed and how they will be supported.

What should you do if you suspect either that a child may be at risk of or experiencing abuse by their peer(s), or that a child may be at risk of abusing or may be abusing their peer(s)?

If a member of staff thinks for whatever reason that a child may be at risk of or experiencing abuse by their peer(s), or that a child may be at risk of abusing or may be abusing their peer(s), they should discuss their concern with the DSL without delay, adhering the school's Safeguarding Policy and Procedures so that a course of action can be agreed.
Where a child is suffering, or is likely to suffer from harm, it is important that a referral to children's social care (and, if appropriate, the police) is made immediately. Anyone can make a referral. Where referrals are not made by the DSL, the DSL should be informed as soon as possible that a referral has been made.

If a child speaks to a member of staff about peer-on peer abuse that they have witnessed or are a part of, the member of staff should listen to the child and use open language that demonstrates understanding rather than judgement. For further details please see the procedures set out in the school's safeguarding policy.

How will the School respond to concerns or allegations of child-on-child abuse?

The DSL will discuss the concern(s) or allegation(s) with the member of staff who has reported it/them and will, where necessary, take any immediate steps to ensure the safety of the child/all children affected. Where any concern(s) or allegation(s) indicate(s) that indecent images of a child or children may have been shared online, the DSL should consider what urgent action can be taken in addition to the actions and referral duties set out in this policy and seek specialist help in preventing the images spreading further and removing the images from the internet. The Internet Watch Foundation (IWF), for example, has a trained team that can evaluate and remove illegal images from the internet when the images are reported to them quickly. They will also share the image with the National Crime Agency's CEOP Command to facilitate an investigation. Any report to IWF will be made in consultation with the police.

DSLs should always use their professional judgement to: (a) assess the nature and seriousness of the alleged behavior, and (b) determine whether it is appropriate for the alleged behaviour to be to be dealt with internally and, if so, whether any external specialist support is required.

In borderline cases the DSL may wish to consult with children's social care and or the Local Authority's MASH team to determine the most appropriate response.
Where the DSL considers or suspects that the alleged behaviour in question might be abusive or violent on a spectrum or where the needs and circumstances of the individual child/children in question might otherwise require it, the DSL should contact children's social care and/or the police immediately and, in any event, within24 hours of the DSL becoming aware of the alleged behaviour. The DSL will discuss the concern(s) or allegation(s) with the agency and agree on a course of action, which may include:

- Manage internally with help from external specialists where appropriate and possible. Where the alleged behaviour between peers is abusive or violent (as opposed to inappropriate or problematic– unless as stated above), scenarios B, listed below should ordinarily apply. However, where support from local agencies is not available, the School may need to handle concerns or allegations internally. In these cases, the School will engage and seek advice from external specialists (either in the private and/or voluntary sector).
- Undertake/contribute to an inter-agency early help assessment, with targeted early help services provided to address the assessed needs of the child/children and their family. These services may, for example, include family and parenting programmes, responses to emerging thematic concerns in extra familial contexts, a specialist harmful sexual behaviour team, CAMHS and/or youth offending services.
- Refer the child/children to children's social care for a section 17/47 statutory assessment. Where a child is suffering, or is likely to suffer from harm, it is important that a referral to children's social care (and, if appropriate, a report to the police) is made immediately. This referral will be made to children's social care in the area where the/each child lives. Depending on the safeguarding procedures issued by the Local Safeguarding Partnership in that area, there will normally be an initial review and assessment of the referral, in accordance with that area's assessment framework. As a matter of best practice, if an incident of child-on-child abuse requires referral to and action by children's social care and a strategy meeting is convened, then the School will hold every professional involved in the case accountable for their safeguarding response, including themselves, to both the/each child who has experienced the abuse, and the/each child who was responsible for it, and the contexts to which the abuse was associated.
- Report alleged criminal behaviour to the police. Alleged criminal behaviour will ordinarily be reported to the police. However, there are some circumstances where it may not be appropriate to report such behaviour to the police. All concerns or allegations will be assessed on a case by case basis, and in light of the wider context.

Safety plans

The School will always carry out a safety plan in respect of:

- any child who is alleged to have behaved in a way that is considered to be abusive or violent,
- any child who has reportedly been abused or affected by the alleged abusive or violent behaviour by another child, or
- any child who may be at risk due to the alleged abusive or violent behaviour by another child as deemed appropriate by the DSL.

Where it is alleged that a child has behaved in a way that is considered to be inappropriate or problematic (as opposed to abusive or violent), the DSL will use their professional judgment – based on the particular concern(s) and/or allegation(s) raised, and the needs
and circumstances of the individual child/children in question – to determine whether (as explained above) it would be appropriate to contact children's social care, and to carry out a safety plan.

Careful judgment and consideration are required as to whether alleged behaviour which might be judged to be inappropriate by an adult might actually be harmful to another child. Consultation is recommended with children's social care if there is any doubt about this.
Careful consideration should also be given to a range of factors (which are outlined in Appendix

Where other children have been identified as witnesses to alleged abuse or violence, consideration should also be given by the DSL to whether there might be any risks to those children, and whether a safety plan would be appropriate in relation to any risks presenting to them.

Information sharing, data protection and record keeping

When responding to concern(s) or allegation(s) of child-on-child abuse, the School will:
- always consider carefully, in consultation with children's social care, the police and other relevant agencies (where they are involved), how to share information about the concern(s) or allegation(s) with the student(s) affected, their parents/carers, staff, and other pupils and individuals,
- record the information that is necessary for the School and other relevant agencies (where they are involved) to respond to the concern(s) or allegation(s) and safeguard everyone involved,
- keep a record of the legal purpose for sharing the information with any third party, including relevant authorities, and ensure that the third party has agreed to handle the information securely and to only use it for the agreed legal purpose, and
- be mindful of and act in accordance with its safeguarding and data protection duties, including those set out in Working Together to Safeguard Children (March 2026) and the HM Government advice on Information Sharing (updated in May 2024).

Disciplinary action

The School may wish to consider whether disciplinary action may be appropriate for any child/children involved. However, if there are police proceedings underway, or there could be, it is critical that the School works in partnership with the police and/or children's social care.
Where a matter is not of interest to the police and/or children's social care, the School may still need to consider what is the most appropriate action to take to ensure positive behaviour management. Disciplinary action may sometimes be appropriate, including to:
(a) ensure that the child/children take(s) responsibility for and realise(s) the seriousness of their behaviour; (b) demonstrate to the child/children and others that child-on-child abuse can never be tolerated; and (c) ensure the safety and wellbeing of other children. However, these considerations must be balanced against any police investigations, the child's/children's own potential unmet needs, and any action or intervention planned regarding safeguarding concerns.
Before deciding on appropriate action the School will always consider its duty to safeguard all children in its care from harm; the underlying reasons for a child's behaviour; any unmet needs, or harm or abuse suffered by the child; the risk that the child may pose to other children; and the severity of the child-on-child abuse and the causes of it.

The School will, where appropriate, consider the potential benefit, as well as challenge, of using managed moves or exclusion as a response, and not as an intervention, recognizing that even if this is ultimately deemed to be necessary, some of the measures referred to in this policy may still be required. For example, action may still need to be taken by the School in relation to other students who have been involved with and/or affected by child-on-child abuse. Exclusion will only be considered as a last resort and only where necessary to ensure the safety and wellbeing of the other children in the School.
Engaging in Fair Access Panel Processes to assist with decision-making associated to managed moves and exclusions can also be beneficial. In the event of any managed move, consideration must be given to sharing information with the receiving school regarding the child-on-child abuse in order to allow best protection of children in the new school. Disciplinary interventions alone are rarely able to solve issues of child-on-child abuse, and the School will always consider the wider actions that may need to be taken, and any lessons that may need to be learnt going forwards, as set out above and below.

On-going proactive work for a whole-school community Contextual Safeguarding approach

The School's response to concerns or allegations of child-on-child abuse should be part of on-going proactive work by the School to embed best practice and in taking a whole-school community Contextual Safeguarding approach (defined above) to such abuse. As such the School's response can become part of its wider prevention work. This response may involve the School working with the local authority to undertake, for example, a Contextual Safeguarding school assessment which would fit into a systems approach to Contextual Safeguarding. The response could also include the School asking itself a series of questions about the context in which an incident of child-on-child abuse occurred in the School, the local community in which the School is based, and the wider physical and online environment – such as:

- What protective factors and influences exist within the School (such as positive peer influences, examples where child-on-child abuse has been challenged, etc.) and how can the School bolster these?
- How (if at all) did the School's physical environment or the students' routes to and from the School contribute to the abuse, and how can the School address this going forwards, for example by improving the School's safety, security and supervision, or by working with local safeguarding partners to mitigate the risks to pupils' safety
  whilst travelling to and from the School?
- How (if at all) did the online environment contribute to the abuse, and how can the School address this going forwards, for example by strengthening the way in which the School encourages positive and safe use of the internet by pupils?
- Did wider gender norms, equality issues, and/or societal attitudes contribute to the abuse?
- What was the relationship between the abuse and the cultural norms between staff and students, and how can these be addressed going forward?
- Does the abuse indicate a need for staff training on, for example, underlying attitudes, a particular issue or the handling of particular types of abuse, or to address any victim-blaming narratives from staff?
- How have similar cases been managed in the past and what effect has this had?
- Does the case or any identified trends highlight areas for development in the way in which the School works with children to raise their awareness of and/or prevent child-on-child abuse, including by way of the School's PSHE curriculum and lessons that address underlying attitudes or behaviour such as gender and equalities work, respect, boundaries, consent, children's rights and critical thinking and/or avoiding victim-blaming narratives?
- Are there any lessons to be learnt about the way in which the School engages with parents/carers to address child-on-child abuse issues?
- Are there underlying issues that affect other schools in the area and is there a need for a multi-agency response?
- Does this case highlight a need to work with certain children to build their confidence, and teach them how to identify and manage abusive behaviour?
- Were there opportunities to intervene earlier or differently and/or to address common themes amongst the behaviour of other children in the School?

Answers to these questions can be developed into an action plan that is reviewed on a regular basis by the School's leadership and the DSL. The School will, where possible and appropriate, work with the local authority and wider partners to deliver on this plan, possibly as part of a wider Contextual Safeguarding school assessment led by or with input from the local authority.

This Policy was adopted on dated: 10 June 2019

Date last reviewed: 11th September 2026

Date to be reviewed: 11th September 2027