



NSPCC

“Is this sexual abuse?”

NSPCC helplines report: peer sexual abuse

EVERY CHILDHOOD IS WORTH FIGHTING FOR

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This report was produced by the NSPCC Knowledge and Information Service.
For more information about this report, please contact us at help@nspcc.org.uk

All names and potentially identifying details in this report have been changed to ensure they are anonymous. Quotes are created from real Childline counselling sessions, message board posts and NSPCC helpline contacts but are not necessarily direct quotes.

Where the data comes from

This report has been written using data gathered from our Childline and helpline services. These services not only provide support to those who contact us, they also help to give us a clear picture of the issues facing children and young people today – such as peer sexual abuse.

NSPCC helpline

Our helpline is a national service where anyone can report or seek advice about their concerns for a child by phone, email, text or online form. It's available 24/7 and is run by child protection professionals, including social workers, teachers and health specialists. In 2016/17, we received over 66,000 contacts from adults concerned about the welfare of a child.

0808 800 5000
help@nspcc.org.uk
nspcc.org.uk/helpline

Childline

Our Childline service provides a safe and confidential space for children and young people to work through a wide range of issues. Our trained volunteer counsellors are available 24/7, and in 2016/17 we delivered over 295,000 counselling sessions. Childline can be contacted online, over the phone, or through our app *For Me*.

0800 1111
childline.org.uk
download our app For Me: childline.org.uk/for-me

Introduction

It's normal for children to demonstrate a range of sexual behaviours as they grow up. But sometimes they may behave in a sexualised way that is inappropriate to their age and stage of development. We call this harmful sexual behaviour, because it's harmful to the children who display it, as well as the people it's directed towards. There are many reasons why children display harmful sexual behaviour, but research shows that exposure to trauma can be a key factor in its development (Hackett, 2016).

Harmful sexual behaviour can be displayed towards peers, younger children, older children or adults. It ranges from behaviour that is socially inappropriate to behaviour that is unexpected or impulsive, and behaviour with an element of victimisation or violence. This may include unwanted or inappropriate touching; forcing or coercing someone else to watch or take part in sexualised activity; and sexual violence. Around a third of child sexual abuse is committed by other children and young people¹ (Hackett, 2014).

We hear from parents and professionals who are concerned about children displaying sexualised behaviour. In 2016/17, there were 663 contacts to our helpline about this. Many of the adults who got in touch weren't confident about deciding whether sexualised behaviour is 'normal' or harmful, and they weren't sure of the best way to respond.

Puberty can be a confusing time and peer relationships naturally change as children grow up. This can mean children also find it difficult to identify which sexual behaviours are appropriate and inappropriate. Those who display harmful sexual behaviour may not recognise that they are doing so. Those who experience harmful sexual behaviour may

realise it makes them feel unhappy or unsafe, but they aren't always clear about how to respond.

In 2016/17, our Childline service delivered 3,004 counselling sessions to children and young people who were concerned about having been sexually abused by their peers. This might be a friend; boyfriend or girlfriend; ex-partner; or another young person who was under the age of 18, and who isn't related to them². Throughout this report we're calling this type of abuse 'peer sexual abuse'. Peer sexual abuse can take place in a range of locations including at school, at home, at social events and online.

According to a BBC Freedom of Information request, the number of police-recorded sexual offences by under-18-year-olds against other under-18-year-olds in England and Wales rose by 71 per cent between 2013/14 (4,603) and 2016/17 (7,866) (BBC, 2017). However, it's likely that peer sexual abuse is under-reported. Research carried out by Radford in 2009 found that 1 in 3 children sexually abused by an adult didn't tell anyone at the time, and this figure is even higher for children who have experienced peer sexual abuse (Radford et al, 2011). Some young people tell our Childline counsellors they don't want to speak out, for reasons like:

- being worried about getting a friend or partner into trouble
- being blackmailed or threatened into keeping things secret
- being afraid of being bullied
- not being sure they will be believed.

¹ Research and crime statistics suggest that anywhere from one fifth to two thirds of sexual abuse is committed by other children and young people. Hackett (2014) gives an overview of some of the key studies. The NSPCC uses the figure of 'around a third' as a mid-way point between the lower end and the higher end of the estimates.

² We're not including abuse by siblings or other family members in this report, because the family relationship is often very different to a peer relationship.

They may not fully understand whether they gave consent for sexual activity to take place, feel guilty or think they are somehow to blame – especially if alcohol was involved, or if they were involved in sexting (sharing explicit texts, images or videos).

We want to help adults support children who are affected by peer sexual abuse more effectively. It's vital that children and young people who have experienced any form of abuse know it wasn't their fault, and are able to get the right help at the right time. So in this report we're sharing what young people have told Childline about their experiences of peer sexual abuse. We've looked at how peer sexual abuse takes place; the impact this has on young people's lives; and the challenges they face accessing support. We're also highlighting what they say helps them get back on track after experiencing peer sexual abuse, what they're telling us about the support they need, and how we can best prevent peer sexual abuse from happening.

A child is anyone under 18, but Childline supports anyone under the age of 19. So throughout this report we'll often refer to 'young people' to include the full age range of those who contact Childline.

When my boyfriend's drunk he grabs me and makes me do sexual things. I tell him that I don't want to but he carries on, I feel really unsafe around him. I'm not sure whether it's sexual assault, and I don't know about consent – he doesn't ask me when he does it so how do I know if I gave consent? (Girl, 17)

When I was younger I was round at a friend's house and he asked me to come and look at his room. I can't really remember what happened after that, I know that he made me pull down my pants and that something happened. I've tried to block the memory, but I struggle sleeping sometimes because I get night terrors. (Girl, 16)

Key messages

- Many adults contacting the NSPCC helpline for advice about children's sexualised behaviour are unclear about which behaviours are part of 'normal' sexual development, and which are harmful and/or abusive.
 - Parents and professionals don't always know the most appropriate way to respond to children who display harmful sexual behaviour and/or who have experienced peer sexual abuse.
 - Young people can be confused about whether or not they have experienced peer sexual abuse. Reasons for this include:
 - they are confused about what constitutes 'normal' sexual activity
 - they don't know whether they gave consent
 - they were drunk when the abuse took place
 - the abuse was carried out by a friend or partner
 - the abuse took place online
 - they blame themselves for what happened.
 - Young people are often reluctant to tell anybody about peer sexual abuse. They may:
 - worry that they won't be taken seriously
 - fear they will be blamed or bullied about what happened
 - be frightened of what the other young person will do to them if they speak out
 - not think that what happened was serious enough to report.
 - Peer sexual abuse can happen in a range of settings, including:
 - at school
 - at home
 - at parties
 - at a friend's house
 - in public spaces
 - online.
 - Experiencing peer sexual abuse can have a long-lasting impact on a young person. In some cases, it can result in symptoms associated with post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD).
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Contacts to the NSPCC helpline about children's sexualised behaviour

In this section, we're looking at contacts to our helpline about children displaying sexualised behaviour. While it's normal for children to display sexualised behaviour as they grow up, behaviour that is developmentally and/or socially inappropriate can be harmful to themselves and others. It's important for any concerns to be reported to the NSPCC helpline or other professionals working with children, so the children involved can get the help they need.

Our helpline is there to help keep children safe. Although most victims of abuse don't go on to display harmful sexual behaviour, we know that exposure to trauma can be a key factor in its development (Hackett, 2016). So for child protection reasons, our practitioners need to make sure all children who are involved in incidents of harmful sexual behaviour are appropriately supported.

In 2016/17, there were 663 contacts to the NSPCC helpline from adults who were concerned about children displaying sexualised behaviour. As with most of the contacts to our helpline, the majority were about children aged 11 and under. The most common behaviours reported to the helpline were:

- children using developmentally inappropriate sexually explicit language
- sexualised role-play/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.



I am really concerned about an eight-year-old boy who is displaying harmful sexual behaviour. Some examples include him pulling out his genitals and simulating sex in front of other children, playing with his genitals in public and trying to touch other children's genitals. He is also very aggressive and violent towards other children. (Anonymous helpline contact)

The sexualised behaviour being reported mainly took place in school, the child's home or a relative/friends' home.

Some parents contacted the helpline after witnessing their own child displaying sexual behaviour or using sexualised language that concerned them. When questioned about it, many children referred to another, often older, child they had spent time with. They either said they were copying the other child's behaviour or that the other child had encouraged them to engage in explicit activities.

Other parents were alerted to incidents of sexualised behaviour through indirect comments made by their child. Many younger children told their parents about experiencing something that they hadn't liked, but they didn't necessarily have a clear understanding of why it was inappropriate. They believed they had participated in a 'game' with another child, and had been told to keep it a secret. This could make them feel confused and anxious about whether it was right to tell their parents. The children referred to "the bum and willy game"; "rude club"; "sexy game"; or playing "mummies/babies and daddies." Parents often only realised the games had a sexual nature when they found out what they were called, and this prompted them to explore the situation further.

In other cases, the parent had witnessed sexualised behaviour between their own child and a friend. This often occurred when children had been playing together in a bedroom or away from view and the parent had appeared unexpectedly. Examples included:

- underwear having been removed
- kissing genitals
- sexual touching
- masturbation
- simulation of sexual acts.

In some cases, parents found one child taking sexually explicit photographs/videos of the other:

My daughter's friend came to play at our house. I went upstairs and walked into the bedroom to see my daughter pulling her knickers down and her friend sat with her mobile phone about to take a photo of her vagina. I asked what they were doing. The friend acted surprised and said "nothing" and my daughter dropped her dress down. I asked to see the friend's phone and there were photographs of my daughter's bare bottom. (Parent)

Opinions about whether a child's behaviour is 'normal' or 'concerning' can vary, and it can be difficult to know how best to respond to behaviour that is unexpected. Some parents who contacted us with concerns about sexualised behaviour taking place between their child and another child had already approached the other child's parents. However, they didn't always feel the other parents' response was appropriate for the type of behaviour being displayed. For example, the other parents may have said that the behaviour was just "normal curiosity" or that they would "have a word" with their child.

Similarly, when parents or teachers raised concerns about harmful sexual behaviour that occurred in school, they didn't always feel that the school were responding appropriately. There was confusion about how the law applies to harmful sexual behaviour, and questions about when it's appropriate to involve the police. Sometimes they felt the school were reluctant to involve outside agencies, such as the police or social services, especially if they felt this would damage their relationship with parents. In some cases, the school hadn't felt it necessary to inform parents that their child had experienced another child's harmful sexual behaviour, but the parents felt they should have been told.

Many teachers who contacted the helpline about sexualised behaviour in school had witnessed sexual activity between children in classrooms, school toilets or changing rooms. They asked for advice on how to deal with the situation, as they weren't sure of the best action to take.

A nine-year-old boy at the school where I work displays very challenging and sexualised language and behaviour. He simulates having sex and grabs children and thrusts at them. His drawings are often of sexual parts and depict violent scenes. I am concerned that the school have not responded appropriately to concerns raised over the past year. (Teacher)

Overall, adults contacting the helpline seem to be uncertain about when sexualised behaviour becomes harmful, and the most appropriate way to respond. Most of the children involved in the incidents being reported to us are aged 11 or under and they are often unaware that they have witnessed inappropriate or even abusive behaviour. Adults are uncertain about whether they should involve other agencies, such as the police; confused about what the law says; and frustrated about a lack of processes to tackle sexualised behaviour and keep children safe, especially at school.



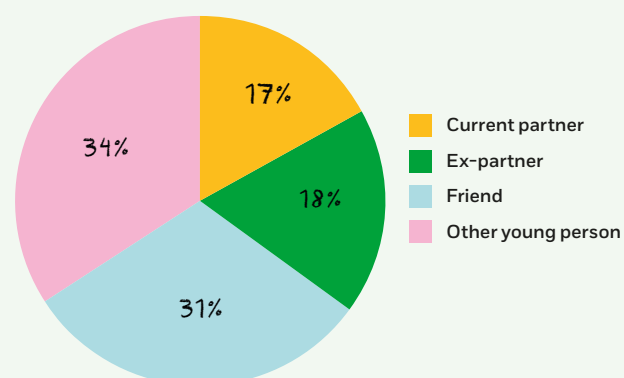


Childline counselling sessions about peer sexual abuse

Children and young people contact Childline after witnessing a range of harmful sexual behaviours and experiencing different types of sexual abuse. Some raise concerns about their own sexualised behaviour, but here we're focussing on what young people tell us about their experiences of being sexually abused by any other young person who is not a family member.

In 2016/17, Childline delivered 3,004 counselling sessions about peer sexual abuse. In 518 of these (17 per cent), young people said they had been abused by a current partner and in 549 sessions (18 per cent) they said they had been abused by an ex-partner. In 936 sessions (31 per cent), they told us about being abused by a friend, and in 1,001 sessions (34 per cent) they raised concerns about abuse by another young person.

Counselling sessions about peer sexual abuse in 2016/17: who carried out the abuse?



Age of young people

Information was available on the age of children in 72 per cent of Childline's counselling sessions in 2016/17. The majority of our counselling sessions are with children aged 12 or over (88 per cent). Of the sessions about peer sexual abuse, most were with children aged 12 or over (96 per cent).

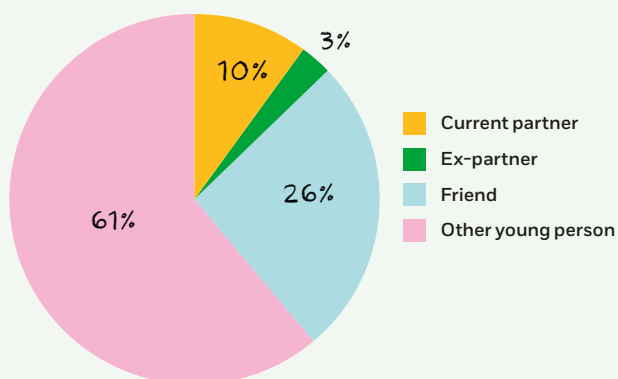
For both age groups, the majority of counselling sessions about peer sexual abuse were about abuse by an 'other young person' (someone who was not a partner, ex partner or friend), but this was most noticeable for younger children. Although in the minority for all ages, the number of counselling sessions about peer sexual abuse by a current or ex-partner made up over a third of the total for older children and young people.

For primary school aged children, peer sexual abuse was more likely to be a one-off incident, for example being touched inappropriately by another child or seeing another child expose themselves. This often happened at school: in the changing rooms or toilets; in the playground; on school buses; and in classrooms.

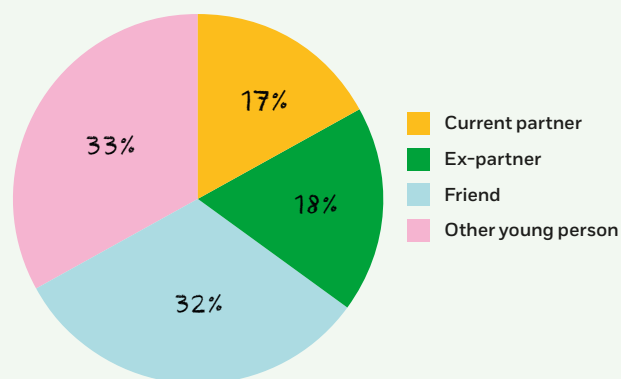
Older children also experienced peer sexual abuse at school, but the abuse took place over a longer period of time. It involved sexual bullying, sexually explicit language and threats of sexual abuse.

It was more common for younger children to talk about peer sexual abuse happening in school than in other settings. Older children also experienced peer sexual abuse in public spaces, such as parks; at other young people's houses; at parties; and online.

Counselling sessions about peer sexual abuse with children aged 11 and under in 2016/17: who carried out the abuse?



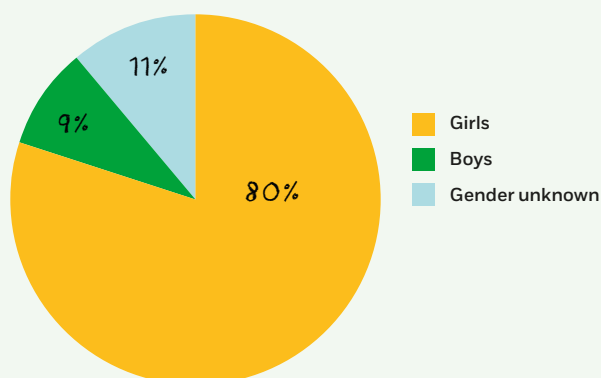
Counselling sessions about peer sexual abuse with 12 to 18-year-olds in 2016/17: who carried out the abuse?



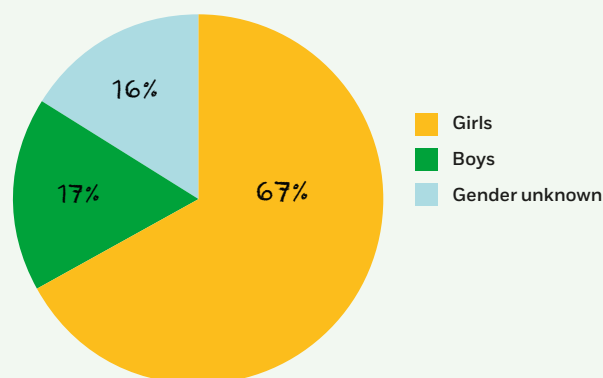
Gender of young people

We know that girls are more likely than boys to speak to Childline counsellors, with almost four times as many counselling sessions provided to girls than boys. This gap is even more pronounced when looking at counselling sessions about peer sexual abuse, with almost nine times as many counselling sessions provided to girls (2,402) than boys (268).

Counselling sessions about peer sexual abuse in 2016/17



Total counselling sessions in 2016/17





Young people's concerns about peer sexual abuse

Confusion about peer sexual abuse

The young people who talked to Childline after having experienced peer sexual abuse were often confused about what had happened to them. They may not have felt comfortable with what had taken place, but they didn't always know it was abuse. Their understanding varied depending on how old they were and who else was involved.

Younger children lack knowledge of sex and sexuality due to their age, and this makes it more difficult for them to recognise sexual abuse. In some cases, young people told us about peer sexual abuse that had continued for years before they realised it was wrong. Some said they only found out they had been abused once they grew older and began learning about sex and relationships.

A few years ago at school a boy put his hand up my skirt during a lesson. He went on to do it again on multiple occasions. At the time I felt numb, I was in shock but I didn't really realise what was happening. I just thought it was boys being boys, but now that I'm older I know it was wrong. I'm still confused about whether it was sexual assault and whether I'm just overreacting, but I've been thinking about it recently and it's brought everything back up again. I want to talk to someone about it but I'm scared they'll say that I'm exaggerating. (Girl, 18)

I think I was raped by somebody I knew from school when I was six. When we were in his room he would take my clothes off and pressure me into doing sexual things, even though I told him no. At the time I didn't really know what was happening, I didn't know why the things he was doing were wrong until recently. I tried to block out the memories of what happened, but now I've started thinking about it again I feel upset and embarrassed. I also feel guilty that I didn't try and stop it at the time or tell anybody. (Girl, 14)

Posts to our peer support message boards ask questions like "Is this sexual abuse?", "Sexual abuse or my fault?", "Was this rape?", and "I don't know if I was raped or not?" Reasons for young people's confusion include:

- thinking that what had happened to them wasn't 'serious' enough to be abuse
- thinking that it wasn't sexual abuse because they hadn't had penetrative sex
- blaming themselves for what had happened because they had originally consented or agreed to meet up with the other person involved
- not considering it to be sexual abuse because they were in a relationship with the other person
- not considering it to be sexual abuse because the other person involved was a friend.



Consent

Several young people who contacted Childline about peer sexual abuse were unsure whether they had given consent for sexual activity to take place. Some even asked their counsellor to tell them whether they had been raped:

Me and my boyfriend are both 14 and he came over earlier because we had talked about having sex for the first time. Although I had said yes before, I told him I didn't want to do it. If two people were going to 'do it' but one of them decides they don't want to and lets the other person know, but the other person goes through with it and does it anyway, is that classed as rape? (Boy, 14)

Alcohol can cause added confusion about consent. Many young people who had been drinking at the time of the abuse said they didn't think it would have happened if they had been sober. They also wondered if it's possible for a person to fully consent to sexual activity when they are drunk.

Some girls felt that boys had exploited the situation they were in, either at parties when alcohol was involved or when it was just the two of them alone, to force them to take part in sexual activity.

I was sexually assaulted a few months ago. I was dating a boy who pushed me into doing things I didn't want to do. He would ignore me when I said no and I had to physically push him away. I was drinking a glass of wine at a house party and he added spirits to my drink. I don't remember what happened that night but my friend told me I passed out. I woke up with my pants down. People laugh and joke about what happened but I've been thinking about it a lot lately. I feel like I'm the only one who doesn't know what happened with my own body. (Girl, 16)

Some young people were also unsure whether they had been sexually abused if they hadn't clearly said "no" to sex. As well as being drunk, some were unconscious or had simply frozen out of shock and fear when the abuse happened. This meant that many of those who had been abused ended up feeling ashamed, guilty and blaming themselves when they had done nothing wrong.

I was raped the other night. It was after a party and my friend was making sure I got home safe. My memory is really blurry, but I remember waking up and he was on top of me, then I blacked out. I messaged him later and he told me that we'd had sex, I feel disgusted. I don't want to tell anybody because they might make me report it, and if I did they would just say it's my fault for being drunk. I feel so ashamed and dirty. I just keep thinking to myself that if I hadn't drunk as much then this wouldn't have happened. I feel awful, I've struggled eating and sleeping and I can't concentrate on anything, I don't know what to do. (Girl, 18)

Many young people who talked about being sexually abused by a partner were also confused about consent. They may have been worried about jeopardising their relationship if they didn't take part in sexual activity, or there may have been assumptions that, because they were in a relationship, they had automatically given consent:

I'm really annoyed because I feel like my boyfriend has been using me for sex. I had sex with him recently and it felt really awkward, I didn't really enjoy it and he's been really distant with me since then. I feel really dirty for having sex with him, and I'm embarrassed that it happened. I don't think he forced me, but I was scared that if I didn't do it then he'd dump me and now I really regret it. (Girl, 16)

Abusive relationships

Young people who had experienced sexual abuse by a partner often talked about being pressured into sexualised situations or activities they were uncomfortable with. Some said this was a one-off incident, but others faced ongoing pressure to perform sexual acts they didn't want to engage in.

Young people who had experienced this ongoing abuse from their partner told us that the pressure to engage in sexual acts increased over a period of time, and their partner's demands intensified. They said their partner was 'nice' to them when the relationship began, but this gradually evolved into more abusive behaviour. Sometimes young people were afraid of their partner ending the relationship if they refused to have sex. Others who had refused sex with their partner had experienced physical violence or threats of violence when they refused. This meant they felt trapped in the abusive relationship.

I've been with my boyfriend for years. The relationship used to be really nice, but recently he's been pressuring me to have sex loads more than we usually do. Now if I say no to him he puts his hands down my pants. I'm confused about why he's started acting like this all of a sudden, maybe I should give him what he wants because he's usually so nice to me. (Girl, 16)

My boyfriend has a much higher sex drive than I do and always wants to do things that I don't. I've tried to say no to him but he just does it anyway. At first I thought it was wrong but he says what he's doing is OK because he's my boyfriend. Recently I told him I wanted to stop having sex after we started but he just laughed and carried on anyway. I would break up with him but he told me he'd hit me if I did. (Girl, 17)

If this was the young person's first relationship, they weren't always sure what 'normal' sexual behaviour looked like:

I'm confused about the bad experience I had in my last relationship. My ex made me perform sexual acts that I didn't want to do; he threatened he would hurt me if I didn't have sex with him, he would call me names and then tell me he loved me. I thought I was in love with him as it was my first relationship. I thought it was normal behaviour at the time, but on reflection, I don't think it was. I still have bad dreams about what happened. I'm so confused and just don't know what to do. (Girl, 15)

Young people who had been sexually abused by a partner often talked about other types of abuse, such as emotional and physical abuse. They had experienced behaviour that was controlling, manipulating, threatening, jealous, violent, aggressive, coercive and insulting. Sometimes this made them feel so insecure and worthless that they thought they deserved the abuse and were frightened to leave the relationship. In other cases, they hadn't realised that they were being abused:

I still miss my ex-boyfriend even though I know he was bad for me. My ex was controlling, would say what I could wear, how I should style my hair, would pressure me into doing things I didn't want to. I didn't realise how bad things were until I came out of the relationship. I feel conflicted as sometimes I thought things were OK because he said nice things to me, but other times it felt very wrong. (Girl, 17)

My ex-boyfriend was very demanding and I did whatever I needed to do to keep him happy, even if I was unhappy and uncomfortable. He was constantly pushy and insisted on doing sexual things all the time. I was uncomfortable with it and scared. I would be so nervous I would be shaking. He never respected my choices or what I wanted. (Girl, 18)

If the young person had continued the relationship despite experiencing abuse, they felt they were to blame for not ending things. This made them feel guilty and ashamed. Some even felt that their choice to continue the relationship meant they weren't being abused:

I was with a boy and I thought what was happening was normal. I still feel so ashamed about what happened, even though it was a few years ago, I still have vivid memories about it. I feel like I couldn't have been sexually abused as I kept going back to see him and it makes me a bad person. I deserved this and it was my fault. I feel so disgusted with myself. (Gender unknown, 16)

Some young people talked to Childline about sexual abuse by an ex-partner, which was still ongoing. They still saw their ex-partner, perhaps because they were still in the same friendship group; went to the same school; or because their families were friends. They felt trapped in this situation: some young people described their ex-partner as having a 'hold' over them.

My ex-boyfriend has been touching me inappropriately and trying to make me do things I don't want to do. I just freeze up when he comes over and I don't feel strong enough to stop him. I don't feel like I can tell people what is happening as he is a family friend and we are expected to hang out together. My anxiety and panic attacks have been getting really bad and it makes me self-harm more. (Gender unknown, 17)

My ex-boyfriend sexually assaulted me and now he won't leave me alone. He's scaring me. I've blocked him online but he's finding new ways of contacting me, like messaging me through his friends' accounts. I'm scared to go out in case I bump into him. I feel weak and vulnerable as he was too strong for me to stop him. (Girl, 15)

Several boys contacted Childline about being emotionally, physically and sexually abused by their current or previous girlfriend. Many had been forced to have sex before they felt ready. Some told us their girlfriend forced them into sex and later blamed them for it, making them feel guilty and confused. One boy explained how his ex-girlfriend would threaten to physically hurt him and tell his parents about their relationship if he didn't do what she wanted. Another told a counsellor about his experience:

My ex-girlfriend used to force me to do sexual things with her that I didn't want to do. She would threaten to hurt me if I refused. My parents are religious and quite strict; she also threatened to tell them if I didn't do what she wanted. I'm in a much happier place now I'm not in that relationship anymore, but I think it's still affecting how much I trust other people. (Boy, 17)

These boys were worried about what other people would say about them if the abuse became public knowledge. They were embarrassed about being in this situation, and worried they would be made fun of if they didn't go along with their ex-partners' wishes.

Other young people whose sexually abusive relationship had ended described being bullied or harassed by their ex-partner. They spoke about their partner continuing to be manipulative, acting possessively and trying to have control over their life. Some were also worried that their ex-partner would come back to hurt them. Several ex-partners were abusive online. This could be through name-calling, spreading rumours, making threats or bombarding the young person with messages:

My first boyfriend would make fun of me and threaten me unless I gave him a blow-job. He also used to hit me. Now we've broken up he sends me abusive texts all the time. I feel really depressed and have started to self-harm again. (Boy, 14)

Online peer sexual abuse

Children are increasingly able to access social media platforms at a young age. This gives them great opportunities to build friendships and gain self-confidence. But over the past few years we've seen an increase in Childline counselling sessions about online safety and abuse (there were 12,248 sessions in 2016/17 – a 9 per cent increase on 2015/16). Peer sexual abuse can happen offline and online, and we know that many young people experience a combination of both.

Several young people who talked to our counsellors about online peer sexual abuse had concerns about sexting (sharing explicit texts, images or videos). This could be with friends, other young people they knew, partners or ex-partners. Some young people told us they didn't feel comfortable taking explicit pictures or sharing them, but they felt pressure to do so. The peers who were asking for sexual messages or images were often forceful – offline as well as online – and young people were being pressured into taking part in other sexual activities as well as sexting.

My ex-boyfriend is harassing me online. He's really abusive. If I don't do what he says over the webcam he shouts and swears at me. I feel like he's using me for his own sexual gains. Even though it isn't physical I feel as though I'm being violated. I feel so disgusted with myself. (Boy, 17)

Once sexual messages or images had been sent, young people were often asked for more images or encouraged to perform sexual acts. Threats could be made that a sexual image would be shared via social media or sent to friends and family if the young person didn't comply with these new requests. In cases where the abuse began online, the young person might receive requests to meet up in person and perform sexual acts to prevent any sexual images and messages they had sent from being shared more widely. This left them feeling scared and vulnerable, not knowing who they could turn to for support.

I'm feeling really low at the moment. My boyfriend used to be really nice and caring but now he's being so mean to me. We were texting the other day and I ended up sending a picture to him of myself naked. I feel so stupid for doing it. Now he says if I don't have sex with him he's going to upload the pictures to Facebook. I've never had sex before and I really don't want to, but I don't want anyone to see the pictures. I really can't cope, I feel like just ending it all. (Girl, 17)

In some cases, young people who had sent explicit pictures found that their images had been shared with their classmates or on social media. They contacted Childline for help to cope with what happened. They feared being judged and bullied by their peers and at school.

I'm so scared about going to school tomorrow. Yesterday I had sex with my boyfriend for the first time. I've known him for years and trusted him completely, he meant everything to me. But after it happened my best friend showed me a video of it, he'd filmed us having sex and then posted it on Facebook. I just can't believe it. I'm so shocked and I can't understand why he would do this. I know that loads of people will have seen it already and they're all going to bully me about it. I can't face it. (Girl, 18)

Some young people who tried to get support from their friends about images or videos being shared felt judged or blamed for what happened. This made them even more confused about the situation and they wondered if they were to blame:

I sent a picture to my boyfriend of myself naked. I didn't want to even send it but he threatened me if I didn't. Now he's sent it to his friends and everyone at school has seen it. I feel so ashamed. Now he's asking me for more pictures and I don't know what to do. He's very forceful, I don't really like having sex with him but when I say no he just carries on. I've tried talking to my friends but they all say it's my fault that everyone's seen the pictures because I was the one who took them in the first place. (Girl, 13)

Boys who contacted Childline about online peer sexual abuse were also worried about the consequences of exchanging explicit messages and images. In some cases, boys were pressured by their friends to watch pornography, or had been sent pornographic material by their friends. They felt pressure to view the images and feared bullying if they refused.



For more information on young people who are pressured into viewing online sexually explicit images, please see our report: "What should I do?" NSPCC helplines: responding to children's and parent's concerns about sexual content online (NSPCC, 2016).

Impact of peer sexual abuse

Young people told our counsellors that experiencing peer sexual abuse left them feeling angry, upset, stressed, worried, scared and confused. They found themselves reliving the situation and didn't know how to cope with it. They discussed the shame and guilt they experienced after being abused, often blaming themselves for getting into the situation in which the abuse took place, or for not being able to stop things:

About a year ago I was raped by a friend of a friend who was a couple of years older than me. He tricked me into going to his room and forced me to do things that I didn't want to. I try and distract myself from thinking about it but nothing's working. I just keep thinking that I could have stopped it. I replay it in my head and think how I should have tried harder to get away. I don't want to tell anybody about it because then people will find out. (Girl, 15)

Young people who experienced peer sexual abuse told us about being distracted at school, unable to focus on their work and feeling isolated. Some were having suicidal thoughts, or said they had previously attempted suicide, because they couldn't cope with what had happened to them. Others said they had developed eating disorders; turned to self-harm to cope with their emotions; or were misusing alcohol and/or substances:

I really don't know what to do. My ex-boyfriend used to force me to have sex with him. Now I'm haunted by it, I feel guilty and low all the time. Sometimes I get flashbacks about what happened and just break down. I've got a new partner now who knows what happened and is careful with me, but when he's sexual I just panic and start crying. It's made me put my guard up and I'm struggling to trust my boyfriend even though I have no reason not to. I've thought about going to a GP but I'm too scared. I've started to feel suicidal and self-harm to cope. I've also started smoking and drinking. I know I need help. I just don't know how or from who. (Girl, 17)

Some young people who had experienced peer sexual abuse told us that they thought they had post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), and some said they had been diagnosed with PTSD by a counsellor or GP. Others didn't mention PTSD, but the effects they described closely reflected its symptoms. These include:

- reliving the experience of sexual abuse
- flashbacks
- difficulty sleeping and night terrors
- anxiety
- difficulty concentrating
- blocking out the memory and/or avoiding remembering what happened
- being unable to remember exactly what happened
- difficulty in trusting people
- thinking that no one else understands them.

While some young people contacted us at the time of the abuse taking place, many were contacting us after a significant period of time because they were struggling to cope with something that had happened when they were younger. At the time they may have been unaware that what was happening was abusive, but as they grew older and developed more understanding of sex and consent, the suppressed memories resurfaced. This meant they had to cope with the trauma of what they had experienced afresh.

Other young people talked about finding it hard to move on from the abuse. For example, school lessons about sex, relationships and consent could bring back bad memories that were very hard to deal with.



Seeking help after experiencing peer sexual abuse

Confiding in somebody

It can be difficult for young people to confide in friends, family members or trusted adults about what's happened to them. Many told us they felt embarrassed, ashamed or guilty. Some young people didn't want their parents to find out they had experienced peer sexual abuse because they were worried their parents would be upset or disappointed in them. Others believed their parents would make them report the abuse to the police and they didn't want to do this.

Many young people didn't want their classmates to find out what had happened. Some were scared of being bullied, some were embarrassed about what had happened, and others thought they wouldn't be believed. They told our counsellors they were scared their friends would judge them because of what happened and that they would end up even more lonely and isolated.

My ex-boyfriend used to pressure me into sending him naked pictures of myself. My mum found out about the pictures and I was mortified. But it wasn't just the pictures. He used to force me to touch him and do sexual things with him. He tried to force me to have sex as well. I've not spoken to anyone else about what happened. I'm too scared to tell anybody, I'm worried about what people would think of me. Now I'm worried that he'll do the same to someone else, I don't know what to do. (Girl, 14)

Some young people who had experienced peer sexual abuse confided in teachers for support. Many described their teachers as helpful, comforting and supportive. Some teachers had been proactive in preventing bullying after explicit images had been shared. Others had helped young people get support from their parents or arranged meetings with the police, parents, social workers and teachers. However, some young people said they found these safeguarding meetings stressful, because it meant they had to relive the sexual abuse.

In some cases, young people didn't receive the support they wanted when they disclosed peer sexual abuse. Some of those who confided in their teachers told us they hadn't been believed; that they didn't think they were being taken seriously; or that they weren't happy with the way the school was responding to the situation. Many were confused about how the school was treating the other young person involved:

When I was with my boyfriend he made me do things I didn't want to and I didn't like what he did to me. He kept putting pressure on me to send him nude photos and now a year later he's showing everyone at school. Now they're calling me names. My school know what's going on but they've said they need to treat both me and my ex the same. I don't understand why as I don't think I've done anything wrong. (Girl, 15)

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Reporting peer sexual abuse to the police

Many young people who contacted Childline with concerns about peer sexual abuse were reluctant to report it to the police. Some were worried they wouldn't be believed if they spoke up about what had happened. They felt there was not enough evidence to support them, and that their accusations could easily be denied. This meant they could be left in a worse situation than before. Others were worried that going to the police would mean they had to tell their family and friends what happened. And some young people just didn't want to have to go through what had happened to them all over again with a police officer.

Because they were confused about what constitutes sexual abuse, other young people didn't think that what happened to them was serious enough to report:

I met up with a boy that I knew in a park. I thought we were just hanging out as friends, but he forced me to do things and touch him in ways that I didn't want to. I'm really shocked about it all, I feel awful. I'm scared to go anywhere on my own now and I'm terrified about seeing him again, even though he thinks everything is fine and texted me saying he had a good time. I feel like telling the police but what could they do? If he denies what happened then there's no proof, and they'll probably just think that it could have been worse. Plus they'll just blame me because I agreed to meet with him in the first place, even though I had no idea that any of this was going to happen. (Girl, 14)

Young people who had reported peer sexual abuse to the police had mixed reactions. Some talked about an ex-partner being interviewed by the police, or having had their phone confiscated because they had been threatening to share explicit images or videos. For some young people, this was a positive outcome – they felt safer knowing that the police had taken action.

But others didn't have such good experiences. They felt they were being judged by the police, or not taken seriously:

I was raped last year and I finally built up the courage to talk to the police recently. I felt really uncomfortable throughout it all and wish I had never said anything now. I don't think they believed me because I couldn't look them in the eye when I was telling them everything. (Girl, 13)

Another young person said that, although the police had taken them seriously, they weren't able to continue with the case:

The police have carried out an investigation but have told me there was not enough evidence to take things further. I now feel really isolated since telling them. (Gender and age unknown)

Supporting young people who have experienced peer sexual abuse

Many young people talk to Childline about dealing with the impact of peer sexual abuse. Things they find beneficial include:

- talking to a trusted adult
- sharing the problem with a Childline counsellor
- visiting a school counsellor or Child and Adolescent Mental Health Service (CAMHS)
- finding a creative outlet for their emotions, such as painting, singing or dancing
- writing down their worries
- focusing on themselves – taking some time to concentrate on their own wellbeing and happiness
- remembering that what happened wasn't their fault.

They often find it helpful to speak to someone who has gone through a similar experience. Childline's peer support message boards are a valuable resource for young people; here they are reassured that they aren't alone and are able to share their experiences in a supportive environment. They can also give and receive advice on positive coping strategies. Often, this highlights the importance of talking things through with an adult:

I'm so sorry to hear what happened to you. He carried on touching you when you told him to stop – so yes it was sexual assault. I think talking to somebody about what happened, like a trusted adult, is the best way to process something like this. If you like painting, singing or dancing then I find creative outlets help too. Dancing helps me to cope with my experience of sexual abuse. (Peer support message board post)



My advice is to speak to somebody about what you're going through. You don't have to keep it to yourself and speaking to someone you trust really helps. For anyone going through something like this, either right now or in the past, you are so strong and you're not alone. You can talk to Childline, or I'm here if you want to talk to me. (Peer support message board post)

What helps the most is definitely talking. For me, writing down my thoughts and making art helped a little as well, but telling someone was what really started to help me cope with what happened. I'm here if you ever need to talk to somebody. (Peer support message board post)

It's encouraging to see that young people are so open in talking about their experiences and keen to support others who are coming to terms with their problems. All our message boards are fully moderated to make sure they are a safe space.

There are also several resources available from Childline online, which young people who have experienced peer sexual abuse find helpful. These include:

Tools

- **Art box** – a tool to help young people express their feelings creatively.
childline.org.uk/toolbox/art-box
- **Childline image galleries:**
 - Sex and relationships image gallery:
childline.org.uk/sex-and-relationships-image-gallery
 - Abuse image gallery:
childline.org.uk/abuse-image-gallery
- **Mood journal** – a tool for young people to record and express their feelings as a diary (this forms part of a young person's locker when they register for an account on the Childline website).
childline.org.uk/locker
- **Reporting explicit content** – our tool to help young people report explicit images of them that have been shared online, so they can be removed from the web.
contentreporting.childline.org.uk
- **Zipit** – our app that helps young people respond to the pressure to send explicit images or messages.
childline.org.uk/zipit-app

Information and support

- **Getting through a tough time** – support for young people who have experienced trauma.
childline.org.uk/getting-through-tough-time
- **Healthy and unhealthy relationships** – information, support and advice on consent and abuse within relationships.
childline.org.uk/healthy-unhealthy-relationships
- **Is it sexual assault?** – a letter to Ask Sam that discusses being raped when drunk.
childline.org.uk/is-it-sexual-assault

- **Jay's Story** – a video for young people about CSE and sexual abuse in relationships.
youtube.com/watch?v=XasNkfQ5AVM
- **Listentoyourselfie** – our 2017 campaign aiming to empower young people to listen to their gut feeling about what's right and wrong.
childline.org.uk/lara-and-paul-stories
- **Peer support message boards** – peer support about a range of topics, including sexual assault.
childline.org.uk/get-support/message-boards
Relationships message board:
childline.org.uk/get-support/message-boards/boards/threads/?roomid=221
Sexual abuse message board:
childline.org.uk/get-support/message-boards/boards/threads/?roomid=277
- **Problems sleeping** – support for young people who have been struggling to sleep.
childline.org.uk/problems-sleeping
- **Sex and relationships** – information and advice about sex and consent.
childline.org.uk/sex
- **Sexting** – advice and support for young people who have sent an explicit image, and those being pressured to start sexting.
childline.org.uk/sexting

Other helpful resources:

- **Brook** – information on sexual health and support around relationships.
brook.org.uk
- **Rape Crisis** – support for people who have been sexually assaulted.
rapecrisis.org.uk
- **Disrespect NoBody** – a campaign promoting healthy relationships.
disrespectnobody.co.uk

Preventing and responding to peer sexual abuse

The young people who talked to us about peer sexual abuse in 2016/17 were often confused about what had happened to them, and were unsure whether they had experienced abuse. Children and young people need to understand what a healthy relationship is and be confident about saying 'no' when they are asked to do something that makes them feel uncomfortable. In September 2016, we launched our #Listentoyourselfie campaign. This encourages young people to listen to their gut feeling about what's right and wrong for them in a relationship and get in touch with Childline if they need to talk things through.

Many of the young people who contacted Childline about experiencing peer sexual abuse discussed feelings of guilt. They felt that they were somehow to blame for the situation, and this prevented them from seeking support. It's vital that children and young people who have experienced peer sexual abuse know that it wasn't their fault, and are able to speak out when they need help.

For our recent research about the impact of online and offline sexual abuse, we talked to some young people from the Childline community (Hamilton-Giachritsis et al, 2017). They made some recommendations about how they think adults should act to prevent all forms of sexual abuse. These included:

- providing good education on healthy relationships, abuse and consent from a young age
- recognising the seriousness of sexual abuse
- engaging in purposeful conversations with young people about it.

We've produced resources to help adults have these discussions with children:

- Parents and teachers can use our **PANTS resources** to teach the Underwear Rule to younger children. This will help keep them safe from sexual abuse, without ever using scary words or even mentioning sex.
nspcc.org.uk/pants
- **Our *Speak out. Stay safe.* programme** visits primary schools to teach children what kinds of behaviour are not okay and who to turn to if they are ever worried.
nspcc.org.uk/schools
- **Share Aware** gives parents the skills and confidence to talk to their children about staying safe online.
nspcc.org.uk/shareaware
- **Net Aware** is a guide to the social networks children use, giving parents advice about features like privacy settings, safety, and reporting problems.
net-aware.org.uk
- **The NSPCC website** offers advice to parents about healthy sexual behaviour and talking about difficult topics.
nspcc.org.uk/healthy-sexual-behaviour
nspcc.org.uk/talkingtips
- **The free Agenda toolkit**, which was published by NSPCC Cymru in November 2016, helps those working with young people to empower them to speak out about issues like sexual harassment and sexual violence; raising awareness of the things that matter most to them.
agenda.wales

Adults who contacted the helpline last year were often unclear about what constitutes peer sexual abuse, and how best to respond to it.

We're supporting organisations to respond effectively to harmful sexual behaviour, so they can identify problematic behaviour, tackle the underlying causes and support all the children involved:

- We've recently launched an online course on managing sexualised behaviour in primary schools.
nspcc.org.uk/msb
- Our harmful sexual behaviour framework helps local areas develop and improve multi-agency responses to children displaying harmful sexual behaviour.
nspcc.org.uk/hsbframework
- We provide a range of resources to help organisations in different sectors safeguard children via our website.
nspcc.org.uk/safeguarding/
- Organisations needing more tailored support to reduce and prevent harmful sexual behaviour and/or peer sexual abuse can contact our consultancy service.
nspcc.org.uk/consultancy
- Professionals may find the Brook sexual behaviours traffic light tool useful, as it helps identify and assess sexual behaviours being displayed by children in different age groups and enables adults to respond appropriately and consistently.
brook.org.uk/our-work/the-sexual-behaviours-traffic-light-tool

We also work directly with children and young people who display harmful sexual behaviour through our National Clinical Assessment and Treatment Service (NCATS) and Turn the Page programme. These help young people recognise and change inappropriate patterns of behaviour so harmful sexual behaviour doesn't keep happening.

We believe that all forms of child abuse are preventable. Peer sexual abuse can happen in a range of contexts, so everyone has a part to play in making our communities safer for children. More needs to be done on a national scale, and we're beginning to see some encouraging changes.

The Department for Education (DfE) has recently published non-statutory advice for schools and colleges on how to prevent and respond to reports of sexual violence and harassment between children (DfE, 2017a). This includes clarification on schools' and colleges' legal responsibilities regarding harmful sexual behaviour; how schools should respond to incidents of harmful sexual behaviour; and highlights the importance of having a whole school approach that includes specialist support and intervention as well as preventive education.

In December 2017, the Sex and Relationships Education Expert Panel in Wales made several recommendations about the future development of SRE, which are being considered by the Cabinet Secretary for Education at the time of writing this report (Welsh Government, 2017). The Scottish Government is in the process of updating its guidance on Relationships, sexual health and parenthood education (Scottish Government, 2017). And the DfE is also consulting on changes to the way sex and relationship education (SRE) and personal, social, health and economic (PSHE) education are taught in England (DfE, 2017b).

This is positive news. We're calling on government to ensure the delivery of Relationships and Sex Education (RSE) in schools across the UK is high quality, adequately funded and relevant to young people's needs, so that every young person can recognise inappropriate sexual behaviour and knows how to get help if they need it.

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Our helpline provides expert advice and support for adults who have any concerns about a child. It's available 24/7, by phone or online, and reports can be made anonymously.

Children and young people can contact Childline if they have concerns about peer sexual abuse or if anything else is worrying them. It's available any time, on the phone, online or through the For Me app.



Together we can help children who've been abused to rebuild their lives. Together we can protect children at risk. And, together, we can find the best ways of preventing child abuse from ever happening.

We change the law. We visit schools across the country, helping children understand what abuse is. And, through our Childline service, we give young people a voice when no one else will listen.

But all this is only possible with your support. Every pound you raise, every petition you sign, every minute of your time, will help make sure we can fight for every childhood.

nspcc.org.uk

EVERY CHILDHOOD IS WORTH FIGHTING FOR