THE CHURCH OF ENGLAND

Safeguarding: Peer-on-Peer Online Bullying

What is peer-on-peer online bullying?

Peer-on-peer bullying is when one or more children/young people repeatedly hurt, humiliate or exclude another child or young person.

Online bullying ('cyberbullying') is bullying that takes place through digital technology, for example:

- Social media (Instagram, TikTok, Snapchat, X, Facebook, etc.)
- Messaging apps (WhatsApp, iMessage, Telegram, Signal, etc.)
- Gaming platforms and online communities
- Group chats linked to school, church activities or friendship groups

Key features of bullying include:

- It is repeated or sustained over time (although a single serious incident can still be very harmful).
- It involves a real or perceived power imbalance (for example numbers, status, digital skills or personal information).
- It often targets a child's identity (for example race, disability, gender, sexuality, faith).
- It can move very quickly online and reach a wide audience.

Key Definitions

For an extensive list of definitions, please refer to our Safeguarding Children, Young People and Vulnerable Adults page.

- **Bullying**: Behaviour that hurts someone else, physically or emotionally, often repeated and involving misuse of power.
- **Online bullying / cyberbullying**: Bullying via phones, tablets, computers, gaming consoles or other internet-connected devices.
- **Peer-on-peer abuse**: Any form of abuse or harm between children and young people of a similar age/stage, including online bullying.
- **Youth-produced sexual images** ("sexting", "sharing nudes/semi-nudes"): Nude or semi-nude images/videos created by children themselves and shared digitally; these may later be used to bully, shame or blackmail.

- **Online hate incidents/hate crime**: Bullying or abuse targeting protected characteristics such as race, religion, disability, sexual orientation or gender identity.
- **Pile-on**: Large numbers ganging up on one person online (comments, reposts, mocking).
- **Bystander**: Someone who sees or knows about bullying but is not directly involved.

Key statistics

- A UK study found **around 4 in 10 children aged 8–17 (39%)** had experienced bullying either on or offline; among those, bullying was more likely to happen on a device than face-to-face (Ofcom/Anti-Bullying Alliance).
- Children with SEND/disabilities are **significantly more likely** to experience frequent bullying than their peers (Anti-Bullying Alliance).

What can online bullying look like?

- Sending threatening, abusive or insulting messages or voice notes.
- Sharing embarrassing photos or videos without consent, including screenshots of private chats.
- Spreading rumours or gossip in group chats, comment threads or Stories.
- Excluding someone from group chats, games or social events ('silent treatment' / 'ghosting').
- Targeted pile-ons, where many people gang up on one person online.
- Impersonating someone by creating fake accounts in their name.

Key signs to look out for

- For Possible indicators a child/young person is being bullied online please see our safeguarding Children, young people and vulnerable adults page.

What to look out for in church life

In church settings, peer-on-peer online bullying may look like:

- Youth group group-chats used to mock, gossip about or exclude another young person
- A child regularly left out of church-peer social events and only discovering this via posts online
- Hostile comments or "jokes" from church peers on a young person's public social media
- Name-calling or memes about a young person's race, disability, SEND, family situation or faith practice
- Photos/videos from church events shared without consent, edited or captioned to humiliate
- Talk about "nudes", "leaks", blackmail or threats to post images involving young people from the church group

Any of these patterns should be treated as potential peer-on-peer abuse.

How to respond

Always refer to the Church of England safeguarding e-manual, specifically to the 'recognising, Responding, Recording and Referring Safeguarding Concerns and Allegations' Code of Practice.

Helpful phrase in the moment

"Thank you for telling me.
This sounds really difficult and I'm glad you spoke up. It's not your fault and we'll take it seriously and work out what to do next."

Preventing bullying in church settings

- Agree clear behaviour expectations for all children's and youth activities, including online spaces linked to church.
- Model respectful, inclusive language and challenge discriminatory comments.
- Build positive peer relationships and encourage bystander intervention (for example supporting someone who is being targeted).
- Ensure children and young people know who they can talk to in confidence if something is worrying them.
- Include online safety and respectful communication in regular teaching and group discussions.

Bullying is never 'just teasing'. Treat online bullying as a safeguarding concern and follow your diocese's safeguarding procedures and the national Church of England safeguarding guidance.

Preventing bullying in church settings

- "You have the right to feel safe – online and offline."
- "Bullying is never your fault, even if you've made mistakes or joined in before."
- "Real friends don't pressure you, threaten you or share things about you to hurt or embarrass you."
- "Talking to a trusted adult is brave, not 'snitching'."

- "No one has the right to ask you for sexual pictures. You can say no."
- "If sexual images of you have been shared or threatened, this is abuse – you're not in trouble for telling someone; we want to help keep you safe."
- "Don't forward or repost hurtful messages or images – even as a 'joke' – it can really harm someone and may be against the law."
- "If you see bullying, you can help by not joining in, checking in with the person targeted, and asking an adult for support."

Further information & up-to-date guidance

Church of England resources:

- Safeguarding: A Safer Church: Signposts safeguarding guidance, reporting routes, and support for victims/survivors.
- Safeguarding e-manual: guidance on responding to concerns, safer environments and working with children and young people
- National safeguarding training portal: 'Creating Safer Spaces' training, including online harms

External Resources:

- NSPCC : Social media, online communities and safeguarding
- NSPCC : Online safety resources and guides
- Childline : Online safety advice and support for young people