

KEY TAKEAWAYS

UNDERSTANDING PEER SEXUAL ABUSE

Peer sexual abuse refers to sexual boundary violations between minors of any age. Harmful sexual behavior looks different at different ages but can range from inappropriate to overtly violent. This means that peer sexual abuse can look different at different ages – often due to changes in physical, sexual, and emotional development. Examples include:

Sibling abuse

Cyberstalking

Non-consensual sexual
image sharing

Forcing, tricking, bribing, or
intimidating another child to
take part in sexual activity

Sexualized hazing on a
middle/high school sports
team

Dating violence
(may or may not include
physical violence)

Children often have limited power, whether that is at home, school, etc. For many youth who engage in harmful sexual behaviors, this is an attempt at regaining some power and control in their lives through control tactics such as:

- Social pressures
- Isolation/exclusion
- Retaliation
- Coercion
- Threats/intimidation
- Relational aggression
- Physical force
- Gaslighting
- Humiliation
- Emotional abuse
- Insults/degradation
- Blame and denial

RECOGNIZING THE IMPACT OF PEER SEXUAL ABUSE

Peer sexual abuse can cause extreme stress, triggering the body's automatic fight, flight, or freeze response and causing long-term stress and dysregulation. Peer sexual abuse can affect a young person's attention, memory, decision-making, and learning abilities, as well as their self-esteem, body image, and identity formation. Reactions to trauma are often misinterpreted because children may exhibit behaviors that are contradictory, confusing, or frustrating, such as:

- Denying the abuse, even when asked by supportive adults
- Blaming themselves and/or providing excuses for the abuser

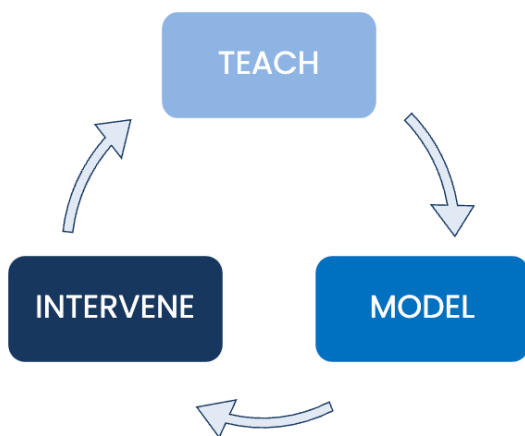
- Engaging in hypersexual behaviors
- Protecting the abuser and/or maintaining a relationship with them
- Dismissing or minimizing the impact

Incidents between peers can affect other young people in the community, especially if adults do not respond promptly or appropriately. Adults in the community may sometimes demonstrate attitudes or engage in behaviors that worsen the impact – even with good intentions. Examples of these attitudes include:

- “I’m staying out of it. They’ll work it out on their own.”
- “Girls mature earlier than boys. She should have known better.”
- “Boys will be boys.”

PREVENTION AND RESPONSE STRATEGIES

Teaching young people about healthy behaviors and boundary violations early on can help them engage in better relationships with each other.



Teach:

- What are boundaries?
- What is consent and how do we practice it?
- What does a healthy relationship look like?
- How do boundary violations cause harm?

Model:

- Healthy interactions with young people
- Boundary-setting and respect between adults
- Empathetic language and effective communication
- Taking accountability for harmful actions

Intervene:

- Witnessing bullying or harmful behaviors by peers
- Overhearing harmful comments
- Supporting someone who has been harmed

Young people may need a lot of support after an incident of peer sexual abuse; trauma-informed communication can help interrupt cycles of abuse and reduce the risk of further harm. A trauma-informed response involves:

- **Understanding** the complexities of sexual misconduct, including the impact of trauma on youth survivors
- **Empathizing** by recognizing the survivor’s perspective and avoiding judgment
- Fostering **safety** by providing predictability and options, where possible
- Building and maintaining **trust**, consistency, and dependability

RAINN'S RESOURCES

National Sexual Assault Hotline:

Free | Confidential | Anonymous

Available 24/7 in English and Spanish to anyone affected by sexual violence in any way.

- Call: (800) 656-HOPE (4673)
- Chat: hotline.rainn.org
- Website: www.rainn.org

Find a local sexual assault service provider: <https://centers.rainn.org/>

Learn more about laws in your state: <https://apps.rainn.org/policy/>

RAINN's List of National Resources for Survivors and Their Loved Ones:

<https://www.rainn.org/national-resources-sexual-assault-survivors-and-their-loved-ones>

OTHER NATIONAL RESOURCES

- **988 Suicide and Crisis Lifeline:** Dial 988: www.988lifeline.org
- **National Domestic Violence Hotline:** 800.799.SAFE (7233): www.thehotline.org
- **1in6 Support Services for male survivors (ages 18+):** www.1in6.org
- **National Human Trafficking Hotline:** 888.373.7888: www.humantraffickinghotline.org
- **TransLifeline:** 877.565.8860: www.translifeline.org
- **ChildHelp National Sexual Abuse Hotline:** 800.422.4453: www.childhelp.org
- **Love Is Respect:** 866.311.9474: www.loveisrespect.org
- **The Trevor Project:** 866.488.7386: www.thetrevorproject.org

LEARN MORE

- **One Love Foundation:** www.joinonelove.org
- **Child Mind Institute:** www.childmind.org
- **Cyberbullying Research Center:** www.cyberbullying.org
- **Darkness to Light:** www.d2l.org
- **National Children's Alliance:** www.nationalchildrensalliance.org
- **Stop It Now:** www.stopitnow.org
- **Advocates for Youth:** www.advocatesforyouth.org

ADDITIONAL SUPPORT FROM RAINN CONSULTING GROUP

RAINN Consulting Group helps organizations move beyond compliance and address their needs related to prevention of and response to sexual misconduct within their community. We are available to support you in these efforts through trauma-informed products and services including:

- Training and educational support
- Development and/or review of policies and protocols
- Client-branded crisis, reporting, and therapy fund hotlines
- Establishment of internal sexual misconduct response team
- Professional development for key responders
- Strategic planning for organizational leaders

RAINN recommends the following trainings to continue your learning pathway:

- Trauma-Informed Communication
- Bystander Intervention
- Understanding Youth Sexual Development
- Framework for Child Sexual Abuse Prevention: Model, Teach, Intervene
- Guidance for Youth Safety in Non-Traditional Settings

To learn more and explore how we can assist, please reach out to RAINN Consulting Group at consulting@rainn.org.