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Staff Safeguarding Think Piece: Peer-on-Peer Abuse, Toxic Masculinity, and the Misogyny Context

Introduction

Peer-on-peer abuse is a significant safeguarding concern in UK schools. It includes a range of harmful behaviours between children, often influenced by social norms and power dynamics. This Think Piece explores how toxic masculinity contributes to such abuse and considers the implications within the context of Misogyny.

Definitions:

The Department for Education defines peer-on-peer abuse as abuse between children under 18, which can include:
- Physical and sexual abuse
- Sexual harassment and violence
- Bullying (including cyberbullying)
- Emotional harm
- Grooming and exploitation

The NSPCC emphasizes that peer-on-peer abuse can be both online and offline, and often goes unreported due to fear, shame, or normalization of harmful behaviours.

Toxic Masculinity - Cambridge Dictionary: *Harmful ideas about how men should behave—like believing they shouldn't cry or show weakness.*

Misogyny - Cambridge Dictionary: *Feelings of hating women, or the belief that men are much better than women*.

Prevalence and Data

- Ofsted's 2021 review found that nearly 90% of girls and nearly 50% of boys in secondary schools had experienced peer-on-peer sexual harassment or knew someone who had.

- The NSPCC reported a 29% increase in children contacting Childline about peer-on-peer sexual abuse in a single year.

- The Department for Education's 2024 statistics show a continued rise in safeguarding concerns related to peer interactions, particularly involving digital platforms.

Safeguarding and promoting the welfare of children is defined in KCSIE 2024.

1. providing help and support to meet the needs of children as soon as problems emerge.

2. protecting children from maltreatment, whether that is within or outside the home, including online.

3. preventing the impairment of children's mental and physical health or development.

4. ensuring that children grow up in circumstances consistent with the provision of safe and effective care.

5. taking action to enable all children to have the best outcomes.

QUESTION – What experience have you had in your setting re this area of concern?

What do these emojis mean?

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Toxic Masculinity and Its Role

Toxic masculinity refers to cultural norms that promote dominance, emotional suppression, and aggression in boys and men. In schools, this can manifest as:
- Normalising sexual harassment or coercion
- Dismissing harmful behaviour as "banter" or "boys being boys"
- Pressuring boys to assert dominance through physical or sexual means

A Government Equalities Office report highlights that these gendered norms are deeply embedded in institutions and can perpetuate cycles of abuse and silence.

The Misogyny Context

In a setting like Misogyny, safeguarding efforts must address:
- Gendered expectations and stereotypes
- The influence of social media and peer pressure
- The need for inclusive, trauma-informed responses

Key questions for reflection:
1. Are students confident that disclosures will be taken seriously?
2. Are staff trained to challenge gendered assumptions?
3. How can you support children re the influences of social media?
4. What types of comments / banter have you heard that could be categorised as toxic masculinity / misogyny? (Staff room / playground / parents / classroom)

Case Studies

Liam, age 11, had started making comments like "girls can't play properly" and "they're too sensitive." He regularly excluded girls during PE, dismissed their ideas in group work, and joked about their emotions in class. His behaviour appeared influenced by things he'd seen or heard—possibly online, from peers, or at home. One girl told a staff member she felt "not smart enough to speak." Staff noticed rising tension and reduced collaboration in mixed-gender activities.

Amira, age 10, had always been confident in class, often volunteering answers and leading group tasks. But over time, staff noticed she'd become quieter—hesitating to speak when boys were present and deferring to them during activities. In group work, she'd let boys take charge, even when she had strong ideas. She began using phrases like "I'm not sure, maybe the boys know better" and avoided leadership roles. A teaching assistant overheard her say, "Boys don't like it when girls act bossy."

Reflection Questions:
Groups could answer questions between them and then share learning and ideas:

1. What social, cultural, or media influences might be shaping this child's beliefs about gender roles?
2. What would be your initial actions and who would you involve in these discussions?
3. How do we respond when children express harmful stereotypes — do we challenge, question, guide?
4. What long-term strategies can we implement to support healthy identity development for all genders?

PERSONAL TAKEAWAYS— here is a space for you to note down your personal takeaways