

What Youth-Serving Nonprofits Need To Know About Youth-On-Youth Abuse



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Youth-serving nonprofits invest a great deal of time and effort addressing the risk that any adult associated with their programs could harm children.

Many youth-serving nonprofits may not have gone to the same lengths to address the risk that youth participants in their programs could harm other young participants. Those risks are real and must be addressed. This article explores research about youth-on-youth abuse and presents practical strategies to help nonprofits craft a prevention approach.

Children possess innocence and playfulness, but they can absorb other stimuli from the world around them, too, including violence and aggression. Youth-on-youth abuse can occur anywhere children are gathered, including institutional settings or nonprofit-sponsored programs.

The range of inappropriate or abusive behaviors by young participants can include many actions, such as bullying, hazing, physical contact, sexual talk, initiations, games, exposure to inappropriate materials, and sexual contact and assault. A child might demonstrate this behavior once, or it could evolve over several escalating incidents.

Nonprofits that work with youth must thoughtfully design and execute programs to serve them, supervised by trained adults. Awareness and understanding of how children can abuse other children will help a nonprofit staff or volunteer team prevent cases of youth-on-youth abuse and misconduct and quickly detect and address any that do happen.

If one young person abuses another while under a nonprofit's supervision, the nonprofit could face legal and reputational risks. Youth-serving nonprofits can't anticipate every behavioral issue that might arise among young people they supervise. But they can and must develop and follow clear guidelines for how to recognize and respond to signs of youth-on-youth abuse. Done well, this work not only will help maintain a baseline of safety at youth-serving nonprofits, it will clearly demonstrate to participants what behaviors are and aren't acceptable and show young people appropriate boundaries and the consequences for violating them.

The Facts About Youth-On-Youth Abuse

Research suggests nearly a third of those who sexually abuse children may be juveniles themselves, according

to [Judith Becker](#), professor emeritus of the University of Arizona College of Science.

In [their report “Juveniles Who Commit Sex Offenses Against Minors,”](#) researchers David Finkelhor, Richard Ormrod, and Mark Chaffin share some sobering statistics:

- Juveniles who commit sex offenses against other children are more likely than adult sex offenders to offend in groups and at schools.
- Teenagers who commit sex offenses are predominately male (more than 90 percent).
- Most offenses involve teenagers acting alone with young children as victims, according to research.
- Offenses cover a wide range, from a single event or a few isolated events to a large number of events with multiple victims.

Many young people who commit sex offenses have been sexually abused themselves. Between 40 percent and 80 percent of youth who commit sex offenses have experienced sexual abuse as children, and 25 percent to 50 percent have experienced physical abuse, [according to the National Center on Sexual Behavior of Youth](#) (NCSBY). Like young people who commit other types of offenses, youth who sexually offend may have experienced child mistreatment, family instability, mental illness, inadequate social skills, learning disabilities, and substance use, NCSBY says.

Adverse childhood experiences, known as ACES, can [impact the likelihood that a young person will experience or perpetrate future abuses](#), and can affect their health and opportunities for their whole lives. But it is possible to [mitigate many effects of adverse childhood experiences](#).

Finkelhor, Ormrod, and Chaffin found that sexual crime recidivism among youth is relatively rare. The vast majority of juveniles who commit sex offenses have no arrests or reports for future sex crimes. [Advances in brain science have begun to change how judges](#) sentence young people for crimes. [Brain science researchers have found](#) that the rational part of a person's brain isn't fully developed until around age 25.

“Even though the primary sources for much of juvenile sexual offending are immaturity, lack of understanding around sexual consent and other social deficits, current responses are often punitive in nature and fail to address the educational and therapeutic needs of these youth,” write [Kristan N. Russell, Ph.D., of the Texas Juvenile Crime Prevention Center, and Shawn C. Marsh, director of judicial studies at the University of Nevada, Reno](#). “This disconnect arises in part from misperceptions of their openness to treatment and likelihood of recidivism, which can lead to harsher sentencing and discriminatory treatment ... Ultimately, we propose better long-term outcomes can be achieved if we focus on rehabilitative approaches (e.g., therapy, social skills training) and prevention efforts (e.g., comprehensive sex education, early identification) to address sexual offenses in youth in lieu of current retributive practices (e.g., detention, registration).”

Youth-on-Youth Abuse Prevention and Detection

Many incidents of youth-on-youth abuse go unreported by survivors and bystanders. Young people may fear adults won't believe them, or they may blame themselves for what they experienced or saw. They might have been intimidated into participating or staying silent and not realized until later that what happened was wrong.

Youth-serving nonprofits can use multiple strategies to lessen the risk of youth-on-youth abuse at their organizations and respond immediately and appropriately if it happens.

Program Design

Youth-serving programs should be designed to maximize young people's enjoyment and learning without compromising safety. Ensure that activities are suitable for the participants, that age groupings/ranges are appropriate for each program, and adequate adult supervision is available for all programs.

Policies

Organizations that serve preteen or teenage participants sometimes adopt a Participant Code of Conduct that governs acceptable behavior in the program. NRMC's [e-book “The Season of Hope”](#) offers a template. You may

find that youth have more “buy-in” to the code of conduct if they participate in its formation. If you use a code of conduct, you must be willing to enforce it if someone breaks the code. Including youth and staff in a single code of conduct sends a powerful message that rules are part of life for both kids and adults.

Accountability and Discipline

Disruptive behavior by young participants should not be allowed to interfere with other children’s ability to benefit from your programs and services. Such behavior could put the safety of children and the organization at risk. Discipline of participants should be age-appropriate and related to the behavior you are trying to change.

Create A Culture That Won’t Tolerate Abuse

Make it a practice to inform parents about children’s behavior, whether positive, negative, or something that seems out of character. Document unusual behaviors among youth, especially sexualized behaviors, along with the response by staff. Programs that allow misbehavior face an increased potential for abuse. Establish expectations for behavior and consequences for misconduct. Stick to the behavior plans you have created for participants. Find ways to recognize young people who speak up when something seems wrong, while protecting confidentiality and privacy for participants.

Involve Parents as Partners

Parents play a vital role in protecting children from abuse and identifying abuse when it happens. Share culturally and linguistically appropriate materials with parents on how to help their children understand unacceptable behavior and report it. Communicate clearly how parents can raise questions and concerns. Add information about youth-on-youth abuse to parenting education programs. Encourage parents to drop in for unannounced visits. One study found that childcare centers that used this strategy reported much lower rates of abuse in programs.

Respond In The Moment

If abuse happens at your nonprofit’s program, immediate steps to take include:

- Stop the abuse.
- Protect the person(s) being harmed.
- Separate the alleged victim(s) and the alleged perpetrator(s).
- Get any necessary outside help (such as calling 911).
- Notify parents or guardians.
- Notify appropriate officials at your organization.

Comply With Mandatory Reporting Laws

Youth-serving programs must have clear guidelines that comply with [relevant mandatory reporting laws](#). Most U.S. states and many territories specify which professionals must report child maltreatment. The professionals most commonly mandated to report include social workers; teachers and other school personnel; physicians, nurses, and other health care workers; counselors and other mental health professionals; childcare providers; medical examiners or coroners; and law enforcement officers. In almost 20 states and territories, any person who suspects child abuse or neglect is required to report. Typically, a report must be made when the person, in their official capacity, has reason to suspect a child has been abused or neglected. Another frequently used standard requires a report in situations where the reporter knows of conditions that would reasonably result in harm to the child.

How your organization approaches youth-on-youth abuse prevention and handles any incidents will impact the lives of all the young people involved. Creating a plan for how you will handle any issues around youth-on-youth abuse and a culture of prevention will strengthen all aspects of your nonprofit’s child protection efforts.

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