

ORIGINAL ARTICLE



‘Letting you share when you need to share’: navigating the potential and precarity of friends and peers for UK young people after sexual abuse in adolescence

Camille Warrington¹ | Debra Allnock¹ | Claire Soares¹ | Helen Beckett¹ | Lindsay Starbuck²

¹Safer Young Lives Research Centre, University of Bedfordshire, University Square, Luton, Bedfordshire, LU1 3JU, UK

²Association of Young People's Health (AYPH), London, UK

Correspondence

Dr Camille Warrington: Safer Young Lives Research Centre, University of Bedfordshire, University Square, Luton, Bedfordshire LU1 3JU, UK.

Email: camille.warrington@beds.ac.uk

Funding information

This study was funded by the NSPCC and ESRC, under their research call ‘Helping children get back on track after abuse and neglect’.

Abstract

This article explores the rarely considered role of friends and peers supporting young people after sexual abuse experienced in adolescence, drawing on participatory research with 32 young people in the UK with lived experience. The article considers ways in which relationships with friends and peers interplay with recovery from abuse. This includes friends and peers as recipients of disclosure, conduits to professional support, sources of emotional support and distraction, and being embroiled in often challenging, precarious peer cultures that young people navigate post-abuse. The article explores young people's rationale for, and experiences of, reaching out to friends and peers. It considers what young people seek and gain from these relationships in the aftermath of abuse, while acknowledging complex risks and precarity of these relationships. It argues that support from friends offers something distinct to family and professionals. It explores benefits of these relationships, but also potential for peer responses to undermine wellbeing if not sufficiently supportive or informed. The article ends by arguing for professionals to better recognise and respond to these relational contexts and consider whether there are safe and appropriate ways to ‘support young people to support’ without responsibilisation, and recognising welfare needs of those providing such support.

KEYWORDS

adolescence, child sexual abuse, friends, participation

Key Practitioner Messages

- Friends and peers can have significant influence on young people's emotional wellbeing after sexual abuse experienced in adolescence.
- Practitioners wishing to support young people's recovery after sexual abuse experienced in adolescence should consider these relationships and provide associated support if necessary.
- Participatory research methods addressing adolescent sexual abuse have the potential to surface new priorities and enhance our understanding of recovery from sexual abuse in adolescence.

This is an open access article under the terms of the [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivs](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/) License, which permits use and distribution in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited, the use is non-commercial and no modifications or adaptations are made.

© 2023 The Authors. *Child Abuse Review* published by Association of Child Protection Professionals and John Wiley & Sons Ltd.

INTRODUCTION

Decades of research reveals the situational nature of parent-peer influence on adolescents (Meeus et al., 2002). Whilst parental influence on children in the adolescent development phase remains important in domains such as school and employment, in other domains, such as leisure time and friendships, peer influence intensifies (Sawyer et al., 2018). Peer relationships and friendships perform important functions, taking on greater significance in promoting adolescents' self-disclosure and intimacy, aiding exploration and self-knowledge (Parker & Gottman, 1989).

Developmental scholars have found that supportive peer relationships in the adolescent life stage contribute to a sense of self (Meeus et al., 2002) and social competence (Laible, 2007). Longer 'best friend' relationships are also associated with better adjustment, educational attainment and improved mental health (Ng-Knight et al., 2019). Child maltreatment literature also identifies that supportive peer friendships moderate the mental health outcomes associated with child sexual abuse (Adams & Bukowski, 2007). Qualitative research with young people identifies ways in which peers and friends may practically and emotionally support young people who have experienced sexual abuse. Allnock (2015) found that, among a sample of 60 young people with varied experiences of maltreatment, including sexual abuse, friends noticed and shared concerns, provided emotional support, disclosed on behalf of their friend, and offered safe havens, moral support and reciprocal solidarity. Friends and peers are also recognised in wider disclosure literature as important disclosure recipients (Priebe & Svedin, 2008; Schönbucher et al., 2012). McElvaney et al. (2014) and Beckett et al. (2019) both identify that friends and peers can play important roles in disclosure processes through asking questions, encouraging young people to speak to adults and providing safe non-judgemental spaces. Conversely Manay et al.'s (2022) model of peer disclosure demonstrates that the process of disclosing to friends can be fraught with uncertainty, and the outcome is often unsatisfactory when friends are ill-equipped to respond.

Evidence also suggests that peer relationships and friendships can be detrimental to adolescents' mental health. Fewer and lower quality interpersonal relationships among adolescents is associated with increased negative health-related outcomes (Prinstein & Giletta, 2020). Lacking supportive peer relationships is associated with social withdrawal (Bond et al., 2007), loneliness, worrying and low self-esteem (Attar-Schwartz et al., 2017), early commencement of smoking, drinking and sexual relationships (Kipping et al., 2012), and long-term mental health consequences (Lereya et al., 2015). Low peer acceptance has been associated with heightened social anxiety, with additional risk factors for girls including limited close relationships, negative friendship experiences and relational victimisation (Pickering et al., 2020). Relational victimisation, defined as exposure to behaviours aimed at damaging relationships or one's social reputation, such as exclusion, manipulation, rumour-spreading and more serious forms of sexual abuse and harm are well-documented within peer and friendship networks (Crick & Grotpeter, 1996; Firmin, 2020; Lloyd, 2020). Qualitative evidence drawing on testimonies of young people who have experienced maltreatment, including sexual abuse, evidences their fears and experiences of bullying (Cossar et al., 2019) and victimisation and sexual harm by peers linked to abuse experiences (Allnock & Atkinson, 2019). Such negative encounters with peers and friends have been found to impact adolescents' well-being into adulthood (Armitage et al., 2021).

Whilst the literature establishes a solid foundation for the role of peers and friends in the lives of young people and a connection to mental health and emotional wellbeing, evidence gaps remain in relation to the role of peers and friends in the lives of adolescents who experience sexual abuse in this life phase, including research that draws directly on young people's testimonies.

AIMS AND OBJECTIVES

This paper will establish the significance and roles of friends and peers in the lives of the young people who experience sexual abuse in adolescence, defined for the purposes of this study as abuse experienced between age 11 and 17 years.

The paper will raise awareness of the ways peers and friends can both promote and destabilise emotional wellbeing in young people following sexual abuse in adolescence and identify practice implications for those supporting young people. These aims will be achieved by centralising young peoples' voices and accounts of their experiences and needs, redressing gaps in the wider evidence base that often marginalises the youth perspective.

Moreover, whilst recognising that adolescence is shaped by cultural, political and social factors, we argue that learning in this paper is internationally applicable given evidence of the significance of peers and friends in adolescence across diverse cultural contexts (Sawyer et al., 2018). Furthermore, the participatory nature of the research aligns with global imperatives for children and young people's voices and influence to be centralised (UNCRC, 1989) and offers learning for the international research community on safe engagement of youth in relation to sexual violence (Bovarnick & Cody, 2020).

METHODS

Overall Approach

The wider study on which this article draws sought to promote understanding about mental health and emotional well-being needs of young people who experience sexual abuse in adolescence (Allnock et al., 2022). The study was undertaken in partnership with the Association for Young People's Health (AYPH). It focused on aspects of the adolescent life-stage which shape young people's experiences and needs after sexual abuse experienced during this period. The definition of sexual abuse used includes contact and non-contact activities, online-facilitated abuse, abuse inside and outside the family, and abuse by adults or young people. For the full study outline, see Allnock et al. (2022).

The study's qualitative research methodology was informed by participatory approaches. It aimed to generate knowledge and recommendations collaboratively with young people using creative, largely group-based data collection processes. Fittingly the focus of this article itself stems from young research participants' identification of gaps in our research questions – encouraging us to consider the role of peers and friends in the aftermath of abuse more closely.

Participatory aspects of the study were supported with additional data collection activities with young people, parents and professionals, and a narrative review of the literature. The research was supported by four young expert advisors – all members of a youth advisory panel at [researchers' institution].

Only data collection activities involving young people are drawn upon in this article and therefore outlined below. (For the study's full methodology see Allnock et al., 2022).

Sampling

Thirty-two young people aged 13–21 years took part in this study. Thirty participants provided primary data through interviews and/or workshops, two of whom also supported developing project outputs. A further two unique participants engaged solely in developing outputs, although drawing on individual experiences to do so. All participants had experienced some form of sexual abuse in adolescence. Twenty-eight participants identified as female, three as male and one as non-binary. Fuller details of the sample are provided in Table 1.

Young people were engaged in the project through 10 voluntary sector services providing therapeutic support to young people following sexual abuse from England ($n = 7$), Northern Ireland ($n = 2$) and Wales ($n = 1$) ('facilitating services'). Facilitating services were funded to ensure all young participants had access to support from a named practitioner throughout the process.

A relatively small pool of potential participants prohibited a prescriptive approach to sampling. Instead, facilitating services were encouraged to identify potential participants representing diverse experiences and demographics. Subsequently, a limitation of the study is that participant diversity is limited to those young people identified by services, and the fact that all participants had sexual abuse experiences identified and responded to by professionals.

Data Collection

Data drawn upon in this article stems from 23 participatory workshops and eight individual interviews with young people.

Participatory Workshops

Participatory workshops were designed and piloted with young expert advisors and delivered in two phases, in partnership with a participation worker from AYPH. Phase one workshops took place between November 2016 and August 2018 and were delivered with small groups of young people (20 in total) from eight facilitating services. They aimed to collaboratively develop knowledge with young people and redress traditional power hierarchies involved in knowledge creation and service user/provider relations (Beresford & Carr, 2012). They facilitated critical dialogue on three interrelated themes: mental health and emotional wellbeing impacts of sexual abuse in adolescence; meaning and value of concepts such as mental health or resilience; and identification and response to young people's post-abuse needs.

Phase one workshops used tools to elicit discussion and reflection, including body mapping and a dice rolling game which allowed participants to develop a fictional narrative about post-abuse needs in adolescence (see Allnock

TABLE 1 Sample overview

Service	YP code/synonym	Gender	Age*	Self-reported ethnicity (where known)	Interview (I) and/or workshop participation (WS)
A	YP 1	F	17	Unknown	WS 1
A	YP 2	F	18	White British	WS 1
B	YP 3	M	18	White British	WS2, WS3, WS4 & I1
B	YP 4	F	15	White British	WS2, WS3, WS4 & I2
C	YP 5	F	17	Unknown	WS5
C	YP 6	F	17	White British	WS5
C	YP 7	F	17	Unknown	WS5
D	YP 8	F	19	Unknown	WS6 & WS7
D	YP 9	F	18	Unknown	WS6 & WS7
D	YP 10	F	17	Unknown	WS8
E	YP11	F	18	Asian (Bangladeshi)	WS9, WS10, WS11 & WS12
E	YP12	NB	17	Asian	WS9, WS10, WS12 & I3
E	YP13	F	17	Asian (Bangladeshi)	WS9, WS10 & WS12
E	YP14	F	15	Unknown	WS9
F	YP15	F	16	White British	WS12, WS14 & WS 15
F	YP16	F	17	Unknown	WS14 & WS15
G	YP17	F	17	Unknown	WS16 & WS17
H	YP18	F	16	Unknown	WS18 & WS19
H	YP19	F	17	Unknown	WS18 & WS19
H	YP20	F	16	Unknown	WS18
H	YP21	F	16	White Irish	I4
I	yp22	F	16	White British	WS21 & I5
I	yp23	F	13	Unknown	WS21
I	yp24	F	14	Unknown	WS21
G	yp26**	F	17	Unknown	WS22
G	yp27	F	14	Unknown	WS22
G	yp28	F	16	Unknown	WS23
G	yp29	M	21	White British	I6
F	YP30	F	19	White British	I7
J	YP31	M	17	Irish	I8

*Age when first engaged with study.

**There is no participant with the interview code Y25 in this study.

et al., 2022 for further details). Tools aimed to maximise participants' sense of control and allow them to share insight and expertise rooted in lived experience without a requirement to directly share personal experience in a group setting.

Phase two workshops took place between October 2019 and February 2020 with an additional six young people from two (additional) facilitating services. This formed part of the analysis and supported young people to respond to emerging findings from phase one workshops. All workshops were recorded through notetaking and audio recordings.

Individual Interviews

Learning from workshops was supplemented by in-depth interviews with eight young people, four of whom were also workshop participants. Interviews focused on impacts of sexual abuse and factors that helped or hindered young people's emotional wellbeing.

Analysis

All data was imported and coded thematically in NVivo 12 using both open (inductive) and deductive coding derived from the research aims and literature. Analysis was informed by constructivist grounded theory (Charmaz, 2006) and participatory research methods (Coyne & Carter, 2018). Themes for analysis stemmed from the initial research questions; the developing workshop themes and structures – as developed in partnership with youth advisors and participants; and line-by-line coding of transcripts. Transcripts were ‘pair coded’ to develop an initial thematic framework. This was further refined following stakeholder consultation and the phase two workshops.

Ethics

Ethics informed all aspects of research design and included standard elements such as informed consent, anonymisation of data, participant support and secure data storage, alongside a project specific ethical framework (see Appendix S1 for further detail on this framework). This integrated key principles such as trauma-informed practice, reflective practice and researcher wellbeing (See Allnock et al., 2022 for full details).

The research was approved through ethics review panels from UK non-profit organisations associated with the project; a national membership organisation of children’s service leaders; and the researchers’ institution.

RESULTS

Research tells us that friends and peers are often those who adolescents first ‘reach out’ to after an experience of sexual abuse (Manay & Collin-Vezina, 2021). The wider literature and our own research identified multiple reasons why young people may turn to friends first, varying in intentionality and expectation. ‘Reaching out’ can often, though not always, involve a form of disclosure about the abuse – either while abuse is occurring or after it has stopped. Indeed, friends can be drawn upon for support and be totally unaware of the abuse (Allnock, 2015). However, friends being availed of it appears to always be imbued with hope for support. The degree to which these hopes are met varies, however, as outlined in findings below. These findings identify different ways in which relationships with friends and peers interplay with recovery from abuse and range from supportive to distressing or harmful.

Friends as a Source of Support

We identified four overarching themes about the positive contribution of friends to young people’s emotional wellbeing after sexual abuse in adolescence: providing a safe and accessible source of support; facilitating access to professional support; offering relaxation and distraction; and solidarity with other victim/survivors.

Friends as a Safe and Accessible Source of Support

‘... I’ve got a group of friends and they understand, they know the story and they respect that and they respect me’. (Workshop 18, two females, 16 and 17 years)

Unsurprisingly participants recognised the need to confide in a trusted person and many identified friends (and in some cases intimate partners) as individuals who occupied this role. For several participants in this study, a friend was identified as the only person they felt able to fully trust and open up to.

Crucially the support offered by friends was described as distinct from that provided by parents, caregivers or professional adults in young people’s lives, meeting otherwise underserved needs. The unique nature of support from friends was described variably but primarily presented as something with the potential to feel less emotionally charged, pressured or judgemental. Although this potential was not always realised, there was evidence that disclosures made to friends could hold fewer implications than disclosures to parents, carers or professionals who held more specific responsibilities about how to respond.

One 17-year-old female explained: *‘Family can take things the wrong way, or what you tell them might hurt them. But with friends, you can pour your heart out (Workshop 1)’*. As this suggests, inter-dependencies within family relationships meant a young person’s disclosure had the power to evoke strong feelings and place additional burdens on young

people themselves. Friendships, conversely, could provide more distance and thus a greater sense of emotional safety in which to *'pour your heart out'*.

Meanwhile, in contrast to relationships with professionals, responses some young people got from friends were rooted in care and mutuality rather than the remit of a funded professional role and the power differentials embodied by that. The significance of this distinction was apparent in descriptions of friendship support which extended beyond the boundaries of what professionals could provide, in some cases linked to physical comfort and presence.

'[My friend] was there for me a lot, she was there when I had a breakdown and she helped me by giving me lots of hugs, yeah'. (Workshop 22, two females, 14 and 17 years)

For others, the value of friends was linked to their availability and accessibility, unbounded by 'office hours'. This level of support was described as countering isolation, supporting young people to feel held in mind by others.

'Like my best friend... He's always there day and night. I can ring him at three o'clock in the morning and he'll answer the phone... He's very understanding, and he seems to say the right stuff'. (Interview 6, male, 21 years)

A further distinction young people made between support from friends and that provided by professionals was in relation to confidentiality. As the wider study from which this data is drawn demonstrates, confidentiality was a particular concern for young people when engaging with services. Confidentiality policies were noted to be a deterrent to disclosure and young people voiced concerns about the loss of control experienced when information had to be shared. For some, friendships represented an outlet in which such restrictions did not apply and were therefore perceived as a more confidential space offering greater control. Although the promise of confidentiality among friends was not always met (as discussed below) several young people described friendships as offering a distinct form of emotional safety.

'They [Friends] let you share when you need to share, rather than force you... My friends have never tried to pressurise me to open up, because once people do try to do that you close up instantly'. (Interview 4, female, 16 years)

The absence of pressure, and confidence that disclosure would neither elicit overly emotional responses or be passed on to others, meant that friends held the potential to provide a unique space for support that was safe, accessible and comforting.

Support and Encouragement to Access Professional Help

Alongside descriptions of friendship support that were purposefully kept separate from professional interventions, there was also evidence that friends could play a role in enabling young peoples' access to services. In these examples, an initial disclosure to friends was part of a young person's pathway to professional support – bridging the divide between isolation and a professional response. Two participants explicitly described how a friend encouraged and supported them to share details of either the sexual abuse or associated mental health needs with a professional.

In one such example, a young person reflected on how a friend they disclosed to encouraged but did not force them to tell a trusted adult. Subsequently when they felt ready to speak to a teacher, the same friend accompanied them and helped to articulate their experiences by reading extracts from the young person's diary, with their consent.

In these examples the possibility of non-directive, non-pressurised support from friends provides young people with a safe first step to wider help. Friends are also seen adopting the role of advocate in these examples, in some cases offering a means of physically voicing what may otherwise feel unsayable.

Friends as a Source of Relaxation and Distraction

The third theme that emerged in relation to friends and peers as a source of support was their role as a source of distraction and enjoyment: an interruption from distressing thoughts and feelings (a means to *'get out of myself'*) and a space to reclaim a sense of 'normality'.

'[Friends can] just take things off your mind. When you are sitting in your room on your own... you are constantly just thinking about what happened to you... but when someone is there who you know... it takes that stress, it takes that lonely off'. (Workshop 22, two females 14 and 17 years)

Recreational time spent with friends was identified by several participants as providing an important counterbalance to isolation and difficult emotions experienced in the aftermath of sexual abuse. Such benefits were noted to be obtainable even when friends were unaware of the abuse, highlighting the importance of adolescents maintaining connections and access to social activities following trauma. Where friends were aware of young peoples' experiences of sexual abuse, there were examples of this role being adopted with intention and care, such as encouraging and facilitating friends to access different forms of support and recovery.

'I wanted to do boxing, but [my friend] knew that I did not feel comfortable doing it... So he said, "All right then, we'll go to the gym," and he went to the gym with me... He changed his wants or desires... for me, which is nice in itself'. (Interview 6, male, 21 years)

This example describes an adolescent actively assessing a friend's needs and proposing social strategies to address them. What remains unknown are the experiences of friends who provide support; the degree to which they felt safe in their role; and the impacts – whether positive or negative.

Solidarity with Victim/Survivors

The final theme relates to the specific value of (and appetite for) relationships between peers who shared similar experiences – be those related to abuse, mental health needs or other life experiences, such as being in care. Involvement in participation groups at their respective facilitating services or indeed participation in the research workshops themselves, created opportunities for young people to make these connections which they reflected had helped them feel recognised and understood.

Such relationships embodied distinct reciprocity and mutual aid, where traumatic experiences could be reframed and used for good: to support others and to provide a sense of meaning and purpose, and counter feelings of shame, self-blame, and isolation.

'The more people I tell the more I feel comfortable about what's happened and the more I can empower other people to feel better, because sometimes people do not tell anyone, and if they listen to someone else's story they think, "That could be me, I could be helping other people"'. (Workshop 23, female, 16 years)

Friends and Peers as a Source of Risk and Distress

While young people shared the positive roles friends can play in the aftermath of sexual abuse, our research unearthed three key ways in which young people's emotional wellbeing can also be compromised by the actions and responses of their friends and wider peer groups (particularly in school) in relation to experiences of sexual abuse. These are: being unequipped to respond; perpetuating disbelief and blame; and intentional harm.

Unequipped to Respond

Participants recognised that friends and peers can negatively impact their emotional wellbeing post-abuse and not necessarily be aware they are doing so. While they recounted responses from friends that were experienced as thoughtless or unhelpful at the time, young people recognised that such responses could sometimes be well-intended – rooted in benevolence but limited by fear or lack of knowledge and understanding around trauma. While accepting the shortfalls of support in this context, young people were often left feeling frustrated by responses from friends that did not meet their needs.

'I do not know, friends are kind of weird, it's either a competition, or they do not know what to do, so if you say you are upset, they'll be like, "I'm upset as well, because of this"... there's a point where they are like, they do not understand'. (Interview 2, female 15 years)

This quote illustrates the divergence between young people's propensity to seek support from friends and a reality in which friends may be ill-equipped to offer appropriate responses. Furthermore, this could mean friends held back from offering support altogether.

'[Friends] are just scared to ask because they do not want to get themselves involved in something that emotionally they cannot handle'. (Interview 7, female, 19 years)

Likewise, young people could themselves be reticent to seek support from friends, for fear of being seen as 'moany' or needy. In some accounts, such anxieties appeared well-founded, with friends described as minimising and underplaying the seriousness of sexualised trauma.

'Even now I'd say to one of my friends, "I've got to go and have counselling this week." They're like, "Do you still go to counselling?!"'. (Workshop 19, two females 18, 19 years)

Perpetuating Disbelief and Blame

Friends and peers responding with denial or disbelief – or blaming the young person for the abuse they had experienced – was a lived-reality that several participants shared in this study. Such responses could compound the dynamics of sexualised trauma and feelings of shame and self-blame – recurrent themes throughout the wider findings of this study and young people's narratives about their mental health and emotional wellbeing post-abuse.

'I found myself in a similar situation and my friends told me I should be flattered because he [the perpetrator] was older and good looking'. (Workshop 10, female 18 years)

Distress attached to such responses was heightened in scenarios of peer-to-peer abuse. Below, a young person explains the particular difficulties of having been abused by another young person known by their wider peer community – and the competing narratives and assertions around truth and blame that are tied to this.

'If you know people who know the person [who abused you] then they'll text them to ask if it's true and then they'll turn around and be like, "No, it's all a lie, nothing happened." Because that happened to me...'. (Workshop 21, three females, 13, 14, and 16 years)

This also highlights the significance of social media in the lives of adolescents (versus younger children), which though not a prominent theme among discussions, was noted as a channel through which name-calling and bullying by peers occurred, exacerbating feelings of being disbelieved or blamed.

Intentional Harm

The final theme relates to responses of friends and peers that young people experienced as intentionally harmful. Several examples of this related to breaches in confidentiality and associated stigma. Wider research consistently reminds us that for young people affected by sexual abuse, maintaining control over personal information is important (Cossar et al., 2019). Although confidentiality is regularly considered in relation to young people's experiences with professionals, participants in this study drew attention to its relevance within friendships and peer groups.

'Most of my friends, I would not really tell them anything because I do not trust them – like me and my friends are close but I just, they have said things [to other people] that I've told them before. So, I sort of just keep everything to myself really'. (Interview 8, male 17 years)

Several workshop discussions and interviews highlighted how information relating to a young person's experience of sexual abuse could be 'leaked' by friends without consent, catalysing anxiety about reputational harms and scapegoating. Relatedly, several young people described gossip and name-calling by friends and peers in relation to their experiences of abuse.

'[Peers] have called me really bad names, especially when I fell out with my friend, she called me a slut, and she knows what I've been through because she was my best friend, and she was one of the first people that I told before I told the school'. (Workshop 22, two females, 14 and 17 years)

Examples of such intentional harm were significant given the value young people placed on friendships as potentially safe, accessible and trusted sources of support, and the importance of wider peer groups in the daily lives of adolescents. Being let down by friends subsequently compounded feelings of intense vulnerability, loss of control, and could lead to social isolation and withdrawal.

DISCUSSION

Young people's testimonies in this project clearly articulate the significance of friends and peers in the aftermath of sexual abuse in adolescence and their relationship with emotional wellbeing, aligning with wider literature (Sawyer et al., 2018). However, the picture presented is complex and paradoxical, providing insight into the myriad ways friends and peers can simultaneously promote, and destabilise, mental health and emotional wellbeing after sexual abuse in adolescence.

On the one hand, friends can be preferred recipients of disclosure, as Schönbucher et al. (2012) found; and fulfil significant support roles, as Allnock (2015) identified. Such relationships appear to be able to buffer young people from some of the impacts of abuse, counter social isolation and act as a bridge to professional support. These roles seem crucial given evidence from wider research that the absence of a trusted person to talk to about an experience of sexual abuse can negatively impact wellbeing (Allnock & Miller, 2013; Reitsema & Grietens, 2016). Similarly, examples of the ways support can operate, although quantifiably small, echo similar accounts given in previous studies (Warrington et al., 2017) and strengthen evidence of the role of friends in supporting young people's disclosure of sexual abuse to adults. Conversely, and echoing findings from existing research, friendships can also prove precarious for young people at a time of intense vulnerability with peer groups becoming a source of secondary victimisation (Allnock & Atkinson, 2019).

Crucially, and a potentially unique contribution of this study, is evidence that even when young people are faced with uncertainty (Manay et al., 2022) and are aware of the fragility of these relationships and risks associated with disclosure to friends or peers, they continue to reach out. This indicates two things. Firstly, during adolescence the instinct or need to connect with peers can over-ride inherent risks involved, especially when the alternative – social isolation – is evidenced as jeopardising mental health and wellbeing. Secondly, it suggests that victims of sexual abuse in adolescence may have needs for support that cannot satisfactorily be met by adults, with friends potentially offering a unique form of support, free from the implications of family dynamics or the bounded nature of a professional offer.

Yet despite the significance of these relationships to young people's mental health or wellbeing, research participants in one workshop noted that friends and peers were rarely talked about or addressed in professional welfare contexts. Similarly, spaces for more formalised peer support were identified as lacking, overlooking the potential for young people's participation in service development to link individual recovery with wider social change (Hamilton et al., 2019). Interestingly the participatory group work initiated for the purpose of this research was repeatedly identified by participants as a unique and helpful experience. Together this suggests that there are missed opportunities to acknowledge and harness the supportive resources that friends and peers represent and to help young people navigate the challenges such relationships embody with greater safety and confidence. Opportunities to promote the positive potential of friendship and peer support should therefore be considered by young people's families and the range of services adolescents encounter in the aftermath of sexual abuse including healthcare, social care and specialist sexual abuse services. Furthermore, and given the particular significance of school for friend and peer relations, professionals working in this domain should be supported to respond to positive and negative impacts of such relationships.

Methodological Considerations and Limitations

A strength of our study is its innovative participatory approach and the related opportunity to foreground the perspectives of young people with experience of sexual abuse in adolescence. The study is limited, however, by a relatively small sample of (mostly female) young people, all of whom share an experience of support from a voluntary sector specialist service. This means that the transferability of findings to other groups of young people who have experienced sexual abuse in adolescence may vary. Similarly, the collaborative, semi-structured approach to data collection means the focus of interviews and workshops varied and some of the issues raised here were not discussed with every participant.

Future research may provide opportunities to test and explore these findings with other relevant groups of young people.

CONCLUSION

When young people affected by sexual abuse in adolescence are provided with space and support to inform not only research findings but also its focus, friends and peers are placed centre-stage – reminding us how professionals' and young people's priorities often differ. Young people's accounts suggest that for practitioners to fully support them after sexual abuse in adolescence there is a need to recognise and respond to these relational contexts. There is also evidence of a need for more structured spaces for peer support, where the constructive potential of peer relationships is enabled, and more difficult dynamics can be addressed. Equally there is a need to acknowledge a reality that young people themselves are often first recipients of a disclosure of sexual abuse in adolescence without access to formal training or support about how to respond. This raises questions about if and how professionals can safely and appropriately 'support young people to support' whilst avoiding placing inappropriate responsibility on young people's shoulders.

Relatedly research is required to address critical gaps in our knowledge – particularly in relation to the experience of those young people who receive disclosures of sexual abuse from friends or are part of a peer group where another young person's experience of sexual abuse becomes known.

What is clear is that young people's accounts challenge us to think anew about these relationships in the aftermath of adolescent sexual abuse, considering both how we can better respond to the associated needs which emerge and harness and support their potential.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

ETHICS STATEMENT

This research received ethical approval from the Institute of Applied Social Research at the University of Bedfordshire reference IASR_17/16.

RESEARCH FUNDER

This study was funded by the NSPCC and ESRC, under their research call 'Helping children get back on track after abuse and neglect'.

ORCID

Camille Warrington  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-1945-4892>

REFERENCES

- Adams, R.E. & Bukowski, W.M. (2007) Relationships with mothers and peers moderate the association between childhood sexual abuse and anxiety disorders. *Child Abuse & Neglect*, 31(6), 645–656. Available from: <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chiabu.2006.12.011>
- Allnock, D. & Atkinson, R. (2019) 'Snitches get stitches': School-specific barriers to victim disclosure and peer reporting of sexual harm committed by young people in school contexts. *Child Abuse & Neglect*, 89, 7–17. Available from: <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chiabu.2018.12.025>
- Allnock, D. & Miller, P. (2013) *No one noticed, no one heard: A study of disclosures of childhood abuse*. London: NSPCC.
- Allnock, D.S. (2015) Child maltreatment: How can friends contribute to safety? *Safer Communities*, 14(1), 27–36. Available from: <https://doi.org/10.1108/SC-02-2015-0005>
- Allnock, D., Beckett, H., Soares, C., Starbuck, L., Warrington, C. & Walker, J. (2022) *Learning from the Experts: Understanding the Mental Health and Emotional Wellbeing needs of those who experience sexual abuse during adolescence*. Luton: University of Bedfordshire. Available from: https://www.beds.ac.uk/media/3qjmxdlq/uob_sylrc_learningfromexpertsreport_full-report.pdf
- Armitage, J.M., Wang, R.A.H., Davis, O.S.P., Bowes, L. & Haworth, C.M.A. (2021) Peer victimisation during adolescence and its impact on wellbeing in adulthood: A prospective cohort study. *BMC Public Health*, 21(1), 148. Available from: <https://doi.org/10.1186/s12889-021-10198-w>
- Attar-Schwartz, S., Mishna, F. & Khoury-Kassabri, M. (2017) The role of Classmates' social support, peer victimization and gender in externalizing and internalizing behaviors among Canadian youth. *Journal of Child and Family Studies*, 28(9), 2335–2346. Available from: <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10826-017-0852-z>
- Beckett, H., Warrington, C. & Montgomery Devlin, J. (2019) *Learning about online sexual harm*. London: Independent Inquiry into Child Sexual Abuse Available from: <https://www.iicsa.org.uk/publications/research/learning-about-online-sexual-harm>
- Beresford, P. & Carr, S. (Eds). (2012) *Social care, service users and user involvement*. London: Jessica Kingsley.
- Bond, L., Butler, H., Thomas, L., Carlin, J., Glover, S., Bowes, G., et al. (2007) Social and school connectedness in early secondary school as predictors of late teenage substance use, mental health, and academic outcomes. *Journal of Adolescent Health*, 40(4), 357.e9–357.e18. Available from: <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jadohealth.2006.10.013>

- Bovarnick, S. & Cody, C. (2020) Putting risk into perspective: Lessons for children and youth services from a participatory advocacy project with survivors of sexual violence in Albania, Moldova and Serbia. *Children and Youth Services Review*, 126, 106003. Available from: <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.childyouth.2021.106003>
- Charmaz, K. (2006) *Constructing grounded theory: A practical guide through qualitative analysis*. London: Sage Publications.
- Cossar, J., Belderson, P. & Brandon, M. (2019) Recognition, telling and getting help with abuse and neglect: Young people's perspectives. *Children and Youth Services Review*, 106, 104469. Available from: <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.childyouth.2019.104469>
- Coyne, I. & Carter, B. (2018) *Being participatory: Researching with children and young people: Co-constructing knowledge using creative techniques*. Cham: Springer International Publishing. <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-71228-4>
- Crick, N.R. & Grotpeter, J.K. (1996) Children's treatment by peers: Victims of relational and overt aggression. *Development and Psychopathology*, 8(2), 367–380. Available from: <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0954579400007148>
- Firmin, C. (2020) *Contextual safeguarding and child protection rewriting the rules*/Carlene Firmin. Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780429283314>
- Hamilton, C., Rogers, A., Howard, K. & Warrington, C. (2019) From the ground up: Young research advisors' perspectives on relationships between participation and protection. *Journal of Children's Services*, 14(3), 228–234. Available from: <https://doi.org/10.1108/JCS-07-2019-0037>
- Kipping, R.R., Campbell, R.M., MacArthur, G.J., Gunnell, D.J. & Hickman, M. (2012) Multiple risk behaviour in adolescence. *Journal of Public Health*, 34(Suppl 1), i1–i2. Available from: <https://doi.org/10.1093/pubmed/fdr122>
- Laible, D. (2007) Attachment with parents and peers in late adolescence: Links with emotional competence and social behavior. *Personality and Individual Differences*, 43(5), 1185–1197. Available from: <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.paid.2007.03.010>
- Lereya, S.T., Copeland, W.E., Costello, E.J. & Wolke, D. (2015) Adult mental health consequences of peer bullying and maltreatment in childhood: Two cohorts in two countries. *The Lancet. Psychiatry*, 2(6), 524–531. Available from: [https://doi.org/10.1016/S2215-0366\(15\)00165-0](https://doi.org/10.1016/S2215-0366(15)00165-0)
- Lloyd, J. (2020) Abuse through sexual image sharing in schools: Response and responsibility. *Gender and Education*, 32(6), 784–802. Available from: <https://doi.org/10.1080/09540253.2018.1513456>
- Manay, N. & Collin-Vezina, D. (2021) Recipients of children's and adolescents' disclosures of childhood sexual abuse: A systematic review. *Child Abuse & Neglect*, 116(1), 104192. Available from: <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chiabu.2019.104192>
- Manay, N., Collin-Vezina, D., Alaggia, R. & McElvaney, R. (2022) "It's complicated because We're only sixteen": A framework for understanding childhood sexual abuse disclosures to peers. *Journal of Interpersonal Violence*, 37(3–4), 1704–1732. Available from: <https://doi.org/10.1177/088626052093305>
- McElvaney, R., Greene, S. & Hogan, D. (2014) To tell or not to tell? Factors influencing young People's informal disclosures of child sexual abuse. *Journal of Interpersonal Violence*, 29(5), 928–947. Available from: <https://doi.org/10.1177/0886260513506281>
- Meeus, W., Oosterwegel, A. & Vollebergh, W. (2002) Parental and peer attachment and identity development in adolescence. *Journal of Adolescence (London, England.)*, 25(1), 93–106. Available from: <https://doi.org/10.1006/jado.2001.0451>
- Ng-Knight, T., Shelton, K.H., Riglin, L., Frederickson, N., McManus, I.C. & Rice, F. (2019) "Best friends forever"? Friendship stability across school transition and associations with mental health and educational attainment. *British Journal of Educational Psychology*, 89(4), 585–599. Available from: <https://doi.org/10.1111/bjep.12246>
- Parker, J.G. & Gottman, J.M. (1989) Social and emotional development in a relational context: Friendship interaction from early childhood to adolescence. In: Berndt, T.J. & Ladd, G.W. (Eds.) *Peer relationships in child development*. New York, NY, USA: John Wiley & Sons, pp. 95–131.
- Pickering, L., Hadwin, J.A. & Kovshoff, H. (2020) The role of peers in the development of social anxiety in adolescent girls: A systematic review. *Adolescent Research Review*, 5(4), 341–362. Available from: <https://doi.org/10.1007/s40894-019-00117-x>
- Priebe, G. & Svedin, C.G. (2008) Child sexual abuse is largely hidden from the adult society: An epidemiological study of adolescents' disclosures. *Child Abuse & Neglect*, 32(12), 1095–1108. Available from: <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chiabu.2008.04.001>
- Prinstein, M.J. & Giletta, M. (2020) Future directions in peer relations research. *Journal of Clinical Child and Adolescent Psychology*, 49(4), 556–572. Available from: <https://doi.org/10.1080/15374416.2020.1756299>
- Reitsema, A. & Grietens, H. (2016) Is anybody listening? The literature on the dialogical process of child sexual abuse disclosure reviewed. *Trauma, Violence & Abuse*, 17(3), 330–340. Available from: <https://doi.org/10.1177/1524838015584368>
- Sawyer, S., Azzopardi, P., Wickremarante, D. & Patton, G. (2018) The age of adolescence. *Lancet: Child and Adolescent Health*, 2(3), 223–228. Available from: https://www.why.org.au/sites/default/files/2019-11/2018Sawyer_Age_of_AdolescenceFINAL.pdf
- Schönbucher, V., Maier, T., Mohler-Kuo, M., Schnyder, U. & Landolt, M.A. (2012) Disclosure of child sexual abuse by adolescents: A qualitative in-depth study. *Journal of Interpersonal Violence*, 27(17), 3486–3513. Available from: <https://doi.org/10.1177/0886260512445380>
- United Nations. (1989) *Convention on the rights of the child*. New York: United Nations.
- Warrington, C., Beckett, H., Ackerley, E., Walker, M. & Allnock, D. (2017) *Making noise: Children's voices for positive change after sexual abuse: children's experiences of help-seeking and support after sexual abuse in the family environment*. Luton: University of Bedfordshire.

SUPPORTING INFORMATION

Additional supporting information can be found online in the Supporting Information section at the end of this article.

How to cite this article: Warrington, C., Allnock, D., Soares, C., Beckett, H. & Starbuck, L. (2023) 'Letting you share when you need to share': navigating the potential and precarity of friends and peers for UK young people after sexual abuse in adolescence. *Child Abuse Review*, 32(3), e2804. Available from: <https://doi.org/10.1002/car.2804>