

ICS Safeguarding Newsletter 18

From Conflict to Connection: Supporting Peer Relationships

Friendships matter deeply to children and young people. They shape confidence, belonging, identity, and wellbeing. When friendships are going well, school feels safer and life feels easier. When they're not, the impact can be significant: anxiety, sleep difficulties, avoidance of school, isolation, changes in appetite, and a drop in self-esteem.

In every school - Primary and Secondary - children will experience disagreement, fall-outs, and social tension. Most conflict is developmentally normal and can be a powerful learning opportunity. However, sometimes what looks like 'friendship issues' could actually be peer-on-peer harm: repeated behaviour that causes emotional or physical harm, fear, humiliation, exclusion, or coercion.

This week's article aims to help families recognise the difference between ordinary conflict and harmful behaviour, and to offer practical ways to support children and teens to build healthy friendships, repair relationships safely, and seek help early.

A short story: The Lunch Table

Mira (Year 5) loved sitting with the same three friends at lunch. One Monday she arrived and saw her name written on a scrap of paper: *'Not today'*. The girls laughed and said it was 'just a joke'. Mira smiled because she didn't want to look upset, but her stomach tightened.

The next day, her water bottle was moved and her seat taken. Again, it was 'just a joke'. By Thursday, the group chat had new rules: you could only join if you 'proved you were loyal'. Mira was told to stop talking to one of her classmates. When she didn't, the messages became sharper: *'No one likes you, don't come tomorrow'*.

At home, Mira didn't mention any of it. She asked for a later bedtime, spent longer in the bathroom, and began saying her head hurt in the mornings. When her mum finally asked, 'Are things okay with your friends?' Mira shrugged: 'It's nothing. I just don't want drama'.

In Secondary school across the courtyard, Kareem (Year 9) had a different version of the same problem. His friends teased him about his accent and the way he ran in PE. At first it was funny. Then it became daily. Someone filmed him tripping and posted it with a laughing emoji. He told himself, *If I can't take a joke, I'll look weak*. But he started skipping PE and sitting alone during break. When a teacher asked, he said, 'It's fine. We're mates'.

Two children. Two ages. One message: *'This is normal, don't make a fuss'*.

And that's why these situations can become serious - because children often minimise harm to protect belonging.

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Conflict or harm? A helpful guide for families

Normal peer conflict often looks like:

- A disagreement or fall-out that happens occasionally
- Both children have a voice (it's not one-sided)
- There is no fear involved
- They can calm down and move on with adult support
- Repair is possible, and the relationship returns to balance

Peer-on-peer harm may look like:

- Repeated behaviour or a pattern over time
- One child holds more power (popularity, age, physical strength, group size, online influence)
- The target feels anxious, trapped, or scared
- The behaviour escalates (more frequent, more intense, spreading to others)
- The child changes their behaviour to avoid it (stops going to clubs, avoids areas, changes route, avoids school)
- The behaviour includes humiliation, coercion, threats, exclusion, sexualised behaviour, or physical aggression

Friendship skills children need (and how families can help)

Healthy friendships are not conflict-free. They are built on:

- **Kindness and respect**
- **Boundaries** ("I don't like that" / "Stop")
- **Repair** (apologising and changing behaviour, not just saying sorry)
- **Honesty** without cruelty
- **Shared power** (no one is "in charge")

In Primary years, children benefit from:

- Practising words for feelings: "left out," "embarrassed," "worried," "angry"
- Learning that "jokes" must be funny for everyone
- Understanding that excluding someone repeatedly is harmful, not "friendship preference"
- Clear scripts they can use in the moment:
 - "Stop. I don't like that."
 - "That's not kind."
 - "I'm going to find an adult."
 - "You can play, but not if you're being mean."

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In Secondary years, teenagers benefit from:

- Support to recognise social pressure and coercion (“If you don’t do this, you can’t be with us”)
- Conversations about identity, reputation, and online life
- Permission to step away from “friends” who harm them, without shame
- Strategies for bystanders (a powerful protective factor):
 - “Let’s go - come with me.”
 - “That’s not okay.”
 - “I’m not sharing that.”
 - Reporting online harm rather than forwarding it

The online layer: group chats, images, and ‘banter’

Many peer conflicts now have an online dimension. A small issue can escalate quickly when:

- Screenshots are shared
- Group chats are used to exclude or humiliate
- Images or videos are posted without consent
- Anonymous accounts appear

A simple family rule can help:

‘If it would hurt in real life, it hurts online too - and it spreads faster’.

Encourage children and teens to:

- Save evidence (screenshots) without responding
- Block/report harmful accounts
- Tell a trusted adult early
- Avoid forwarding or reacting (even emojis can fuel harm)

What parents can do when your child says: ‘It’s fine’

Children often fear that telling an adult will make things worse. Try:

- “I’m glad you told me. You’re not in trouble.”
- “You deserve to feel safe at school.”
- “Let’s work out the next step together.”
- “Who is the kindest adult you could talk to at school?”
- “Would you like me to email, or would you prefer to speak first with support?”

A quick check-in that works for most ages:

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- “Who did you spend time with today?”
- “Was anything unkind or uncomfortable?”
- “Did you feel left out at any point?”
- “Is anyone being pressured to do things they don’t want to do?”
- “What would you like to happen next?”

When to contact school

Please contact us if you notice:

- A sudden change in mood, sleep, appetite, or confidence
- Avoidance of school, clubs, or certain areas
- Lost friendships without explanation, or distress after phone notifications
- New secrecy around devices or social media
- Unexplained injuries, missing belongings, or frequent complaints of headaches/stomach aches
- Your child describing threats, coercion, sexualised language/behaviour, or physical aggression

It is always better to contact us early. Many issues can be resolved quickly when addressed at the first signs.

How school responds

When peer-on-peer concerns are raised, we focus on:

- Safety and wellbeing of the child experiencing harm
- Clear investigation and evidence gathering (including online evidence when relevant)
- Support for those harmed and those causing harm (because behaviour can be learned and changed)
- Restorative approaches **only when safe and appropriate** (never forcing a child to face someone who harmed them)
- Ongoing monitoring, supervision, and communication with families

A final message to children and teens (worth repeating at home)

- “You are allowed to say no.”
- “A friend does not scare you, control you, or humiliate you.”
- “If it’s happening online, it still counts.”
- “Telling an adult is not ‘snitching’—it’s getting help.”

Friendships are a place to feel safe, seen, and valued. When they become a source of fear, pressure, or repeated hurt, adults must step in. Thank you for helping us build a

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community where children and young people learn not only academics, but also how to treat each other with dignity and care.

If you have a concern, please contact the Designated Safeguarding Lead:

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Try:

- "I'm glad you told me. Tell me more."
- "What happened just before you started feeling that way?"
- "If the feeling had a name, what would it be?" (worried/embarrassed/scared/left out/angry)
- "Has this happened before, or is this new?"
- "Where was it happening — in class, at break, online, or on the way to/from school?"
- "If this happened to your friend, what would you want them to do?" (this can really help older children open up)

These questions work because they are calm, curious, and non-judgemental. They help children feel heard without pressure.

What to avoid (even with the best intentions)

When we're worried, it's easy to rush in with reassurance or quick solutions. Sometimes that closes the conversation.

Try not to lead with:

- "Are you sure?" / "That can't be right."
- "Just ignore it."
- "You need to be tougher."
- "I'll sort it out right now." (unless immediate safety is involved)

Instead, pause, listen, and let your child feel taken seriously.

A simple '3-step check' that helps at any age

If you notice a concerning phrase or change, try this:

1. **Notice** – "I've heard you say that a few times."
2. **Name** – "It sounds like something is worrying you."
3. **Nurture** – "You're not in trouble. I'm here, and we'll work it out together."

A note on older children and teens

As children get older, they often share less—not because they trust you less, but because they're:

- trying to manage things independently
- worried about 'making a fuss'
- scared of consequences (friendship fallout, devices being taken away, adults overreacting)

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A helpful phrase is: "I won't overreact — but I will help."
It reassures them that telling you won't make everything explode.

For children and young people: If something feels wrong...

Sometimes our feelings are clues. If you feel worried, unsafe, or uncomfortable:

- Tell a trusted adult (at home or school)
- If it's online: stop, don't reply, save evidence (screenshots), and tell an adult
- If you're not ready to talk: you can start with "Something's bothering me, but I don't know how to say it yet."

You never have to handle big worries on your own.

When to contact the school

Please reach out if:

- your child mentions feeling unsafe, threatened, hurt, or pressured
- there are repeated worries about a person (child or adult)
- you notice escalating anxiety, school refusal, or sudden behaviour changes
- your child shares anything about harmful online contact or messages

Our safeguarding team would always rather hear early, even if you're not sure. We can support calmly and discreetly.

Final thought: When children say "I'm fine," they may mean "I don't have the words yet."
The most protective thing we can offer is a steady adult who listens, believes, and acts when needed.

Kathryn Honey

Primary Headteacher and Designated Safeguarding Lead