

Key legal and ethical considerations when working with friends and peers

During a friendship and peer assessment, you should continually reflect on whether your approach is welfare-led and whether the young person's rights and needs are being prioritised. This document recaps key legal and ethical considerations. Make sure these are in place before you begin and considered throughout the assessment process.

Purpose

Be clear about why you're doing a friendship and peer assessment. The purpose must always be safeguarding. When that's the case, this work can align with legal frameworks like the Human Rights Act and General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) under the protection of health.

Mapping groups of young people for crime prevention or intelligence gathering directly contravenes the Human Rights Act and GDPR and could lead to the criminalisation of young people who should be given a safeguarding response.

It's easy for boundaries to blur, especially when information could be relevant to both safeguarding and criminal investigations. That's why it's important to stay grounded in your purpose throughout the assessment process from gathering information to planning and intervention.

Transparency

Some local authorities share clear public statements explaining how and why they carry out friendship and peer assessments. Others have gone further by actively involving young people, families, and communities in conversations about the process. The more open you are, the more likely people are to understand and engage with the work.

Process

It's important to have a clear record of the process which should be accessible to everyone involved. The process should outline why a friendship and peer assessment is needed, when and how it happens and who is involved.

Proportionality

Like any child and family assessment, the approach to friendship and peer assessments should develop over time in a reflective way, as new information emerges. It should also be proportionate. Consider whether your processes allow for this level of sensitivity to evidence, as your assessment develops. Consider also whether it allows you to respond appropriately to the severity of harm experienced by a group.

Relational

Young people want us to consider who is best placed to engage with them in assessing their friendships. Find out who these trusted adults are and collaborate with them to engage young people in the process. Consider too how you can earn young people's trust and reassure them that you will respect their experiences and what they share.

Recording

Consider where you will record information. Focus on capturing themes about harm and safety in a context, rather than detailed personal data about individuals wherever possible. This helps protect privacy while still building a clear picture of risk. Recording may look different depending on whether you're working with an individual (and considering their friendships), or a group of friends directly. Either way, strong policies on data ownership, oversight, and deletion are essential.

Privacy

Information-sharing can protect young people but only when carried out thoughtfully, proportionately, and with respect for privacy and participation. Sharing information without careful consideration can damage relationships with young people and constitute a breach of their right to privacy.