
SEXUAL HARASSMENT

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Almost 80% of students in secondary schools report experiencing sexual harassment at school. At the elementary school level it is exhibited differently and thus it may be overlooked. In fact, sexual harassment has become so commonplace that many accept it as something everyone puts up with. However, sexual harassment is unacceptable, causing personal pain and embarrassment, creating a negative school environment, and feeding into more violent behaviors. It is important for teachers, parents, and students to gain an understanding of what sexual harassment actually is, how to respond to it, and how to prevent it.

What Is Sexual Harassment

Behaviors. Sexual harassment is unwanted and unwelcome sexual behavior. Physical behaviors may include touching that is uncomfortable, embarrassing, and/or offensive (such as unwanted groping, pinching, or patting). Sexual harassment is not limited, however, to physical acts. Using crude or sexually inappropriate language can be considered sexual harassment if it creates an uncomfortable environment for someone else. Sexual harassment may also include offensive jokes, comments, greetings, verbal teasing, or inappropriate name-calling, such as “Hey, babe,” “Hot stuff,” or “Big stud.” Students often sexually harass others by calling them “fag,” “homo,” or other degrading terms that refer to sexual orientation.

Additional types of sexual harassment include students starting or spreading sexual rumors, writing sexual graffiti on bathroom walls, sending crude e-mails or letters, and displaying sexual drawings or pornography. A person in a position of power may request sexual favors in return for a starting position on a school team, a higher grade, or access to a popular club or peer group. Individuals who experience sexual harassment feel fearful, intimidated, manipulated, and overpowered.

Identification. Identifying sexual harassment is not always easy. A boy may jokingly snap a girl’s bra, or a girl may teasingly tug at a boy’s pants, and then claim, “I was just teasing” or “I thought they liked it.” Even though sexual harassment may not have been the motive, if the target finds the behavior uncomfortable, embarrassing, or threatening, there is a problem. It is the perception of the individual who is being harassed, not that of the harasser, that weighs most heavily in deciding if harassment has occurred.

It is important to consider the individual’s age and the context of the situation when identifying sexual harassment. For example, if kindergartners are playing kissing tag and there is a sense of fun and enjoyment for all students, the game is not sexual harassment. If a teacher hugs an injured child, this is most likely not sexual harassment. If, however, the child perceives the touch as uncomfortable or the touching happens repeatedly, it may be sexual harassment. Similarly, if junior high students are flirting and the interaction is good natured without a sense of threat or intimidation, the flirting is probably not sexual harassment.

Types and Prevalence of Sexual Harassment

Gender issues. Girls and boys report experiencing sexual harassment at about the same rate, even though most people believe that girls are more often the target. However, boys and girls experience different types of sexual harassment. Girls are more likely than boys to be physically harassed and are also more likely to be harassed by adults. Girls are more likely to be touched, grabbed, pinched, or brushed up against in a sexual way.

However, for all students, sexual harassment is most frequently verbal: sexual comments, name-calling, jokes, gestures, or looks. For example, girls may be the brunt of rumors such as, “She slept with

Joe.” Boys are more likely to be called “gay” than girls. For both boys and girls, about 75% of students who are sexually harassed also harass others.

Boys may find it more difficult to report being sexually harassed. Adults may assume that boys should enjoy the sexual attention of girls or that boys are wimpy if they do not stand up for themselves. Boys are expected to toughen up and put up with harassment. These attitudes are not helpful and may promote or inadvertently support a disrespectful attitude that strengthens the power of students who sexually harass others.

Developmental issues. Sexual harassment in elementary school looks different from sexual harassment among adolescents. Younger students may be frightened by sexual harassment even though they may not understand the sexual nature of the interaction. Younger students, students with poor social skills, or those with developmental delays may not know how to assertively respond to the harasser or how to report it.

Situations related to harassment. Students report that sexual harassment typically occurs in places such as the cafeteria, hallways, and classrooms, places where adults are present, but may not be aware of the behaviors. Many times sexual harassment appears mild or harmless. For example, one of the most common forms of sexual harassment is being called “gay.” Teachers may overlook the behavior because it happens so frequently or may believe the student can handle it himself or herself or that he or she is not bothered by it.

Although less common, students who sexually harass adults may be more likely to sexually harass school support staff such as paraeducators, cafeteria workers, and janitors rather than teachers or administrators because support staff may be perceived as less powerful. School support staff may be confused by the offensive behavior and not report it to administrators. Even when incidents are reported, staff may be told, “That’s just part of your job.” When the student’s behavior is not addressed, the student does not have an opportunity to learn more appropriate behaviors and may continue to disregard the rights of others.

How to Identify and Respond to Sexual Harassment

Supporting Victims

Symptoms of harassment. When students talk about experiencing sexual harassment, they report feeling “upset,” “embarrassed,” “anxious,” “vulnerable,” and “unsafe.” Some students report feeling “used,” “unclean,” or “dirty.” They may report feeling

“worthless” or “like a second-class citizen.” Students who are the target of harassment may experience anxiety, distress, confusion, and some symptoms of depression, especially a sense of helplessness. They may avoid places where the harassment tends to occur, such as certain hallways or places in the lunchroom. Other students may complain of stomachaches or headaches in order to avoid the harasser.

Supporting reports of harassment. Students may have difficulty talking to adults about sexual harassment. They may wrongly assume that they are to blame because of how they dressed or because of something they said or did. It should never be implied that the targeted student is responsible for the harasser’s offensive behavior. Students should not be told, “If you had told us earlier, we could have stopped it before it got to this point.” Every effort should be taken to relieve the pressure and guilt the target may feel. When a student reports being sexually harassed it is important not to downplay the experience or reaction. Telling the student, “Just ignore the person and he or she will stop,” discounts the student’s discomfort with the situation. This type of response may send a message to both the target and the harasser that adults may not take the time and effort to protect students or do not know how to respond themselves.

Responding to sexual harassment. Some students may be confused or feel threatened and uneasy, but they do not come forward and report the incident or incidents because they fear retaliation. Adults can help students identify what is happening and take appropriate steps to intervene. Some steps include role-playing assertive responses with students. An assertive response may be, “I do not like it when you brush up against me. I want you to stop touching me.” Another option is to write a brief letter to the harasser specifically requesting the behavior to stop. Adults can help the student develop a plan so that he or she feels safe. The safety plan may include a route change, schedule change, or assigned friend to accompany the student in risky areas.

Establishing School Policies

Written policies. According to federal law, Title IX, each school must have a written policy against sexual discrimination, including behaviors associated with sexual harassment. Each school policy must be made public. The policy should define sexual harassment, clearly state that it is inappropriate, and then identify a procedure for investigating complaints. Although schools typically designate one person who is trained to investigate claims of sexual harassment, it is preferable to assign two people, a male and a female, to accommodate students’ possible discomfort with

reporting harassment to an adult of the opposite gender.

Investigating reports. When a student reports harassment, it is important to take the complaint seriously. Legal problems arise when school personnel are aware of an incident of sexual harassment but do not effectively respond. Investigation of claims should follow school policy. Maintaining objectivity and fairness during the investigation communicates respect for all students. Students are more likely to report sexual harassment when they believe teachers care about them and are trustworthy. The student should be assured that he or she will be protected from retaliation. Even if a student chooses not to file a complaint, school administrators must maintain the confidentiality of the student and address the issue.

Constructive consequences. Although the tendency is to focus on punishment for offenders, implementing a zero-tolerance policy does not address the needs of students who harass. Responding effectively and constructively to offending behavior poses a challenge to school adults. Harassers must face the negative consequences of their behavior, even if their intentions were to joke or tease. It is important to move the harasser through the negative consequences or punishment phase and into the constructive phase of generating options for alternative, more acceptable behavior. These students need to learn positive social skills and have opportunities to practice them in a supportive, learning environment.

Components of effective policies. A well-written and accessible school policy must clearly communicate that sexual harassment is unacceptable. Guidelines for creating an easily understood policy are available online at www.aauw.org/k-12. The policy should include:

- School-specific examples to assist students in identifying sexual harassment
- Description of how claims will be investigated
- Statement prohibiting retaliation
- Specific disciplinary consequences for harassment and retaliation
- List of resources available to both the targets and harassers, such as counseling or outside community resources

Training. Even though developing and posting this policy are appropriate first steps, independently they are ineffective in decreasing harassing behaviors. The policy must be supported by school administrators, teachers, and other school staff who understand their important role in decreasing sexual harassment. All school staff should receive training to help them identify and

respond appropriately to sexual harassment and in their role in creating supportive and respectful school environments. For example, adults should not tell sexual jokes or make inappropriate sexual references and innuendos. They should avoid gender stereotyping. When adults model respectful behavior, students are likely to follow their example.

Preventing Sexual Harassment

Preventing sexual harassment must be an ongoing priority. Training that occurs over time, across settings, and includes the entire faculty, staff, and administrative personnel will be more effective than a one-time session of training for the teachers. Classes covering civil rights, diversity, or tolerance can include the topic of sexual harassment, and provide opportunities for ongoing discussion about respectful behavior. In addition to integrating this topic with existing coursework, specific materials about sexual harassment should be available for classroom use. Although a short video clip about sexual harassment may be appropriate to start a discussion, a video in isolation is not as effective as a discussion in changing student attitudes and behavior. Students prefer to *talk* with adults and peers about their observations, feelings, and experiences. Materials to assist with classroom and school-wide training on sexual harassment are listed in the “Resources” at the end of this handout.

Conclusion

Sexual harassment is a sensitive topic. Merely providing students, parents, and staff with information about the school’s sexual harassment policy is insufficient. Schools must provide positive, proactive behavioral supports, ongoing training, and discussions as part of the daily school routine rather than relying solely on disciplinary consequences for inappropriate behavior and language. Administrators, teachers, students, and parents must nurture an inclusive, supportive, and respectful environment in their efforts to decrease and eliminate sexual harassment.

Resources

- American Association of University Women. (2001). *Hostile hallways*. Washington, DC: AAUW Educational Foundation. ISBN: 1879922010. Available: www.aauw.org/k-12
- Stein, N. (1999). *Classrooms and courtrooms: Facing sexual harassment in K–12 schools*. New York: Teachers College Press. ISBN: 0807738786.
- Stein, N., & Sjostrom, L. (1994). *Flirting or hurting? A teacher’s guide on student-to-student sexual harassment in schools (grades 6–12)*. Washington,

DC: National Education Association. ISBN: 0810618648.

U.S. Department of Education, Office for Civil Rights. (2001). *Sexual harassment policy guidance: Harassment of students by school employees, other students, or third parties*. Washington, DC: Author. Available: www.ed.gov/about/offices/list/ocr/docs/sexhar00.html
WGBY-TV. (1996). *Flirting or hurting: Sexual harassment in schools* [video]. Available: GPN, P.O. Box 80669, Lincoln, NE 68501-0669; (800) 228-4630.

Websites

American Association of University Women—
www.aauw.org
A leader in addressing education and sexual harassment issues. Lists resources available for increasing understanding of sexual harassment and for preventing and responding to incidents. See: www.aauw.org/ef/harass/schoolresources.cfm
Office for Civil Rights, U.S. Department of Education—
www.ed.gov/about/offices/list/ocr/checklist.html
Has a number of resources on sexual harassment; see also www.ed.gov/about/offices/list/ocr/docs/ocrshpam.html?exp=0, a pamphlet for school administrators, teachers, and other personnel to help them recognize and address sexual harassment in the school setting.

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The National Association of School Psychologists (NASP) offers a wide variety of free or low cost online resources to parents, teachers, and others working with children and youth through the NASP website www.nasponline.org

and the NASP Center for Children & Families website www.naspcenter.org. Or use the direct links below to access information that can help you improve outcomes for the children and youth in your care.

About School Psychology—Downloadable brochures, FAQs, and facts about training, practice, and career choices for the profession.
www.nasponline.org/about_nasp/spsych.html

Crisis Resources—Handouts, fact sheets, and links regarding crisis prevention/intervention, coping with trauma, suicide prevention, and school safety.
www.nasponline.org/crisisresources

Culturally Competent Practice—Materials and resources promoting culturally competent assessment and intervention, minority recruitment, and issues related to cultural diversity and tolerance.
www.nasponline.org/culturalcompetence

En Español—Parent handouts and materials translated into Spanish. www.naspcenter.org/espanol/

IDEA Information—Information, resources, and advocacy tools regarding IDEA policy and practical implementation.
www.nasponline.org/advocacy/IDEAinformation.html

Information for Educators—Handouts, articles, and other resources on a variety of topics.
www.naspcenter.org/teachers/teachers.html

Information for Parents—Handouts and other resources a variety of topics.
www.naspcenter.org/parents/parents.html

Links to State Associations—Easy access to state association websites.
www.nasponline.org/information/links_state_orgs.html

NASP Books & Publications Store—Review tables of contents and chapters of NASP bestsellers.
www.nasponline.org/bestsellers
Order online. www.nasponline.org/store

Position Papers—Official NASP policy positions on key issues.
www.nasponline.org/information/position_paper.html

Success in School/Skills for Life—Parent handouts that can be posted on your school's website.
www.naspcenter.org/resourcekit