

## Sexual harassment: staff guidance

Following the publication of Ofsted's [Review of sexual abuse in schools and colleges](#) (2021), which uncovered an epidemic of sexual harassment and abuse among pupils in schools and colleges, an inclusive RSHE curriculum is now high on the agenda for schools, with a focus on respect for others, risks and implications of online and peer to peer harassment.

Ofsted's core recommendation is that school leaders act now and act quickly, working on the assumption that sexual harassment is taking place whether it has been reported or not.

*Nearly 90 per cent of girls, and nearly 50 per cent of boys, said being sent explicit pictures or videos of things they did not want to see happens a lot or sometimes to them or their peers. Children and young people told us that sexual harassment occurs so frequently that it has become 'commonplace'. The frequency of these harmful sexual behaviours means that some children and young people consider them normal.* ([www.gov.uk/government/publications/review-of-sexual-abuse-in-schools-and-colleges](http://www.gov.uk/government/publications/review-of-sexual-abuse-in-schools-and-colleges))

Sexual harassment isn't a clear-cut topic and what may constitute harassment for one person or in one context won't be the same for or in another. This toolkit aims to empower staff and students to question and to challenge behaviour which may be inappropriate or makes them feel uncomfortable and therefore explores the nuances of harassment and how to begin an all-important conversation within a school setting.

*Almost a quarter (24%) of female students and 4% of male students at mixed-sex schools have been subjected to unwanted physical touching of a sexual nature.* ([www.gov.uk/government/publications/sexual-violence-and-sexual-harassment-between-children-in-schools-and-colleges](http://www.gov.uk/government/publications/sexual-violence-and-sexual-harassment-between-children-in-schools-and-colleges))

The Everyone's Invited movement and Ofsted review have highlighted the prevalence of sexual harassment in schools. Saying 'it doesn't happen here' isn't an option anymore – all schools need to consider their role in educating children and young people in this area.

The Ofsted report also adds that carefully sequenced RSHE based on the [statutory curriculum](#), which specifically includes sexual harassment and violence (including online), should be a vital part of our response to this problem.

### Ofsted's recommendations

- Develop a culture where all kinds of sexual harassment are recognised and addressed, including with sanctions when appropriate.
- The RSHE curriculum should be carefully sequenced with time allocated for topics that children and young people find difficult, such as consent and sharing explicit images.
- Provide high-quality training for teachers delivering RSHE.
- Improve engagement between multi-agency safeguarding partners and schools.

([www.gov.uk/government/news/ofsted-culture-change-needed-to-tackle-normalised-sexual-harassment-in-schools-and-colleges](http://www.gov.uk/government/news/ofsted-culture-change-needed-to-tackle-normalised-sexual-harassment-in-schools-and-colleges))

## Defining sexual harassment

The Equality Act of 2010 has this definition: ‘unwanted conduct of a sexual nature which has the purpose or effect of violating someone’s dignity, or creating an intimidating, hostile, degrading, humiliating or offensive environment for them’. It covers indecent or suggestive remarks, unwanted touching, requests or demands for sex and the dissemination of pornography.

It is important that everyone is clear on the definitions of sexual harassment, while acknowledging that people will feel differently about each item on the list below. Ultimately the harassment will have varying degrees of impact to each individual and the severity of each point is to be reported and dealt with in a sensitive manner and in one that ensures the harassment stops and the situation is dealt with as effectively as possible.

Acts of sexual harassment can occur online or face-to-face; the key message for schools to remember is that if an individual feels threatened, or reports they were sexually harassed, it is vital that their story is heard and that the young person feels supported, valued, and more importantly, that they feel safe.

Sexual harassment includes:

- telling or digitally sending sexual or personally sexual jokes or sexual taunting
- sending porn or links to porn websites
- inappropriate touching in passing or when stationary
- inappropriate sexualised gestures, noises or hand signals
- spreading sexual gossip
- taking intimate pictures without permission
- passing on intimate photos without permission
- ‘upskirting’, which means taking pictures without permission and/or knowledge looking up clothing
- calling people names with sexual connotations.

## Defining sexual assault

Sexual or indecent assault is an act of physical, psychological and emotional violation in the form of a sexual act, inflicted on someone without their consent. It can involve forcing or manipulating someone to witness or participate in any sexual acts.

If a person commits an offence of sexual assault if they intentionally touch another person sexually and the other person does not consent to this touching.

## Defining Sexual Violence

The Sexual Offences Act, 2003 defines sexual violence as:

- rape – a person commits an offence of rape if: he intentionally penetrates the vagina, anus or mouth of another person with his penis when the other person does not consent to this act
- assault by penetration – where someone penetrates the vagina or anus of another person with a part of her/his body or anything else without consent.

## Guidance for staff

Sexual harassment is an uncomfortable topic and one that makes many people defensive too. Staff may hold a variety of values around sexual harassment and it is important that staff remember to 'facilitate' sessions rather than relaying their own beliefs and opinions.

Setting boundaries before conversations can really help. A working together agreement must be set ahead of any delivery with pupils and certain points can be added as and when they arise. For example, some of the basic criteria for a 'working together agreement' could be:

- listen to different opinions and ensure they are respected even if you don't necessarily agree
- make sure you ask questions and make time for discussion
- not to ask personal questions or make personal comments
- please ask for help after this session if you need further support or advice (refer to local and national support services)
- listen well to each other
- no judgement during the session.

Ensure respect, active listening and empathy are understood and committed to; this applies to the sessions staff will deliver as well as the thoughts of staff relating to this challenging topic.

It is essential that school provide a safe space for pupils to speak with someone they trust if they feel they need to disclose peer-on-peer sexual abuse and harassment. Pupils therefore need to know they will be supported and teaching staff should ensure that all pupils are supported and assured that they will be taken seriously and that any disclosures will be dealt with in line with schools' policies and safeguarding procedures.

It should be assumed that sexual assault is taking place within a setting and that is not to be tolerated. Pupils should receive the correct information around treating everyone with respect, healthy relationships and the impact of sexual imagery online. These important topics should be covered through the school's relationship, health and sex education curriculum, in line with the requirements set out by the Department for Education.

Staff can ensure pupils are aware of the severity of sexual assault within school and this message can be covered during assemblies, lessons and posters/signposting to support services. If staff are struggling to take disclosures or manage sensitive conversations then it is essential they receive advice and guidance via the DSLs in school and know that any reports of sexual harassment must be dealt with in accordance to school policy.

If a pupil approaches you with a disclosure, it is important to listen, not to ask any leading questions but to give the pupils time to talk. It is equally important to ensure the pupil is aware that the disclosure will be taken seriously and to acknowledge their bravery in speaking out.

## Discussion starters

Begin by looking at the following statements and discuss whether staff agree, disagree or are somewhere in between. These points can initiate healthy discussions between staff members and can assist with addressing our own values and beliefs in relation to this topic.

- Receiving a wolf whistle is only banter.
- Girls in school wearing short skirts are prone to sexual harassment.
- There are clear systems in school for pupils to report verbal sexual harassment.
- There are clear systems in school for pupils to report physical sexual harassment.
- Boys don't tend to report any sexual harassment.
- If a lad pings a female students bra strap this shouldn't be a huge issue.
- If a pupil reports that another pupil is stalking them this matter should be taken seriously.
- I feel confident that I know the correct steps to take if a pupil report receiving nude images.
- It is only males that harass females and there aren't any cases of same sex harassment or female to male harassment.
- Females tend to lead on the boys, especially if they wear suggestive clothing and make up.
- Boys tend to get hormones at around school age and they need to let off steam by 'cat calling'; they don't mean anything by it.
- The porn industry gives people the idea to harass others sexually.