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# Sexual Harassment: A Guide for School Personnel

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Approximately 80% of students in U.S. secondary schools report they have experienced sexual harassment, but it also occurs frequently in elementary schools (American Association of University Women, 2001). This type of behavior has become so commonplace that many accept it as something everyone puts up with. Even if it is common, sexual harassment is unacceptable, causing personal pain and embarrassment and creating a negative learning environment.

## WHAT IS SEXUAL HARASSMENT?

Sexual harassment is defined as unwanted and unwelcome sexual behavior.

### Types of Harassment

Physical behaviors may include touching that is uncomfortable, embarrassing, and offensive. Sexual harassment is not limited to physical acts. In fact, sexual harassment is most frequently verbal. Using crude or sexually inappropriate language can be considered sexual harassment if it creates an uncomfortable environment. 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, sending mean or crude text messages, 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.

### Identifying Sexual Harassment

Identifying sexual harassment is not always easy. A boy may snap a girl’s bra, or a girl may tug at a boy’s pants. The perpetrator may 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 and interventions are needed.

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 probably not 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. It is the perception of the student who is being harassed, not that of the harasser, that weighs most heavily in deciding if harassment has occurred.

## PREVALENCE OF SEXUAL HARASSMENT

For both boys and girls, about 75% of students who are sexually harassed also harass others, including classmates and adults. 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. When a student’s harassing behavior is not addressed, the student misses an opportunity to learn appropriate behaviors and may continue to disregard the rights of others.

### Gender Differences

Girls and boys report experiencing sexual harassment at about the same rate, but they 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. Boys may find it more difficult to report being sexually harassed because they fear adults may assume that boys should enjoy the sexual attention of girls or that boys should stand up for themselves rather than report their discomfort to authority figures.

### **Adult Harassment**

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 because support staff may be perceived as less powerful than teachers or administrators.

## **HOW TO IDENTIFY AND RESPOND TO SEXUAL HARASSMENT**

It is important that school personnel recognize and respond to signs and reports of sexual harassment.

### **Be Alert to Reports and Signs 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. 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. Other students may complain of stomachaches or headaches in order to avoid the harasser.

### **Provide a Caring Environment to Report Harassment**

Students may have difficulty talking to adults about sexual harassment. They may wrongly assume that they are to blame because of something they said or did. Never imply 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." When a student reports being sexually harassed, it is important not to downplay his or her experience or reaction. Telling the student to just ignore the person and it 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. Students are more likely to report sexual harassment when they believe teachers care about them and will respond in a meaningful way to their experiences. The student should be assured that she or he will be protected from retaliation.

### **Increase Supervision and Implement Consequences**

Some students who are sexually harassed may be confused or feel threatened and uneasy, but they do

not report the incident because they fear retaliation. Increasing supervision is key to decreasing harassing situations; it is also important to create clear expectations for respectful behavior and implement consequences when hurtful behavior occurs. The perpetrator will need opportunities to learn and apply appropriate social skills, which could include apologizing or seeking attention in positive ways.

### **Teach Assertive Response**

Teaching the target of harassment how to respond assertively could also be part of a comprehensive intervention plan. An assertive response might be, "I do not like it when you brush up against me. I want you to stop." The plan also may include a route change or a schedule change, which should be focused on the harasser rather than the target. The target should not be inconvenienced because of the harasser's behavior.

### **Develop and Follow Mandated Policy**

According to Title IX of the Education Amendments of 1972, each school must have a written public policy against sexual discrimination, including behaviors associated with sexual harassment. The policy should define sexual harassment, clearly state that it is inappropriate, and 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 individuals, a male and a female, to accommodate students' possible discomfort with reporting harassment to an adult of the opposite gender. Legal problems arise when school personnel are aware of an incident of sexual harassment but do not effectively respond or do not follow school policy.

## **PREVENTING SEXUAL HARASSMENT**

Preventing sexual harassment requires establishing an effective school policy and providing training to staff and students.

### **Guidelines for Developing School 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 from the American Association of University Women (see Recommended Resources). The policy should include:

- School-specific examples to assist students in identifying sexual harassment
- A description of how claims will be investigated
- A statement prohibiting retaliation

- Specific disciplinary consequences for harassment and retaliation
- A list of resources available to both the targets and harassers, such as counseling or outside community resources

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.

### **Training to Prevent and Respond to Sexual Harassment**

Preventing sexual harassment must be an ongoing priority. All school staff should receive training to help them identify and respond appropriately to sexual harassment and to understand their role in creating supportive and respectful school environments. Training that occurs over time and across settings and includes the entire faculty, staff, and all administrative personnel will be more effective than a one-time session.

For students, 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 about sexual harassment may be appropriate to start a discussion, a video in isolation is not as effective as a discussion about 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 Recommended Resources.

### **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. Furthermore, administrators, teachers, students, and parents must nurture an inclusive, supportive, and respectful environment in their efforts to decrease and eliminate sexual harassment.

### **REFERENCE**

American Association of University Women. (2001). *Hostile hallways: The AAUW survey on sexual harassment in America's schools*. New York: Author. Available: <http://www.aauw.org/research/hostile.cfm>

### **RECOMMENDED RESOURCES**

#### **Print**

Stein, N. (1999). *Classrooms and courtrooms: Facing sexual harassment in K-12 schools*. New York: Teachers College Press.

Stein, N., & Sjostrom, L. (1994). *Flirting or hurting? A teachers' guide on student-to-student sexual harassment in schools (Grades 6-12)*. Washington, DC: National Education Association.

United States 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: <http://www.ed.gov/about/offices/list/ocr/docs/sexhar00.html>

WGBY TV (Producer). (1996). *Flirting or hurting: Sexual harassment in schools* [VHS video]. (Available from GPN, P.O. Box 80669, Lincoln, NE 68501-0669; 800-228-4630; FAX 800-306-2330)

#### **Online**

American Association of University Women (AAUW), Educational Foundation: <http://www.aauw.org/ef/harass/schoolresources.cfm>

The American Association of University Women has been a leader in addressing education and sexual harassment issues. This website lists resources available for increasing understanding of sexual harassment and for preventing and responding to incidents.

Equal Rights Advocates, *Sexual harassment at school: Know your rights*: <http://www.equalrights.org/publications/kyr/shschool.asp>

Equal Rights Advocates provide help for those who find themselves victimized by sexual harassment and informs people of their legal rights. This site has some examples of sexual harassment and how to deal with them appropriately.

Office of Civil Rights, *Checklist for a comprehensive approach to addressing harassment*: <http://www.ed.gov/about/offices/list/ocr/checklist.html>

The Office of Civil Rights has created a comprehensive approach for addressing sexual harassment in schools.

Office of Civil Rights, *Sexual harassment: It's not academic*:  
<http://www.ed.gov/about/offices/list/ocr/docs/ocrshpam.html>

This site by the Office of Civil Rights has some basic facts about harassment and some commonly asked questions and their answers.

Office of Safe and Drug-Free Schools, listserv: <http://www.ed.gov/news/newsletters/listserv/preventioned.html>

The purpose of this listserv is to provide an information outlet for the U.S. Department of Education's Office of Safe and Drug-Free Schools

Program. It is available to the public. The content includes a newsletter, legislation, and information about federal programs and grant opportunities. If you want to receive the OSDFS *Prevention News Bulletin*, go to the website to enroll.

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