
BY ELLIE L. YOUNG, PHD, NCSP; BETTY Y. ASHBAKER, PHD; & BRYAN K. YOUNG, Brigham Young University, Provo, UT

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 harass-
ment, 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 harass-
ment 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 expecta-
tions for respectful behavior and implement conse-
quences 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 har-
asser’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 harass-
ment 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 iden-
tifying 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


RECOMMENDED RESOURCES

Print


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 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.


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.

Ellie L. Young, PhD, NCSP, is a Professor; Betty Y. Ashbaker, PhD, is an Associate Professor; and Bryan K. Young is a graduate student, all in the School Psychology Program at Brigham Young University, Provo, UT.

© 2010 National Association of School Psychologists, 4340 East West Highway, Suite 402, Bethesda, MD 20814—(301) 657-0270