

Addressing Sexual Harassment

Overcoming sexual harassment requires a combination of education, opportunity to practice pro-social behavior, and discipline.

By Ellie L. Young and
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Between classes Rosanna and her friends pass Adam, who reaches out and slaps her bottom as she walks by. The girls giggle and continue to their lockers. Later in the bathroom, Rosanna tells her best friend that she wishes Adam would leave her alone. He makes her uncomfortable.

Rosanna isn't alone. Almost 80% of students in secondary schools report they have experienced sexual harassment (American Association of University Women [AAUW], 2001). This type of behavior has become so commonplace that many adolescents accept it as something everyone puts up with.

However commonplace, sexual harassment is unacceptable, causing personal pain and embarrassment and creating a negative learning environment. School administrators can provide leadership to help students and teachers understand what constitutes sexual harassment and that it will not be tolerated. Clearly written policies, consistent enforcement, and emphasis on teaching positive behaviors will set the school tone. Leaders can also provide learning opportunities so that students and teachers can distinguish between normal social interactions, such as flirting, and sexual harassment and learn how to respond to harassment when it occurs.

A Simple Definition

Simply put, sexual harassment is any unwanted and unwelcome sexual behavior, but the range of those behaviors is wide. Physical behaviors may include touching that is uncomfortable, embarrassing, or offensive. Using crude or sexually explicit 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 may sexually harass others by calling them "fag," "homo," or other degrading terms that refer to sexual orientation.

Additional types of sexual harassment include starting or spreading sexual rumors, sending mean or crude text messages, writing sexual graffiti on bathroom walls, sending vulgar 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 a peer group. Individuals who experience sexual harassment feel fearful, intimidated, manipulated, and overpowered.

Developmental and Social Context

Understanding the developmental context of sexual harassment can help administrators identify the behavior and respond appropriately. During early adolescence, students are developing abstract thought, starting to discover their sexuality, and just beginning to have romantic relationships. Young adolescents also tend to be egocentric, making it difficult for them to understand and respond to the emotional reactions of others. They may confidently believe that they are not hurting anyone even when their actions have painful consequences for someone else.

Therefore, identifying sexual harassment is not always easy at this age. The line between good-natured interactions and harassment can be blurry among young adolescents for whom flirting and teasing are an evolving, sometimes intense part of their social development. If students are flirting and the interaction is mutually enjoyable without a sense of intimidation, it probably is not sexual harassment. A boy may snap a girl's bra or a girl may tug at a

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Student Services is produced in collaboration with the National Association of School Psychologists (NASP). Articles and related handouts can be downloaded from www.nasponline.org/resources/principals.



boy's pants with no harm intended because, in his or her mind, it is simple flirtation. The harassed student may respond in a light-hearted way, because he or she is either having fun or trying to avoid embarrassment, despite feeling uncomfortable or threatened. Sometimes it can be a little of both. But the perceptions of the student who is being harassed, not the harasser, need to weigh most heavily in deciding if harassment has occurred. Even if sexual harassment is not a motive, if the target finds the behavior uncomfortable, embarrassing, or threatening, it requires intervention.

High school students generally have a better developed capacity to understand romantic relationships, tend to have more mature social skills, and can think abstractly. They may still be self-centered and unable to understand the complexity of sexual behavior, but it is reasonable to expect most older adolescents to be able to recognize when their actions are inappropriate or hurtful to others. Their harassing behaviors may be more sophisticated than those of younger students, and they also may be more aware of how to keep the behaviors hidden from adults. All students, regardless of their age, may be hesitant to report harassment because they are embarrassed or fear the situation will become public.

The media can be a significant influence for all age groups. Students are inundated with images of sexual behavior and, in some cases, inappropriate bullying or hurtful flirting that can shape how they interact with the opposite sex. Such behavioral models can be terribly confusing to students who are learning to set personal boundaries, particularly for young adolescents. Moreover, the media rarely accurately represent the potential harm or resulting repercussions from harassing or aggressive sexual behaviors.

Effective Sexual Harassment Policies

An effective policy to prevent and address sexual harassment includes the following:

- A clear message that sexual harassment is unacceptable
- School-specific examples to assist students in identifying sexual harassment
- A description of how awareness and skills building for students will be incorporated into curricula
- Commitment to staff training and their role in creating safe school environment
- A description of how claims will be investigated
- A statement prohibiting retaliation
- Specific disciplinary consequences for harassment and retaliation
- Opportunities to teach students (both the harasser and the victim) pro-social replacement behaviors
- A list of resources that is available to both the victim and the perpetrator, such as counseling or outside community resources.

Guidelines for creating an easily understood policy are available online at www.aauw.org/research/harassmentFreeHallways.cfm.

Resources

Classrooms and Courtrooms: Facing Sexual Harassment in K–12 Schools. N. Stein. 1999. New York: Teachers College Press.

Checklist for a Comprehensive Approach to Addressing Harassment. U.S. Department of Education, Office for Civil Rights. 2005. Retrieved August 1, 2008, from www.ed.gov/about/offices/list/ocr/checklist.html

Flirting or Hurting? A Teachers' Guide on Student-to-Student Sexual Harassment in Schools (Grades 6–12). N. Stein & L. Sjoström. 1994. Washington, DC: National Education Association.

Harassment-Free Hallways: How to Stop Harassment at School. American Association of University Women. 2002. Retrieved August 1, 2008, from www.aauw.org/research/harassmentFreeHallways.cfm

Revised Sexual Harassment Policy Guidance: Harassment of Students by School Employees, Other Students, or Third Parties. U.S. Department of Education, Office for Civil Rights. 2001. Retrieved August 1, 2008, from www.ed.gov/about/offices/list/ocr/docs/shguide.pdf

Sexual Harassment: It's Not Academic. U.S. Department of Education, Office for Civil Rights. 2005. Retrieved August 1, 2008, from www.ed.gov/about/offices/list/ocr/docs/ocrshpam.html

should stand up for themselves, rather than report their discomfort to authorities (AAUW, 2001). Students who are exploring their sexual identity can be particularly vulnerable to sexual harassment and bullying. Because of the added complexity of the social-emotional issues involved at this age, administrators should be sure that staff members are trained to support the needs of those students.

Sexual harassment of students by adults is less common than harassment among students (AAUW, 2001) but is extremely serious, involving a gross abuse of power and trust. And occasionally, students sexually harass adults (AAUW), often targeting support staff members—such as paraeducators, cafeteria workers, and janitors—who are perceived as less powerful. In all cases, school leaders must ensure that staff members and students understand appropriate boundaries, what their rights are, and that violations will be dealt with immediately and seriously.

A growing area of concern for educators and parents is cyber-sexual harassment that occurs through e-mail, instant messaging, text messaging, Web sites, and cell phones. Sometimes this is intentionally cruel. Other times, students may not be aware that teasingly photographing a peer in the locker room and then sending the pictures as a joke can have serious, long-term (and legal) consequences. (See “Student Services: Cyberbullying” in the September 2008 issue of *Principal Leadership*.)

Responding to Sexual Harassment

According to Title IX, each school must have a written, public policy against sexual discrimination, including the 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, because students may be uncom-

Prevalence and Forms

Most sexual harassment is verbal: sexual comments, name calling, jokes, gestures, or looks. For both boys and girls, 54% admit that they have harassed someone in a school setting. Students report that sexual harassment typically occurs in such places as the cafeteria, hallways, and classrooms, places where adults are present but do not notice the behaviors and so do not intervene (AAUW, 2001).

Girls and boys report experiencing sexual harassment at the same rate but in different forms. Girls are more likely than boys to be physically harassed and are also more likely to be harassed by adults. Boys are more likely to be verbally harassed. They also may find it more difficult to report harassment because they fear that adults may assume that boys should enjoy the attention of girls or that boys

fortable reporting harassment to an adult of the opposite sex.

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. Ignoring or downplaying reports of sexual harassment has been an underlying factor in several lawsuits. Students are more likely to report sexual harassment when they perceive that school adults are trustworthy, caring, and will respond in a supportive manner. The student should be assured that she or he will be protected from retaliation.

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 can feel anxiety; distress; confusion; and some symptoms of depression, especially a sense of helplessness. They may avoid places where the harassment occurred or experience physical symptoms that keep them out of school.

Students often have difficulty talking to adults about sexual harassment. They may wrongly assume that they are to blame because of something they said or did. Administrators and staff members must never imply that the 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 their experience or reaction. Telling the student "just ignore the person and it will stop" discounts the student's discomfort, sending a message to both the student and the harasser that adults will not make the effort or do not know how to protect students.

Some students do not report sexual harassment because they fear retaliation. Increasing supervision is a vital key to decreasing harassing situations; it is also important to create clear expectations for respectful behavior and implement consequences when hurtful behav-

ior occurs. The harasser will need opportunities to learn and apply appropriate social skills, which could include apologizing or seeking attention appropriately. The response also may include a schedule change for the harasser; the student victim should not be inconvenienced because of the harasser's behavior. Teaching the student victim how to respond assertively and to set and maintain boundaries should also be part of a comprehensive intervention plan.

Preventing Sexual Harassment

Efforts to prevent sexual harassment should begin with administrative leadership; be ongoing; involve staff members, students, and parents; and be consistent with other positive behavior and school safety practices. A well-written and accessible school policy developed by members of the school community

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must clearly communicate that sexual harassment is unacceptable. The AAUW has posted guidelines for creating an easily understood policy on its Web site (www.aauw.org/research/upload/completeguide.pdf).

Although the policy should emphasize a protective zero-tolerance approach, it should not limit how administrators can discipline students. All inappropriate behavior should be addressed and stopped immediately, regardless of its designation. Disciplinary consequences should take into account the developmental and social context of the behavior (e.g., whether the students are friends or an imbalance of power exists between the perpetrator and the victim), and provide for opportunities to teach students pro-social replacement behaviors, such as showing kindness and respect.

Developing a policy alone is not enough. The policy must be supported by staff members, parents, and students, who should understand their important role in decreasing sexual harassment as well as in creating supportive and respectful school environments. All staff members should receive specific training to help them identify and respond to sexual harassment.

Students should have multiple opportunities to understand sexual harassment and other forms of bullying. Classes covering civil rights, diversity, or tolerance can include the topic of sexual harassment and provide opportunities to talk about respectful behavior. Specific lessons on sexual harassment should provide concrete examples on such topics as how to make clear the behavior is unwelcome, the harmful consequences, and alternative ways to seek attention.

Although a short video can introduce a topic, watching a video in isolation is not as effective as a discussion. Secondary students are just learning how to set personal boundaries, especially as they move into secondary settings, and they may need specific, directed instruction about how to do so. It is particularly important to teach young people how to say,

“Stop, I don’t like that” assertively and clearly so that their peers genuinely understand that their behavior is unwelcome. Role-playing during instruction, particularly for younger adolescents, helps students practice their emerging skills. Lessons should be reinforced throughout the year. Parents should be aware of curricula and classroom discussions and talk to their children about boundaries and expectations for respectful, caring behavior. Of utmost importance is the supervision that parents can provide, especially surrounding electronic communication.

Conclusion

Sexual harassment is a sensitive topic. Merely providing students, parents, and staff members with information about the school’s sexual harassment policy is insufficient; schools must take decisive action. They 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. All faculty and staff members must model appropriate behaviors. Further, administrators, teachers, students, and parents must nurture an inclusive, supportive, and respectful environment in their efforts to decrease and eliminate sexual harassment. **PL**

REFERENCE

■ American Association of University Women. (2001). *Hostile hallways*. Retrieved from www.aauw.org/research/hostile.cfm

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