Identifying and Responding to Sexual Violence: Tips for Educators

Sexual violence impacts millions of individuals in the United States each year, making it a significant public health concern (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention [CDC], 2023). Any sexual act that is committed or attempted by a person without freely given consent, or when the victim is unable to consent or refuse, is considered sexual violence. Some examples include rape, forced or intentional sexual touching without consent, forcing a person to have sex or sexual contact with someone else, and sexual contact when the victim is a minor or is under the influence of drugs or alcohol. In addition to sexual violence, individuals may experience other harmful unwanted behaviors, such as sexual harassment, which includes unwanted sexual advances, requests for sexual favors, or other verbal or physical harassment of a sexual nature. These behaviors may occur in person or through one’s phone, email, social media, and computer.

Unfortunately, sexual violence is very common. Studies have shown that sexual violence frequently starts with individuals who are minors. Over half of women and almost 1 in 3 men have experienced sexual violence involving physical contact during their lifetimes (CDC, 2023). Additionally, 1 in 3 women and about 1 in 9 men reported experiencing sexual harassment in a public place. While it is clear that sexual violence can impact individuals from all communities, the threat of sexual violence is heightened for people who live at the intersection of various marginalized identities. For example, women and racial and ethnic minority groups experience sexual violence more frequently than men and White people. Almost half of all trans and nonbinary people experience sexual violence, with the prevalence being higher for trans people of color and those who are homeless or disabled, or who do sex work (James et al., 2016). Sadly, because of the stigma of sexual violence, many individuals do not report sexual violence to the police or others. The low level of reporting is also shaped by marginalized communities’ experiences of mistreatment by the police. This document will provide guidance to support educators in preventing sexual violence, identifying individuals who need support, and creating a safe learning environment.

UNDERSTANDING CONSENT

To fully understand the scope of sexual violence, individuals need to know what consent means. In simple terms, consent is giving permission for something to happen or agreement to do something. There are several reasons why people may be unable to give consent. Such reasons range from age to having an illness or disability that prevents understanding of what they are being asked to do. Being asleep, unconscious, or intoxicated may also prevent someone’s ability to give consent. Finally, a person may feel like they don’t have a choice to engage in a sexual act because they are being threatened with a weapon or physical violence, or because the person committing the act is in a position of power or authority over them. It is important to understand that consent involves communication between two people, and someone can change their mind and withdraw consent at any time. If consent is not (or cannot be) given, and a sexual act occurs, it is considered sexual violence.

CONSEQUENCES OF SEXUAL VIOLENCE

Sexual violence can have both short- and long-term psychological, emotional, and physical effects on a survivor. Some of the consequences include:

If you or someone you know needs support, call the RAINN National Sexual Assault Hotline: 800-656-HOPE (4673)
Identifying and Responding to Sexual Violence

- Physical injuries (e.g., bruising, genital trauma)
- Psychological injuries (e.g., depression, anxiety, suicidal thoughts)
- Chronic gynecological, gastrointestinal, or sexual health concerns
- Posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD)
- Substance use risk behaviors (e.g., smoking, excessive alcohol use)
- Decreased self-esteem
- Difficulties with personal relationships, daily routines, returning to work or school, and retaining a sense of normalcy
- Bullying and sexual harassment

Given the potential for lasting effects that sexual violence can have on an individual’s physical, social, and emotional well-being, it is important to give attention to prevention efforts and to identifying and supporting victims.

WHAT SCHOOLS CAN DO

Schools play an important role in creating safe learning environments for all students. Well planned prevention programming can help reduce the incidence of sexual violence among youth within the school. When developing policies to address sexual violence, schools should consider incorporating the following:

- Ensure proper student supervision in all areas of the building. Identify high-risk areas of the school grounds, and then monitor them regularly during all times of the day, including before and after school.
- Complete an annual or biannual assessment that reviews student engagement, school safety, and the learning environment.
- Define school norms in relation to sexual violence and having healthy relationships. Areas to promote include:
  - Addressing victim-blaming, violence, and bullying behavior
  - Encourage respectful behavior
  - Promote the strengths of women and girls
  - Teach that sexual violence is preventable
- Build relationships with local sexual violence centers. Some provide guidance and professional development to school staff members.
- Implement age-appropriate education on healthy sexuality, consent, and social and relationship boundaries. Teach skills to prevent sexual violence.
- Teach students strategies to support their peers who experience sexual violence. Steps may include creating a distraction to allow the person to get to a safe place, asking the person if they are in trouble, reporting the incident to authorities, and enlisting others to support the person.
- Create a trauma-informed learning environment for all students that promotes safety and prevents further victimization and other abusive behaviors.
- Review the CDC technical package on preventing sexual violence, which is intended as a resource to guide and inform prevention decision-making.

IDENTIFYING INDIVIDUALS NEEDING SUPPORT

Signs that a young person may have been sexually assaulted or abused may be difficult to identify since many of the symptoms are common during puberty or may be indicative of other mental health conditions. Below are some of the signs to be aware of:

- Unusual weight loss or gain
- Loss of appetite or excessive eating
- Signs of physical abuse
• Sexually transmitted infections (STIs)
• Signs of depression (e.g., persistent sadness for 2 weeks or more, lack of energy, mood changes, withdrawal)
• Anxiety or worry
• Failing grades
• Changes in personal hygiene
• Self-harm
• Expressing thoughts about suicide or suicidal behavior
• Drinking or drug use

Involvement in abusive relationships is closely tied to sexual violence, so it is important to also screen for signs that the youth is experiencing some form of abuse in romantic relationships. Indicators of an abusive relationship include involvement with a partner who:

• Tries to get the youth to engage in sexual activity they are not ready to engage in
• Sexually assaults the youth or coerces them into unwanted sexual activity
• Refuses to use contraception or protection against STIs during sexual activity
• Physically harms the youth
• Tries to control how the youth spends their time (e.g., keeping them from spending time with family and friends or engaging in their own activities)
• Makes threats to control the youth’s actions
• Uses alcohol or drugs to impair the youth’s judgement and ability to consent
• Uses technology (e.g., photos/videos, apps, social media) to engage in sexual harassment, unsolicited, or nonconsensual sexual interactions

PROVIDING SUPPORT FOR SURVIVORS

Educators can support survivors of sexual violence in several ways. If you suspect that a youth has experienced sexual violence, you can:

• Talk with the youth about your concerns and demonstrate that you are worried about them.
• Reassure them that it is not their fault and that you will provide help and support.
• Make space for the youth to express how they feel, and validate the youth’s emotions.
• Provide systems of support for victims and survivors to minimize the harm they experience. Identify individuals available on campus who can be sources of support during the school day, if needed.
• Identify community resources available to provide support and share potential resource lists with survivors and their families. Provide resources and information to parents and caregivers. Remind the caregivers it is important to talk with the youth, provide space for the youth to express themselves, reassure the youth it is not their fault, and validate their emotions.

REFERENCES


RECOMMENDED RESOURCES


Contributors: Christina Chester (née Conolly), Lisa Coffey, Franci Crepeau-Hobson, Scott Woitaszewski, Emilie Ney, Seth Lipkin