

Preventing and responding to sexual harassment and sexual violence between children and young people

Significant concerns have been raised about the prevalence of peer-on-peer sexual harassment and sexual violence, including online, both in and out of school. Although the issue can affect children or young people of any gender, evidence shows that girls are more likely to be the victim of sexual violence and sexual harassment and that boys are more likely to be the perpetrator. However, other children can be particularly vulnerable, including children who are, or are perceived to be, lesbian, gay, bi, or trans (LGBT).

There is clear recognition across the system that sexual harassment and sexual violence between children and young people are not simply a school problem – this reaches far beyond the school gates – and many others (including the government, Ofsted, parents, police, social care, youth services and others) have a responsibility to act to address the issue. But schools can and do play a key role in the prevention of and response to incidents of sexual harassment and sexual violence.

Schools should always follow local and national safeguarding guidance. This document aims to bring together information and resources for schools to help them review, develop and improve their approaches to preventing and responding to peer-on-peer sexual harassment and violence, including online.

Key definitions

The definitions used by the Department for Education (DfE) are as follows:

Peer-on-peer sexual abuse: this term includes sexual violence, sexual harassment, upskirting and sexting (also known as ‘youth-produced sexual imagery’).

Sexual harassment: unwanted conduct of a sexual nature that can occur online and offline, which includes the following:

- Sexual comments, such as telling sexual stories, making lewd comments, making sexual remarks about clothes and appearance, and calling someone sexualised names;
- Sexual “jokes” or taunting
- Physical behaviour, such as deliberately brushing against someone, interfering with someone’s clothes, and displaying pictures, photos or drawings of a sexual nature
- Online sexual harassment, which may be standalone or part of a wider pattern of sexual harassment and/or sexual violence. This may include the following:
 - Non-consensual sharing of sexual images and videos
 - Sexualised online bullying
 - Unwanted sexual comments and messages, including on social media
 - Sexual exploitation, coercion and threats.

Sexual violence: the sexual offences of rape, assault by penetration and sexual assault.

Harmful sexual behaviour: an umbrella term for problematic, abusive and violent sexual behaviours that are developmentally inappropriate and may cause developmental damage.

Context

In 2016/17, the Women and Equalities Committee published a report on sexual harassment and sexual violence in schools. The evidence it gathered in its inquiry painted a concerning picture and criticised the government for having no coherent plan to provide the support and guidance schools wanted and needed to tackle the causes and consequences of sexual harassment and sexual violence.

The Contextual Safeguarding Network published a briefing in 2020 on harmful sexual behaviour in schools, presenting findings from a two-year study and considering the implications and resources for schools and multi-agency partners, including the key issue of a lack of reporting and the barriers children and young people face in disclosing incidents at school.

Everyone's Invited was founded in June 2020, and since 8 March 2021, more than 15,000 anonymous testimonies have been submitted and shared on the website. These deeply concerning reports of sexual harassment and sexual violence, both in and out of school, prompted the government to ask Ofsted to undertake an immediate review of safeguarding policies in state and independent schools and colleges in relation to sexual abuse.

On 10 June 2021, Ofsted published its review of sexual abuse in schools and colleges. The review included visits to 32 schools and colleges, with Ofsted speaking to more than 900 children and young people about the prevalence of peer-on-peer sexual harassment and sexual violence, including online, in their lives and the lives of their peers. It also spoke to leaders, teachers, governors, local safeguarding partnerships (LSPs) and parents. Ofsted is clear that this report should not be assumed to be a fully representative sample of all schools and colleges nationally. The report presents a picture of practice across participating schools and colleges, from which it has drawn conclusions.

This review highlighted how prevalent sexual harassment and online sexual abuse are for children and young people. For many young people, incidents are so commonplace that they see no point in reporting them. Ofsted heard from girls 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.

The review made recommendations for school and college leaders, multi-agency partners and the government.

The review recommended the following:

“School and college leaders should create a culture where sexual harassment and online sexual abuse are not tolerated, and where they identify issues and intervene early to better protect children and young people.

“In order to do this, they should assume that sexual harassment and online sexual abuse are happening in their setting, even when there are no specific reports, and put in place a whole-school approach to address them”.

A whole-school approach

A whole-school approach involves all parts of the school working together with a commitment to preventing and responding to harmful sexual behaviours. Within this is also the need to challenge negative influences and attitudes, gender stereotyping, and discriminatory or sexist language. It needs partnership working between senior leaders, governors, teachers and all school staff, as well as parents, carers and the wider community. This can include support from your local authority or academy trust, collaboration with other schools and working with local safeguarding partnerships.

Most schools will have elements of a whole-school approach in place; some may have a very well established approach, and others may need to do more to establish it. Regardless of where you are on this journey, the first step should be to review and assess your school’s response to harmful sexual behaviours. This will enable you to identify strengths and weaknesses in your approach and prioritise actions that may need to be taken.

Although schools may feel under pressure to react quickly, any developments or changes to your approach must be considered, planned and communicated clearly. Taking time to consider what actions will have the desired impact in your setting will help to avoid any unintended consequences, which more immediate reactions sometimes have. You may wish to consider how you can reassure students, parents and staff that this issue is taken seriously by the school, what you have already in place, the available support and any plans you have to build on this.

The [Contextual Safeguarding Network](#) has created a range of resources for schools. Its website provides all the resources for schools to assess their response to harmful sexual behaviour (HSB) using a traffic-light tool for self-assessment.

The self-assessment tool supports you to review the following:

- **Systems and structures:** designated safeguarding lead’s (DSL’s) capacity, recording and referral pathways, peer-on-peer abuse, HSB policy and parental engagement.
- **Prevention:** staff training, relationships and sex education (RSE) and incident management.
- **Identification:** definitions, recording and tracking, resources and disclosure options
- **Response and intervention:** staff motivation, thresholds, response to incidents, the physical environment and external referrals
- **Cultural context:** prevalence, student disclosure, peer support, ethos, language and challenging normalisation

You can also find templates and guides for using a range of methods, including engaging with students, staff and parents, as well as reviewing policies and procedures and safeguarding logs.

Using this self-assessment and the traffic light tool will enable you to identify priority areas for your school. The traffic light tool provides descriptors for what might be considered best practice in each area, and these can be used to guide the actions you plan to take.

There is a huge range of resources available to support schools in developing and improving the different aspects of their whole-school approach. We have highlighted some that members may find helpful below.

[UK Feminista](#) provides a free staff online training course, guidance on taking a whole-school approach and resources for schools, including template strategies, policies and classroom activities tackling sexism.

Brighton & Hove's Equality and Anti-Bullying Schools Strategy Group has produced a [brief guide to challenging sexist and sexual language and bullying](#), which aims to support staff to challenge sexist and sexual language and gender stereotyping appropriately.

Stonewall has worked with UCL, Cardiff University and the University of Brighton to produce a training course, [gender in the classroom](#), which aims to equip teachers with the tools to understand and tackle harmful gender stereotypes in schools and colleges.

[Outside the box](#) is a resource from Equaliteach for those working with children and young people from early years through to key stage five. It offers a strategy to develop a whole-school approach committed to promoting gender equality and tackling sexism and sexual harassment.

[Opening doors](#) from the Institute of Physics is 'a guide to good practice in countering gender stereotyping in schools'. The report identifies barriers to countering gender stereotyping in schools and provides suggestions for best practice identified through visits to schools.

[Harmful sexual behaviour in schools](#) is an online training course from the NSPCC designed to help educators develop the skills and knowledge necessary to recognise, report and record sexualised behaviour concerns.

[Redraw the balance](#) is a Primary Futures campaign highlighting the prevalence of gender stereotypes even among primary age children. Primary Futures has also released [pre-recorded resources](#) on tackling gender stereotypes, including pupil activity worksheets, a teacher guide and display slides.

Relationships, sex and health education (RSHE)

In its recommendations, Ofsted highlights the need for "a carefully sequenced RSHE curriculum, based on the Department for Education's (DfE's) statutory guidance, that specifically includes sexual harassment and sexual violence, including online. This should include time for open discussion of topics that children and young people tell us they find particularly difficult, such as consent and the sending of 'nudes'."

PSHE education is the school curriculum subject dedicated to supporting children and young people's safety and well-being. When delivered effectively and regularly, it can play a crucial part in preventing and addressing harassment and abuse as part of a whole-school approach.

Most of the PSHE education curriculum content is now compulsory since the introduction of [statutory relationships education/RSE and health education](#) (RSHE).

Safeguarding bodies were at the forefront of calling for this change, which allows schools the opportunity to prioritise PSHE education in a way that contributes to a culture of respect for others, creates a space in which challenging issues and questions can be addressed safely, and increases awareness and understanding of these issues and contributory factors.

Being proactive as well as responsive

It is important that PSHE education lessons are responsive to current events. Understandably, this is seen as an ideal context for addressing such issues as they arise in the public consciousness.

At the same time, lessons mustn't be reduced to a knee-jerk reaction to current events in the school or the world beyond the school gates. If limited to this purpose, then lessons become a forum for discussions around events and issues, but pupils lose their ability to develop the protective and preventative knowledge, understanding, skills and attributes that are at the heart of effective PSHE education.

The aim should be to ensure a carefully sequenced, spiral curriculum that revisits the relevant topic areas, each time extending and deepening the learning in an age and developmentally appropriate way. Although sexual harassment, abuse and violence would not be directly covered with young children, the foundations for this learning should be introduced from key stage one – including, for example, learning about the following:

- Asking, giving and not giving permission
- What makes a good friend?
- Boundaries and privacy
- Body parts that are private.

This essential foundation enables future learning on the signs of an unhealthy relationship, the effects of pornography, the concept of consent and so on, as pupils progress through the later key stages.

Laying the foundations in primary schools

In key stages one and two, teachers can begin to lay the foundations for respectful, consensual and healthy peer relationships as children grow. It is essential to ensure this content is planned and taught in an age and developmentally appropriate way, making use of baseline assessments, local data and guidance from planning documents, such as the [PSHE Association's programme of study](#) and [programme builders](#) to make decisions about what should be covered in each year group.

For example, statutory relationships education content in the primary PSHE curriculum should help pupils to explore the following:

- The characteristics of friendships, including mutual respect, truthfulness, trustworthiness, loyalty, kindness, generosity, trust, sharing interests and experiences, and support with problems and difficulties
- How to recognise who to trust and who not to trust, how to judge when a friendship is making them feel unhappy or uncomfortable, how to manage conflict, how to manage these situations and how to seek help or advice from others, if needed
- Practical steps they can take in a range of different contexts to improve or support respectful relationships
- That in school and in wider society they can expect to be treated with respect by others, and that in turn they should show due respect to others, including those in positions of authority.
- What a stereotype is, including gender stereotypes, and how stereotypes can be unfair, negative or destructive
- The importance of permission-seeking and giving in relationships with friends, peers and adults.

This understanding will support primary pupils' current safety while preparing them for specific learning about sexual harassment and sexual violence at the secondary phase.

Key stages three and four RSHE requirements directly addressing harassment and abuse

The introduction of statutory RSHE represents an important milestone in ensuring all schools respond to the needs and concerns of young people, including the worrying prevalence of sexual harassment and violence.

The DfE's statutory relationships and sex education guidance identifies a wide range of relevant content in the secondary phase related to treating others respectfully, recognising unhealthy relationships and seeking support, including the following:

Respectful relationships, including friendships

- That some types of behaviour within relationships are criminal, including violent behaviour and coercive control
- What constitutes sexual harassment and sexual violence, and why these are always unacceptable.

Online and media

- That specifically sexually explicit material (eg pornography) presents a distorted picture of sexual behaviours, can damage the way people see themselves in relation to others and negatively affects how they behave towards sexual partners
- What to do and where to get support to report material or manage issues online
- The impact of viewing harmful content.

Being safe

- The concepts of and laws relating to sexual consent, sexual exploitation, abuse, grooming, coercion, harassment, rape, domestic abuse, forced marriage, honour-based violence and female genital mutilation; and how these can affect current and future relationships
- How people can actively communicate and recognise consent from others, including sexual consent, and how and when consent can be withdrawn (in all contexts, including online).

Intimate sexual relationships, including sexual health

- How to recognise the characteristics and positive aspects of healthy one-to-one intimate relationships, which include mutual respect, consent, loyalty, trust, shared interests and outlook, sex and friendship
- That there is a range of strategies for identifying and managing sexual pressure, including understanding peer pressure, resisting pressure and not pressurising others.

This statutory guidance provides schools with an outline of what they need to cover and the important knowledge that pupils should acquire. PSHE education must also equip pupils with the skills and attributes to apply this understanding in the real world. The [PSHE Association's programme of study](#) and [programme builders](#) exemplify how to integrate the statutory content into a comprehensive PSHE education programme.

Staff training and choosing resources

Understandably, teachers might lack confidence when teaching about sensitive issues such as sexual harassment and sexual violence. As with any complex topic in PSHE education, teachers must be given the training and pedagogical understanding to teach it well. For example, through establishing a safe learning environment with pupils before teaching takes place.

Ofsted's review also recognises the need for high-quality training for teachers delivering RSHE. There are many organisations offering training in this area, and your choice of training will depend on the needs of your staff. However, a good starting point might be to look at what is available from the [PSHE Association](#) and [Sex Education Forum](#) who have significant expertise in this area of the curriculum. It may also be helpful to look at the DfE's [support and training materials for schools](#).

Teachers also need resources that they can trust and know have been assessed for their safe and effective approach to learning. The PSHE Association's quality assurance process takes a rigorous approach to assessing the suitability and effectiveness of teaching resources, and relevant resources include the following:

- Resources to support the Home Office's '[disrespect nobody](#)' and '[something's not right](#)' campaigns
- Alice Ruggles Trust's [relationship safety](#) resources
- Medway Public Health's materials on '[managing healthy and unhealthy relationships](#)'
- University of Exeter's '[working out relationships](#)' lesson plans.

Complementary learning activities

Learning in PSHE education lessons can be enhanced through other aspects of school life as part of the whole-school approach. These include assemblies, focus days and one-off events. But it is important to remember that such input should be used to enhance the taught curriculum, not to replace it.

Assemblies and one-off events can offer a vehicle for raising awareness of issues and can be memorable and impactful. However, the learning they provide may be negligible unless it is embedded in subsequent lessons.

It is also important to consider carefully whether a topic is appropriate to discuss in a setting such as an assembly, where the usual safe learning environment created in PSHE education lessons cannot be replicated. Pupils with increased vulnerability – or personal experiences of an issue – may find the content upsetting, and there will be limited opportunity to discuss issues raised.

It is only through carefully planned lessons that we can teach the knowledge and develop the understanding, skills and attributes that will support children and young people to build and maintain positive relationships, recognise unhealthy or abusive relationships, and keep themselves and others safe.

Online sexual harassment

A whole-school approach to preventing and responding to harmful sexual behaviours, including sexual harassment and abuse, should cover offline and online behaviour. However, online sexual harassment can present different or additional challenges, and schools may want to develop their approach to it specifically.

Childnet International has written guidance for school leaders on online sexual harassment. [Online sexual harassment: understand, prevent and respond](#) covers the following:

- Defining online sexual harassment and the behaviours it describes
- The impact of online sexual harassment
- The reasons behind online sexual harassment
- Statutory and legal responsibilities for schools and educational settings
- Preventative education
- Improving multi-agency working
- Responding to disclosures
- Increasing reporting among young people

Childnet also provides a wealth of relevant resources and support for young people, teachers, and parents and carers.

[Project deSHAME](#) aims to tackle peer-based online sexual harassment by empowering local communities to work together to increase reporting among young people with the following resources:

- [Just a joke](#) is an online sexual bullying teaching toolkit for use with 9 to 12-year-olds, which contains a teaching guide, lesson plans, practical activities and a quiz to run with young people

- [Step up, speak up!](#) is a practical campaign toolkit to address the issue of online sexual harassment among young people aged 13 to 17
- [Online sexual bullying: advice for parents and carers of 9 to 12-year-olds](#)
- [Online sexual harassment: advice for parents and carers of 13 17-year-olds](#)
- [Foster carers: advice for talking to 9 to 17-year-olds about online sexual harassment](#)

The [UK Safer Internet Centre](#), a partnership of three leading organisations, promotes the safe and responsible use of technology for young people. This is another reliable source of information, advice and resources to support schools to keep their pupils safe online.

Responding to incidents of sexual harassment and violence between children and young people

The Everyone's Invited movement seeks to highlight an issue that has long existed. All schools, whether or not named in some of the allegations submitted to Everyone's Invited, will want to reassure students, parents and staff that this issue is taken seriously by the school and that you have, or will take, steps to manage allegations of peer-on-peer abuse.

Incidents of sexual harassment and sexual violence between children and young people may happen both inside and outside of school. Incidents outside of school may be more complex because they may involve pupils from other schools and so require collaboration between schools. In either case, if a pupil discloses they have been a victim of sexual harassment or sexual assault, or the school becomes aware in another way (for example, through their peers or social media), you should instigate your processes to respond to the allegation.

What everyone should know

Part five of the DfE's [keeping children safe in education](#), the statutory guidance for schools and colleges, provides guidance about managing reports of child-on-child violence and sexual harassment.

You can find much more detail in the DfE's [advice](#) on sexual violence and sexual harassment between children in schools and colleges.

Some of the key points are as follows:

- The importance of pre-planning, effective training and effective policies regarding child-on-child sexual violence and sexual harassment
- The importance of reassuring any victim coming forward that you will take their allegations seriously, support them and keep them safe
- Effective safeguarding practice includes not promising confidentiality when a child makes an allegation
- Recognition that a child may choose anyone in the school to disclose to, and therefore, all staff should receive appropriate training
- Staff should be non-judgemental, not ask leading questions, be supportive and respectful, and use open questions
- The best time to make a record of the details of the report is after the child has finished, and then immediately write up a thorough summary

- You should express no personal opinions in the report
- If the designated leader is not present at the meeting, you should inform them of it as soon as possible.

For useful training on the above, schools could also use the NSPCC's resource called [let children know you're listening](#).

Dealing with allegations of peer-on-peer abuse

When a school receives an allegation of peer-on-peer sexual violence and harassment, it can be a source of great anxiety for all concerned. You might well have to deal with angry and deeply upset parents of both the alleged victim and alleged perpetrator. A cool head is required, and you must seek and adhere to guidance and support from appropriate authorities.

If appropriate, contact your local authority safeguarding team, the NSPCC's helpline for professionals (call 0808 800 5000) and NAHT's advice team (call 0300 30 30 333 and select option 1) to discuss the case and assess what the appropriate actions to take are.

Practical steps

If you receive reports in relation to current students, then part five of [keeping children safe in education](#) sets out how schools and colleges should manage this. This guidance also incorporates the DfE's advice on [sexual violence and sexual harassment between children in schools and colleges](#), and this will be a key document to understand the steps you should take. All reports should be dealt with on a case-by-case basis, and given their high-profile nature, we would recommend your DSL rather than the deputy leads this. As they would ordinarily do, they should ensure they follow the requirements of the statutory guidance and DfE's advice mentioned above.

If you receive reports where the alleged perpetrator has left (or never attended) your setting, then it is not possible to carry out a proper investigation into a report of sexual assault or sexual harassment. The focus here must be on supporting the child that has made the allegation, including support in reporting the incident to the police if appropriate.

Where allegations have been made anonymously, it is very difficult to take these forward. We would recommend getting specific legal advice from your providers in relation to the steps you should take. However, some general principles, in addition to getting legal advice, about specific steps you should take should be considered:

- Has more than one allegation been made? If so, do they provide you with any information to increase the safety of children in the school? For example, if the incidents have taken place in a badly lit or inaccessible area of the school, swift action to resolve this or limit children's access can be taken without the need to understand whether or not the allegations are true. These sorts of steps should also be taken where a report is not anonymous to limit the risk of future harm. Moreover, even if your school hasn't received reports, consideration can be given to site safety in relation to the risk of sexual assault.

- Can information be given to the children to encourage reporting on a non-anonymous basis? Does this mean a culture change in the school? Again, this step will be helpful even if no allegations have been made in relation to your school.
- A review of safeguarding policies and procedures (safeguarding and child protection, online safety and acceptable use, anti-bullying, behaviour and discipline, and risk assessment of pupils' welfare) and codes of conduct should take place. In particular, we would recommend ensuring that the new NSPCC helpline created to support potential victims of sexual harassment and abuse in educational settings be referenced, and that your arrangements for the management of peer-on-peer abuse and for listening to pupils are clear. This will also be an important step where reports have not been anonymous or, indeed, where your school hasn't had any reports made.
- Review the training provided to staff because all staff should be trained to manage a report. Is it effective in ensuring that staff are confident about how to manage disclosures effectively? Do you have a system in place to measure the outcomes of this training so that you can demonstrate that staff had good knowledge of the issues, rather than just that they attended the training? Does it take account of any updated local safeguarding partner advice? Again, this is just good practice, but perhaps greater resources can be allocated to this where you have received anonymous reports.
- Review the arrangements in place to hear your 'pupils' voice' - we recommend a range of available options are put in place.
- A review of the school's safeguarding culture. How is this established and measured? Is inappropriate behaviour challenged and action taken?

As a general point, we strongly recommend taking legal advice in this area if accusations of any kind have been made to ensure you're taking all appropriate steps and any decisions you make can be justified if needed.

Risk assessments

In all cases of sexual violence, there will be an immediate call for the school to produce a risk and needs assessment.

For reports of sexual harassment, you should consider the need for a risk assessment on a case-by-case basis. When establishing the appropriate response to an act of sexual harassment, it would be worth looking at the [harmful sexual behaviour framework](#), which uses professor Simon Hackett's proposed continuum model to demonstrate the range of sexual behaviours presented by children, and also considering [Brook's sexual behaviour traffic light tool](#).

A needs and risk assessment should consider the following:

- The victim, especially their protection and support
- The alleged perpetrator
- All other children (and adult students and staff when appropriate).

You should record and regularly review risk assessments.

The DSL (or a deputy) must ensure they are engaging with children’s social care and specialist services. Any risk assessment produced by social workers will inform the school or college in creating a strategy to support and protect their pupils and help to update its risk assessment.

Case studies

The case studies in section four of [sexual violence and sexual harassment between children in schools and colleges](#) all relate to children of secondary school age, perhaps relating to the fact that it is more likely that harmful sexual behaviour will occur among children of secondary school age.

However, cases in primary schools can sometimes be particularly complex because of the age of alleged victims and perpetrators. Consider the two following case studies, which reflect the sort of calls that NAHT’s advice line has received:

- 1) A five-year-old girl has complained to her parents that a boy in her class has made her and a friend pull down their pants. The father of the girl is demanding that the boy be permanently excluded for an act of sexual abuse
- 2) Two eight-year-old girls have complained to their teacher that a boy in their year group is regularly slapping their bottoms and grabbing at them during break times. One has stated that on the way home from school one day, the boy pulled her top off and ran off with it, laughing.

In both cases, the first task is to establish as far as possible what exactly happened while accepting the probability that the allegations are true. As a result, all necessary actions to protect both the alleged victims and alleged perpetrators should be taken.

If the investigations prove that the allegations are supported, then it will be necessary to follow the guidance very carefully as laid out in section four of [sexual violence and sexual harassment between children in schools and colleges](#).

You will have to ascertain whether each act constitutes what can be described as behaviour that is reflective of safe and healthy sexual development or represents harmful sexual behaviour (Brook’s sexual behaviours traffic light tool and Hackett’s continuum model).

In both cases, it would seem to be the case - based on the information presented – that the behaviours would be described as inappropriate to abusive in nature.

In case one, if the action of the boy was, as far as could be ascertained, the first time such behaviour had occurred, then the school might consider it appropriate to deal with it internally (although a call to NSPCC’s helpline and the local authority to confirm the decision would be advised). Both sets of parents should be informed of the situation and reassured that it was being dealt with appropriately. The behaviour policy would be referred to and action taken as appropriate. It would be worth setting up a regular opportunity for the alleged victim’s parents to report how their daughter is doing over the weeks that follow. The same opportunity should be given to the parents of the alleged perpetrator.

In case two, this would appear to be problematic to abusive behaviour. It has happened on a number of occasions and has involved victimisation. A risk assessment would be appropriate, and a referral to Early Help might be considered appropriate. The victims would need to be protected from the alleged perpetrator. Depending on the circumstances, it might be worth exploring the idea of a managed move to another school for the perpetrator as a protection for the victims and him.