

Teens and Sexual Harassment: Making a Difference¹

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This publication is one in a series of discussions on understanding teen sexuality.

Introduction

As parents and educators, we might think that today's youth live in a complex world—one that may prove to be more challenging than when we were teenagers. Teens may be especially confused and misinformed by media-based myths about sexuality and sex role behaviors. It is not uncommon to see images of sexual behavior on TV shows that teens prefer and hear explicit sexual lyrics in the songs teens listen to. Examples include:

- TV sitcoms or dramas in which teens or adults have sex to get to know each other better, but in the next season are sleeping with someone new.
- music videos with explicit lyrics and imagery.
- detailed news coverage of sexual crimes such as murder, rape, abductions, or drug induced sexual conduct.

Beyond the media, teens learn unhealthy or unrealistic ideas about sexuality from their peers.

We can see the effects a sexually charged culture has on the daily lives of adolescents. Sex as portrayed in the media translates into clothing styles as well as behaviors (teens are likely to learn how to behave on a first date from the media). The media's exaggerated early teen sex roles create a huge divide between young men and women in how they dress and act towards one another. Teen females may wear tight clothes that emphasize curves, wear heavy makeup, and show more skin than males do in their daily wear.

Sexual messages and behavior they witness affect the lives of adolescents more than most adults care to realize. External sources demonstrate the sexual toxicity of our popular culture – one that can potentially poison our youth if we do not teach them a healthier view of sexuality¹. (For more information on this topic see the EDIS publication “Communicating with teens about sex: Facts, Findings, and Suggestions” FY852/FCS2251)

Sexual Harassment: Defined

One of the unfortunate offshoots of our cultures obsession with sex is problems with sexual harassment. Sexual harassment harms the sexual integrity of teens in their peer relationships. A definition of sexual harassment is unwelcome

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attention of a sexual nature, occurring through verbal and/or physical interaction. Being a victim of sexual harassment is likely to affect a teens academic performance or work ability and may create a hostile or threatening atmosphere for the teen². In fact, sexual harassment coming from one teen to another is a type of bullying³. Sexual harassment of teens can occur anywhere —in middle and high schools⁴, in the workplace⁵, and in community. For example, neighborhoods or the internet. Sexual harassment happens not just between the sexes, but also between girls or between boys. Female to male or male to female sexual harassment tends to get worse between 6th and 8th grade, a span of time when teens' bodies begin to appear more sexually mature⁶.

To help define the problem, here are some examples of sexual harassment that teens may be likely to see or experience:

- continually asking someone out when they have communicated a lack of interest
- unwanted requests for social or sexual activity
- making sexual jokes, gestures, or remarks
- inappropriate touching (brushing up against, grabbing, patting, or pinching in a sexual manner)
- spreading sexual rumors about someone
- making comments about a person's body, clothing, sexual orientation, or sexual behavior
- intimidation (blocking or cornering someone in a sexual way) or assault (pulling clothing off or down, forcing someone to do something sexual such as kissing)
- inappropriate sexual remarks or questions in “cyberspace” (instant messaging, e-mail, chat rooms)^{2, 4, 7}

Sexual Harassment at School

Most adults/parents may think that such incidents are rare in the lives of adolescents they work with or with their own children. However, a national study of preteens and teens in public schools showed that about four-fifths (80%) of females and

three-fifths (60%) of males experienced sexual harassment while in school⁴. Adding insult to injury, preteens and teens who experienced harassment were more likely to have responded by giving unwanted sexual attention to others. In fact, 40% percent of the students who reported being a victim to sexual harassment responded by being absent from school or skipping classes³. Also, sexual harassment in school usually takes place in public, in front of school staff and teachers.

The most common types of sexual harassment in school include:

- sexual comments, looks, jokes, or gestures (92% of females/83% males experienced)
- being touched, grabbed, or pinched in a sexual nature (83% females/65% males)
- purposely being brushed up against in a sexual manner (75% females/55% males).
- being flashed or mooned (58% males and females, equally)
- having sexual rumors spread about them (50% males/54% females)
- having clothes pulled at in a sexual way (46% males / 50% females)
- having their way blocked or being cornered in a sexual way (25% males / 51% females)⁴

Sexual Harassment in the Workplace

School is not the only place teens experience inappropriate sexual behaviors. Teen employment in the United States is among the highest rate of any industrialized nation⁸. Nearly 70% of 16-17-year-old high school students work during the school year⁹. In fact, 35% of high school students reported that they experienced sexual harassment in their part-time work. Of the 35% who were sexually harassed, 63% were girls and 37% were boys⁵. In 19% of cases, perpetrators were supervisors, and 61% of the time, harassment came from coworkers who were more likely to be peers. Overall, females felt more upset

and threatened by an experience of sexual harassment in the workplace than male teens⁵.

Sexual Harassment in Cyberspace

As youth are using the internet in greater numbers than ever before, it is important to be aware of their vulnerability online¹⁰. A Girl Scout Research Institute study found that 30% of teenage girls who used the internet (a majority who used the internet daily) had been sexually harassed while they were in a chat room⁷. Teen girls in this situation often felt helpless in how to respond to, for example, requests for bra sizes, being shown photos of naked men, or inappropriate comments or questions concerning their sexuality.

How Sexual Harassment Affects Teens

The effects of being victimized by sexual harassment include:

- distractions from work performance, especially for girls
- confusion and upset to teenage girls who experience sexual harassment online
- a decline in academic performance when sexual harassment occurs in schools
- victims becoming perpetrators of sexual harassment
- experiencing negative emotions such as anger, betrayal, depression, and anxiety
- feeling a lack of control over ones life and a drop in self-esteem
- psychosomatic stress symptoms such as headaches, stomach pains, insomnia, and irritability²

How to Handle Sexual Harassment Among Teens

Most adults may wonder, “Where do we go from here?” and “How do we protect and educate our teenagers?” Some suggestions to share with teens, parents, and educators follow.

Suggestions for Teens

- Don't ignore what is happening. Do not let behaviors that seem small keep happening, because they most likely will get worse instead of better. Tell the offender that you dislike their behavior and that you need it to stop immediately.
- Don't let someone accuse you of not having a sense of humor, you are simply asking to be treated with respect.
- Don't blame yourself for what is happening (for example, what you were wearing when the incident happened). It is the harasser who is responsible for what is happening.
- Know your rights for a harassment-free environment. Sexual harassment is illegal and you have the right to complain to the proper authorities when it happens. Tell a parent, teacher, counselor, or other trusted adult immediately.
- Keep records of your experiences (list incidents, dates, behaviors and people involved, including witnesses). A calendar is helpful for keeping track of problem behaviors.
- Ask for help from a knowledgeable person. Talk about how the harassment bothers you and come up with ways to deal with it. For example, talk to a parent or mentor about how to put a stop to inappropriate comments in a chat room. Role play a potential scenario.
- Even if you are not the victim, do not be afraid to speak up when you see it happening. Inform harassers that their behavior is called “sexual harassment.” Tell someone when you think his or her sexual behavior or jokes are inappropriate. (“I don't find that funny.” or “I don't like that.”)
- Keep your instant messaging (IM) within a circle of friends that you know in person and avoid responding to e-mails or IMs from strangers. When you feel someone on-line has started to sexually harass you, end the conversation immediately and exit the chat room.^{2, 7}

Suggestions for Parents

- Research school and workplace policies on sexual harassment and discuss these with your teen. Make the definition of sexual harassment clear to your teen. He or she may have unknowingly witnessed or experienced sexual harassment.
- Don't be afraid to bring up the topic of sexual harassment in your teens life. Its okay if he or she isn't comfortable talking about their own experiences with you. Provide them with a mentor or knowledgeable peer that both you and your teen trust to talk with. Your teen may be willing to discuss such incidents happening in the lives of their friends and peers. This opens up conversation about preventative steps to take and how to handle it when it happens.
- Take advantage of teachable moments in your adolescent's life, doing role plays and providing them with resistance skills (For example practice saying, "I am not going to tolerate being talked to or written to like that." "I don't think thats funny." Teach them how to get out of a bad interaction in a chat room or among peers).
- Share the suggestions for teens with your teen, reinforcing that when they experience sexual harassment, it is not their fault and that something can be done about it.

Suggestions for Educators ^{11, 12}

- Pay attention when an adolescent in your care appears distressed. If he or she is a victim of sexual harassment, follow-up on it by alerting supervising adults. Do not simply respond with a "boys will be boys (or girls will be girls)" attitude. Acknowledge the teens feelings about the reported incident(s) and make sure appropriate documentation is made.
- Whether in the school, the workplace, or other community organizations, work to promote a culture that does not tolerate sexual harassment. It is not just about changing the perpetrator's behavior, but increasing awareness and bystander action to prevent sexual harassment. Make a policy statement on sexual harassment that is

well-known to all youth and youth workers within the school or community-based organization.

- Once you have developed a sexual harassment policy, create a simple complaint procedure with readily available documents for filing. Actively enforce this policy and be sure that investigations are exhaustive and brought to closure in a timely manner.
- Be aware of likely places for patterns of sexual harassment to occur (for example, the school bus, a classroom, an overnight trip setting with low adult supervision) and work to prevent the risk of incidents in those settings.
- Provide information on sexual harassment and conduct workshops on the topic for youth, youth workers, and educators to increase awareness and action.
- Provide access to psychological services, such as support groups, counseling, or psychotherapy for teen victims and perpetrators of sexual harassment.

Conclusion

These tips can be helpful in opening up the lines of communication between youth, adults, and organizations in which they work together. It is important for youth to feel safe and protected from unhealthy interactions of a sexual nature and for adults to be informed about the experiences of youth and facilitate healthy youth decision-making. The most important role of parents and adults is to change the atmosphere of schools¹³ and communities in order to help youth protect their sexual integrity in a potentially socially toxic environment.

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Resources

For Teens

1. Teen Advice: Provides advice, scenarios and definitions from "Teen Advice" column online <http://teenadvice.about.com/library/weekly/aa060102a.htm>
2. Hansen, G.L., & Mallory, W.W. (2005). Eliminate sexual harassment. University of Kentucky Cooperative Extension Service. Accessed on July 22, 2005 http://www.agnr.umd.edu/nnfr/adolsex/fact/adolsex_harass.html
3. New York City Alliance Against Sexual Assault: Facts for teens on sexual harassment http://www.nycagainstrape.org/survivors_factsheet_60.html
4. Girls Inc.: A list of books and resources for teen girls to read about sexual harassment <http://www.girlsinc.org/ic/content/SexualHarassment.pdf>

For Parents

1. Teen Advice: Lists a number of online articles about sexual harassment—advisable for teens and parents to view together <http://teenadvice.about.com/od/sexualharassment/>
2. American Association of University Women: A resource for parents and educators http://www.aauw.org/research/girls_education/hostile.cfm
3. Palo Alto Medical Foundation: A resource defining sexual harassment and school policy—a resource for both parents and youth http://www.pamf.org/teen/sex/rape_assault/sexualharass.html

For Youth Workers/Administrators/Educators

1. Public television for Western New England:
Sexual harassment in schools information and lessons
on for educators
<http://www.wgby.org/edu/flirt/fhmain.html>

2. Mid-Atlantic Equity Consortium: A
bibliography on preventing sexual harassment among
students and educators in the public school system
<http://www.maec.org/sexharas.html>

3. Discovery School.com: A workshop available
for educators to use (must be purchased) to teach
9th–12th grade teens about sexual harassment and
how to deal with it
[http://school.discovery.com/lessonplans/programs/
sexualharassment/](http://school.discovery.com/lessonplans/programs/sexualharassment/)