



Sexual bullying: developing effective anti-bullying practice

**A guide for school staff and other
professionals**

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About this guide

The Anti-Bullying Alliance has developed this guide on prevention and response to sexual bullying to assist teachers and other professionals as they seek to educate and support children.



It is written to apply to the school environment but many of the principles are relevant to other settings where adults support children and young people. It draws on evidence from both the research literature and evidence derived from consultation with children, disabled children and those with special educational needs (SEN) and professionals in relation to sexual bullying. It outlines the specific issues that professionals should be aware of in relation to sexual bullying and also suggests actions that staff can take to educate and support all students, and especially those disabled children and those with SEN, around this sensitive and often neglected issue.

The views of children and young people involved in the consultation, and associated quotations, are used throughout.

We would encourage you to use this to share key messages with other staff members as you develop your own action plan to tackle all forms of bullying behaviour.

Summary

- Bullying has a significant effect on children and young people's mental health, emotional well-being and identity – and schools have a legal duty¹ to tackle it.
- Sexual bullying is a significant issue for all children and young people – but disabled children and those with SEN are at particular risk of sexual abuse².
- Knowledge is power. All children need support to understand about puberty and sexual development; to recognise harmful sexual behaviour; to learn about consent, and to communicate concerns about sexual bullying.
- Schools have a duty³ to create an environment where sexism is not tolerated; where personal space of students and staff is respected; where sexist language and comments are challenged, and where students and staff feel empowered to say no to any unwanted touch.



Education does not create more harassment. It puts a name on the inappropriate behaviour that already exists. Education does not create more problems for educators. It allows existing problems to be identified and solved at the local level.¹

¹ The Education and Inspections Act 2006 provides that maintained schools must have measures to encourage good behaviour and prevent all forms of bullying amongst pupils.

² http://www.nspcc.org.uk/inform/research/briefings/disabledchildrenandabuse_wda48224.html

³ Under the Equality Act 2010 schools as public bodies must eliminate unlawful discrimination, harassment, victimisation and any other conduct prohibited by the act.

What is sexual bullying?

The Anti-Bullying Alliance (ABA) defines bullying as:

“the repetitive, intentional hurting of one person or group by another person or group, where the relationship involves an imbalance of power.”

It can happen face-to-face or through cyberspace.

Academics in the UK and overseas have argued about the most appropriate definition of sexual bullying as it includes a wide spectrum of behaviours, but for the purposes of this guide, **we include any bullying behaviour with a sexual element.** This behaviour can be between children and young people of any gender and/or sexual orientation, and between children and adults. Research suggests that sexual bullying has a disproportionate impact on girls⁴. While significant numbers of boys are also targets of sexual bullying, this often has a homophobic element⁵, suggesting this behaviour is driven by gender inequality within society with peer enforcement of perceived gender norms. For this reason it is vital that schools take a strong approach against all forms of sexism and gender inequality as the foundation stone on which to build a response to sexual bullying.



We know that disabled children and those with SEN can be particularly vulnerable to all forms of abuse, including sexual abuse⁶, and that they are disproportionately vulnerable to experiencing bullying⁷ – with devastating consequences. A report for the NSPCC also showed that children and young people with learning disabilities were overrepresented when researching children and young people that display harmful sexual behaviour⁸.

Schools often struggle to communicate messages about appropriate sexual behaviour to children and young people – and may feel even more out of their depth when it comes to children with special educational needs or particular impairments. There may be a misconception that these children and young people are not interested in sex, or that it would be somehow inappropriate to discuss sexual matters with them – however this only serves to leave children vulnerable to bullying and abuse. Each year, significant numbers of children face exclusion from school for ‘sexual misconduct’⁹.

Fixed term and permanent exclusions for sexual misconduct from state funded schools 2014/15 (DfE)

	Fixed term	Permanent
Primary schools	230	10
Secondary schools	1,960	90
Special schools	60	n/a

Each one of these exclusions represents a failure to address harmful sexual behaviour between children and young people, and will have caused immeasurable hurt and

⁴ Witkowska, E (2005) Sexual harassment in schools: Prevalence, structure and perceptions, National Institute for Working Life, and Dept of Public Health Sciences, Karolinska Institute, Stockholm, Sweden, p30

⁵ McMaster, L, (2002) ‘Peer to peer sexual harassment in early adolescence: A developmental perspective’, Development and Psychopathology, 14, 91-105

⁶ http://www.nspcc.org.uk/inform/research/briefings/disabledchildrenandabuse_wda48224.html

⁷ NCB (2012), Perspectives on Bullying and Difference, National Children’s Bureau

⁸ Childline (2005) Young people displaying sexually harmful behaviour, Briefing Paper

⁹ <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/permanent-and-fixed-period-exclusions-in-england-2014-to-2015>

embarrassment to the children and families involved. No parent or carer wants to find out their child has been on the receiving end of sexual misconduct, or has been accused of sexual misconduct. Schools have a duty therefore **to talk about these issues, set appropriate boundaries, and to communicate appropriate behaviour** in a way that meets the needs of all children and young people.

What behaviour does this include?

Let's be clear- not all sexualised behaviour between children and young people is bullying or abuse. The Stop it now! Charity has a very useful booklet¹⁰ that describes healthy sexual development. They emphasise that disabled children and young people and those with SEN may develop at different rates according to their impairment; that care must be taken to educate appropriately according to their sexual development and to make sure they can communicate any worries they may have. The ABA definition of bullying includes an imbalance of power – and some children may be more vulnerable to coercion and control – a key characteristic of sexual bullying.

What is age-appropriate sexual behaviour?

Pre-school children (0-5 years)

Commonly:

- Use childish 'sexual' language to talk about body parts
- Ask how babies are made and where they come from
- Touch or rub their own genitals
- Show and look at private body parts

They rarely:

- Discuss sexual acts or use sexually explicit language
- Have physical sexual contact with other children
- Show adult-like sexual behaviour or knowledge

School-age children (6-12 years)

Commonly:

- Ask questions about menstruation, pregnancy and sexual behaviour
- Experiment with other children, often during games, kissing, touching, showing and role-playing e.g. mums and dads or doctors and nurses
- Masturbate in private
- Older children in this age range are also more likely than pre-school children to use sexual words and discuss sexual acts, particularly with their friends

They rarely:

- Masturbate in public
- Show adult-like sexual behaviour or knowledge

Adolescents (13-16 years)

Commonly:

- Ask questions about relationships and sexual behaviour
- Use sexual language and talk about sexual acts between themselves
- Masturbate in private
- Experiment sexually with adolescents of similar age

NB. About one-third of adolescents have sexual intercourse before the age of 16

They rarely:

- Masturbate in public
- Have sexual contact with much younger children or adults

¹⁰http://www.stopitnow.org.uk/files/stop_booklets_childs_play_preventing_abuse_among_children_and_young_people01_14.pdf

Stop It Now! describe **harmful sexual behaviour**¹¹ as ranging ‘from experimentation that unintentionally goes too far, through to serious sexual assault’. They write that ‘often victims are uncomfortable or confused about what is happening and may feel that they are willingly involved, but not understand that the behaviour is harmful’. This can be exasperated for children who may find it hard to understand and communicate their feelings. This means it is vital that school staff take time to understand the context in which behaviour has taken place, the development needs of the children involved, and the nature of the relationship between those involved.

Key questions to ask when investigating sexualised behaviour between children and young people:

- Is the behaviour in the context of a particular type of relationship (e.g. a ‘romantic’ relationship where there may be pressure to please)?
- Is there a power imbalance between those involved (e.g. age difference, physical strength and capability, emotional development)?
- Are those involved equipped to describe their wants and desires and to give consent?
- Is the behaviour age appropriate and appropriate to the level of development of the person involved – or could the person have been coerced into a type of behaviour?
- Is the behaviour potentially harmful or risky? (e.g. the distribution of sexual photos or video content).
- Is the behaviour appropriate to the school environment whether or not you consider it to be consensual?

The type of behaviour within a school environment that could constitute sexual bullying, or could contribute to an environment where sexual bullying is more likely to occur includes:

- Sexual comments, taunts and threats
- Inappropriate physical contact that makes the recipient feel uncomfortable or scared (this can include hugging and kissing)
- Distributing sexual material (including pornography); sending photos or videos of a sexual nature
- Making phone calls and sending texts or messages of a sexual nature
- ‘Games’ with a sexual element that may make a child or young person feel uncomfortable or scared (e.g. taking clothes off, kissing or touching games)
- Pressure to spend time alone or apart from others with another person, or people, that makes the person feel uncomfortable or scared (e.g. behind school buildings, in the toilets or changing rooms, in the field)

¹¹ <http://www.stopitnow.org/ohc-content/what-is-age-appropriate>

- Pressure to be in a relationship with another person, or to engage in a sexual act with another person – both inside and outside of school
- Sexism in all its forms; pressure to conform to particular gender ‘norms’ (e.g. pressure on boys to have multiple partners, or pressure on boys and girls to be heterosexual)

‘Boys who were not seen to have the attributes valued by the dominant male group were jeered at and sometimes singled out for sexual persecution with or without the help of other boys...Boys and girls were deeply implicated in the construction and policing of their own sexual identities that were limited by their knowledge of the range of gender identities available.’¹²

Impact of pornography

The young people that took part in the ABA focus group felt strongly that the increased consumption of pornography was a driver for sexual bullying. In their view pornography:

- affected how young people thought about sex and what sex should be like
- affected how young people thought they should behave
- portrayed stereotypes and could affect how a young person felt about themselves (e.g. that they weren’t doing what other men were doing)
- made people feel pressured to act more sexually
- made people judge others more about their sexual behaviour
- influenced verbal sexualised bullying about people who don’t conform to stereotypes (e.g. calling a man gay, because he doesn’t sleep around)

“Like in films, always sex. All in your face. And the language they use to describe women and the, you know, the words used to describe stuff to do with sex is really derogatory. People just don’t think about it anymore, they just like, desensitised to it. It can be derogatory to both but maybe to women more.”

“Alters their perceptions of it [sex]. Not real.”

“Like, if you’ve never had it [sex] before and you see it on telly and people could end up forcing themselves on a girl or a bloke and not actually realising that’s not ok.”

“You might think that is what real sex is like.” [and not understand it’s not real]

It is vital that any work to address sexual bullying gives young people an opportunity to discuss whether pornography has an influence on their relationships and experience.

¹² Duncan, N. (1999) Sexual bullying: gender conflict in pupil culture, London: Routledge, p. 23

Preventing sexual bullying

Some of the behaviour listed above as contributory to sexual bullying may seem controversial. For example, hugging and kissing, but what's important, is that all children and young people in your care are empowered to communicate if they are scared or embarrassed by any physical touch. It is hard for anyone to tell someone they are invading their personal space – and this may be even more so for disabled children and those with SEN. School staff should also encourage behaviour that keeps children and young people safe in the wider community, and is appropriate beyond school, in further education or the workplace.

Key principles for prevention

1. **Talk about these issues with students.** Sexual bullying thrives in a climate of secrecy. Create time and a safe place to explain sexual development, and harmful sexual behaviour in an age and development appropriate way with the children and young people you work with. Listen to what children and young people have to tell you about what is happening in school and in their lives. There may be new trends that you are unaware of. Listen – but be prepared to challenge behaviour that young people may see as 'normal' but you consider to be harmful.

'When sex education classes are perceived as useful and informative, and when classes are presented well and include good class discussions, more students talk about unwanted sexual behaviour or report these experiences to school personnel.'¹³

2. **Talk about these issues with colleagues.** Create time for training and for open discussion. Make sure staff can discuss any behaviour that they find embarrassing or uncomfortable and that they know how to report inappropriate behaviour – whether from a fellow colleague or from a child. Make sure you agree on your approach to tackling sexual bullying and that all staff feel empowered to challenge sexual bullying in all its forms – including sexism and sexual comments.

In discussion with a group of teachers from a mainstream secondary school, teachers raised a particular problem with students making sexual comments to younger teachers, or newly qualified teachers. One female member of staff reported being on the receiving end of repeated comments and advances from students when she first started teaching. She said she had received no training on how to deal with these comments or advances, and had felt like they were just part of the job. **Anti-Bullying Alliance training for school staff, 2013.**

3. **Teach the meaning of 'no'.** All children and young people, regardless of their age, developmental needs, or disability, need to be empowered to say no to any physical touch or approach that makes them feel scared or uncomfortable. They also need to understand that if someone says no to them, they must respect this at all times – even if they are in a romantic relationship with this person. Staff must also feel empowered and supported to say no to any behaviour or approach that they find uncomfortable or inappropriate.

¹³ Timmerman. M. C (2004) 'Safe schools and sexual harassment: The relationship between school climate and coping with unwanted sexual behaviour', Health Education Journal, 63 (2), 113-126

4. **Teach and model respectful relationships.** This incorporates teaching around the meaning of 'no' but also includes challenging all forms of sexism, respecting personal space, loving and valuing your own body, not judging someone else for their experience or preference, and showing kindness and understanding to children and young people who may be different to you or may have had a different experience to you.
5. **Do not allow sexual name-calling or comments.** Be clear that sexual name calling and comments are not accepted in your school environment. Take time to work with children and young people to explain what this means, and the types of words or comments this could include (e.g. swear words, slang words for body parts, sexual innuendo, sexual advances or comments). Challenge all forms of casual sexism that put pressure on children to behave in particular way, or to have a particular identity.

We don't believe people suddenly become harassing as adults. This destructive behaviour is learned, and it is learned to a dramatic extent, in our schools.¹⁴

"...if you're on your own and like all your mates are 'pulling', makes you feel pressured. Feel really small. Vulnerable."¹⁵

6. **Discuss online related behaviour.** Talk about the challenges and risks of romantic and sexual relationships online. Discuss the pros and cons of sharing sexual messages or images. Be clear what is acceptable within the school environment and communicate what action you will take if personal messages, images or videos are shared.
7. **Be approachable.** Sexual development and puberty is a scary time for all children and young people. However, children with complex needs and impairments may find it even harder to communicate how they are feeling, or to come to terms with new thoughts or desires. Make sure they can share with you, or an appropriate member of staff, any worry or concern they may have, and also ask any question with confidence.

"Stop it being a taboo. There are things about this that are important to talk about."¹⁶

8. **Be alert.** Be aware of developing relationships between the children and young people that you work with. Look out for any behaviour that could cause concern – for example, any power imbalance within relationships such as age difference and developmental difference. Be aware of 'learnt' sexualised behaviour that seems inappropriate (e.g. does not seem appropriate to the age or development of a particular child).
9. **Communicate with parents and carers.** Make sure you have an anti-bullying policy that includes sexual bullying and that you have explained what this includes, and what this means to parents and carers. Create time and space for parents and carers to ask their own questions, and share their own concerns about their child's sexual development. Work with parents and carers if you have any particular concerns about a child's behaviour – don't allow a situation to escalate. Remember that parents and carers might be embarrassed to talk about these issues or may be ignorant of their child's own sexual development – be gentle and respectful.

¹⁴ Shoop, R. and Hayhow, J. (1994) Sexual Harassment in our schools, Allyn and Bacon, Preface

¹⁵ ABA focus group with young people, 2014

¹⁶ ABA focus group with young people, 2014

Key messages from children, disabled children and those with SEN that took part in a focus group on sexual bullying (ABA, 2014)

- There is little or no teaching, learning or information about sexualised bullying. This makes it difficult to understand and to know what to do if it happens.
- Sexual bullying is on a spectrum and can progress to sexual assault.
- Sex and relationships education is often very poor for disabled students.
- There are a lot of wider pressures that have influenced the increase in sexual bullying (e.g. the way sex is portrayed in films and increased access to pornography). This can influence how young people see and understand sex and make them feel pressured to act in a certain way.

Responding to sexual bullying

- 1) **Listen and take complaints seriously.** Children and young people frequently report that they are not listened to or believed when they try to report bullying – this is particularly the case for disabled young people and those with SEN. Take every complaint seriously, talk to the young person about action they would like you to take and respect this as far as it allows you to keep the young person safe. Be mindful not to ask leading questions as this could bias the response to a serious incident that may need further escalation.
- 2) **Record and report.** Make a note as soon as an incident has been disclosed to you. Report all incidents to the school child protection officer. Regardless of how serious you determine the incident to be, the child protection officer should decide whether it needs to be reported to the police or to your local children's services department. Keep a record of incidents. Bullying by its very nature is repetitive and so careful record keeping allows you to identify whether this is a one off incident, or a pattern of behaviour. It also provides important evidence should you need to sanction a child at a later date, or provide information in the event of a further incident or investigation.
- 3) **Sanction as appropriate but take every opportunity to educate.** The sanctions you take will depend on the nature of the incident, and the age and development level of the child or young person involved. However, every incident should be an opportunity to educate the child or children involved as to the appropriate way to behave, and should be used as a basis for further work with the wider student and staff body to address these issues. The nature of bullying is that it is repetitive, and so it is vital to check that lessons have been learnt, and that the behaviour has stopped.
- 4) **Confidentiality is vital.** These can be embarrassing and difficult issues for children and young people to share and disclose and so it is very important that they trust you to keep information private (as far as you are able, according to your school child protection policy). Only share on a need to know basis, and consider carefully **how and when you share information with parents and carers.**
- 5) **Don't forget incidents outside of the school environment.** All headteachers have powers to sanction behaviour outside of school 'to such an extent as is reasonable'¹⁷. This is particularly pertinent to 'cyber' related bullying, bullying on transport to and from school, and bullying on school trips. Make this clear in your anti-bullying policy, and include discussion about bullying outside of school in your prevention work.

¹⁷ Section 90 of the Education and Inspections Act 2006

Where to go for help

The following organisations can provide information, advice and assistance:

[Anti-bullying Alliance](#) – the ABA website has a wealth of information relating to all forms of bullying. Membership of the ABA is open to all schools and gives you access to new information and resources as they become available. The ABA can also offer bespoke training in relation to sexual bullying.

[Sex Education Forum](#) – The SEF website has a range of resources to support quality sex and relationships education. Membership of SEF provides current news, information and advice.

[Stop it Now!](#) Stop it Now! Is a child sexual abuse prevention campaign. Visit their website for range of materials to support your work in this area including leaflets and posters. They also have a helpline for anyone that is concerned about sexual abuse – including sexualised behaviour between children and young people.

[NSPCC](#) - The NSPCC is a charity that works to end all forms of child cruelty across the UK. Visit their website for information and advice relating to child sexual abuse and sexual bullying. They also have a helpline for anyone that is concerned about a child.

[Department for Education](#) – Refer to the DfE website for up to date government policy relating to bullying behaviour. The current advice is summarised in 'Preventing and tackling bullying: Advice for headteachers, staff and governing bodies – March 2014'.
https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/288444/preventing_and_tackling_bullying_march14.pdf