

## **Sexual Harassment in Middle and High Schools**

Casey T. Tobin, PhD

University of Wisconsin- La Crosse

Sexual harassment includes any sort of unwanted 1) physical contact such as hugging, touching clothing, flashing sexual body parts, stroking hair or body parts, and sexual assault; 2) verbal or written communications including suggestive comments, inappropriate jokes, requests for sexual favors, comments about someone's body, rumor spreading, or threats of sexual contact; and 3) non-verbal actions such as staring, sharing naked photographs, or making suggestive gestures or expressions. Sexual harassment also includes nonsexual aggressions directed at a student because of their gender identity or sexual orientation. For example, if a teacher makes a comment about females being less intelligent than males simply because they are female, it would be considered sex discrimination, a form of sexual harassment. When these actions occur frequently or are severe enough to cause a student to feel uncomfortable and/or confused and interfere with classes or school involvement, it is considered sexual harassment.

Sexual harassment seems to be a part of middle and high school students' everyday life, with more than half of students reporting experiences with unwanted sexual conduct, with the most common form of sexual harassment being unwanted physical touch. More females reportedly experience sexual harassment with males as perpetrators, however, females and males can be perpetrators and victims. Gender non-conforming adolescents are particularly vulnerable to sexual harassment.

Various physical and mental changes happen during the formative years of middle and high schools. Adolescents progress through puberty and begin to explore their individuality and

sexuality. It can be a very confusing time for many, and incidents of sexual harassment at school may add to this confusion. Because this is a time of change and awkwardness, many victims of sexual harassment at school do not report it because of embarrassment or fear. Many students may not even be aware that they are the victim of sexual harassment.

Perpetrators of sexual harassment in middle and high schools can be anyone from classmates, to teachers and coaches, to support staff. When a student is being sexually harassed, ideally some sort of written record documenting the events and aggressions is helpful. One of the first things a student can do to try to end the harassment is to firmly and clearly tell their harasser that they do not appreciate these behaviors and explain how it makes them feel. It is possible that the harasser doesn't realize that their actions are causing such profound effects and simply need to be told to stop. As a minor, the student should involve their parents or caregiver, to assist with addressing this issue and possibly filing a formal grievance report with the school.

Students are legally protected from sexual harassment by Title IX of the Education Amendments of 1972. This federal law prohibits sex-based discrimination in all schools and organizations that receive federal funding. This law indicates that all schools must have policies that specifically address sexual harassment and the policies should be distributed to all students, faculty, and parents. Grievance procedures are also required to be in place and published if a student, parent, or faculty member chooses to file a formal complaint of sexual harassment. If a complaint of this nature is filed, schools are required to investigate the accusations in a timely manner. If it is determined that sexual harassment has occurred, schools are required to take the necessary measures to ensure the perpetrator stops the harassment and does not occur again in the future. Schools are responsible for addressing any residual effects of the sexual harassment including support and counseling for the victim and arrangements for academic services for the

victim to aid in completing any schoolwork that was effected by the harassment. If the school fails to take proper action regarding the report of sexual assault, the victim and their family have the right to file a lawsuit against the school for discrimination.

Victims of sexual harassment in middle and high schools can experience lasting effects. It can take a toll on the emotional and mental health of a student including reports of anxiety with going to school, inability to concentrate, lowered self-esteem, weight fluctuation, problems sleeping, and depressive symptoms. A student's education or school experience can also suffer due to missed class time, poor academic performance because of psychological effects, quitting activities to avoid their perpetrator, or even transferring schools. These effects could be exacerbated if the student did not report the harassment and/or did not receive the necessary support and counseling after reporting.

### **Further Reading:**

Mirk, S. (2020). *You do you : Figuring out your body, dating, and sexuality*. Minneapolis:

Twenty-First Century Books.

Smith, J., Van Deven, M., & Huppuch, M. (2011). *Hey, shorty! A guide to combating sexual harassment and violence in public schools and on the streets*. New York, NY: Feminist Press.

Strauss, S. (2012). *Sexual harassment and bullying: A guide to keeping kids safe and holding schools accountable*. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers.

Wetzel, R., & Brown, Nina W. (2000). *Student-generated sexual harassment in secondary schools*. London: Bergin & Garvey.

Zaloom, S. (2019). *Sex, teens, & everything in between : The new and necessary conversations today's teenagers need to have about consent, sexual harassment, healthy relationships, love, and more.* Naperville, Illinois: Sourcebooks.