

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, educators, and volunteers who work with youth, we probably 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 (or episode) are sleeping with someone new;
- music videos with explicit lyrics and imagery;
- detailed media coverage of celebrity sexual transgressions (adultery) and crimes (murder, rape, abductions, or drug induced sexual conduct).

Beyond the media, teens can 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 exaggeration of early teen's 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 teens witness affect their lives more than most adults care to realize. Advocates for positive youth development have worked to expose and transform the sexual toxicity of our popular culture—one that can potentially poison our youth if we do not teach them a healthy view of sexuality¹. (For more information on this topic see the EDIS publication "Communicating with teens about sex: Facts, Findings, and Suggestions" FY852/FCS2251).

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Sexual Harassment: Defined

One of the unfortunate offshoots of our culture's 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 attention of a sexual nature, occurring through verbal and/or physical interaction. Being a victim of sexual harassment is likely to affect a teen's 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 workplace^{5,10}, and in community (for example, neighborhoods or the internet). Sexual harassment happens not just between the sexes, but also among girls or just boys⁶. 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 may think that such incidents are rare in the lives of adolescents they work with or even with their own children, because they have not seen it happen. Yet when sexual harassment occurs in school, it usually takes place in public, often in front of school staff and teachers.

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 whereas a smaller sample from a 2009 study found 78% of 9th grade boys and 65% of 9th grade girls experienced some form of sexual harassment⁶. A larger study of nearly 2,000 9th graders reported that males and females were equally likely to experience sexual harassment (42% for boys and 44% for girls); boys were more likely to be exposed to unwanted sexual content and homosexual accusations whereas girls heard more discussions of and jokes about sex, as well as received unwanted touching⁹.

Adding insult to injury, preteens and teens who experienced harassment were more likely to have responded by giving unwanted sexual attention to others. Also, 40% percent of the students who reported being a victim to sexual harassment responded by being absent from school or skipping classes³.

In a recent study, common types of in-school sexual harassment were reported (by over 200 ninth graders) to be⁶:

- hearing sexual comments, looks, jokes, or gestures (57% of females, 61% males experienced)
- being shown or given sexual pictures, photos, notes, messages or drawings (15% of females, 30% of males)
- having sexual rumors spread about them (25% females, 11% males)
- being called gay or lesbian (9% females, 28% males)

- being flashed or mooned (25% females, 28% males)
- being touched, grabbed, or pinched in a sexual nature (30% females, 32% males)
- purposely being brushed up against in a sexual manner (24% females, 47% males).
- having clothes pulled down or off (11% females, 19% males)
- being forced to kiss the harasser (4% females, 7% males)⁶.

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 nation¹¹. Nearly 70% of 16-17-year-old high school students work during the school year¹². 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. In a more recent study of high school women, over half (52%) had experienced sexual harassment in work settings¹⁰. 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 online¹³. 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 performance⁵ and job dissatisfaction¹⁰, especially for girls
- increased likelihood of missing school and withdrawing from school when harassed in the workplace¹⁰
- 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 one's life and a drop in self-esteem
- psychosomatic stress symptoms such as headaches, stomach pains, insomnia, and irritability²; and, in the long term,
- suicidal thoughts, early dating (see FCS2250 "Teens & Dating EDIS publication), substance use, and feeling unsafe in school for both boys and girls, as well as self-harming behaviors and risky dieting for girls.⁹

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 adults who work with youth follow.

Suggestions for Educators and Volunteers Who Work with Youth^{14,15}

- Don't be afraid to talk about sexual harassment with youth in a safe setting (public, and where youth outnumber adults), using age-appropriate, concrete language. For example, discuss types of sexual harassment and how it affects teens in your educational programs. Ask youth open-ended questions and refrain from judgment in the event they share about incidents that happen to them or their friends. Ask youth to think about how they felt and consider ways to prevent future incidents at the interpersonal and community levels.
- Provide information on sexual harassment and conduct workshops on the topic for youth, youth workers, and educators to increase awareness and action.
- Pay attention to when adolescents in your care appear distressed. If he or she is a victim of sexual harassment, especially within your youth organization, follow-up on it by alerting supervising adults. Do not simply respond with a "boys will be boys (or girls will be girls)" or "she/he brought it upon her/himself" attitude. Acknowledge the teen's feelings about the reported incident(s) and make sure appropriate documentation is made.
- Provide access to and make yourself aware of psychological services, such as support groups, counseling, or psychotherapy for teen victims and perpetrators of sexual harassment.
- In the event a youth wants to open up discussion one-on-one with you about an experience, preferably bring in another adult. Prior to this, make sure you are aware of local counseling options to whom youth can be referred. Make sure adults and youth are matched by gender (e.g., female adults with female youth) when sensitive discussions about any area of sexuality occur.
- Don't be afraid to enforce institutional and activity-specific dress codes-which are present for youth safety. For example, an adult male may

need to prevent a young man from entering the cafeteria, after swimming, until he puts on his shirt.

- Promote awareness campaigns and intervention strategies with other adults in your youth organization, especially for the early high school years when sexual harassment has been linked to negative outcomes several years later⁹.
- Whether in the school, the workplace, or other community organizations, work to promote a culture with zero tolerance for 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 parties within your youth 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 yet brought to closure in a timely manner.
- Be aware of likely places and times 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.

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 teen's life. It's 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 that's 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 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. It's not cool with me.")
- 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}

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 schools¹⁶ 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>

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http://www.agnr.umd.edu/nfr/adolsex/fact/adolsex_harass.html

3. New York City Alliance Against Sexual Assault: Facts for teens on sexual harassment http://www.svfreenyc.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/learn/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 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.discoveryeducation.com/lessonplans/programs/sexualharassment/>