

4. Preventing online sexual harassment

4.1 A whole school approach

For any educational setting this includes: young people, parents and carers and members of the children's workforce, including teachers, support staff, senior leadership, governors and break/lunchtime supervisors.

Schools and other educational settings can take proactive measures to help prevent online sexual harassment from occurring, and to reduce the impact of any incidents that do happen whilst supporting the young people involved. Preventative, whole school measures are vital in ensuring individual instances of online sexual harassment do not go unchecked and do not escalate. Allowing unhealthy and/or harmful attitudes to go unchallenged may facilitate further instances of peer-on-peer abuse, both online and offline.

Effectively addressing online sexual harassment means making sure that everyone within a school community understands that it is not acceptable, considers the impact on young people and their relationships, knows how to identify it and takes action to prevent it.

"[We need to learn what] 'sexual harassment' really is – in regards to being online. Everyone gets comments about being 'hot' and what would be classed as sexual comments, but no one really knows where the limit is; no one is aware of what classes as harassment when everything – comments, photos – revolves around sexualising bodies. Then once we can identify it, we can then be taught how to deal with it."

Girl, 17 years

"I think it's more an ethos of the whole school. The strongest thing we have in our school is probably relationships. I think we're firm but at the same time can be quite informal and relaxed with our kids."

Teacher, Secondary School

Effective prevention should start as early as possible. As soon as students join the school they should be immersed in a positive whole school ethos which promotes mutual respect and trust. A culture of support and respect can help reduce incidents and the impact of incidents. All members of the school community should be confident that online sexual harassment can and will be challenged.

A member of the senior leadership team will need to take overall responsibility for the coordination and implementation of online sexual harassment prevention and responding strategies. However, it is vital that all members of the community are involved in the prevention of online sexual harassment and are made aware of reporting routes and support available. As with other issues that will potentially impact on the community, wherever possible and appropriate, policies and processes should be discussed, agreed and developed collectively.

4.2 Young people's attitudes to prevention

Project deSHAME research shows young people aged 13 – 17 said they have learned about key topics relating to healthy relationships and online sexual harassment at school. However, many of those did not find this helpful. The research highlights how schools, police and other agencies have the opportunity to be involved in preventing online sexual harassment and the need to continually strive to find effective ways to engage young people with these topics.

'Types of behaviour that would be online sexual harassment'

85%

learned about it in school

41%

of those found this helpful

'Responsibility to not share someone's nude/nearly nude images without their permission'

87%

learned about it in school

51%

of those found this helpful

'How to report online sexual harassment'

83%

learned about it in school

43%

of those found this helpful

'Law about online sexual harassment'

79%

learned about it in school

40%

of those found this helpful

'Digital behaviours that are okay or not okay in relationships'

82%

learned about it in school

44%

of those found this helpful

4.3 Statutory responsibilities for education settings

- All education settings have a [duty to protect](#) students from all forms of bullying behaviour, to have a behaviour policy and measures in place to prevent all forms of bullying.
- All school staff have a responsibility to [provide a safe environment in which children can learn](#), this includes online as well as physical spaces.
- [Teachers](#), including [head teachers](#), must safeguard children's wellbeing and maintain public trust in the teaching profession as part of their professional duties.
- All school and college staff members [should be aware of the types of abuse and neglect](#) so that they are able to identify children who may be in need of help or protection. All staff should be aware that safeguarding issues can manifest themselves via peer on peer abuse.
- Schools are required to [ensure children are taught about online safety](#) through teaching and learning opportunities. This may include relevant issues through personal, social, health and economic education (PSHE) or through relationship and sex education (RSE).
- Schools and colleges should work [with social care, the police, health services and other services](#) to promote the welfare of children and protect them from harm.
- Schools have a duty to review and develop online safety as part of their safeguarding responsibilities. In England the Common Framework inspections carried out by [Ofsted](#) include discussions with learners relating to online safety and bullying including cyberbullying, and a review of how the school promotes positive behaviour, addresses prevention and responds to incidents.

The Department for Education's guidance '[Sexual violence and sexual harassment between children in schools and colleges](#)' (2018) sets out best practice in terms of peer-based sexual harassment and violence, and cross-references other advice, statutory guidance and the legal framework.

As part of their statutory duty to safeguard children, schools and colleges are required to comply with guidance issued by the Secretary of State. All schools and colleges must adhere to the following;

- Schools must have regard to [Keeping Children Safe in Education](#) and [Working Together to Safeguard Children](#)
- All schools are required to follow anti-discrimination laws, and staff must act to prevent discrimination, harassment and victimisation within the school under the [Human Rights Act 1998](#).
- Schools should be aware of their obligations under the Equality Act 2010 – see [advice for schools](#) and [advice for further and higher education](#).
- All state-funded schools must teach sex education and pay due regard to the statutory [Government guidance on Sex and Relationships Education](#) (SRE). New requirements for all secondary schools to teach Relationships and Sex Education are planned to come into effect from September 2019 (see below).

The Children and Social Work Act 2017 placed a duty on the Secretary of State to make the following changes in all schools in England:

- Relationships Education compulsory for all primary pupils
- Relationships and Sex Education (RSE) compulsory for all secondary pupils
- Personal, Social, Health and Economic Education (PSHE) compulsory for all state-funded pupils

All schools will be required to teach these subjects and have regard to the statutory guidance from September 2020. The Department for Education is also actively encouraging schools to start teaching these new subjects from September 2019.

The proposed statutory guidance would focus on the following themes:

- Different types of relationships, including families, friendships, dealing with strangers and, at secondary school, intimate relationships;
- How to recognise, understand and build healthy relationships, including self-respect, respect for others, tolerance, boundaries and consent, how to manage conflict, and also how to recognise unhealthy relationships;
- How relationships may affect health and wellbeing, including mental health;
- Healthy relationships and safety online; and
- Factual knowledge, at secondary school, around sex, sexual health and sexuality

Online sexual harassment prevention should build on these requirements, promoting and maintaining a safe and welcoming environment.

4.4 Preventative measures

Effectively addressing online sexual harassment is an ongoing whole-school commitment to:

- 4.4.1 Understand and talk about respect and consent – offline and online
- 4.4.2 Keep policies and practices up to date
- 4.4.3 Make reporting easier
- 4.4.4 Promote the positive uses of technology
- 4.4.5 Ensure support is easily accessible
- 4.4.6 Evaluate the impact of prevention activities

4.4.1 Understand and talk about respect and consent – offline and online

Developing and agreeing on a shared understanding of what respect, consent and healthy relationships look like offline and online, and supporting school-wide discussion around how these issues connect with online sexual harassment provides a firm foundation for prevention activities. These discussions should be seen as conversations with purpose. They should be approached with clear, long-term goals in mind – to ensure everyone in school can identify unacceptable online behaviour, that all students feel confident enough in the school system to report it and that all staff are confident in knowing how to respond.

In addition to students, staff should also be given the time and space to discuss these issues and to ask questions about school policy and approaches to delivering activities around this issue in a safe space. Use INSET days, team meetings and other training opportunities to explore these issues as a group and call on each other's expertise and experience. If teachers are confident in their knowledge of the topic, it is much more likely they will be able to recognise and respond to online sexual harassment with assurance.

Be aware when asking educators to deliver activities on this issue with students, it can be an emotional topic. There is a chance students, educators or people they know have may been affected by sexual harassment in some way, online or offline. Allow staff the time and space to prepare and reflect on the activities they are being asked to deliver, and offer all staff a time and place to discuss any worries or questions they may have with Senior Leadership. For staff who feel they need additional support, it may be beneficial to offer the support of an extra staff member present in lessons on this topic, or the opportunity to watch another staff member deliver similar lessons/activities to help them understand what to expect and to judge how comfortable they feel delivering these themselves.

To tackle online sexual harassment it is essential to understand and address any underlying factors or embedded attitudes within your school and consider how

they may be impacting on young people. During focus groups, young people communicated difficulties in being able to always recognise when online behaviour was 'unwanted,' and how to ask for consent online.

How to develop positive social norms and etiquettes online that enable trust, respect and consensual online relationships to thrive is a challenge that many young people are currently navigating, and often without the support of adults. Young people will come to school having varying levels of understanding around relationships, sex and consent. It is important for schools to provide young people with safe environments and opportunities to explore these topics and ask questions.

The school should also consider what it could do to actively promote the welfare of groups that are disproportionately affected by online sexual harassment.

Whilst open dialogue and communication are essential in prevention activities, it is important to clarify when and what is appropriate to discuss and with who, for all members of the school community including staff. In focus groups, some young people mentioned they believed staff 'gossiped' about students in the staffroom and were put off from reporting for this reason.

“Sometimes they say, ‘Oh we won't tell anyone,’ but you get some teacher that doesn't realise they're not meant to say – then they make a comment and you realise they have been told.”

Boy, 17 years

Curriculum opportunities

Online sexual harassment can be addressed through Personal Social Health and Economic education (PSHE), Relationships and Sex Education (RSE), Citizenship, as well as lessons on the law and current affairs.

Effective teaching around this issue should be embedded throughout complementary subject areas, underpinned by the school's policies and supported by all staff. It should have a clear set of values and standards and be delivered in such a way that is both age and stage appropriate for the young people within the school.



Practical tips

Below is a list of suggested action points to ensure a shared understanding of respect and consent:

- Come to a shared conclusion on what constitutes online sexual harassment and add this to existing anti-bullying and/or behaviour policies.
- Include conversations around relationships, sex and consent in discussions around online sexual harassment.
- Make it clear that all forms of sexual violence and

sexual harassment are not acceptable, will never be tolerated and are not an inevitable part of growing up.

- Do not tolerate or dismiss sexual harassment as “banter”, “part of growing up”, “just having a laugh” or “boys being boys/girls being girls.”
- Give staff time and space to discuss this issue together. Staff could use a lesson plan from the [‘Step Up, Speak Up!’ teaching toolkit](#) to work through together or to start conversations around.
- Check to see if appropriate resources are accessible to staff and students. Online resources about online sexual harassment may include some terminology that causes them to be blocked by internet filters, and some websites may need to be actively allowed access by school computers.
- Consult with young people on how they wish to be supported in learning about and addressing online sexual harassment.
- Consider how to promote the welfare of groups who are disproportionately targeted e.g. raising awareness, bringing in external speakers, embedding into your code of conduct/ethos.
- Embed preventative education around online sexual harassment throughout the curriculum.

4.4.2 Keep policies and practices up to date

Online sexual harassment prevention activities can impact on a range of school activities – staff development, computing support and infrastructure and curriculum planning, for example.

Schools should ensure that their anti-bullying policy and/or school behaviour policy makes reference to how technology impacts young people’s behaviour, including online sexual harassment. Policies should be forward thinking and robust enough to cover a range of situations through preventative measures.

When instances of online sexual harassment occur, staff may need to make difficult decisions under pressure, and without delay. Putting policies in place early on helps to guide these decisions and ensure incidents are dealt with consistently and in the agreed manner.

When considering how existing school safeguarding procedures address online sexual harassment and other forms of harmful sexual behaviour, it may be helpful to conduct a self-assessment of existing policies in order to identify any gaps and seek out resources to address these.

Acceptable Use Policies (AUPs)

AUPs are the rules that students and staff agree to follow in order to use technology in school to keep everyone safe. Engage young people and staff in the development and drafting of AUPs. It is important to ensure the language used is appropriate and accessible to the age or group of students it is intended for. It is for schools to decide if they wish to ban or restrict the use of mobile phones, devices or certain internet sites during school

hours, and whether to include in their behaviour/anti-bullying policies sanctions for their misuse.

Publicising sanctions

Pupils, parents/carers, staff and governors should all be made aware of the consequences of online sexual harassment and of the rights and responsibilities of technology use. Schools should consider appropriate actions for all who are involved, including perpetrators and those who actively take part in and/or encourage such behaviour, e.g. those who share other people’s content or who ‘like’ or comment on it online.

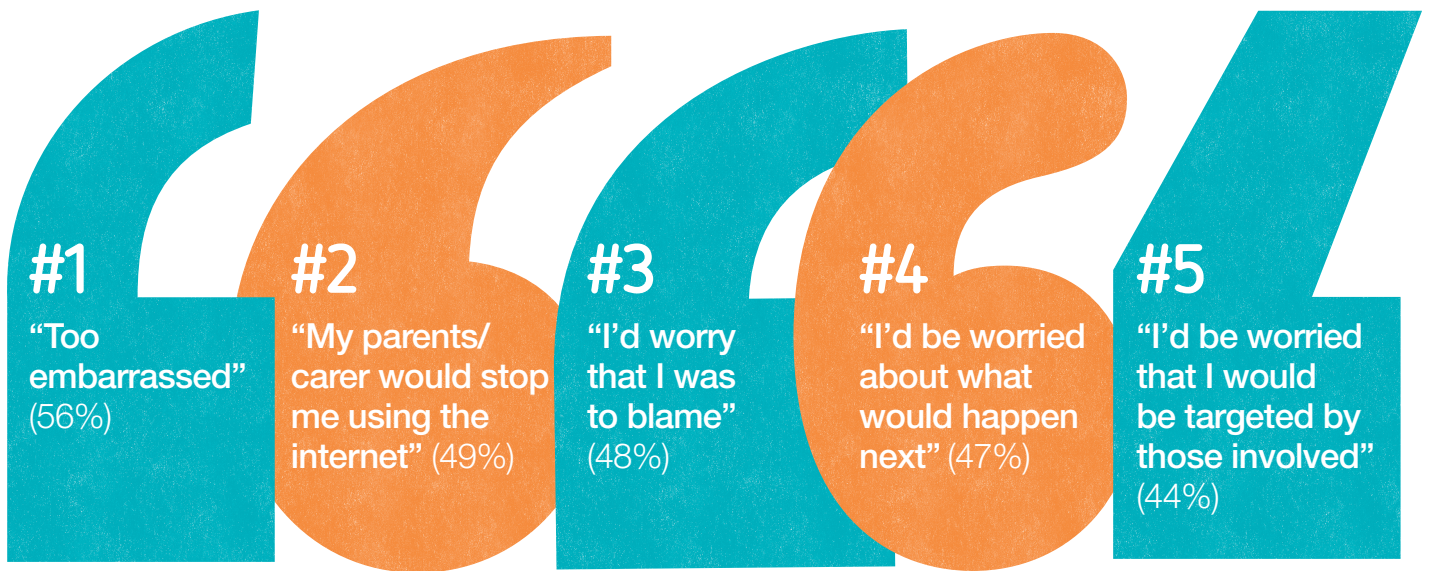


Practical tips

Below is a list of suggested action points to ensure policies and practices are kept up to date:

- Assess how robust existing school policies are. A sample scenario could be discussed in a staff training session and used to assess the school’s existing response, or schools could make use of existing self-assessment tools such as:
 - » The [Contextual Safeguarding Network](#) harmful sexual behaviour assessment tool. You need to register (for free) to access these resources.
 - » [360 Safe](#) is a free online safety policy review tool
 - » [Online Compass](#) is a free to use tool to review online safety provisions.
- Identify any current gaps in knowledge or practice and seek out training opportunities, resources and further advice to address these. Consult with staff on what they would find useful.
- Ensure relevant policies define and make provision for the protection of students against online sexual harassment.
- Engage young people in assessing and wording the school AUP, ensure it is well publicised and staff apply it consistently.
- Publicise sanctions for misuse of technology. This could form part of a home–school agreement or written into the school code of conduct.
- Employ a [contextual safeguarding](#) policy that takes into account the wider circumstances of young people involved in any incidents, in order to deliver a targeted response.
- Create a clear policy that gives ground rules to decide if and when a student’s device needs to be confiscated. Confiscating the victim’s device/s should be avoided as far as possible, as it may be perceived as a punishment for something that was carried out by another person.

Top #5 barriers to seeking help:



4.4.3 Make reporting easier

Reporting any incident of online sexual harassment can be difficult for the person/s involved and for bystanders. It may be particularly difficult for young people to report it if this will reveal something about their online activities that they do not want to share, for example sexual preference or sexuality.

When asked why young people might not want to report online sexual harassment, the top 5 barriers to seeking help were:

- #1 Too embarrassed (56%)
- #2 My parents/carers would stop me using the internet (49%)
- #3 Worried that they are to blame (48%)
- #4 Worried about what would happen next (47%)
- #5 Worried about being targeted by those involved (44%)

Schools should ensure they have developed strong and clear reporting procedures which have been shared with all members of the school community. All members of the community should recognise that asking for help is not a failing or a weakness, but a strength which shows courage and good judgement.

Many schools have very sound policies in place, but students are unaware of what they mean, what happens if they make a report or even that the policy/procedure exists.

Practical tips

Below is a list of suggested action points to ensure reporting is an easy process:

- Ensure all staff know how to treat all disclosures of harm with respect and seriousness and maintain a non-judgemental approach. Take pro-active measures to ensure students are aware this is the approach taken by the school.

- Publicise reporting routes to all members of the school community and share contact hours of appropriate staff members to contact (including their photographs so students can identify them) if possible.
- Ensure students understand how a report would be treated and escalated if needed. Anonymous reporting routes can be a helpful option, but it is important that all members of the school community understand they are not a replacement for robust and effective safeguarding procedures. You may consider having email addresses set up for reporting; ensure any anonymous reporting mechanism is set up with careful consideration to how it will be managed. The South West Grid for Learning has [Advice for Schools](#) on managing anonymous online reporting.
- Clarify the reporting process to all members of the school community. Students may be put off if they are unsure about what will happen if they make a report. Ensuring the reporting is as transparent and clear as possible can help students feel more confident to disclose a concern.
- Ensure there is a culture within your school that denounces victim-blaming or slut-shaming as a priority.
- Ensure bystanders feel empowered and able to report without fear of consequences from their peers.

"We've always said, you talk to someone you feel comfortable talking to. And sometimes it's not even teaching staff, its other support staff or technicians, or all sorts of people that they will and talk to, the school nurse."
Teacher, Secondary School

4.4.4 Promote the positive uses of technology

Keeping up-to-date and informed about young people's use of technologies, and their potential abuse and risks, is important. While young people are experts on their own use and can be a valuable source of information about technology, they may not necessarily understand all of the risks involved and the strategies for keeping their experience of technology safe and enjoyable.

New technology and services can have a great impact on the behaviour of young people. A lack of awareness from adults may mean that certain behaviours go undetected.

Whilst technology can present risk for young people it is important to remember the wealth of opportunities it also offers. Schools should ensure that preventative measures do not disrupt or interfere with the positive use of technology and the internet. It's important that technology use is appropriately encouraged and celebrated.



Practical tips

Below is a list of suggested action points to ensure the positive uses of technology are promoted:

- Invite students to deliver workshops or assemblies to the school community about the latest online trends and popular sites/apps/games.
- Invite students to share their online role models and where they go for information and inspiration online. Signpost to further places where support and advice can be accessed online. See p.29 for more support organisations for young people.
- Use technology within the classroom and teach how to use it positively and safely, for example, students can research information, be creative and keep up to date with school news all through using the internet.
- Consult with students on the creation and wording of school policies. Students could run surveys, conduct interviews and collect suggestions to present to Senior Leadership staff.
- Set up a peer-to-peer support programmes, or use existing groups such as the student council to focus on online sexual harassment to raise awareness and engage learners. Some existing online safety peer education programmes to schools are available, for example, [Childnet's Digital Leaders Programme](#).

4.4.5 Ensure support is easily accessible

It is important that all students in school know how and where to seek support for concerns about online sexual harassment.

Schools should signpost to appropriate support for young people, staff and parents/carers, both internally but also from external organisations. See p.29 for suggestions of further organisations that offer support.

Inform staff how the school can work together with other agencies to raise awareness of external support and reporting routes, for example:

- The police
- The Local Authority
- The Local Safeguarding Children Board (LSCB)
- Other local specialist organisations, such as LGBT+ support groups
- Specialist children's advocates such as Children and Young People's Independent Sexual Violence Advisors (ChISVAs)
- [Professionals Online Safety Helpline - a free to use online safety advice helpline for all members of the children's workforce](#)

External organisations can provide information, guidance, and training on issues relating to online sexual harassment – for example, educational workshops around online safety, gender, LGBT+ issues and disability. They can support schools and staff in understanding different discriminatory behaviours, and equip the school to recognise and challenge them.



Practical tips

Below is a list of suggested action points to ensure support is easily accessible:

- Ensure all students know who, when and where they can go to in school for support with a concern around online sexual harassment. You may wish to display posters with these details plus photographs of the relevant staff members.
- Display [posters](#) around school and add a section on your school intranet or website promoting other organisations that offer support and guidance to students that can offer them alternative routes to seek advice and report.
- Consider training from external partners with specific expertise.
- Share preventative resources, practices and ideas with safeguarding leads from other schools and local authorities.

4.4.6 Evaluate the impact of prevention activities

Regular reviews of the impact of online sexual harassment and the attitudes within the school community are vital to reduce incidents in the long term. The school should decide on realistic aims in terms of prevention activities and how these will be measured, and communicate findings to the whole school community.

When an issue is made visible, reporting routes are made clear and people feel safe to discuss and identify incidents, it is likely that the school will see the number of reports relating to those issues increase in the short term. This does not necessarily mean incidents are increasing, rather that the number of people reporting them is going up. This should be viewed as a positive result, and evidence that your focus on prevention is working.



Practical tips

Below is a list of suggested action points to ensure the impact of preventative activities are recorded and evaluated:

- Consider conducting annual student and staff attitude and experience surveys. These could address how safe members of the school community feel, how comfortable they feel in reporting online sexual harassment incidents, and how happy they are with the ways incidents are dealt with.
- Consider conducting a parent and carer opinion survey. Asking questions about online sexual harassment will provide you with an indication about awareness and the success of your prevention work.
- Where possible, publicise progress, activities and impact findings to the whole school community.

4.5 Preventing online sexual harassment: checklist

- Does the school ensure it is taking a whole school approach and embedding online safety and healthy relationships messages across the curriculum and community?
- Are the senior leadership team confident and up-to-date in their knowledge of understanding, preventing and responding to incidents of online sexual harassment?
- Does the school support all staff in their duty to understand, prevent and respond to online sexual harassment through policy, procedures, and regular training and development opportunities?
- Do pupils and staff understand the essentials of keeping themselves safe online – including privacy settings, reporting, and getting material taken down?
- Does the school ensure the whole school community is involved in prevention work, including the creation of related policies?
- Do all members of staff understand how to report any incident of online abuse they become aware of?
- Are students made aware of the different reporting routes available to them? Are students aware of what happens after they make a report and how they would be supported?
- Are parents made aware of the different reporting routes available to them? Are parents aware of what happens after they/their child make a report and how they would be supported?
- Do staff have an understanding of how young people in the school community use technology? Is the school familiar with the devices, sites and apps the community use?
- Does the school promote the positive use of technology?
- Are there consequences for sexual harassment, including online, in your school? Is the whole school community clear about sanctions?
- Are staff and students aware of the ways in which the school provides support for people who are sexually harassed online?
- Is the school monitoring and measuring the impact of its prevention work?