

5. Responding to online sexual harassment

When incidents of online sexual harassment occur, the ways in which schools respond to them and support those involved can be crucial in preventing further escalation and harmful behaviour, and further victimisation. An effective response should also reinforce a positive and supportive school culture and work to minimise any lasting negative impacts for those involved.

5.1 Young people's attitudes to reporting

Project deSHAME found that only 15% of young people would be likely to tell a teacher if they experienced online sexual harassment. The barriers they identified for not telling a teacher were as follows:

- #1 "I would be worried that my school would overreact" 59%
- #2 "I would be worried it would make it worse" 54%
- #3 "I wouldn't know which teacher to speak to" 37%
- #4 "I don't think I would be taken seriously" 27%
- #5 "The teachers are too busy to speak to" 26%

These statistics are an indication of the sensitivity, transparency and calm manner young people need in order to feel comfortable enough to report online sexual harassment, and provide helpful guidance to shape school safeguarding procedures.

"I think there is [help] but people are scared to use it because it will knock their reputation down. They think they'll lose street cred, they'll lose their mates, and their egos will shrink. If they use that help then they'll admit to being weak."

Girl, 14 – 17 years

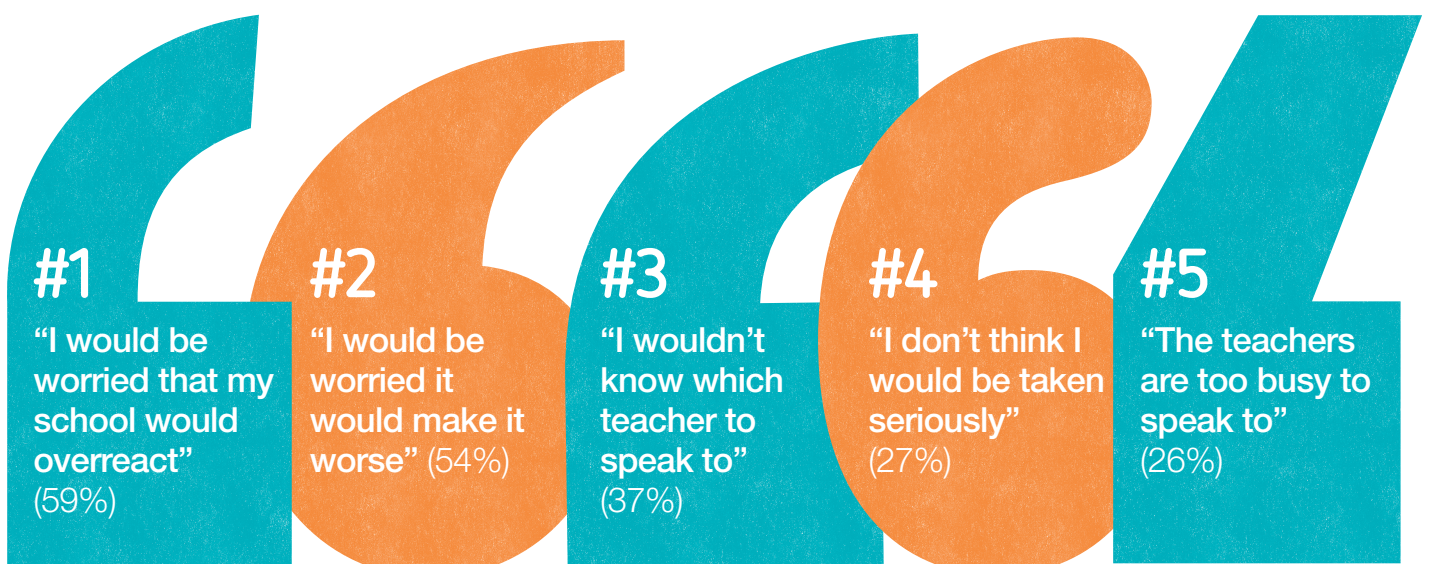
"People that don't believe in confidentiality. Like when this help is sent out, it always says confidential, but people just don't trust that enough, and I think they always think, what if someone finds out? And then they either think that, and everything else that could happen around that is what stops them from telling someone"

Girl, 14 – 17 years

"[About people who report to teachers] They're a snitch"

Boy, 16 – 17 years

Top #5 barriers to seeking help:



5.2 Immediate responses to reports of online sexual harassment

When staff become aware of a report of online sexual harassment, help should be provided as early as possible, and the school's child protection procedure should be followed.

Practical tips for handling an immediate report of online sexual harassment:

- Consider how the disclosure was made. Was it a direct report to a member of staff, was it made by a friend of the victim, or was it overheard indirectly? The school's child protection procedure should always be followed, but it is also important to understand why the victim may not have made the disclosure themselves, and to handle this sensitively and with multi-agency support if necessary.
- Acknowledge the barriers the young person has overcome to make a disclosure, take their report seriously and reassure them they have done the right thing.
- Carefully consider the language used to support the victim and take a non-judgmental approach. For ease of identification, school staff may refer to 'victims' or 'perpetrators,' but the students may not identify, or wish to identify themselves in that way.
- Avoid victim-blaming. The victim may have engaged in some risky behaviour that another student has taken advantage of, but this does not mean they deserve blame. If parents or carers need to be notified, remember that they may also feel some element of victimhood by association.
- Remain calm and non-judgemental throughout the disclosure. Something the young person says may seem shocking, but they have overcome a great barrier in feeling comfortable enough to make a report. Revealing any shock may put them off from continuing with their disclosure.
- Involve the young person in decision making. Give them as much information and detail on next steps as appropriate. Not understanding what is going to happen next can make the experience even more upsetting for those involved. If a staff member does need to inform a senior colleague, ask the student if they want to be a part of that conversation.
- Explain who else may need to be informed about the disclosure, but also explain who will not need to be told. In focus groups some students were worried their disclosure would be shared around the school staff room as gossip. Whilst effective child protection practice includes not promising confidentiality, it is helpful to clarify exactly what this means in realistic terms.
- What safeguarding support does the alleged perpetrator require? It may be that their behaviour is the result of either their own abuse or their exposure to

abusive content or behaviour. It is important to assess the wider context of the incident to be able to make an informed decision. This does not mean disciplinary action cannot be taken – this can and should occur at the same time if necessary, proportional to the incident. See 'Step Up, Speak Up!'s' advice document, ['Supporting young people who display harmful sexual behaviour online.'](#)

- Do any other young people need supporting? Witnesses to the incident may also be in need of support. Due to the nature of being online, this may be a very large group of young people. Consider the best ways to effectively reach all the young people who may need support. For example, it may be that students are spoken to in class groups and are signposted to people and places where they can talk about what they have witnessed further.
- Do other schools or organisations need to be contacted? If any young people from outside of the school are believed to be involved, it is best practice to contact their Senior Leadership and inform them of any incidents if possible. They may be currently unaware, or may have further information about the incident that may be useful in supporting the school's own students.

5.3 Identifying illegal content and activity

Some instances of online sexual harassment may break the law. Schools should have existing protocols on how to pass these incidents on to the police. This will often be a natural progression of making a referral to children's social care or working with a Police Community Support Officer connected with the school. The Designated Safeguarding Lead has the responsibility to be aware of the local processes for making referrals to children's social services and making reports to the police.

In the case of illegal activity, the police will be able to assist schools and other organisations to determine what content is needed for the purposes of evidence, and how best to secure this.

Sexting and online sexual harassment

One example of illegal activity is 'sexting.' This is the consensual or non-consensual sharing of self-generated sexually explicit or nude images commonly known by young people as 'nudes' or 'sending nudes.' Both consensual and non-consensual sharing of explicit images of children under the age of 18 is illegal under the Protection of Children Act 1978.

All incidents of youth-produced sexual imagery should be responded to in line with school child protection policy, however, non-consensual sharing would also be defined as an incident of online sexual harassment.

School staff should not view illegal images unless doing so is unavoidable or necessary to the safety of the children involved. Staff should never copy or forward illegal images. Further advice on how to respond to instances of sexting can be found in the UKCCIS advice [Sexting in schools and colleges](#):

[Responding to incidents and safeguarding young people.](#)

If a young person (under the age of 18) has produced or shared material consensually, it may be appropriate for the school to manage the incident directly after they have conducted a full and robust risk assessment.

However, in any case where the material was shared without consent, obtained by pressure or shared with malice, it will most likely need police involvement. Under their duty of care, the police may need to investigate any aggravating factors, such as coercion, blackmail, adult involvement, or existing vulnerabilities, and to collect evidence, in order to make the most appropriate and proportionate response. The police have publicly stated they are not seeking to unnecessarily criminalise young people for this type of behaviour, particularly with first time offences.

Schools should always refer incidents to the police where they:

- Involve coercion, blackmail or exploitation
- Are extreme or violent in their nature
- Involve a child or children under 13
- Involve a child at significant or immediate risk of harm
- Involve a child who is already recognised as vulnerable by children's social care or the police
- Involve images or recording of a crime, e.g a recording of an assault
- Involve a high number of children

See p.12 for legislation that can apply to online sexual harassment.

Even if something breaks the law, the students involved may not want to escalate the incident to the police. This may be for a number of reasons.

The deSHAME research report found the top 5 barriers that prevent young people from reporting to the police were:

- #1 "I wouldn't want them to involve my family" – 61%
- #2 "I wouldn't want to get into trouble" – 55%
- #3 "I think it would be too difficult" – 44%
- #4 "I would think it wasn't serious enough" – 43%
- #5 "I wouldn't know how to" – 42%

Top #5 barriers that prevent young people from reporting to the police



Understanding why the victim is reluctant to go to the police can be helpful in knowing what further information or reassurance they need to understand how the police could help.

If the victim continues to ask for no police involvement, school staff may still lawfully report the incident if it is justifiable, for example, to protect children from harm. It is vital the victim is kept informed of the reasons behind needing to involve the police, and that they understand the police have a duty of care to protect children first and foremost.

Further advice on considering confidentiality in cases of sexual harassment can be found on p.21 of the [DfE's Sexual violence and sexual harassment between children in schools and colleges \(2018\) advice](#).

5.4 Containing the incident

Online sexual harassment can include a number of complex factors; messages and images can be both public and private, harassment can repeat across multiple different platforms and it can be taking place between young people in different schools, locations or communities. There is also the risk that the harassment will resurface online later on, and cause further victimisation in the future.

Students may feel reluctant to take a report further if they believe there is nothing that can be done as the abusive content is already 'out there.' Schools should not promise they can remove the content completely, but should explain the importance of making an effort to remove as much as possible. It can lower the risk of the content resurfacing later on, and may give the victim back an element of control.

If an incident constitutes a criminal offence, images or other material that break the law should be preserved appropriately as evidence. Further information on this can be found in the [Sexting in schools and colleges guidance](#) from UKCCIS.

Take guidance from law enforcement as to what evidence may be needed. Schools may be required to hold young people's devices until the police make further contact. Guidance explaining the powers schools have to screen and search students and to confiscate items can be found in the Department for Education's guidance [Searching, screening and confiscation: advice for schools](#).

As well as the police, there are several other routes to report illegal online content or activity:

- To remove illegal images from the internet, you can contact the [Internet Watch Foundation](#).
- To report violent content such as depictions of rape or torture, you can contact the [Internet Watch Foundation](#).
- To report any concerns that a child has been coerced into taking and sending nude or sexually explicit images by an adult, or is being groomed or sexually exploited by an adult using the internet, you can contact [CEOP](#).

- To report hate crimes and incidents, including racist material, you can contact [True Vision](#).

In all cases where you can report via another route in addition to the police, ensure both parties are aware of who else you have reported to or plan to report to, to ensure the response is cohesive.

Schools have been advised **not to wait** for the outcome of police investigations before protecting the victim, alleged perpetrator and other children in the school. Further advice on working with the police to support students going through a criminal process for sexual harassment allegations can be found on p.28 of the [DfE's Sexual violence and sexual harassment between children in schools and colleges advice \(2018\)](#).

If an incident is concerning but does not constitute a criminal offence, schools should refer back to their child protection policies, escalating the issue to the local children's safeguarding board if necessary.

Steps should be taken by the school to contain the incident as soon as possible. Ensure upsetting content is removed from devices and services to minimise it spreading further, and reduce the chance of re-victimisation in the future.

The quickest and most effective route to removing online content is for the person who originally posted it to take it down or delete it.

If the person/s responsible for the harassment is identifiable:

- Explain why the material is unacceptable and request they remove it.
- Ask for any other evidence of the online sexual harassment to also be deleted from their device/s or online services (e.g. original photos on phones and saved content on online 'cloud-based' services).
- Refusal to delete sexual harassment material from a personal device is likely to constitute reasonable grounds for confiscation.
- If students refuse to take down or delete harassing content, inform a parent or carer to support with this.
- Ask for the names of any other people the material has been forwarded on to.

If the person/s responsible for the harassment cannot be identified:

- Work with the victim or those who made the disclosure to identify those who carried out the harassment. Young people may not be forthcoming with this information, for fear of negative repercussions from their peers e.g. being known as a 'snitch' or 'grass.' It is important to reassure them they will be supported throughout the whole process, and apply appropriate sanctions to students who react negatively. In the long term, take steps within your school to create a culture where reporting is encouraged and applauded, rather than ridiculed or criticised.

- Contact the online site or service the material is hosted on. Use the available reporting routes to request the content is removed. Service providers should remove content that breaches their terms and conditions.
- For further information on how to report on different sites and services, visit the [How to make a report](#) page on the Childnet website and the [‘Report’](#) page on the Report Harmful Content website.

In any situation there is a chance the upsetting content may resurface in the future, for example, if someone has saved a screenshot or another copy of the material. It is important to let the victim know they can report any repetitions of the harassment that resurface, and that they will be offered the same amount and quality of support each time.

Professionals Online Safety Helpline



**Professionals
Online Safety
Helpline**

The [Professionals Online Safety Helpline](#) is a free helpline for all members of the children’s workforce,

offering advice and support with online safety issues. The team can help with any online safety issues – privacy, online reputation, gaming, grooming, cyberbullying, sexting, and inappropriate behaviour on social media etc. As the only helpline in the UK solely dedicated to supporting the children’s workforce, POSH is unique in its relationships within industry - having direct channels to escalate concerns to social media companies and many websites.

The helpline is available to call or email Monday to Friday 10am – 4pm.

Email: helpline@saferinternet.org.uk
Call: 0344 381 4772

Reporting Harmful Content Online portal



**REPORT
HARMFUL
CONTENT**

reporthearmfulcontent.com

is a service designed to:

- Provide information on sites’ and services’ community standards.
- Give advice on how to report problems online.
- Mediate where appropriate or explain why content hasn’t been removed.
- Provide assistance in removing harmful content from platforms.

They provide an online tool that guides you through the reporting processes of different sites and services, offer a way to escalate a report if you feel you have not received an adequate response, and offer appropriate advice.

5.5 Continuing support

Online sexual harassment can have a lasting impact on those involved; even though an incident may appear to be resolved, this may have no bearing on how those involved feel for a long time afterwards. This can be amplified by the online nature of the harassment – the victim may be worried the harassment could reappear at any time. There is also a risk that the alleged perpetrator receives abuse for their apparent actions. There may be a risk that those involved skip lessons, or miss school altogether if they do not feel they have the support to be able to be in the same environment as their peers. It is crucial the victim’s needs are placed at the forefront of all ongoing support to help them feel safe and secure, for as long as necessary, in order to safeguard both their emotional well-being, and their education.

The victim may need some time to come to terms with the incident, or may have a delayed reaction and need time to understand the wider consequences caused by the harassment. If the victim feels ready to, it can be helpful to reflect on the incident and how it made them feel. Highlight positive action they can take from now on.

Discuss with those involved how they would like to be supported going forward, and work together to form a practical plan. Aside from those staff members who **need** to know about an online sexual harassment incident (e.g. the DSL), it may be useful for some staff or peers who work with the student to know an incident has occurred so that they can be sensitive to their needs and offer support.

Appendix 1 has a checklist to work through with the student to help them decide who they would like to tell about their experience, and how much they want them to know.

If an incident has broken the law and is being progressed through the criminal justice system, be mindful that young people can find this difficult and stressful. It is important that any young person in this situation receives ongoing support. Cases can sometimes take a long time to be processed, and the trauma felt by young people may resurface at critical moments e.g. being called to give a statement in court. Possible delays in the criminal justice system also highlight the importance of making thorough written records of any reports made to the school, to be able to reference in the future if needed.

Any conviction may draw attention to the school and to those students involved. It will be essential the school ensures victims and alleged perpetrators remain protected, particularly from re-victimisation both online and offline. See p.27 of the DfE’s [Sexual violence and sexual harassment between children in schools and colleges advice \(2018\)](#) for more information about the criminal process system.

5.6 Working with parents and carers to support victims

If a student experiences online sexual harassment, informing parents and carers is the next natural progression, unless there is reason to believe that doing so will put the young person at risk of further harm.

Understandably, parents and carers may be upset or angry at the incident their child has experienced, or possibly blame them for being involved. It is important to prioritise the safeguarding of the victim above all else, and find ways to work with parents and carers to create an effective and supportive plan for the victim going forward.

Practical tips for working with parents and carers:

- Meet with parents/carers to ensure they are aware of the incident and all aggravating factors, unless there are other factors to suggest informing them puts the student at risk of further harm. Ask the student if they want to be involved in this process.
- Is the victim reluctant to tell their parents/carers? Why? Does this have wider implications?
- Give parents/carers the details of what the school has done so far to support the victim, and clear information regarding the school's safeguarding procedure.
- Ask parents/carers what they feel the school can do to best support their child and make suggestions on how they can best support their child at home.
- Do the parents/carers blame their child for the incident? If so, help them in understanding that the best way to help their child is not to focus on who is at fault, but to offer emotional support and a safe space to talk about their feelings.
- Decide with parents/carers how often they would like to be contacted by the school with updates in the reporting process. Decide together on what these updates should include.
- If other agencies need to be involved, decide together how parents/carers want to be involved with this.
- If the police need to be informed, decide together how much support parents/carers want from the school in this process. Make parents/carers aware of the type, and breadth, of support the school can offer.

71%

Project deSHAME found that 71% of 13 – 17 year olds have seen people their age making sexual 'jokes' (e.g. rape jokes) in the last year.

5.7 Changing online sexual harassment behaviours

Once the young person/people responsible for the online sexual harassment has/have been identified apply appropriate behaviour sanctions following your behaviour policy.

When asked why young people might engage in online sexual harassment, the most common response was "for a joke" (54%). Perpetrators may use this to excuse their behaviour, to pass it off as 'banter,' or to imply their actions have been misinterpreted or taken too seriously. They may believe that the problem is not their behaviour, but that the person who has been harassed has 'over-reacted' or misunderstood.

Project deSHAME found that 71% of 13 – 17 year olds have seen people their age making sexual 'jokes' (e.g. rape jokes) in the last year.

Schools should work with those who have engaged in the harassment to ensure they recognise the consequences of their actions, and are supported to change their behaviour. Interviews with educators suggest using restorative approaches to resolve conflict can be effective in preventing further harm, such as bringing victims and perpetrators together to discuss the incident. Involving parents and carers in this work can be essential in ensuring the messages are being reinforced at home as well as at school.

Be aware that restorative justice may not always be appropriate, and it is important to work with the victim on deciding whether it is something they are comfortable with. There is a risk that if not carefully managed, it may cause further trauma, particularly with extreme or severe incidents.

“I do restorative justice every week so I quite often am in here with everyone round the table. It’s when you start getting them to understand how what they’ve said has affected, not just the person but their wider family, how it’s affected their education, their attendance to school. But I think the key that we need to start with is the parents; parents and guardians. If we can get them on board and get them to understand then I think you’ve made that baby step.”
Pastoral Manager, Secondary School

For more information on working with perpetrators, please refer to the ‘Step Up, Speak Up!’ guidance, [‘Supporting young people who display harmful sexual behaviour online.’](#)

5.8 Responding to online sexual harassment: checklist

- Are staff familiar with the school’s processes for responding to online sexual harassment? If they need to refer to school policies, can they access these easily and quickly?
- Is the whole school community aware of how the school supports students who are victims of abuse out of school hours, and in school holidays?
- Are staff aware of current attitudes and barriers to reporting amongst students, and are they making efforts to improve these?
- Are students who have been harassed being appropriately involved in the decision making and resolution process?
- Are appropriate staff trained in carrying out a risk assessment to determine if the incident may be illegal?
- Do staff know what to do if they suspect online sexual harassment activity breaks the law?
- Do staff know how to escalate reports to appropriate senior staff members using school procedure?
- Does the school consult with any other agencies to support their response? (E.g. local children’s safeguarding board, children’s social services, the police).
- Is one staff member acting as the point of contact if other agencies are involved? Is there a clear plan on how to effectively facilitate multi-agency collaboration?
- Are staff familiar with the school’s processes in relation to searching students, confiscating devices and deleting materials? If they need to refer to school policies, can they access these easily and quickly?
- Are all students who may have been affected by an incident of online sexual harassment (bystanders, victims, and perpetrators) being offered ongoing support?
- Are parents and carers being kept informed and involved in the resolution of any online sexual harassment incidents?
- Are students who have carried out online sexual harassment being supported to change their behaviour?

6. Further help

Support for young people

Childline

A free, confidential service for children 18 and under to obtain counselling support online, via email or phone.

www.childline.org.uk
0800 11 11

The Mix

A free and confidential multi-channel service for young people aged between 13-25 years old.

www.themix.org.uk
0808 808 4994

Young Minds

A mental health and wellbeing charity that offers support and guidance for young people through their website.

www.youngminds.org.uk

Victim Support

An independent charity offering support to people who have been a victim of crime with a free and confidential helpline.

www.victimsupport.org.uk
0808 1689 111

Papyrus

A free and confidential helpline for young people who may be contemplating harming themselves or committing suicide.

www.papyrus-uk.org
0800 068 4141

Respect Phone Line

A confidential and anonymous helpline for anyone concerned about their violence and/or abuse towards a partner or ex-partner.

www.respectphoneline.org.uk
0808 802 4040

Young Stonewall

An organisation for all young lesbian, gay, bi and trans people – as well as those who are questioning. There's helpful advice on their website and you can also find out about other local services in your area.

www.youngstonewall.org.uk

Support for staff

UK Safer Internet Centre Professionals Online Safety Helpline (POSH)

A free helpline to support any member of the children's workforce with online safety issues or risk prevention.

www.saferinternet.org.uk/professionals-online-safety-helpline
0344 381 4772

NSPCC

The NSPCC runs dedicated helplines for anyone worried about a child. If you have concerns or suspicions, contact the free helpline service to speak to an NSPCC counsellor at any time.

www.nspcc.org.uk
0808 800 5000
help@nspcc.org.uk

Support for parents

NSPCC helpline

A helpline for anyone who is worried about a child's safety or wellbeing

www.nspcc.org.uk
0808 800 5000

Young Minds

A helpline for parents who may be worried about the mental health and wellbeing of a child.

www.youngminds.org.uk
0808 802 5544

Family Lives

A charity offering support with all aspects of family life.

www.familylives.org.uk
0808 800 2222

Use this list of questions to decide on a plan of action with any young person who has experienced online sexual harassment. It can help clarify the reporting process to the young person, and help identify the type of support they need at this time. It may be helpful to revisit this checklist regularly to see how the level of support needed may have changed.

Your Name:

Class / Form

Who already knows about your experience?	
Who do you want to know about your experience?	
How much do you want them to know?	
What sort of support do you want them to give you?	
What do you not want them to do?	