

# Online sexual harassment

Understand,  
prevent and  
respond

Guidance for schools on addressing  
online sexual harassment

A Campaign  
Toolkit from



Step Up,

Speak Up!

PROJECT  
**deSHAME**

Digital Exploitation and Sexual Harassment Among Minors in Europe  
Understanding, Preventing, Responding



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**31%** of respondents had seen people their age creating fake profiles of someone to share sexual images, comments or messages in the last year, while almost half (47%) witnessed other young people sharing personal details of someone who is seen as 'easy'.

**6%** of young people aged 13 – 17 years have had their nude or nearly nude image shared with other people without their permission in the last year, while 51% have witnessed this happening.

**66%** The majority of respondents (66%) agree that people will think badly about a girl if her nude or nearly nude image is posted online, whereas a smaller proportion would think the same if it were a boy (45%).

**23%** of respondents have witnessed young people secretly taking sexual images of someone and sharing them online, while 8% admitted they had done this in the last year.

**10%** of respondents aged 13 – 17 years have received sexual threats online from people their age in the last year, while 31% have witnessed this happening.

**"I have experienced lots of homophobic comments after coming out, and have heard other people use them as an insult."**  
Gender and age unknown

**"My mate had an argument with this lad, they can't stand each other, they were talking for a bit but now they don't like each other. She never sent him photos, but he got this photo off the internet and put it on his Story, so-and-so's nudes"**  
Girl, 13-16 years

**7%** of respondents said that someone used sexual images of them to threaten or blackmail them in the last year.

**1 in 10** respondents said their boyfriend or girlfriend had pressured them to share nude images in the last year, with girls being more likely to report this.

**26%** of respondents aged 13 – 17 years have had rumours about their sexual behaviour shared online in the last year, with 65% saying that girls are judged more harshly for this than boys.

**4 in 5** respondents (80%) had witnessed people their age using terms like 'sket' or 'slut' to describe girls in a mean way online in the last year, while over two-thirds (72%) had witnessed people using homophobic or transphobic language online.

**Almost half** of respondents aged 13 – 17 years (47%) said that they have witnessed people their age editing photos of someone to make them sexual, for example putting their face on a pornographic image or placing sexual emojis over them.

# 1. About this guidance

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## 1.1 Who is this for?

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This guidance is for all adults responsible for child protection, children's well-being and implementing safeguarding policies in schools and other youth settings.

## 1.2 What does this guidance cover?

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The guidance covers:

- Defining online sexual harassment and the behaviours it describes
- The impact of online sexual harassment
- The reasons behind online sexual harassment
- Statutory and legal responsibilities for schools and educational settings
- Preventative education
- Improving multi-agency working
- Responding to disclosures
- Increasing reporting amongst young people

## 1.3 Why is this advice important?

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Young people aged 13 – 17 are increasingly at risk of being exposed to unhealthy and upsetting online behaviour from their peers. Whilst technology can be a powerful and positive tool, it also brings with it the potential to carry out harmful actions, including peer-to-peer online sexual harassment.

Addressing all forms of online sexual harassment is vital to support the health and well-being of members of the school community. This is an issue that needs cohesive, collective and collaborative action by the whole school community. In order to teach young people about this issue it is essential that schools model and practice the behaviour they expect from students. This includes open and honest communication, supporting all individuals who need it, involving staff, parents, students and governors, and prioritising relationship and sex education. It includes giving teachers the time, training and support in order to deliver lessons that target these issues. Provision should be made for developing the emotional intelligence and personal development of students and there should be targeted support for those who may have been involved in online sexual harassment. This can only happen with senior leadership commitment, a supportive culture and effective and relevant policies. This advice aims to guide school leaders in embedding best practice throughout their school to manage this issue effectively.

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Statistics included are taken from the Project deSHAME survey. This was run in 2017 with over 3000 young people aged 13 – 17 across the UK, Denmark and Hungary. Quotes included are taken from both the survey and from focus groups run in UK schools in 2017. Unless specifically mentioned, statistics and quotes represent data gathered from the UK only.

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## 2. Summary

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### Understanding online sexual harassment: checklist

- Are school staff aware of the different forms that online sexual harassment can take and the specific characteristics of online sexual harassment?
- Does the school share a clear understanding of what online sexual harassment is and why it is not acceptable?
- Are school staff aware that online sexual harassment can overlap with offline sexual harassment and other harmful sexual behaviours?
- Does the school share a clear understanding of agreed terminology and how it should be used?
- Does the school effectively address the range of issues relating to bias and prejudice?
- Are school staff aware of the range of issues that may contribute to students displaying harmful sexual behaviour online?
- Is the school familiar with the key laws and statutory guidance which relate to online sexual harassment?

### 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?

## 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?

## 3. Understanding online sexual harassment

### 3.1 What is online sexual harassment?

#### 3.1.1 Definition

Online sexual harassment is unwanted sexual behaviour on any digital platform. It can happen between anyone online, but this guidance specifically focuses on peer-to-peer incidences.

Online sexual harassment can include a wide range of behaviours that use digital content (images, videos, posts, messages, pages) on a variety of different online platforms (private or public).

Online platforms include:

- **Social networking services:** Instagram, Snapchat, Facebook, Twitter
- **Communication and messaging services:** WhatsApp, Kik, iMessage, Facebook Messenger, Skype, Google Hangouts, Facetime
- **Entertainment and gaming services:** YouTube, Xbox Live, Playstation Network

It can make a person feel threatened, exploited, coerced, humiliated, upset, sexualised or discriminated against.

Further factors to consider:

- **Gender** – This plays a key role. Both boys and girls can be targeted. Research tells us that for some forms girls are more likely to be targeted, and they are often judged more harshly than boys for becoming a victim.
- **Vulnerabilities** – Online sexual harassment can cross over with other factors that can make young people particularly vulnerable including actual or perceived gender, gender identity, sexual orientation, race, religion, psychological vulnerabilities, special educational needs or disabilities.
- **Offline behaviours** – Experiences of sexual harassment can overlap between the offline and online worlds, including offline behaviour such as stalking, relationship abuse and exploitation.
- **Prevalence** – Different forms of online sexual harassment can be happening simultaneously across multiple different platforms and can be easily shared between them.

Online sexual harassment is often focused around schools and local communities and can often play out online in front of an active, engaged audience which can add to the distress caused. Bystanders can also be affected by witnessing online sexual harassment regardless of whether they engage with it or not.

Whilst this guidance document targets peer-to-peer harassment, it is also possible for adults to sexually harass young people online. For further advice and resources around adults making online contact with children for sexual purposes, or to report this issue or any other concern around grooming, please visit [www.ceop.police.uk](http://www.ceop.police.uk).

#### 3.1.2 What forms can online sexual harassment take?

Online sexual harassment can occur in a variety of ways and for a variety of reasons. Different behaviours are often experienced simultaneously, and can overlap with offline experiences of sexual harassment (e.g. sexual abuse, bullying, relationship abuse and stalking).

For example:

- An anonymous account may be set up to collect and share sexual gossip and rumours in order to shame classmates or peers.
- After a relationship breaks down a young person may find an image they shared with an ex-boyfriend or ex-girlfriend appearing online with their full name and the school they go to attached, as a way for their ex-partner to humiliate or shame them.
- A young person may fall out with a close friend and find a social media profile set up in their name that 'outs' them as gay, lesbian or bisexual.
- A young person may post a photo of themselves online and receive sexualised comments about their body and sexually explicit comments based on sexual acts or behaviours.
- A young person may feel more comfortable talking about their feelings with a stranger online only to find out it was a classmate and as a result their personal life is being shared and discussed online.
- A nude image may be shared online attached with someone's name, implying that the image is of them, however the image is taken from a random search online.

Further case studies can be found in the [deSHAME Research Report](#).



Project deSHAME categorises online sexual harassment in four main types:

<b>Non consensual sharing of intimate images and videos</b>  A person's sexual images and videos being shared without their consent or taken without their consent	<b>Exploitation, coercion and threats</b>  A person receiving sexual threats, being coerced to participate in sexual behaviour online, or blackmailed with sexual content	<b>Sexualised bullying</b>  A person being targeted by, and systematically excluded from, a group or community with the use of sexual content that humiliates, upsets or discriminates against them	<b>Unwanted sexualisation</b>  A person receiving unwelcome sexual requests, comments and content
Sexual images/videos taken without consent ('creep shots' / 'upskirting') Sexual images/videos taken consensually but shared without consent ('revenge porn') Non-consensual sexual acts (e.g., rape) recorded digitally (and potentially shared)	Harassing or pressuring someone online to share sexual images of themselves or engage in sexual behaviour online (or offline) Using the threat of publishing sexual content (images, videos, rumours) to threaten, coerce or blackmail someone ('sextortion') Online threats of a sexual nature (e.g. rape threats) Inciting others online to commit sexual violence Inciting someone to participate in sexual behaviour and then sharing evidence of it	Gossip, rumours or lies about sexual behaviour posted online either naming someone directly or indirectly alluding to someone Offensive or discriminatory sexual language and name-calling online Impersonating someone and damaging their reputation by sharing sexual content or sexually harassing others Personal information shared non-consensually online to encourage sexual harassment ('doxing') Being bullied because of actual or perceived gender and/or sexual orientation Body shaming Sexualised body shaming 'Outing' someone where the individual's sexuality or gender identity is publicly announced online without their consent	Sexualised comments (e.g. on photos) Sexualised viral campaigns that pressurise people to participate Sending someone sexual content (images, emojis, messages) without them consenting Unwelcome sexual advances or requests for sexual favours 'Jokes' of a sexual nature Rating peers on attractiveness/sexual activity Altering images of a person to make them sexual

### 3.1.3 What can online sexual harassment overlap with?

#### Other forms of abuse and discrimination

Online sexual harassment can intersect with other discrimination and hate crimes, relating to a person's actual or perceived gender, gender identity, sexual orientation, race, religion, special educational need or disability. Young people in these groups may face unique forms of online sexual harassment as well as multiple barriers that can prevent them from accessing support. For example, if a young person receives sexual harassment online that discriminates against them for being LGBT+, they may not wish to seek help if they are not ready or willing to disclose their personal sexual life to school staff. A young person from a religious family may be afraid of telling their parents about an incident if it conflicts with their religious beliefs.

#### Harmful sexual behaviour and online sexual harassment

Harmful sexual behaviour is an umbrella term that describes behaviours that one would not expect of a child of a particular age or developmental stage. Online sexual harassment and harmful sexual behaviour can sometimes overlap. For example, a 13 year old child starts searching for increasingly violent pornographic videos and sends out the links to younger peers. The harmful content, non-consensual nature and the concerning actions from the 13 year old makes this scenario both online sexual harassment and harmful sexual behaviour.

The key in any situation is to support all of the young people affected, whether victim, perpetrator or bystander. Displaying signs of harmful sexual behaviour may be an indication a child has either been the victim of abuse themselves, or witnessed it happening to others, and is therefore in need of further support.

For more information on recognising harmful sexual behaviour please refer to:

- Step Up, Speak Up! toolkit: [Supporting young people who display harmful sexual behaviour online](#)
- [NSPCC's Harmful Sexual Behaviour Framework](#):
- [Brook's traffic light tool](#)

#### Child Sexual Exploitation and online sexual harassment

Child Sexual Exploitation (CSE) is a type of sexual abuse. This can occur within any relationship in which there is an imbalance of power, including within young people's peer-to-peer relationships. Children who are sexually exploited receive something e.g. money, presents or affection in return for performing sexual activities or others performing sexual activity on them. A young person in an exploitative relationship may not understand they are being abused; they may have been coerced or tricked into believing they are in a consensual, loving relationship with their abuser or they may have been under the influence of drugs or alcohol. Sexual exploitation can also happen to young people in gangs or have a relationship with those in gangs, as part of initiation rituals or demonstrations

of status or power. CSE is not always physical and can happen online too.

CSE and online sexual harassment can overlap, and may have different aggravating factors:

- It may involve adult perpetrators. For example, if an adult was coercing a child to collect nude images of other children in their peer group, this may constitute both CSE and online sexual harassment.
- It may be part of gang related exploitation. For example, if a young person was pressurised into filming sexual activity with another person and made to share the video with their peers as part of an initiation ritual, this may constitute both CSE and online sexual harassment.
- It may be part of further exploitation of a young person's vulnerabilities. For example, if a young person with SEND was being coerced by peers to request sexual acts from others online, this may constitute both CSE and online sexual harassment.

It is important to consider the wider contributing factors about any instance of online sexual harassment. A young person that at first may present as a perpetrator of online sexual harassment, could themselves be a victim of child sexual exploitation.

For more information on CSE please see page 5 of the Department for Education's [Child sexual exploitation – Definition and guide](#).

## 3.2 Terminology

This guidance refers to victims, perpetrators, and alleged perpetrators, as commonly understood terms by professionals. However, when working with young people it is important to understand that not all young people will identify themselves as victims or perpetrators or want to be labelled as such.

As a school, decide what terminology and language is appropriate to use when handling incidents of online sexual harassment, and ensure this is kept to consistently by all members of staff. If a student is being supported through an incident of online sexual harassment, ensure they have been consulted with as to how they wish to be referred to.

## 3.3 Impact

### 3.3.1 Who does online sexual harassment happen to?

Anyone can be subjected to online sexual harassment; there is no 'typical' victim. However, the Project deSHAME research report found that certain groups are more vulnerable than others.

### Girls

Typically girls are more likely to identify themselves as victims of online sexual harassment.

71% of respondents aged 13 – 17 years said that they think online sexual harassment happens more often to girls than boys, while just 4% said it happens more to boys and 26% thought it was about the same.

**“I was being pressurised into sending sexual photos and videos of myself and was threatened if I didn’t. They would go on and on at me when I said no but would carry on with the threats.”**

Girl, 13 years

This is not to say it never happens to boys, but there is a risk that it goes unreported or unrecognised more often.

**“I guess you never know with boys because they never really tell people. So, it’s really under-represented in that area with boys and sexual harassment.”**

Girl, 16-17 years

### Children with psychological vulnerabilities

Project deSHAME survey data suggested young people who perceived themselves to have particular psychological vulnerabilities reported experiencing certain forms of online sexual harassment more than their peers who did not identify as such.

- Peer pressure was a significant predictor of all victimisation experiences, with young people who reported greater levels of peer pressure being more likely to report these behaviours.
- Social support was a significant predictor of many victimisation behaviours. The lower the perceived levels of social support reported by young people, the more frequently they reported victimisation experiences.
- Depression was a significant predictor of all but of a few behaviours. Young people who reported higher levels of depression more frequently reported all victimisation experiences, except receiving sexual comments and having nude images shared without permission.
- A high level of self-esteem was a predictor of many victimisation experiences, including having nude images shared without permission, having contact details shared, having images changed to make them sexual, and being blackmailed as a result of sexual images. This may be due to these young people sharing more photos, or taking more risks online, and feeling more competent in being able to handle online problems themselves.

### Children with SEND (Special Educational Needs and Disabilities)

During interviews with teachers and professionals it was suggested that young people with SEND can be especially vulnerable as:

- It may be assumed that any changes in behaviour or withdrawal from activities or peers may be as a result of their individual needs and not investigated further.
- Communication barriers may prevent them from asking for help or obtaining support.
- There is potential for young people with SEND to experience a higher level of targeted bullying.
- There is potential for young people with SEND to be more easily coerced into doing something they feel uncomfortable with or lacking the communication skills to say no.

Project deSHAME research suggests that having a disability is a significant predictor of having nude images shared without permission, having images edited to make them sexual, and receiving sexual threats.

### Children who identify as LGBT+ (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual or Transgender/sexual)

During interviews with teachers and professionals it was suggested that children who identify or are perceived to be LGBT+ may also be disproportionately targeted. There is a significant gender difference with this form of homophobic, biphobic and transphobic victimisation as well, with boys (12%) being more likely to have been targeted with this form in the last year compared to girls (8%).

It is important to recognise that the inequalities we may see in young people’s online lives are a reflection of those seen in wider society. An inclusive and comprehensive approach to relationship and sex education in schools is key to tackling these issues in a broader sense.

## 3.3.2 Victim blaming

Victim-blaming occurs when others hold a victim accountable for the harm that was committed against them. Victims may also blame themselves for the harm that has come to them.

Why does it happen?

- Societal norms: Young people may hear of high profile harassment or abuse cases in the media, or within their local communities. For example, news stories might refer to a victim as being at fault for being in the wrong place at the wrong time, or wearing inappropriate clothing, whilst the perpetrator’s behaviour goes unchallenged.
- Self-protection: The human brain has a tendency to seek out predictability. If something bad happens at random to someone for no apparent reason, people can feel threatened that something similar could happen to them. Victim-blaming may be a subconscious strategy young people employ to

dissociate themselves from the threat of becoming victims themselves.

- Peer pressure: Young people often want to align with strong peer groups. To avoid the risk of being on the outside of a peer group, young people may join in with victim-blaming to show they are not a victim either.

Victim-blaming can often be a secondary form of harassment in cases of online sexual harassment; whether this is experiencing guilt and blame from others, or victims blaming themselves. This can lead to victims feeling alone, unsupported or at fault. This can make the outcomes worse as they may be less likely to report and ask for help.

62% of respondents said that they felt that if someone's nude or nearly nude image is shared online, they are partly to blame.

**“It’s partially the girl’s fault for sending it in the first place.”**

Boy, 13 years

**“The person who sent it (a nude photo), they would be more of a problem because if it weren’t for them then it wouldn’t have been all over the internet.”**

Boy, 13 years

### 3.3.3 Slut-shaming

Slut-shaming occurs when people harass or abuse (mostly) girls and women, for example, because of how they look, what they wear, or their presumed or invented levels of sexual activity.

Why does it happen?

- Societal norms: Modern society can be seen to encourage women and girls to be valued in terms of their sexual appeal. If girls are seen to be ‘breaking the rules’ of what is socially acceptable sexual behaviour, they can face punishment and shame for healthy sexual expression, or if they are seen to be deviating from this.
- Victim-blaming behaviour: Slut-shaming is a particular form of victim-blaming, and can stem from similar reasons (see point 3.3.2).

**“Everyone says its okay for boys to send ‘dick pics’ but when girls do it all you get is hate like slag, sket, slut etc.”**

Girl, 14 years

### 3.3.4 How can it make victims feel?

Online sexual harassment may affect different young people in different ways. These feelings may be an instant reaction, or be delayed, and only affect a victim later on once they have reflected on the situation or if it escalates further.

Online sexual harassment of this kind may make a young person feel any of the following:

- Threatened or scared
- Exploited
- Coerced
- That their dignity is violated
- Humiliated or degraded
- Shamed or judged
- Upset
- Sexualised
- Discriminated against because of their gender or sexual orientation
- Feel guilty or that they are to blame

The experience and impact of online sexual harassment is unique to the individual and can be felt both in the short-term but also can have long-term impacts on mental health and wellbeing. Long term impacts can be amplified because of re-victimisation. For example, if content is re-shared online after the initial incident. It is important to recognise that there is no single way that a young person may experience online sexual harassment and that it might also affect others who witness it.

## 3.4 Research into online sexual harassment

### 3.4.1 How common is it?

Project deSHAME was conducted as a result of growing concerns about online sexual harassment amongst young people aged 13–17 years.

As demonstrated in the quotes and statistics on p.2 and the table on p.7, online sexual harassment encompasses a wide range of behaviours. Project deSHAME data (collected from 13–17 year olds) suggests there is a strong likelihood many young people in schools across the country have either witnessed or experienced online sexual harassment.

It might be that this activity takes place outside of school, but it is very likely to have an impact on the school-life of the children involved and on the school itself.

Online safety is a safeguarding issue, as recognised by Ofsted and by the Department for Education. If a child discloses anything that is worrying them online, whether it be from harassing messages or from seeing something upsetting about a friend online, either in or out of school hours, staff should deal with this information in the same way as dealing with any child protection concern.

### 3.4.2 Why do young people sexually harass others online?

When asked why young people might engage in online sexual harassment, the most common responses were:

- #1** As a joke (54%)
- #2** To hurt someone (52%)
- #3** To retaliate because someone else started it first (50%)
- #4** To get their own back on an ex (47%)
- #5** To get respect from their friends (45%)

Online sexual harassment emerges from a complex combination of societal, peer, relationship and developmental factors, which are facilitated and moderated by digital technology.

Reasons may include:

- Societal – Sexualisation, misogyny and anti-LGBT+ behaviour can often go unchallenged in wider society that young people are witnessing, and they are often reinforced by narrow gender roles and expectations. Societal factors can often be played out through young people's peer dynamics – see next point.
- Peer group factors – Peer groups can normalise the expectation to engage in certain forms of harassment or sexual behaviour with the attitude 'everyone is doing it' – even if this is not the case. Popularity and status are all possible motivations for harmful behaviour. It can be easy for jokes to go too far or to be passed off as 'banter,' particularly when they are at the expense of another person.
- Relationship factors – As they are learning about relationships, respect and consent, young people may cross the line between flirting and harassment, encouragement and pressure. Sometimes these behaviours are abusive, coercive or exploitative. Break ups can be played out in front of the wider peer group and can involve 'revenge' from both the couple involved and their peers. The 'reputation' of those aggrieved in a relationship may be perceived to be important to maintain and may result in a young person engaging in online sexual harassment.
- Developmental factors – Teenagers have a developmental tendency to seek new sensations, take risks and succumb to peer pressure. They are at a stage where they are exploring their emerging sexuality and may have a lack of understanding about sex and relationships. The enduring nature and audience for digital content means that online communication facilitates a different form of risk-taking and potentially intensifies the impacts.
- See Chapter 5 of the [deSHAME Research Report](#) for further details.

## 3.5 Online sexual harassment and the law

Some incidents of online sexual harassment can break the law. Context is key in every situation and it is crucial that this is taken into consideration when responding. If involved, the police should determine the response on a case by case basis.

Even though some laws may apply in some cases, every instance of online sexual harassment is unacceptable and should not be tolerated, or accepted as an inevitable part of 'being a teenager.'

The age of criminal responsibility in England and Wales is 10. It is worth noting the Crown Prosecution Service (CPS) Guidelines on prosecuting cases involving communications sent via social media:

"The age and maturity of suspects should be given significant weight, particularly if they are under the age of 18 [...] Children may not appreciate the potential harm and seriousness of their communications and a prosecution is rarely likely to be in the public interest".

For the purposes of this information, the term 'child' refers to any person aged 17 or under.

Some of the laws relevant to online sexual harassment include:

### [Communications Act 2003](#)

This Act covers all forms and types of public communication. With regards to online behaviour, it covers the sending of grossly offensive, obscene, menacing or indecent communications and any communication that causes needless anxiety or contains false accusation.

### [Protection from Harassment Act 1997](#)

This includes criminal and civil provision for harassment (incidents that have happened repeatedly, i.e. on more than two occasions). It also provides a more serious offence of someone causing another person to fear, on at least two occasions, that violence will be used against them. Stalking, including cyberstalking, is covered.

### [The Computer Misuse Act 1990](#)

This Act criminalises the impersonation or theft of someone else's identity online. This means that creating a fake account in the name of a peer is technically against the law.

### [Equality Act 2010](#)

This Act states that it is against the law to discriminate against anyone on the ground of protected characteristics. These include disability, gender, gender reassignment (when a person undergoes a full or partial process – social or medical – for the purposes of

reassigning their sex), race, (including colour, nationality, ethnic or national origin), religion, or belief, sex and sexual orientation.

Hate crimes and hate speech: If a crime is committed against someone because of their religion, race, sexual orientation or disability, this is classified as a hate crime. Hate speech is defined as expressions of hatred and threats directed at a person or a group of people on account of that person's colour, race, nationality, ethnic or national origin, religion or sexual orientation. Hate crimes should be reported to True Vision- [www.report-it.org.uk](http://www.report-it.org.uk)

### [The Malicious Communications Act 1998](#)

This Act covers the sending of grossly offensive or threatening letters, electronic communications or any other form of message with the intention of causing harm, stress or anxiety.

### [Sexual Offences Act 2003](#)

This Act covers the prevention and protection of children from harm due to sexual offences. The term 'sexual offences' describes offences including, but not limited to, rape, sexual assault, causing sexual activity without consent, child sex offences including grooming, abuse of position of trust, offences against persons with a mental disorder impeding choice, voyeurism offences including recording sexually intrusive images under someone's clothing and indecent photographs of children.

### [Protection of Children Act 1978 – England and Wales](#)

### [Civic Government \(Scotland\) Act 1982 – Scotland](#)

### [Protection of Children Act \(Northern Ireland\) Order 1978](#)

These Acts criminalise the taking, creating, showing, distributing, possessing and publishing any advertisement of indecent photographs of children (people under the age of 18).

### [Section 33 of the Criminal Justice and Courts Act 2015 – England and Wales](#)

This Act states that it is against the law to disclose private sexual photographs or films of someone else without their consent, with the intent to cause distress. This is sometimes referred to in the media as 'revenge pornography.' Where the images may have been taken when the victim was under 18, prosecutors will consider offences under the Protection of Children Act.

### [Abusive Behaviour and Sexual Harm \(Scotland\) Act 2016](#)

This Act criminalises abusive behaviour and sexual harm, including disclosing or threatening to disclose an intimate photograph or film of someone else without their consent, with the intent to cause distress. This is sometimes referred to in the media as 'revenge pornography.'

### [Section 51 of the Justice Act \(Northern Ireland\) 2016](#)

This Act states that it is against the law to disclose private sexual photographs or films of someone else

without their consent, with the intent to cause distress. This is sometimes referred to in the media as ‘revenge pornography.’



#### Outcome 21 Guidance

As of January 2016 the Home Office launched a new outcome code (Outcome 21) to help formalise the discretion available to the police when handling crimes such as youth produced sexual imagery (sexting). The College of Policing has produced guidance to advise forces on how to respond to and record cases of sexting between those aged under 18. If the making and sharing of images is considered non-abusive and there is no evidence of further criminal activity (e.g. exploitation, grooming) or evidence of it being persistent behaviour, Outcome 21 can be applied. The child’s involvement would be recorded on police systems, but as it has been decided that further investigation in order to pursue further formal action is not in the public interest, no further police action would be taken. In the event of a future ‘Enhanced Disclosure and Barring Service’ (DBS) check, it would be unlikely that this record would be disclosed.

See the [College of Policing’s Briefing Note](#) for more information.

For more information on how to handle reports of sexting within school see the [UKCCIS Sexting in schools and colleges guidance](#).

## 3.6 Understanding online sexual harassment: checklist

- Are school staff aware of the different forms that online sexual harassment can take and the specific characteristics of online sexual harassment?
- Does the school share a clear understanding of what online sexual harassment is and why it is not acceptable?
- Are school staff aware that online sexual harassment can overlap with offline sexual harassment and other harmful sexual behaviours?
- Does the school share a clear understanding of agreed terminology and how it should be used?
- Does the school effectively address the range of issues relating to bias and prejudice?
- Are school staff aware of the range of issues that may contribute to students displaying harmful sexual behaviour online?
- Is the school familiar with the key laws and statutory guidance which relate to online sexual harassment?

“If you had it in Year 7 you’d probably be more scared of getting in trouble with the police and stuff. Then in Year 11 some people just stop caring about getting in trouble.”

Boy, 16-17 years

## 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.

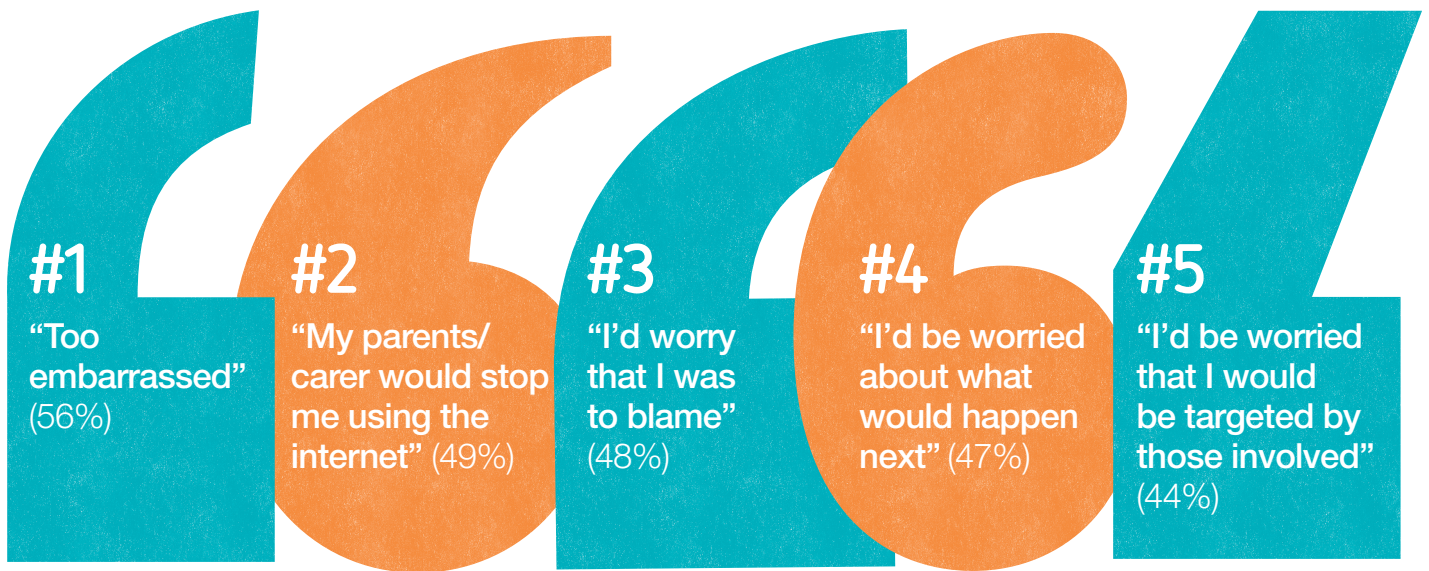


#### Practical tips

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?

## 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

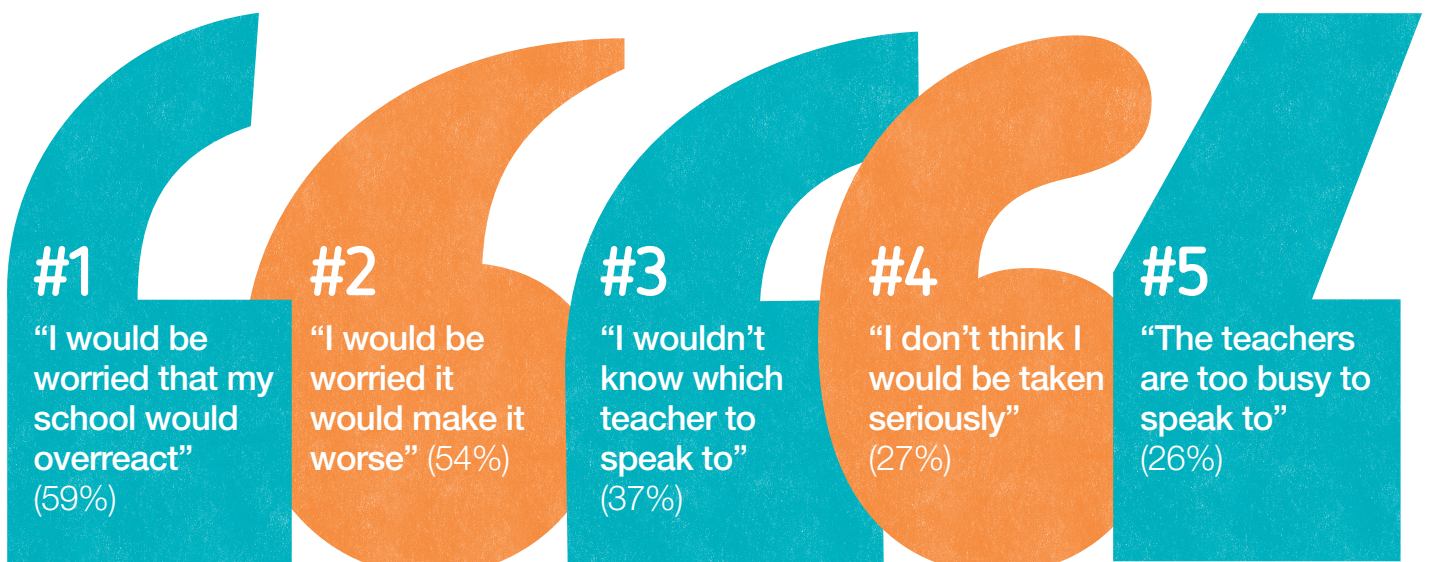
"People that don't believe in confidentiality. Like when this help is sent out, it always says confidential, but people just don't trust that enough, and I think they always think, what if someone finds out? And then they either think that, and everything else that could happen around that is what stops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

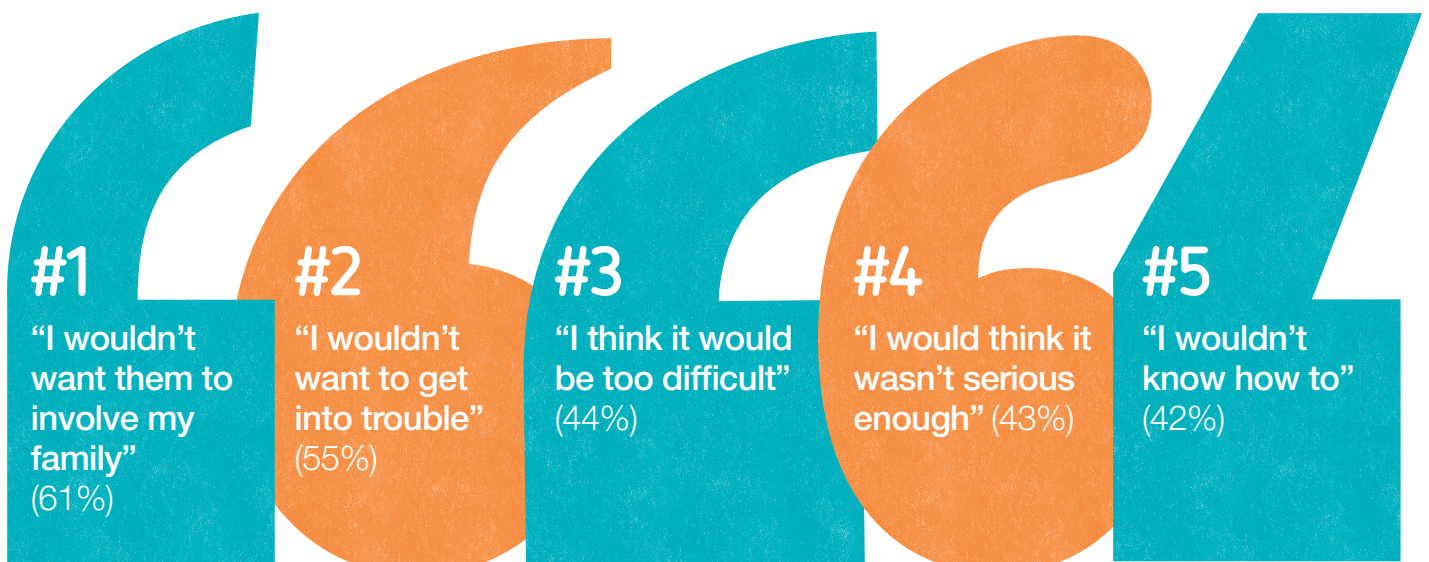
See p.12 for legislation that can apply to online sexual harassment.

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 harassment and sexual violence 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](mailto:helpline@saferinternet.org.uk)  
**Call:** 0344 381 4772

### Reporting Harmful Content Online portal



**REPORT  
HARMFUL  
CONTENT**

[reportharmfulcontent.com](http://reportharmfulcontent.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.

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**“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

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### Support for young people

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#### Childline

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

[www.childline.org.uk](http://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](http://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](http://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](http://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](http://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](http://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](http://www.youngstonewall.org.uk)

### Support for staff

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#### 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](http://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](http://www.nspcc.org.uk)  
0808 800 5000  
[help@nspcc.org.uk](mailto:help@nspcc.org.uk)

### Support for parents

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#### NSPCC helpline

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

[www.nspcc.org.uk](http://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](http://www.youngminds.org.uk)  
0808 802 5544

#### Family Lives

A charity offering support with all aspects of family life.

[www.familylives.org.uk](http://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 <b>not</b> want them to do?	







"I would be too scared to go to the police."  
Girl, 13 – 14 year

"It might not be physically noticeable but they're probably judging you in their heads and you know it. It's easy to see that coming across."  
Boy, 17 years

"It's definitely a lot worse for girls. From my point of view, I hear a lot more male nudes going around than female. And I feel like, not that they don't care, but it's not a surprise to them anymore. They're just like, ok, whatever. If a girl does it, it's a lot more sensitive."  
Girl, 17 years

"If he's been brought up in a way that respects women he's less likely to make fun of her and send it around. But if he's someone that treats women like animals and doesn't care about them at all, he'll show it to his friends and makes a real laugh out of her."  
Boy, 17 years, UK

"If one person was to start spreading the rumour, other people will then join in, and if one of them picks on them then they would eventually get everyone else joining in. It just slowly grows and grows."  
Boy, 14 – 15 years

"It was late at night and I got a message, it was from a boy from my school. It was pornography and then he started messaging me. I blocked him but I still get upset about it sometimes."  
Girl, 15 years

"Say your nude's been leaked to people and they are saying stuff to you, you won't tell a teacher because you know full well that teachers got to ring home, so what will your mum and dad say?"  
Girl, 14 – 15 years

"It passes on, everyone has friends, those friends have friends, and it all links back. The internet makes it such a small world."  
Boy, 17 years

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