



Girl Connection

For those who serve adolescent females
Iowa Gender-Specific Services Task Force
December 2005

Sexual Harassment in School

Eight out of ten students in grades eight through eleven...take a moment to think about how many students that would mean at your local school. If eight out of ten students reported difficulty reading or writing, the public outcry would be enormous. The fact is that eight out of ten students report experiencing sexual harassment in school.

In 1993, the American Association of University Women completed a survey of students that examined sexual harassment in school. The resulting report, entitled "Hostile Hallways" was followed up in 2001 with a second survey and report. Astonishingly, the percent of students experiencing sexual harassment did not change.

Something that had changed was that students were vastly more aware of what sexual harassment was and that their schools had specific policies against those behaviors.

Other noteworthy observations from the report included that the vast majority of sexual harassment is from student to student and that although girls still report experiencing sexual harassment at greater levels than boys that gap is beginning to tighten.

The three most common forms of reported sexual harassment include:

- Sexual comments, jokes, gestures or looks
- Touching, grabbing or pinching in a sexual way
- Intentionally brushing up against in a sexual way

The three most upsetting forms of reported sexual harassment include:

- Spreading sexual rumors
- Pulling off or down clothing
- Saying they were gay or lesbian

As detailed in the "Hostile Hallways" report, sexual harassment, when experienced by students has a varied and extensive impact ranging from not wanting to go to school and cutting class to staying away from certain places and people at school. Clearly, sexual harassment affects students' ability to learn and moreover, their right to feel safe at school.

So, if students are more aware of sexual harassment and their schools policy against it and adults see the impact it is having, why has little changed? Certainly, the answer is not a simple one. Rather than focusing on placing blame, adults and students both can make an effort to change the culture that says sexual harassment is "no big deal". This also means going beyond the school setting with strategies to prevent sexual harassment. Parents need to become involved in the prevention process as do any adults with a stake in making schools a safer place.

What are Some Things Students Can Do?

- Be persistent about reporting sexual harassment until taken seriously
- Become involved in a student group that addresses sexual harassment in school
- Document any incidents of sexual harassment for later use
- Know what the school policy says and what it means

What are Some Things Adults Can Do?

- Refrain from making sexist comments and jokes
- Use gender-inclusive language
- Refuse to stereotype people based on gender, sexual orientation or other characteristics
- Encourage children to speak up for themselves
- Know school policies as well as student action steps

Everyone can increase their knowledge of sexual harassment and ways to prevent it. The resources listed below are recommended:

American Association of University Women (AAUW). (1993). Hostile Hallways: The AAUW survey on sexual harassment in America's schools. Washington D.C. AAUW Education Foundation.

American Association of University Women (AAUW). (2001). Hostile Hallways: Bullying, Teasing, and Sexual Harassment in School. Washington D.C. AAUW Education Foundation.

American Association of University Women (AAUW). (2004). Harassment-Free Hallways: How to Stop Sexual Harassment in School. Washington D.C. AAUW Education Foundation.

State of Iowa Department of Education. (2005). Preventing Bullying and Harassment: A Support Manual for Iowa's Sample District Harassment and Bullying Policy. Des Moines, IA.

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