

Ofsted review of sexual abuse within schools

The government asked Ofsted to conduct a rapid review of sexual abuse in schools, after numerous anonymous testimonials of sexual harassment and abuse were posted on the [Everyone's Invited](#) website. The review was conducted in May 2021 and published on 10 June.

Ofsted visited 32 schools and colleges as part of its review, some of which had been named on the 'Everyone's Invited' website. Inspectors spoke to:

- Over 900 children and young people about the prevalence of peer-on-peer sexual harassment and sexual violence (including online)
- School leaders
- Teachers
- Governors
- Local safeguarding partners (LSPs) including the Essex Safeguarding Children Board
- Parents and other stakeholders

The key findings from the review

Reporting harmful behaviour

Pupils often see no point in reporting harmful behaviour because, they say, incidents are so commonplace. Of the children and young people Ofsted spoke to:

- Nearly 90% of girls, and nearly 50% of boys, said being sent explicit pictures or videos of things they did not want to see happens a lot or sometimes to them or their peers
- 92% of girls, and 74% of boys, said sexist name-calling happens a lot or sometimes to them or their peers

Children and young people, especially girls, told Ofsted that they do not want to talk about sexual abuse for several reasons, even where their school encourages them to. For example, the risk of being ostracised by peers or getting peers into trouble is not considered to be worth it for something perceived by children and young people to be commonplace. They worry about how adults will react, because they think they will not be believed, or that they will be blamed. They also think that once they talk to an adult, the process will be out of their control.

When Ofsted asked children and young people where sexual violence occurred, they typically talked about unsupervised spaces outside of school, such as parties or parks without adults present, although some girls told us they also experienced unwanted touching in school corridors.

RSHE doesn't meet the needs of young people

The children and young people Ofsted spoke to felt that relationships, sex and health education (RSHE) was not equipping them with the information and advice they need. As a result, many turn to social media or their peers to educate each other.

Some teachers and leaders underestimate the scale of the problem

Ofsted found that some teachers and leaders:

- Didn't identify sexual harassment and sexualised language as significant problems, or were unaware they were happening
- Underestimated the prevalence of online sexual abuse

School leaders are having to make difficult decisions they're not equipped for. For example, in cases involving sexual violence, some leaders said they were unsure how to proceed when criminal investigations do not lead to a prosecution or conviction.

Ofsted notes that schools need clearer guidance from the government, to help them make decisions in cases like this, or where there are long-term investigations of harmful sexual behaviour. Ofsted highlights that while schools can play their part in tackling sexual harassment and sexual violence, it's not only their responsibility to solve it.

Local safeguarding partners (LSPs) have varying levels of oversight

Some LSPs Ofsted spoke to had been working closely with schools and understood children’s experiences of sexual harassment and violence, including online. But, a small number weren’t aware that these were significant problems in their local area.

Ofsted will update its training, inspection handbooks and practices

The aim will be to strengthen inspectors’ ability to inspect how schools and colleges are tackling sexual harassment and violence, including online.

Recommendations for school leaders

School and college leaders should create a culture where sexual harassment and online sexual abuse are not tolerated, and where they identify issues and intervene early to better protect children and young people. In order to do this, they should assume that sexual harassment and online sexual abuse are happening in their setting, even when there are no specific reports, and put in place a whole-school approach to address them. This should include:

1. A carefully sequenced RSHE curriculum, based on the Department for Education’s (DfE’s) statutory guidance that specifically includes sexual harassment and sexual violence, including online. This should include time for open discussion of topics that children and young people tell us they find particularly difficult, such as consent and the sending of ‘nudes’
2. High-quality training for teachers delivering RSHE
3. Routine record-keeping and analysis of sexual harassment and sexual violence, including online, to identify patterns and intervene early to prevent abuse
4. A behavioural approach, including sanctions when appropriate, to reinforce a culture where sexual harassment and online sexual abuse are not tolerated
5. Support for designated safeguarding leads (DSLs)
6. Training to ensure that all staff (and governors, where relevant) are able to:
 - better understand the definitions of sexual harassment and sexual violence, including online sexual abuse
 - identify early signs of peer-on-peer sexual abuse
 - consistently uphold standards in their responses to sexual harassment and online sexual abuse

Key questions for staff and governors

- Do our safeguarding and pupil behaviour policies address harmful sexual behaviour and peer on peer abuse and are they well understood by everyone?
- Are staff and other adults trained to recognise the signs of peer on peer abuse?
- Are staff and other adults clear about procedures where they are concerned that a child may be a victim of peer-on-peer abuse?
- Do pupils feel safe and protected from peer-on-peer abuse? How do you know?

Additional guidance and further reading

- <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/review-of-sexual-abuse-in-schools-and-colleges/review-of-sexual-abuse-in-schools-and-colleges>
- Harmful Sexual Behaviour Framework <https://learning.nspcc.org.uk/research-resources/2019/harmful-sexual-behaviour-framework>
- Sharing nudes and semi-nudes: advice for education settings working with children and young people <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/sharing-nudes-and-semi-nudes-advice-for-education-settings-working-with-children-and-young-people>
- Keeping Children Safe in Education September 2021