

What is Sexual harassment?

Does someone have to touch you for it to be sexual harassment? Do sexually suggestive words count? If someone is staring at your body, is it sexual harassment? Can a friend sexually harass you? What if it only happens once?

After ten years of doing work to prevent sexual harassment in the New York City public schools, we have come up with a rather broad working definition of sexual harassment: sexual harassment is any unwanted behavior or attention of a sexual nature that may or may not interfere with a person's ability to participate in or benefit from a school's programs or activities.

Identifying sexual harassment can be confusing. Sometimes we are unable to express exactly what we believe happened to us. We may be unsure of why it happened or whether what happened was okay, especially if the perpetrator is our friend. We may not understand why we feel embarrassed or uncomfortable. These are common questions and reactions that, unfortunately, don't have easy answers.

Although sexual harassment involves sexual behaviors, it's actually not about sex. People who harass others are acting in a way that communicates aggression, hostility, and a desire for control. They feel powerful by making someone, who they see as inferior, feel scared or uncomfortable. Sometimes they simply want attention. Regardless of their motivation, perpetrators of sexual harassment need to be stopped.

Some behaviors are severe enough that they only need to happen once to constitute sexual harassment. For example, if Student A gropes Student B's breasts, butt, or genitals in the hallway between classes without permission, this is clearly inappropriate and need not be repeated to be called sexual harassment. Another example of a clear case of sexual harassment is if someone says or writes lewd comments about a student, such as "Jen is a slut" or "Benjamin is a faggot." This creates a hostile environment for Jen and Benjamin that can interfere with their ability to learn.

However, if Student A asks Student B out on a date and Student B is not interested, this may be annoying, but it's not harassment if the behavior is not repeated. The bottom line is that if a behavior feels bad and makes you uncomfortable, you have the right to tell the person to stop. If they don't stop, you have the right to ask your school to intervene.

Sexual harassment affects our lives in profound ways because it grows out of larger forms of individual and institutional oppression that we experience as young people, women, people of color, immigrants, and members of the LGBTQ community. Achieving social justice is not just about race or class or gender or ability or nationality or religion. It's about all of those things at once, because, as Mahatma Gandhi famously said, "No one is free when others are oppressed."

Sexual harassment can include, but is not limited to:

Touching, pinching, or grabbing someone else's breasts, butt, or genitals

Touching, pinching, or grabbing your own breasts, butt, or genitals in front of others

Sexual comments, jokes, stories, song lyrics, or rumors

Gestures and facial expressions (e.g. winking or licking lips)

Inappropriate looks or staring at someone's body

Clothing pulled to reveal your body or someone else's body

Sexual pictures or drawings (e.g. a pornographic magazine)

Demands for sexual activity

Physical intimidation (e.g. standing too close to someone, following someone, blocking someone's way so they can't leave)

Cyberbullying (when the Internet, cell phones, or other devices are used to send or post text or images intended to hurt or embarrass another person)*

*National Crime Prevention Council definition of cyberbullying

<https://www.ncpc.org/>

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