

How to Address Sexual Harassment and Assault with Children

We can help kids avoid the serious problems associated with these experiences

By Jo-Ann Finkelstein, Ph.D.



A majority of children will experience sexual harassment or assault in school by peers and educators. **Parents are often unaware of these alarming statistics because their children (and schools) are not talking about it.** As a clinical psychologist, I have found kids are unprepared

for the harassment they will encounter as their bodies and **sexuality** develop. A Harvard **survey** found most young people reported they had never had a conversation with their parents about **what sexual harassment is** and how to avoid sexually harassing others. Parents often tell me they lack resources and/or feel awkward, but the topic is too important to forgo.

Harassing behaviors are often justified as part of growing up, but they're associated with a host of serious outcomes, such as **feeling unsafe at school, early dating, substance abuse, suicidal thoughts, and academic problems.** And they have far-reaching effects: **harassment impacts the friends of victims who witness or hear about it, and victims often become perpetrators to continue the cycle of violence.** By listening to our kids and helping them assess their level of discomfort with various incidents, they'll learn to listen to their gut and be able to decide whether they want to call out future incidents, ask an adult to step in, or ignore them. They should hear, though, that ignoring persistent harassment is unlikely to make it stop, and that harassment and assault are difficult to process alone, even for adults.

Tips to Prepare Kids for What to Expect

- **Be explicit and share resources. Our kids want to hear from us.** Though we're getting better as a culture about teaching kids about **boundaries** and bodily autonomy from a young age, we need to be more explicit about the nuances of consent and what constitutes coercion. Conversations around consent and unwanted touch or

attention can happen at any age, but it's best to **begin in elementary school** before kids reach **puberty.** We can get kids talking by asking them how students of different genders interact at school, such as whether boys make comments about girls' bodies (or vice versa), call them names, make sexist or homophobic slurs, or grab body parts and yank clothes. While one instance of harassment may seem trivial in isolation, these psychological paper cuts accumulate becoming festering wounds of self-doubt.

Our kids want to hear from us, even though in the moment they may shoot us daggers with their eyes, fire cannonballs of sarcasm, or run for cover. About 60% of respondents in the Harvard survey reported their parents hadn't discussed, for example, the "importance of not pressuring someone to have sex with you," the "importance of not continuing to ask someone to have sex after they have said no," or the importance of not having sex with "someone who is too intoxicated or impaired to make a decision about sex." But encouragingly, those who did have these conversations with their parents said they'd been influential, and 70% reported wishing they'd received more information from their parents about **romantic relationships,** in general. So talk to your kids! Parents can better understand what kids want and need to know by seeking out and sharing age appropriate resources such as **SASH Club's Power Topics** and **Love is Respect.**

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- **Use everyday, teachable moments.** Instead of steamrolling our kids with information, we can seize on teachable moments from the news, media, or their everyday life. When a friend called asking what to do about overhearing her son and his friends using words like 'ho' and 'thot' (an acronym for "that ho over there") I suggested stating in a neutral tone, "That language is sexist and

we don't demean any genders in our house." When she approached him, he countered, "It's no big deal. Even the girls laugh." My friend replied, "They might. But there's no reason girls' sexuality should be demeaned while guys get high fives for theirs." High five friend! We can wonder aloud why boys bond in that way and remind them sexist "jokes" influence how we think and behave toward girls, and that others may assume our jokes mean we approve of degrading or harassing girls. Though girls and LGBTQ+ people are more likely to be harassed, anybody—especially those who fall outside the traditional girl-boy binary—can be targeted.

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- **Emphasize enthusiasm and pleasure.** While teaching consent is crucial, it isn't enough. We give consent for a root canal, but that doesn't mean we like it. What we really want our kids to look for and to feel themselves when it comes to engaging sexually, whether it's flirting, commenting, touching, or sex—is enthusiasm and pleasure. We can tell them if their partner isn't excited, they can't follow their own excitement. It's helpful to distinguish for them harassment from **flirtation**. Flirting requires tuning into someone else's **body language** and desires, it goes both ways, and makes both parties feel good. Harassment is the opposite. It ignores what the other person wants or doesn't want and makes them feel embarrassed, angry, helpless, or hopeless. The same goes for engaging sexually. To really know if their partner is genuinely enthusiastic, encourage them to live by the rule, "Don't guess. Ask!" If they can't discuss sex openly with their partners, they're not ready to get physical.
- **Teach Them to Stand Up to Harassment.** While it's not our kids' job to avoid or prevent their own harassment or assault, teaching them to stand up to it is important. They can help prevent harassment through **bystander intervention** and calling out perpetrators. If they grasp that their efforts can potentially prevent harassment and assault from spreading through society, they might be more motivated to speak out. Standing up when others are being harassed can also help reduce self-blame when it happens to them.
- **Listen and let them know you won't blame them.** Let your kids know they can always come to you either just to talk or to help resolve any problems with how they're being treated. Make it clear you believe they're not responsible for harassment or assault and will never make them regret coming to you.

Many of us are completely oblivious to the risks children face until something happens to one of our own. By listening to our kids, we can learn a lot about what they face day in and day out and help them understand that what seems like a normal way of relating is not acceptable. It's a slippery slope from **gender bias** and jokes to sexual harassment and assault. We can help interrupt the landslide by standing up against poor or unequal treatment early, no matter how small it may seem.



Tips For Helping Kids Who Have Experienced Harassment or Assault

- **Offer Steady Support and Understanding.** Sexual assault leaves a child feeling powerless over their surroundings and can lessen their faith adults will protect them. When a child discloses they've been assaulted, it's essential to listen without interrupting, letting them talk and attending to their feelings before focusing on the details. Immediate validation goes a long way: Hug them, tell them you're sorry this happened and that you'd like to help in any way you can. They often feel ashamed, angry, sad, lonely, anxious, different, betrayed, depressed, or experience a loss of trust. Teens already believe nobody understands them, and a sexual assault intensifies that feeling. A victim of assault wants to know you don't think they're as rotten as they feel they are, but just telling your teen that won't convince them. They need to experience steady support and understanding—not just about the assault but about how they're handling it, even if that means tolerating a roller coaster of moods and insolence.

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- **Be Careful Not to Blame Them With Your Questions.** It's not uncommon to feel angry initially with a child for being in that situation in the first place. Maybe they were drinking, maybe they snuck out of the house to meet someone they liked, or maybe they just walked to the back of the school to make out with someone. In our wish to protect our kids, we might inadvertently chasten them. Even well-meaning questions can sound like disbelief, and many kids already blame and doubt themselves. By asking about their choices, such as the street they took, the outfit they wore, the person they hung out with, or whether they were flirting, we send the message they had a role in being unfairly treated or hurt.

Even though most parents don't believe their child deserved to be hurt, they often struggle to think past the rule they broke or the choice they made which allowed for the harm to take place. In part, this is a defense mechanism—it allows the parent to feel as if they and their child had control over a situation and simply failed to exert it properly. But the truisms we hear about teenagers are real: they push limits, they're impulsive, and they have intense sexual feelings. It's practically their job to test their own and their parents' boundaries as they're figuring out where their parents end and they begin. More than once I've said to a parent, "She could have shown up naked and he still would've had no right to do what he did." If we begin simply by inviting

them to tell us what happened and what they're feeling, the fear they contributed to their own harassment will surface, and you'll be able to talk about their choices then without suggesting they "asked for it."

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- **Allow for Autonomy in Navigating the situation.** After a sexual assault, many parents want their child to take action, but it's vital to give your child as much control as possible. If the assault is serious, this can be tricky, because they may require emergency contraception and to be checked for STIs. Many states in the U.S. have a time limit for filing a report, though most extend the deadline for minors. But an investigation is more effective when begun earlier. There's also more evidence from a medical exam within the first 72 hours of the assault. You can help by finding out about the **processes** and **services available in your area** and gently letting your child know their options. You could let your child know that if they were to go to the police, they may be able to speak with specially trained officers. Families can also seek out **victim advocates** services.

Harmful behavior often begins in schools where sexual harassment and assault are normalized, ignored, or denied. Learning more about students' rights under Title IX— the federal law prohibiting sex discrimination in schools— is essential. The Stop Sexual Assault in Schools website provides essential information for anyone addressing the impact of sexual harassment and assault on a student's education.

Selected Resources:

- Concise definitions of sexual harassment: [SSAIS website](#) [SASH Club](#)
- What to do if sexually assaulted: [SSAIS Website](#) [SASH Club](#)
- Youth-friendly sexual harassment/assault education: [SASH Club](#)
- [Love is Respect](#) (dating violence)
- [The Trevor Project](#) (LGBTQ+ suicide prevention)
- [The JED Foundation](#) (Suicide prevention)
- [Toolkits for parents and students to reduce sexual harassment/assault at school](#)
- [Parents can be agents for change](#)
- [What adults can do about sexual harassment and assault \(video\)](#)
- [Sexual Harassment is Happening in My School? clip](#)
- [Sexual Harassment: Not in Our School!](#) (student-focused full length video with national experts)
- [Consent topics](#) for K-5 youth from MOASH
- [Broadcast with experts talking about consent education and discussions with K-12 students](#) (Jackson County OR SART)

Stop Sexual Assault in Schools

- [Stop Sexual Assault in Schools Website](#)
- [SSAIS YouTube](#)
- [Instagram](#)
- Email info@stopsexualassaultinschools.org

