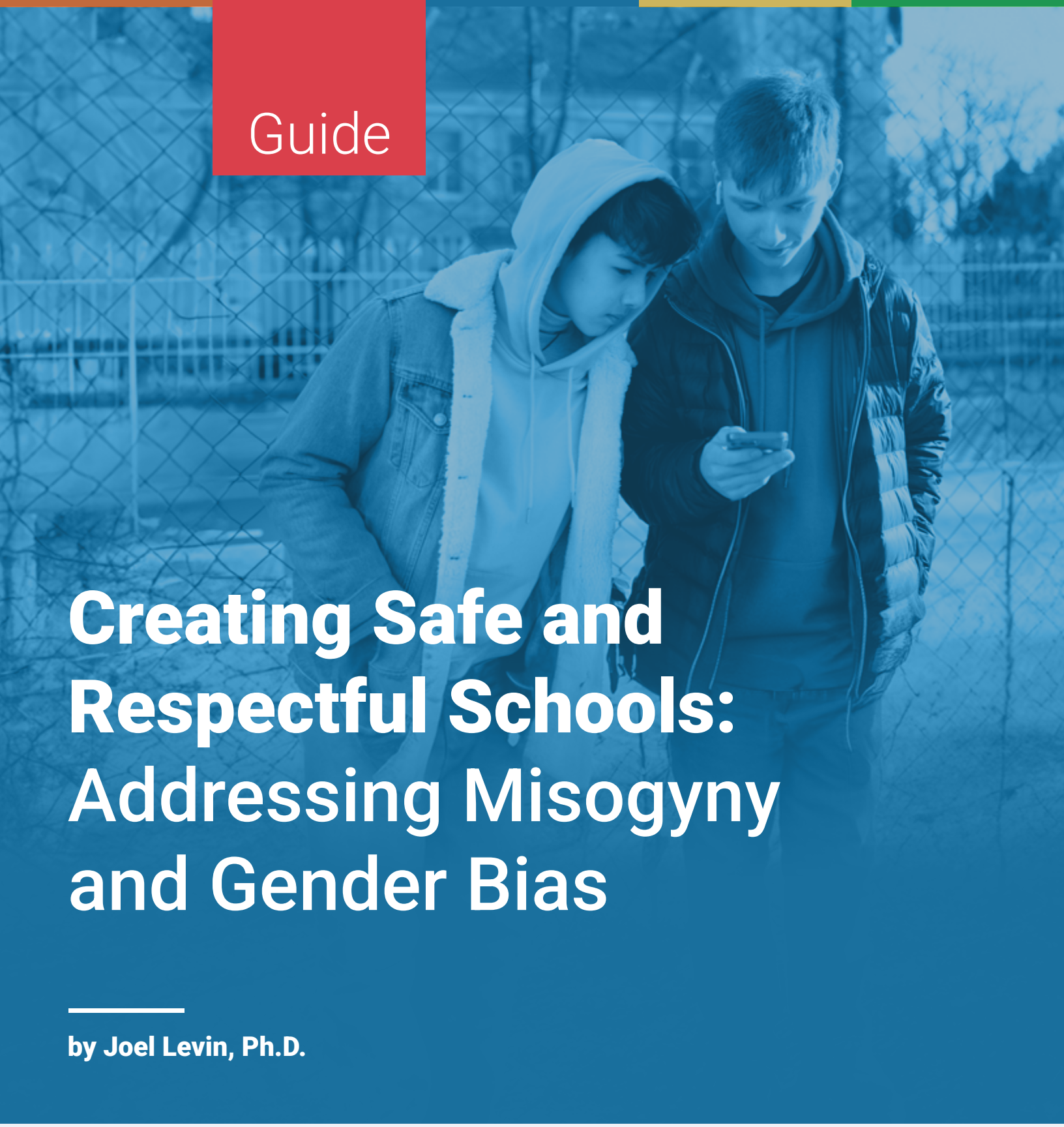
Guide



Creating Safe and Respectful Schools: Addressing Misogyny and Gender Bias

by Joel Levin, Ph.D.

SSAIS
Stop Sexual Assault in Schools

www.ssais.org

Creating Safe and Respectful Schools: Addressing Misogyny and Gender Bias

by Joel Levin, Ph.D.

What's happening in our schools?

Boys in elementary school yell expletives at girls and threaten to "touch them." In middle school, boys snap girls' bra straps, call them "hoes," and say they are "asking for it." High school boys rank girls' attractiveness and share the list school-wide through group chats. Students circulate manipulated images of female classmates online and mock them when they object. Boys who show emotion, enjoy theater, or dress differently are ridiculed as "he-she" or "soyboy." Girls who report sexual harassment are labeled liars or attention-seekers. Female teachers are not immune. Some students dismiss their authority or treat them with less respect simply because they are women.

Many educators have seen incidents like these. What's troubling is how routine this behavior has become and the toll it takes on girls and LGBTQ+ students. Reinforced by social media, online influencers, peer culture, and broader cultural messages, misogyny and gender bias often shape how students treat each other in ways that affect safety, relationships, and learning.

Addressing these issues helps create schools where every student can learn free from harassment, discrimination, and harmful stereotypes. It also helps young people develop healthy relationships, empathy, and the critical thinking they will need throughout their lives.

This guide provides an overview of misogyny and gender bias in K–12 schools and offers practical strategies for educators, school leaders, families, and students.

What do we mean by misogyny and gender bias in schools?

Misogyny is hostility, contempt, prejudice, or discrimination directed toward women, girls, and people who identify as female.

Gender bias refers to stereotypes, assumptions, or treating people differently because of their gender. Both misogyny and gender bias can limit students' opportunities and contribute to a school climate where students feel less safe, respected, and able to participate fully.

Gender-based harassment is often brushed aside as teasing, joking, or typical adolescent behavior. Everyone has heard the familiar responses: "They're just kids," "He just likes you," "It's just a joke," "He didn't mean anything by it," or "That's how boys talk." Yet comments and actions that adults dismiss can have an ongoing impact. Gradually, they shape school culture and discourage students from speaking up.

What's different now?

While misogynistic attitudes are not new, educators report that students are increasingly exposed to misogynistic content. During the 2025 American Federation of Teachers webinar **Addressing the Rise and Impact of Misogyny Among Students in Grades 6–12**, 96% of participants reported seeing or hearing examples of misogyny in their schools.

Children hear messages about gender at younger ages than before. Social media, gaming platforms, group chats, and online influencers shape how students think about girls, boys, and relationships. Some messages reinforce rigid gender roles, hostility toward women, or that being a man means dominating others.

Social media algorithms often recommend more extreme material since controversial content keeps people engaged. Because influencers often package

these messages as advice about success, relationships, or masculinity, young people start to view them as normal, humorous, or empowering. By the time adults notice what a student is watching, that student may already have seen dozens of similar posts or videos reinforcing the same messages.

How does misogyny affect girls?

Girls feel the direct consequences. They face sexist comments, unwanted touching, online abuse, exclusion, or pressure to conform to narrow expectations about appearance and behavior.

The effects are easy to miss. A girl stops raising her hand. Another leaves a mostly male STEM class because she is tired of being disparaged. Another decides not to run for student government. Girls stop reporting harassment because they assume nothing will change.

These experiences affect confidence, school engagement, and a student's sense of belonging. Students who are focused on avoiding ridicule or navigating hostility often become distracted from learning.

How does misogyny affect boys?

Many online messages present a narrow picture of what it means to be a boy or a man. They suggest that showing emotion is weak, asking for help is humiliating, and respect comes from power and control.

Boys who don't fit these expectations often become targets. Students who are artistic, emotionally expressive, academically focused, or defy stereotypes may be mocked or excluded. Pressures to conform

contribute to loneliness, relationship difficulties, and mental health challenges. In some cases, they lead to harmful or violent behavior.

Most boys are looking for guidance, not conflict. Schools, families, and trusted adults can offer healthier models of masculinity that reflect empathy, confidence, accountability, and respect.

How do misogyny and gender bias affect LGBTQ+ students?

Misogyny is closely linked to rigid beliefs about gender roles. LGBTQ+ students are therefore often affected by the same attitudes that contribute to misogynistic behavior.

Students who do not conform to traditional expectations about masculinity or femininity face harassment, bullying, or exclusion. Boys are teased for appearing "too feminine." Girls are criticized for being "too assertive." Transgender and nonbinary students face hostility because their identities challenge traditional assumptions about gender. Homophobia, transphobia, and misogyny frequently reinforce one another.

How can adults talk to children about misogyny and gender bias?

Adults often worry that conversations about misogyny will be uncomfortable or confrontational. According to clinical psychologist **Jo-Ann Finkelstein**, most children want and benefit from conversations with parents and trusted adults. The most productive discussions are calm, curious, nonjudgmental, and focused on helping youth think critically.

Instead of immediately correcting or arguing about sexist behavior, invite conversation with age-appropriate questions to find out:

- What is this person is trying to say?
- Why could they be saying that?
- How would someone feel if they heard that?
- Is it really true?

With younger children, conversations may focus on fairness, kindness, stereotypes, and respect. With older youth, discussions can explore social media influencers, relationships, consent, online exploitation, and safety.

A single conversation might not change behavior because young people receive messages about gender from many sources. Ongoing conversations are likely to be more effective than a one-time talk.

What can schools do?

Schools are most effective when they address misogyny and gender bias through a whole-school effort, and when it is part of everyday school life rather than a one-time assembly or lesson. A whole-school approach should:

- Establish clear expectations that all students deserve respect.
- Adopt and enforce policies prohibiting sex-based harassment and discrimination, including sexualized ranking of students, sharing manipulated images, gender-based slurs, and online harassment.
- Ensure students know how to report concerns.
- Teach healthy relationships, consent, digital citizenship, media literacy, gender stereotypes, and respectful communication throughout grade levels.
- Train staff to recognize and respond consistently to gender bias, sexist comments, and online misconduct.
- Partner with families by providing resources on online influences, healthy relationships, and gender stereotypes.
- Involve students in prevention efforts, leadership opportunities, student clubs, school climate initiatives.

See the resources at the end of this guide.

What can teachers do?

Students notice who gets interrupted and whose ideas receive attention. They notice when teachers address harmful comments and when they let them pass. Students are

more likely to report concerns when they believe an adult will take them seriously and take corrective action.

Teachers should set expectations by establishing clear classroom norms, responding to harmful comments when they occur, and ensuring all students have opportunities to participate and lead. Dr. Finkelstein suggests that teachers' responses to misogynistic or sexist comments can follow this pattern:

- Assume positive intent when possible: "I don't think you meant to hurt anyone..."
- Name the problem: "...but that comment relies on a stereotype about girls."
- State the value: "In this classroom, we judge people as individuals."
- Offer an alternative: "Try talking about the specific behavior instead."

Simple, adaptable scripts, like those in Dr. Finkelstein's toolkit **What to Say When You See Sexism** can help teachers, parents, and students respond to harmful comments, ask thoughtful questions, and keep conversations productive.

Educators can also help students think more critically about what they see online. Instead of telling students what to believe, encourage them to ask questions and look at different perspectives. Here are some suggestions:

- Present real-world **scenarios** of misogyny and sexual harassment to stimulate reflection and discussion about how students would react to the circumstances portrayed.
- Discuss popular social media messages about masculinity, dating, or relationships. Ask students what evidence is being presented, who benefits from the message, and what impact it could have.
- Identify persuasion tactics and manipulation in influencer videos and podcasts.
- Have students work in groups to recognize stereotypes, emotional appeals, and unsupported claims in online posts or videos.

What can youth do?

Students can help create positive school climates by refusing to participate in sexist jokes, rumors, harassment, or online abuse. They can practice being an upstander by supporting classmates who experience mistreatment and seek help from trusted adults when concerns arise.

Schools can strengthen these efforts through peer education programs like the **Youth Safety and Equity Info-zines project**, student-led campaigns and leadership groups, mentoring initiatives, awareness campaigns, and activities like **SASH Club** (Students Against Sexual Harassment).

Responding to common beliefs about misogyny and gender bias

"It's just a normal part of growing up. Children will get over it."

Harmful attitudes and conduct can become more serious if they are ignored. Early warning signs deserve attention because they can sometimes lead to sexual assault, stalking, and domestic violence. Schools address bullying, racism, and other harmful behaviors because early intervention helps prevent them from becoming acceptable. Misogyny and gender bias should be treated similarly.

"It's not as serious a problem as drug use or mental health issues."

Addressing misogyny complements rather than competes with other efforts to support student well-being.

"Students won't listen to adults who tell them to disbelieve what they see and hear online. Peer approval is what counts."

Peer influence is a strong motivator of youth behavior, but trusted adults continue to play an important role. Rather than telling students what to think, teachers can help them ask questions, evaluate evidence, and reflect on the consequences of harmful beliefs and behavior.

"Anti-misogyny talk is just male bashing."

Misogyny harms people of all genders. It can lead boys to suppress emotions, avoid vulnerability, dominate others, and conform to rigid expectations about masculinity. Girls can also feel pressure to adopt the beliefs about gender roles and female worth promoted by misogynists. The goal is not to label students but to focus on examining ideas and behavior through self-reflection and discussion.

Moving forward

- A safe and respectful school encourages thoughtful, sometimes challenging conversations. It is one where students help create a community in which everyone is valued and can learn free from harassment, discrimination, and gender bias.

- Early intervention matters. The attitudes students develop in childhood shape future relationships, workplaces, and communities. When adults respond consistently, students are included in solutions, and respect becomes part of everyday life, schools become welcoming places for everyone.

Dive deeper

Essential resources

- ***Misogyny Free Schools.*** Website pages with articles, action plan, campaign assets, videos, broadcast media, misogyny stories, and opportunities to engage. A project of Stop Sexual Assault in Schools (***SSAIS***).
- ***Misogyny and Male Supremacy: It's Not Just a Joke.*** A youth-focused presentation by Lydia Bates, Southern Poverty Law and the research team at the Polarization and Extremism Research & Innovation Lab at American University for SSAIS and ***SASH Club***.
- ***Addressing the Rise and Impact of Misogyny among Students in Grades 6-12.*** A free on-demand webinar created for Share My Lesson with professional development credit.

Toolkits and guides

- ***How to Address Sexual Harassment and Sexual Assault with Children***, Jo-Ann Finkelstein.
- ***What to Say When You See Sexism: A Practical Toolkit for Teachers, Parents, Adult Allies, and Students***, Jo-Ann Finkelstein.
- ***Supporting LGBTQ+ Students***, SSAIS youth-focused presentation.
- ***Supportive Measures for Students Experiencing Sexual Harassment and Harm***, SSAIS.
- SSAIS ***toolkits*** and SASH Club ***Power Topic presentations***.

Articles

- ***#MisogynyFreeSchools: A New Movement for Respect and Safety.*** An overview of resources to address gender bias in schools, SSAIS for Share My Lesson.
- ***Misogyny is Rising in U.S. Classrooms: Where is the National Response?*** SSAIS in Ms. Magazine.
- ***The Power of Peer Education to Combat Sexual Harassment.*** SSAIS for Share My Lesson.

Websites and advocacy

- ***Stop Sexual Assault in Schools*** the first-stop resource for addressing gender equity in schools.
- ***Girls Learn International***'s ***open access curriculum*** on gender equity for middle and high school students.
- ***SASH Club***, Students Against Sexual Harassment, a free peer education framework for youth age 12+.
- The ***Youth Safety and Equity Info-Zines*** project, SSAIS.

Books

- ***Schooling Misogyny: Exposing and Eliminating the Influence of the Manosphere in Education Settings***, Stephanie Wescott and Steven Roberts, Routledge, 2026.
- ***Unmasking the Manosphere: Tackling the Misogyny Crisis in Schools***, Matt Pinkett, Routledge, 2026.
- ***Sexism & Sensibility: Raising Empowered and Resilient Girls in the Modern World***, Jo-Ann Finklestein, Penguin Random House, 2024.
- ***A School Without Hate: Evidence from Education Interventions***, Pasha Dashtgard and Cynthia Miller-Idriss, Harvard Education Press, forthcoming in 2027.

Dr. Joel Levin, Ph.D. (Education), Cofounder of Stop Sexual Assault in Schools, is a career education and instructional designer. As Director of Programs for SSAIS, Dr. Levin designs resources that address gender equity and sexual harm in schools, and his perspectives appear in numerous media outlets. Dr. Levin also answers a wide range of inquiries, including those from families, schools, journalists, organizations, and lawmakers.

Stop Sexual Assault in Schools

- Stop Sexual Assault in Schools Website
- SSAIS YouTube
- Instagram
- Email info@stopsexualassaultinschools.org