Review of sexual abuse in schools and colleges

A rapid review of sexual abuse in schools and colleges in England carried out by Ofsted on the request of the government.

10 June 2021

Background to the report

The rapid review of sexual abuse, including peer-on-peer sexual harassment, sexual violence and online abuse in schools and colleges in England was carried out by Ofsted, at the request the government. It looked at:

- safeguarding and the curriculum
- multi-agency safeguarding arrangements
- victims' voice and reporting.

This briefing summarises findings and recommendations from the review.

The review included visits to 32 schools and colleges in April and May 2021, during which the views of over 900 children and young people were gathered. The review visited independent and state-funded schools including two state-funded primary schools. Ofsted also spoke to leaders, teachers, governors, local safeguarding partners (LSPs), parents and stakeholders. The review included a literature review and analysis of 2,030 testimonies publicly available on the Everyone's Invited website.

The scale and nature of sexual abuse in schools

The report found that sexual harassment and online sexual abuse were the two issues most commonly experienced and talked about by children and young people. The vast majority of girls indicated that harmful sexual behaviours happened 'sometimes' or 'a lot' between people their age. Among the most commonly reported behaviours were: sexist name-calling and comments; and being sent or coerced into sharing sexual images. Boys were much less likely to think that harmful sexual behaviour affected them or their peers.

Many children and young people talked about teachers not 'knowing the reality' of their lives, or being 'out of date'. In general, they reported much higher incidences of sexual harassment, online sexual abuse and bullying behaviours than teachers and leaders were aware of. LGBTQ+ children and young people reported a particularly big gap between staff's knowledge of incidents and their daily experience of harmful sexual behaviour.

Overall, children and young people tended to say they felt physically safe at college or school, although there was a clear emotional impact on girls who experienced regular sexual harassment or other harmful sexual behaviour.

Some school leaders defined online sexual harassment as 'happening out of school'. However, the review found evidence of how online sexual harassment had a significant impact on the normalisation of harmful sexual behaviour and unhealthy cultures within school.

Sexual abuse outside of school

When children and young people talked about feeling physically unsafe, this generally related to situations that occurred outside school.

Children and young people in several schools reported that harmful sexual behaviour

happened at house parties, without adults present, and that alcohol and drugs were often involved. Some children, young people and leaders also identified parks as places where sexual harassment and violence took place.

Girls also talked about feeling uncomfortable because of sexual harassment or bullying from peers on bus journeys (including school buses).

How does the current system of safeguarding listen to the voices of children and young people?

The review found that children and young people rarely speak to adults about sexual harassment and sexual violence, including online abuse. Most children and young people said they would feel most comfortable talking to friends.

Reasons children and young people gave for not reporting sexual harassment and violence included:

- not knowing what would happen next
- concerns about 'reputational damage', for example being ostracised from a social group or damage to a sexual reputation
- concerns about the reaction from adults, including feeling judged or blamed
- concerns about confidentiality and not knowing what will be done with the information
- feelings that things were so common place there was 'no point' in reporting them
- feelings of embarrassment or shame in talking to someone of a different generation about sex.

Despite this, the review found that schools still rely too much on children telling someone about abuse, instead of proactively looking out for potential indicators that abuse may have taken place.

Schools understanding and response to sexual abuse

Responding to incidents

There were many examples where incidents of sexual violence were dealt with appropriately and school policies and statutory guidance such as 'Keeping children safe in education' were informing practice. However, the review highlighted some inconsistencies in responses where professionals had interpreted guidance differently. Some schools were dealing with incidents of sexual harassment and sexual violence, including online abuse, in an isolated way, without considering the context and wider safeguarding risks.

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The review noted concern that many instances of sexual harassment, including the pressure to share nudes and the sharing of youth-produced sexual imagery without consent, were going unrecognised or unchallenged by school staff.

How schools perceive their responsibility

The review found that leaders in some schools said they were unclear about the scope of their safeguarding responsibilities and how and when they could intervene. Some leaders talked about how difficult it was to make effective decisions when police and other lengthy multi-agency investigations were ongoing.

Approaches to address sexual harassment and violence

The review found a wide variety of sanctions for perpetrators of sexual harassment and sexual violence, including online sexual abuse. Examples included fixed-term exclusions, detentions, internal referrals and removal of privileges. Some children and young people, particularly girls, believe that sanctions are often not tough enough or that the wrong person was sanctioned. For example, boys who pressured others to send 'nudes' were punished less than girls who sent images.

In addition to sanctions, many schools offered support to the victim and the perpetrator to prevent future incidents and tackle any underlying causes of harmful sexual behaviour.

However, the review found that the extent to which leaders evaluate whether sanctions and/or interventions are effective varies, as does the evidence of ongoing monitoring of children and young people who have perpetrated harmful sexual behaviour.

Staff training and development

The review found that most staff receive annual safeguarding training, which includes updates on 'Keeping children safe in education'. However, most staff training on harmful sexual behaviours tended to be piecemeal. This was often because it was incorporated into training on other important aspects of safeguarding. In a few schools, there was no training on peer-on-peer sexual harassment and sexual violence. These schools expected staff to read the government's guidance instead.

The review also found that governors would benefit from better training and greater involvement in tackling harmful sexual behaviours.

Training and development for Designated Safeguarding Leads

The review found examples of good practice in some schools, with Designated Safeguarding Leads (DSLs) engaging with the local safeguarding partners (LSPs) and

forming support networks locally with other DSLs. However, some DSLs talked about a lack of high-level training at LSP level in how to address, manage and follow up on allegations of a serious sexual nature.

Learning from incidents

The review reported inconsistencies in how staff were defining and recording instances of sexual abuse, including recording of discussions with multi-agency partners and the outcome of referrals. Some schools had systems in place for recording incidents, but did not analyse the data and information to identify any patterns or trends that could inform their response.

Delivering the new RSHE curriculum

While acknowledging the disruption caused by the coronavirus pandemic, the review identified a number of issues that meant that children and young people were not getting the quality of relationships and sex and health education (RSHE) they should. These included weak implementation of RSHE, poor teacher subject knowledge, and significant gaps in curriculum coverage.

The review found that children and young people were seldom positive about their RSHE and PSHE lessons. Some felt it was 'too little, too late', and talked about filling in the gaps in their knowledge through social media or their peers.

Multi-agency safeguarding arrangements

The review held discussions with 12 local safeguarding partners (LSPs) to seek their views on how well multi-agency safeguarding arrangements to tackle sexual harassment and violence were working. The review found that some LSPs had been working closely with schools to track and analyse data from schools, and understood children's experiences of sexual harassment and violence. However, a small number told us that they were not aware that sexual harassment and violence, including online, in schools and colleges were significant problems in their local area.

The review identified a gap in guidance for how schools and colleges should respond when there are lengthy investigations into incidents of sexual harassment or violence, or when investigations do not lead to a prosecution or conviction. Some school and college leaders also wanted clearer guidance on where their responsibilities start and end, for example with incidents of harmful sexual behaviour that happen outside school.

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Recommendations

Due to the evidence of widespread sexual harassment and online sexual abuse, the review makes it clear that schools, colleges and multi-agency partners need to address concerns, even when there are no specific reports.

Recommendations for schools, colleges and partner agencies

- School and college leaders should develop a culture where all kinds of sexual harassment are recognised and addressed, including with sanctions when appropriate.

- The RSHE curriculum should be carefully sequenced with time allocated for topics that children and young people find difficult, such as consent and sharing explicit images.

- Schools and colleges should provide high-quality training for teachers delivering RSHE.

- There should be improved engagement between multi-agency safeguarding partners and schools.

Recommendations for government

- The government should consider the findings of the review as it develops the Online Safety Bill, in order to strengthen online safeguarding controls for children and young people. It should also develop an online hub where schools can access the most up-to-date safeguarding guidance in one place.

- A guide should be developed for children and young people to explain what will happen after they talk to school staff about sexual harassment and abuse.

- The government should launch a communications campaign about sexual harassment and online abuse to help change attitudes, including advice for parents and carers.

References

Ofsted (2021) **Review of sexual abuse in schools and colleges**. [London]: Ofsted.
<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/review-of-sexual-abuse-in-schools-and-colleges>

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