

Guidance for schools on preventing and responding to sexist, sexual and transphobic bullying

Safe to Learn: Embedding
anti-bullying work in schools

Quick Guide



A quick guide to Safe to Learn: Preventing and responding to sexist, sexual and transphobic bullying

Every child in every school has the right to learn free from the fear of bullying, whatever form that bullying may take. Everyone involved in a child's education needs to work together to ensure this is the case.

What is sexist, sexual and transphobic bullying?

Sexist, sexual and transphobic bullying occurs when a pupil (or group), usually repeatedly, harms another pupil or intentionally makes them unhappy **because of their sex or because they may not be perceived to conform to normal gender roles**. The root cause of sexist and sexual bullying is gender inequality.

Sexist bullying can be defined as bullying based on sexist attitudes that when expressed demean, intimidate or harm another person because of their sex or gender. These attitudes are commonly based around the assumption that women are subordinate to men, or are inferior. Young people's expectations and attainment can be limited by sexist attitudes. Sexist bullying may sometimes be characterised by inappropriate sexual behaviours.

Sexual bullying can be defined as bullying behaviour that has a specific sexual dimension or a sexual dynamic and it may be physical, verbal or non-verbal/psychological. Behaviours may involve suggestive sexual comments or innuendo including offensive comments about sexual reputation; or using sexual language that is designed to subordinate, humiliate or intimidate. It is also commonly underpinned by sexist attitudes or gender stereotypes. Sexual bullying can be seen as sexual harassment in the school.

Transphobic bullying stems from a hatred or fear of people who are transgender. 'Transgender' is an umbrella term that describes people whose sense of their gender or gender identity is seen as being different to typical gender norms.

Where children and young people are perceived not to be conforming to the dominant gender roles that may be widely expected of them, schools should be alert for signs of bullying. Anyone whose expression of their gender identity may be interpreted as different from wider cultural or social norms of being male or female may experience bullying related to this.

Young women and girls are disproportionately experiencing sexual and sexist bullying. Young women and girls report that it has become a normal part of their everyday lives. It is because of the gender stereotypes and social norms surrounding female identity that they experience sexual, sexist bullying.

Transphobic bullying is commonly underpinned by sexist attitudes. Boys and girls may be equally affected. An individual may also experience transphobic bullying as a result of perceptions that a parent, relative or other significant figure displays gender 'variance' or is transgender.

Behaviours displayed in these forms of bullying are in many cases similar to those of other forms of bullying, but there is the additional element of **inappropriate or coercive sexual behaviours**, which can in extreme cases constitute criminal behaviour such as sexual abuse. Some of the behaviours associated with sexist, sexual or transphobic bullying, such as the use of sexist or inappropriately sexual language, can sometimes go unchallenged in schools as school staff are unsure how to respond appropriately. Examples of some behaviours which may be seen in instances of sexist, sexual or transphobic bullying include: inappropriate and unwanted touching, spreading rumours of a sexual nature, use of humiliating or offensive sexist, sexual or transphobic language (eg. reversing he/she pronouns) and the display or circulation of images of a sexual nature.

Sexual and sexist bullying is a form of violence against women and girls as it disproportionately impacts on girls and young women. Girls are more commonly at risk from sexual and sexist bullying and this is a crucial issue to address because of its relationship to the broader issue of violence against women in society. However, boys have also reported being subjected to sexual or sexist bullying (as shown in data provided by ChildLine), and transphobic bullying may be targeted towards young people of either sex. It is important to note the links to homophobic bullying as young men are bullied when they do not fit in to heterosexual gender roles.

Why should schools deal with this kind of bullying?

Schools should take an active approach to tackling all forms of bullying, and need to address sexist, sexual and transphobic bullying as a specific issue. By working to prevent this type of bullying from taking place, schools can safeguard the welfare of their pupils, while at the same time playing their part to create a society in which people have positive attitudes to difference and treat each other with respect. Schools can take an active role in promoting the development of healthy and respectful relationships.

Schools must respond to this type of bullying as they are responsible for safeguarding the health and well-being of their pupils, which can be adversely affected by bullying. Sexist, sexual and transphobic bullying can damage lives. It may cause fear and anxiety, increase the likelihood of self-harm and limit aspirations and achievement. The effects of exposure to bullying can last well into adulthood.

Because of the particular potential for this form of bullying to be characterised by inappropriate sexual behaviour and because of the particular seriousness of violence (including sexual violence), **schools must always consider in cases of sexist, sexual and transphobic bullying whether safeguarding children processes need to be followed**. In addition to this, serious cases may constitute criminal behaviour and require police involvement, and **school staff need to be fully aware of when and how police involvement should be sought** (see further details under the 'Responding' heading below).

Legally, schools are required to take measures to prevent **all** forms of bullying among pupils and to protect pupils from harm, ensuring their physical and mental health and well-being. Schools also have specific duties in equalities legislation to protect their pupils from

discrimination. The Gender Equality Duty specifically mentions the legal requirement for schools to be working towards eliminating sex discrimination and harassment, and to promote equality between men and women, girls and boys.

Schools have a unique and important role to play in challenging the sexist, sexual and transphobic attitudes that underpin this form of bullying before they become embedded patterns of behaviour. Challenging the attitudes underpinning sexual, sexist and transphobic bullying from an early age helps to combat the potentially violent and criminal behaviours that can be motivated by these attitudes later in life.

It is also important to note that teachers may well be victims and perpetrators of sexual, sexist and transphobic bullying.

How should schools deal with this kind of bullying?

Prevention and response go hand in hand in any successful anti-bullying strategy. This is a particularly important dynamic when considering bullying that is prejudice-related. Where bullying behaviours may be predicated on values or beliefs that require challenge it is critical that the school takes action to deal with both the behaviour and the underpinning attitudes that drive it.

Preventing: Steps for schools to take to prevent sexist, sexual and transphobic bullying

- The first step to take in dealing with sexist, sexual and transphobic bullying is to **make clear the whole school's commitment** to addressing the issue. This should take the form of a written statement, which should be included in the school's anti-bullying policy and be devised with input from the whole school community including teaching and non-teaching staff, the leadership team, governors, parents and carers and, crucially, pupils themselves. This statement should be regularly promoted across the whole-school.
- Then the school needs to ensure it has a **clear understanding of the nature and extent of sexist, sexual and transphobic bullying** within the school. This can be done through gathering baseline data, through analysing bullying records, conducting focus groups etc, to provide a common reference point from which the school can further explore, analyse and respond to the underlying issues or causes of this form of bullying.
- Next the school needs to act on this information, to **develop practices and activities** that seek to prevent sexist, sexual and transphobic bullying from happening, and address negative attitudes that underpin this behaviour. For example, the school may produce a script providing prompts for how to respond to uses of sexist, sexual or transphobic language in the classroom, or a leaflet or a series of assemblies, or an event such as International Women's Day could stimulate a whole-school activity that stimulates discussion of gender issues and promotes positive attitudes amongst pupils.

- **Staff training and development** is one important issue. All school staff will need professional support and training to be fully equipped to deal with sexist, sexual and transphobic bullying. This may include training in how to safeguard the welfare of pupils experiencing this kind of bullying, how to challenge inappropriate use of language, and how to apply disciplinary sanctions consistently, appropriately and proportionately to bullying of this nature.
- The way schools **design their curriculum** also has an important part to play. The curriculum should be designed to address issues related to sexist, sexual and transphobic bullying at all key stages. The national curriculum already provides a range of opportunities to do this, for example the 'developing good relationships and respecting the differences between people' section of the Key Stage 1 and 2 national framework for PSHE; or the PSHE personal well-being programme of study for key stages 3 and 4.
- There are also wider opportunities to proactively and positively address these issues through school activities. Using the taught curriculum and wider school activities, schools can work to build a positive ethos where diversity is respected and sexist, sexual and transphobic bullying is not tolerated.

Finally, it is important that schools maintain a comprehensive and current understanding of the nature and extent of sexist, sexual and transphobic bullying in the school, and **engage in a regular review process** to ensure current practices and activities are having the desired impact. They could have a specific working group lead by young people and senior management.

- The recording system used by the school to record incidents of bullying needs to be capable of recording incidents as sexist, sexual or transphobic, so schools have clear and specific information about these forms of bullying. It also needs to be designed and promoted in such a way that pupils feel encouraged and confident using it to report sensitive information if they need to.
- This information then feeds in to the school's ongoing policy and practice review process, which should incorporate an ongoing programme of review of issues related to sexist, sexual and transphobic bullying.

Responding to specific incidents

When responding to an incident of sexist, sexual or transphobic bullying, the school needs to ensure it is engaging with: the individual or group who have experienced bullying (and possibly their families/carers), the individual or group engaging in bullying behaviour (and possibly their families/carers), and the wider school community.

Responses to individuals experiencing bullying need to ensure the immediate safety of the pupil is protected, immediate action is taken to limit and prevent further harm, and longer term support is put in place (including involving specialist agencies where appropriate).

- As stated above, with cases of sexist, sexual and transphobic bullying, safeguarding issues are of particular relevance, and **schools must always consider whether safeguarding children processes need to be followed**. These processes may need to be followed in order to protect a child or young person experiencing sexist, sexual or transphobic bullying (which could constitute sexual abuse or intimidation) from the perpetrator of the abuse, or to protect a perpetrator whose behaviour is thought to be underpinned by abuse taking place at home or another setting.
- **All staff should have an up-to-date understanding of safeguarding children issues and be able to implement the school's safeguarding children policy and procedures appropriately, and should be provided with support to enable them to identify cases where safeguarding may be an issue.**
- Issues of confidentiality and disclosing sensitive information are also especially pertinent in cases of sexist, sexual and transphobic bullying, and school staff need to be fully trained in how to deal with this. The school's confidentiality policy should provide a framework for staff when deciding whether or not they can offer confidentiality to a pupil who discloses information about themselves or their situation.
- Relevant support structures need to be in place within the school. This can include the training of school councillors and pastoral support staff. It may also include referrals to specialist support organisations.

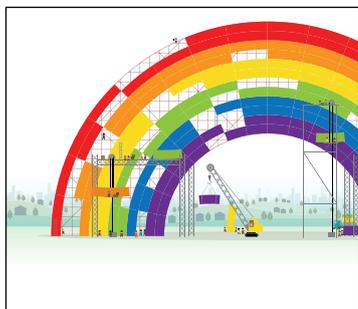
Responding to pupils who engage in bullying behaviour involves applying appropriate disciplinary sanctions to arrest the bullying behaviour, and putting appropriate support in place to address the attitudes and problems that underlie the bullying behaviour.

- School staff should be trained to ensure they respond consistently, appropriately and proportionately to pupils engaging in sexist, sexual and transphobic bullying. Schools should determine what sanctions to use in light of the specific bullying incident.
- It is important to remember that displaying bullying behaviour of this nature may in some cases expose underlying problems such as abuse at home, so again staff need to consider whether safeguarding processes should be followed.
- Specialist external agencies may need to be involved in responding to bullying behaviour. For example the police or education programmes that work with young men.

Responses that involve the whole school community are also an important part of preventing and responding to sexist, sexual and transphobic bullying.

- Incidents should be analysed to see if they highlight any issues of wider relevance to groups in the school who were not directly involved, and appropriate activities should be planned to engage with these groups and address the highlighted issues.
- Celebrating success in anti-bullying work and organising positive, proactive activities for the whole school is also crucial for building a positive anti-bullying ethos and preventing sexist, sexual and transphobic bullying.

In the pages which follow, more detailed information, advice and guidance on all the issues covered here is provided, along with links to further resources and support services that schools may wish to draw on when addressing issues around sexist, sexual and transphobic bullying.



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