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What Students and Parents Should Know About Making Schools Free From Bullying and Harassment

Every student has the right to be safe and to have others treat him or her with respect.

Unfortunately, students throughout our region report bullying and harassment are big problems for them because such incidents happen frequently and are hurtful. In fact, bullying and harassment happen so often that many believe it is a normal part of school. Some people also think that students who are harassed must have done something wrong or are partly to blame for the problem. This is not true! If you are the target of harassment, it is never your fault. And, choosing to bully or harass someone, even if you are upset, is never okay.

Harassment can cause you to feel guilty, trapped, helpless, frustrated, resentful, angry, hopeless, and/or alone. You may also feel confused and that it is partly your fault. If you are the target of harassment, you should report it to a trusted adult at your school. If someone you know is a victim of harassment, you should talk to them and help them to report it.

Your school should have a policy that will tell you what to do if you have problems with bullying and harassment. The following information explains what harassment is and what you can do to stop it.

How to identify bullying and harassment

Harassment is unwanted behavior directed at a student or a group because of their race, sex, disability, or national origin and creates a hostile learning environment. The behavior may be gestures or verbal, written, or physical forms of aggression. Harassment can be blatant or subtle, one incident or a pattern. It can happen between students, between adults, or between an adult and a student. It can happen to people of any age. It may happen directly between two people, indirectly through rumors, or electronically.

Because harassment causes serious harm, students should never ignore it. It doesn't matter if the person who is doing the harassment says they're only kidding or is just having fun. If their behavior offends or hurts you, it is wrong. If you know that harassment is happening to you or someone else, you should report it.

Many times harassment is obvious and easy to see. At other times, it is harder to identify because people may view it differently. Unacceptable behaviors that may be harassment fall into three categories:

1. Clearly wrong any time it happens such as nasty insults, forced kissing, blocking someone's way, stalking, touching someone in sexual ways without permission, or physically hurting someone.
2. May be offensive to some people but not to others such as jokes, teasing, or using negative nicknames.
3. May be offensive depending on who is doing it or how it is done such as giving compliments about how someone looks, an adult asking a student for a date, or asking personal questions.

Some examples of harassment are:

- Name-calling, insults, or jokes that are offensive.
- Displays of graffiti, pictures, or written material that is racist.
- Exclusion from school activities or events.
- Staring, posturing, making gestures, or other acts that are intimidating, threatening, or demeaning.
- Verbal threats of harm, stalking, or physical attacks.

Cyberbullying

Cyberbullying refers to the use of technology to send demeaning messages to students based on race, national origin, sex, or disability. This form of harassment is cruel and as harmful as hitting or hurting someone in person. Students using email, instant messaging, texts, or posting graphic materials on social media sites can get into trouble at their school or with the law. For example, sexting—sending or receiving sexually explicit or suggestive images or video via cell phones—is a crime.



Sexual harassment

Sexual harassment is unwanted verbal, nonverbal, or physical conduct of a sexual nature that creates a hostile learning environment. Flirting is okay if it is between two classmates and both are involved in the flirting behavior. It is never okay for adults to flirt with students or flirting to continue if someone asks for it to stop.

Examples of sexual harassment include, but are not limited to, the following:

- Unwelcome physical contact, touching, invasion of personal space, or other sexual advances.
- Jokes, suggestive remarks, sexual innuendoes, sounds, or gestures.
- Unwanted comments about someone's dress and appearance.
- Display of sexually suggestive pictures or written material.
- Threats or use of intimidation in return for sexual favors.

Misconceptions about harassment

Some people blame students who are victims of bullying or harassment for bringing it on themselves, but that is not true. Here are some other mistaken ideas about the problem:

Students who are harassed did something wrong and deserve it.

Harassment is never okay. You are not responsible if someone chooses to harass you. Each of us is responsible for how we choose to act and cannot blame others for our choices.

It's okay as long as I don't physically hurt them. This not true. We can hurt others by ignoring them, giving them mean looks, spreading rumors, or leaving them out on purpose so that others won't like them. A person can severely torment another with comments, gestures, or in writing.

Everybody does it so it must be okay. Most students know that harassment is not okay and want to help make it stop. If you see harassment, you should not join in even if others ask you to do so. You should try to stop the behavior only if you can do so safely. If not, you should get help from an adult.



What students can do

Remember that harassment is not your fault and you are not alone. Here are some things you can do if you think you are being harassed:

- Do not blame yourself—harassment is wrong and not your fault.
- Keep a journal (not as part of your diary). Write down the following information:
 - The date and time of every incident
 - Anything you do or say to tell the harasser to stop harassing you
 - Names of friends you told and what you said to them
 - Any reports—in writing or verbal—that you make to teachers or other school staff members
 - What happened after each report (note if nothing happened)
- Do not respond to cyberharassment sent through emails, text messages, or social media, but save the messages to document the problem.
- Tell a close friend if you need support and help in reporting the incident.
- Tell your parents/guardian or other trusted family member.
- Talk to the harasser if you feel safe doing so. Tell him or her that you want them to stop harassing you in person or in writing. Stick to the facts and keep copies of everything.

- Tell an adult at school. If that person does not help, tell someone else. Keep a record of all conversations in your journal.
- Tell whoever you report the incident to at school if you want your complaint to remain confidential, though there are some cases where the school must report harassment to other agencies such as social services.
- Learn about your school's harassment policy. The first school employee you talk to is required to make sure you know about the policy and, if you do not, to explain it to you. You may decide to handle the complaint either informally or formally, even after the school representative becomes involved.
- Ask what steps the school will take to resolve your complaint. Follow the directions in your school's grievance procedure.
- If you are unhappy with how the school is handling your complaint, ask for help from someone with more authority, such as a school board member or the superintendent. Keep documenting the harassing behavior and any steps you take.
- If you are scared, angry, or confused, ask for support, including counseling if counselors are available at your school.

When to tell school authorities

There are certain times when harassment is going on that you should immediately talk to a trusted adult or someone else.

Talk to someone immediately if ...

- the harasser tries to make you promise to keep the harassment a secret
- the harasser is an adult
- the harassment happens only when you are alone with that person
- you are being physically threatened or hurt

When someone else is being harassed

If your friend or someone you know is a victim of harassment, you can help him or her in important ways. Help your friend understand how important it is to report the problem to a teacher or counselor: it's their job to provide support to stop the harmful behavior. Offer to go with your friend to report the problem. Remind your friend that the harassment is not their fault. Be a good listener and help the person who is being harassed write down the facts about the harassment:

- What happened
- Where and when it occurred
- Who saw it happen
- How it made your friend feel
- How your friend tried to stop it

You can help if you see or know that a student is a target of harassment. Be sure that you choose ways to help that are safe for you and the other student:

- Tell the harasser you do not think it is funny.
- Tell the harasser to stop.
- Walk away and ask an adult for help.
- Do not say or do things that will encourage the harasser. For example, do not giggle, stare, tell jokes, or gossip about what happened. These things often make the situation worse because people think that you approve of the behavior.



How to recognize if you are harassing others

Some students hurt others even when they know it is wrong to do so; others may follow along with their friends to be part of the group. Some people harass others without really understanding their behavior is hurtful. Each of us is responsible for treating others with respect. Some questions you can ask yourself are:

- Would I like my family treated this way?
- Would my parents or guardians be proud of my behavior?
- Would I act this way if an adult were present?
- Do I want to keep my behavior secret from adults or others?

Preventing harassment

There are many things that you can do to help prevent harassment in your school. Some things you can do are:

- Report harassment of yourself or others.
- Support other students and participate in support groups.
- Know your rights.
- Understand formal and informal complaint procedures for dealing with harassment.
- Attend training in harassment and assertiveness skills. Volunteer to help teach other students.
- Be involved in setting policy and procedure.
- Participate in assemblies.
- Volunteer to create or serve on a committee that helps students who have problems with harassment.
- Treat each student in your school with respect.
- Have a “no tolerance” mindset toward harassment.
- Learn how to use mediation to solve problems (mediation involves a third person who can help you resolve a conflict).
- Inform your parents or guardians of policies and procedures and any current incidents at your school.



Stopping harassment

Here are ways you can stop harassment and help make your school a safe place for every student to learn:

- Show respect and consideration toward everyone regardless of race, national origin, gender, age, parental status, physical condition, or other perceived differences.
- Learn about and appreciate individual and cultural differences of others. Show sensitivity to different learning styles and nonverbal behaviors.
- Be respectful and try to get to know people who have different family or cultural backgrounds than you.
- Try to understand your beliefs that are biased or are based on stereotypes of people.
- Use nonbiased language at school, at home, and in the community.
- Learn how to recognize bias and how it demeans people.
- Make a conscious effort to understand your own biases toward others. Take advantage of opportunities to learn about bias and prejudice.
- Participate in multicultural learning activities that celebrate and commemorate the contributions of people of color and women to our society.

Students' rights

You have the right under federal law (and most state laws) to attend schools that are safe, welcoming, and do not allow harassment. If you or someone you know is a target of harassment, you have the right to ask the school to stop it immediately. Your school should take steps to stop the harassment, prevent it from happening again, and provide help to the victim. The school also must protect students from retaliation for telling and asking for help.

Your school must have a policy to prevent harassment and a plan to deal with harassment if it happens. This policy should be available to you. Often, the policy is part of your student handbook and posted in public places. It should describe your rights, identify a person who can help you, and explain how you should ask for help.

We recommend you try to resolve the situation at your school, if at all possible, before involving the federal Office for Civil Rights or filing a lawsuit. However, if you are dissatisfied with the school's efforts, you can at any time contact the Office for Civil Rights in your area, your state Department of Education, your state Department of Human Rights, an attorney, or a police officer to file a complaint. If all else fails, you can file a lawsuit under the terms of Title IX of the Education Amendments of 1972 or Title VI of the Civil Rights Act of 1964.



What parents can do

Parents can help prevent and eliminate harassment from your children's lives by:

- Talking to your children about the importance of treating everyone in a respectful way.
- Teaching your children about harassment. For example, help them understand how to recognize harassment and what to do if it happens. You can also help your children understand the importance of telling an adult (you or the school) to get help.
- Asking your children's teachers how they help students learn from and respect others from different cultures. You should also learn how the teacher prevents harassment in the classroom and how they respond to incidents that occur.
- Participating in training or information-sharing meetings about harassment.

- Using respectful, inclusive language at home, in your children's school, and in the community.
- Keeping in mind that anyone is likely to have biases or prejudices and making an effort to understand any biases you may have.
- Speaking up and confronting prejudice and discrimination. Dealing with it directly and, if necessary, reporting it to the appropriate person or agency.
- Asking teachers how you can help support their efforts to prevent harassment.
- Monitoring your children's activities on the Internet and the use of their cell phones.



If your child is being bullied

If your child is a victim of harassment, report it to the school. The first school employee you talk to is required to inform you that there are policies and procedures to guide you and the school. You may decide to handle the complaint either informally or formally, even after the school representative becomes involved. Make sure that you tell the school if your child wants to keep the complaint confidential. You should begin to take the following measures to collect evidence:

1. Keep a journal that includes the following information:
 - The date and time of every incident
 - Anything you or your child does or says to tell the harasser to stop the harassment
 - Names of friends that your child told and what was said to them
 - Any reports—in writing or verbal—that you or your child makes to teachers or other school staff members
 - What happened after each report (note if nothing happened)
2. Save harassing voice mails or electronic messages, but do not let your child respond to these messages.
3. Help your child report the harassment to school administrators. If that person does not help, tell someone else.
4. Keep a record of all conversations.