



SEXUAL AND SEXIST BULLYING: DEVELOPING EFFECTIVE ANTI-BULLYING PRACTICE

A guide for the school and
children's workforce



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Help With Bullying

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1. ABOUT THIS GUIDE

The Anti-Bullying Alliance has developed this guide on prevention and response to sexual and sexist bullying to assist school and children's workforce professionals as they safeguard, educate and support children in their care. For the purposes of this guide, we focus on child-on-child sexual and sexist bullying in schools in England but please refer to the [Department for Education's Keeping Children Safe in Education](https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/keeping-children-safe-in-education-2) statutory guidance¹ on how to safeguard children from all forms of abuse.

This guide refers to schools however, many of the principles within this guide are also relevant to other settings where adults support children and young people. It draws on law and government guidance; best practice from organisations that specialise in children's safety and/or sexual harms; and research literature and consultation with children, including children and young people with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND). It outlines the specific issues that professionals should be aware of in relation to sexual and sexist bullying and also suggests actions that staff can take to safeguard, educate and protect all students.

The views of children and young people involved in the consultation, and associated quotations, are used throughout.

We encourage you to use this guide to update your anti-bullying policy and procedures and educate all staff members on how to keep children safe.

With thanks to all the young people involved in the consultations, and to Kidscape and the NSPCC for their input into this guide.

1 – Department for Education (DfE), Keeping Children Safe in Education statutory guidance, <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/keeping-children-safe-in-education-2>

2. KEY POINTS

- **Bullying has a significant effect on children and young people's mental health, emotional wellbeing, and identity – and schools have a legal duty² to tackle it.**
- **Child-on-child abuse is a safeguarding issue.** All staff should be aware that children can abuse other children (including online) and be clear on school policy and procedures (DfE, Keeping Children Safe in Education)¹.
- Sexual and sexist bullying can impact all children – but schools should be aware that **girls and pupils with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND) are particularly at risk of sexual abuse**, and it's much more prevalent than adults realise³.
- **All children need support to understand about puberty, healthy sexual development and healthy relationships;** to recognise harmful sexual behaviour; to learn about consent, and to feel confident that their school is a safe environment where they can confidently share any concerns. Relationships and Sex Education (RSE) is one way in which children are taught about these issues, but it should also be part of a school's ethos, pastoral system and approach to managing behaviour.
- **Schools have a legal duty⁴ to create an environment where sexism is not tolerated;** where personal space of students and staff is respected; where sexist language and comments are challenged; and where students and staff feel empowered to say no to any unwanted touch.



2 – The Education and Inspections Act 2006 provides that maintained schools must have measures to encourage good behaviour and prevent all forms of bullying amongst pupils. <https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2006/40/contents>
3 – Ofsted (2021), Review of Sexual Abuse in Schools and Colleges: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/review-of-sexual-abuse-in-schools-and-colleges/review-of-sexual-abuse-in-schools-and-colleges>

4 – Under the Equality Act 2010 schools as public bodies must eliminate unlawful discrimination, harassment, victimisation and any other conduct prohibited by the Act. <https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2010/15/contents>

3. WHAT IS SEXUAL AND SEXIST BULLYING?

Academics in the UK and overseas continue to debate the most appropriate definition of sexual and sexist bullying as it includes a wide spectrum of behaviours, but for the purposes of this guide, **we include any bullying behaviour that is sexual or sexist in nature.**

Whilst explaining the definitions in this guide is intended to support you to prevent, identify and respond effectively to incidents of Sexual and Sexist Bullying, it's important that

all reports and concerns of bullying behaviour and sexual or sexist behaviour are taken seriously and responded to appropriately in accordance with your anti-bullying policy and safeguarding procedures.

See also the 'Responding to sexual and sexist bullying' section for further information.

To ensure we are able to prevent bullying, act quickly when it takes place and avoid misidentifying bullying, it is vital that schools and other settings have a shared definition of bullying. This should be understood by the whole school or setting including parents, young people and all staff.

3.1 IDENTIFYING SEXUAL AND SEXIST BULLYING

To identify whether something is sexual or sexist bullying you must ask two questions, firstly:

1. Is it bullying?

While there is no legal definition of bullying, the Anti-Bullying Alliance and its members have an agreed shared definition of bullying based on research from across the world over the last 30 years.

When considering whether it's bullying, it's important to consider the key elements within the definition which are:

- Is it repetitive?
- Is it intentional?
- Is it hurtful?
- Is there a power imbalance?

Bullying is the **repetitive, intentional hurting** of one person or group by another person or group, where the relationship involves an **imbalance of power**. It can happen face to face or online.

2. Is it sexual or sexist in nature?

To establish whether the bullying behaviour is sexual or sexist in nature it's important to understand the different types of harmful sexual behaviours along with what we mean by sexism.

According to the DfE¹, child-on-child sexual abuse is most likely to include, though not limited to:

Sexual violence - behaviours that are sexual offences under the Sexual Offences Act (2003) including rape, assault by penetration, sexual assault (this may include an online element which facilitates, threatens and/or encourages sexual violence).

Sexual harassment - such as sexual comments, remarks, jokes and online sexual harassment, which may be standalone or part of a broader pattern of abuse.

Causing someone to engage in sexual activity without consent - such as forcing someone to strip, touch themselves sexually, or to engage in sexual activity with a third party.

Upskirting - typically involves taking a picture under a person's clothing without them knowing, with the intention of viewing their genitals or buttocks to obtain sexual gratification, or to cause the victim humiliation, distress or alarm.

Sexting - consensual and non-consensual sharing of nude and semi-nude images and/or videos (also known as 'youth produced sexual imagery' or 'nude image sharing').

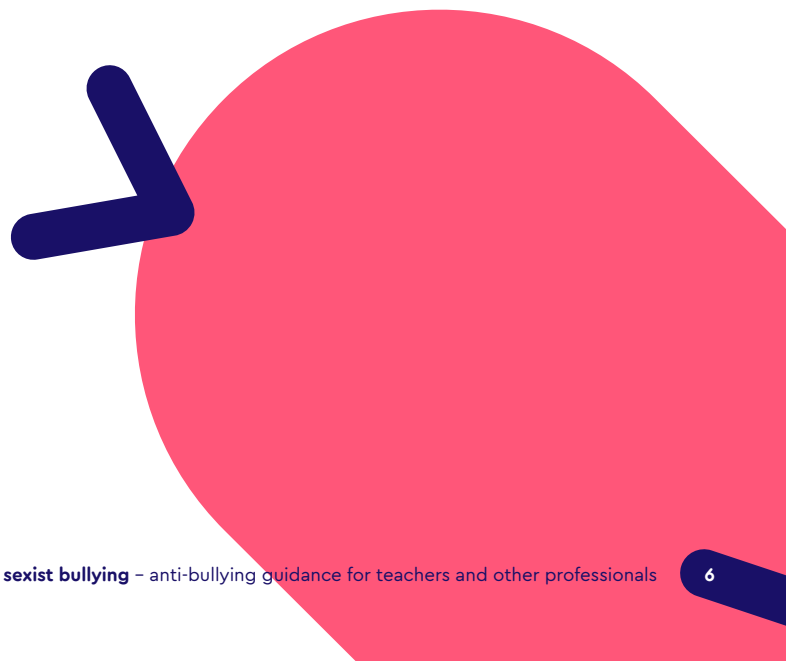
Harmful sexual behaviour (HSB) - Sexual behaviours expressed by children and young people under the age of 18 years old that are developmentally inappropriate, may be harmful towards self or others, or abusive towards another child, young person or adult. The DfE use a model to explain the continuum of sexual behaviours from normal and developmentally expected to inappropriate, problematic, abusive and violent. It can happen face to face, online or both. The term has been widely adopted in child protection.

Sexism - there are many different definitions of sexism, for the purposes of this guide we refer to sexism as prejudice or discrimination based upon the idea that a person or a group of persons is inferior because of their sex, including maintaining and reinforcing sexist stereotypes, and perpetrated at individual, institutional and structural levels⁵.

Child sexual exploitation - it is also important to have an understanding of child sexual exploitation which can occur between children and young people and is a form of child sexual abuse. Child sexual exploitation is 'where an individual or group takes advantage of an imbalance of power to coerce, manipulate or deceive a child or young person under the age of 18 into sexual activity (a) in exchange for something the victim needs or wants, and/or (b) for the financial advantage or increased status of the perpetrator or facilitator. The victim may have been sexually exploited even if the sexual activity appears consensual. Child sexual exploitation does not always involve physical contact; it can also occur through the use of technology'.⁶

5 - This is adapted from the Council of Europe's definition, 'Recommendation CM/Rec(2019)1 of the Committee of Ministers to member States on preventing and combating sexism' (2019): https://search.coe.int/cm/pages/result_details.aspx?objectid=090000168093b26a

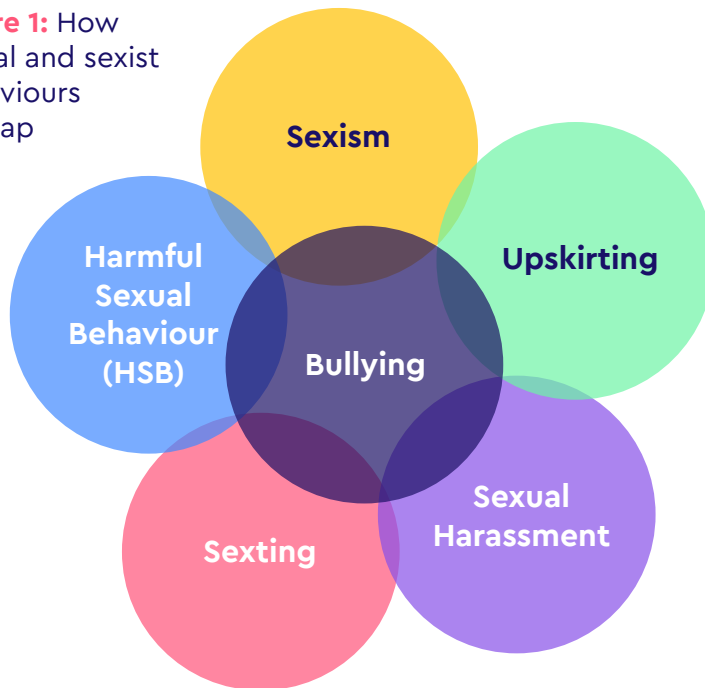
6 - Department for Education, Child sexual exploitation: definition and guide for practitioners: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/child-sexual-exploitation-definition-and-guide-for-practitioners>



3.2 BULLYING AND SEXUAL AND SEXIST BEHAVIOURS

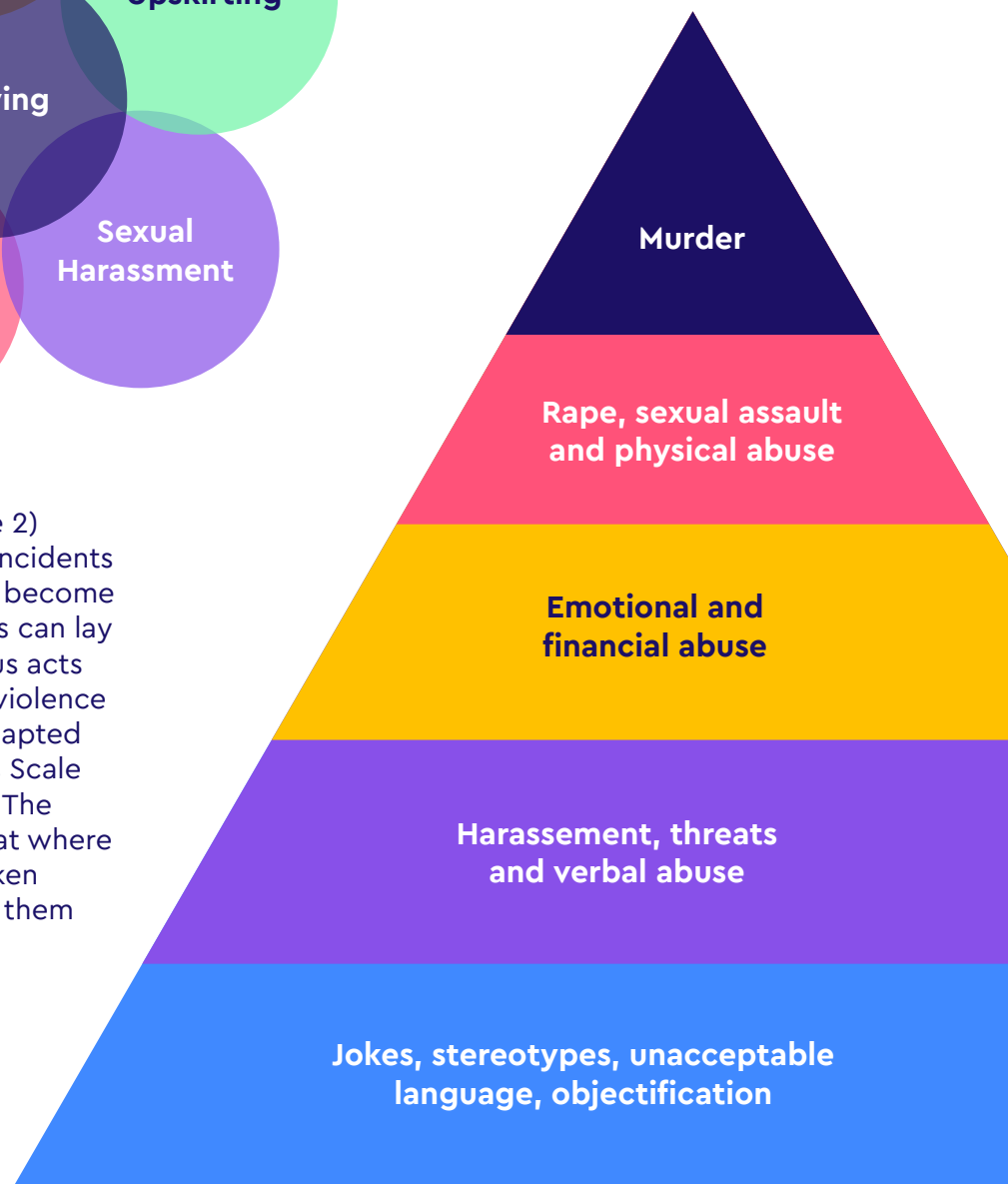
Bullying and sexual and sexist behaviours overlap and it is possible that behaviours can be sexual bullying, sexist bullying and sexual harassment. For example, sexual bullying taking place may also be a sign that there is heightened risk of harmful sexual behaviour, sexual exploitation and/or sexual violence.

Figure 1: How sexual and sexist behaviours overlap



This scale by Equaliteach⁷ (Figure 2) highlights that when 'low-level' incidents of sexism and sexual harassment become commonplace or normalised, this can lay the foundations for further serious acts of prejudice, discrimination and violence (their example scale has been adapted and is based on Gordon Allport's Scale of Prejudice and Discrimination). The intention was to demonstrate that where the 'lower level' incidents are taken seriously, educators can prevent them from escalating.

Figure 2: Scale by Equaliteach on how incidents can escalate if not taken seriously.



“Downplaying certain behaviours, for example dismissing sexual harassment as “just banter”, “just having a laugh”, “part of growing up” or “boys being boys” can lead to a culture of unacceptable behaviours, an unsafe environment for children and in worst case scenarios a culture that normalises abuse leading to children accepting it as normal and not coming forward to report it”.

DfE, Keeping Children Safe in Education (2022)

7 - Equaliteach, Outside the Box: A whole-school approach to promoting gender equality and tackling sexism and sexual harassment <https://equaliteach.co.uk/education/classroom-resources/outside-the-box/>

3.3 IDENTIFYING SEXUAL AND SEXIST BULLYING

As discussed earlier in this guide, to decide if a scenario is sexual or sexist bullying, you should ask yourself two questions:

1. Is it bullying?
2. Is it sexual and/or sexist in nature?

Reminder of the definition of bullying:

Bullying is the **repetitive, intentional hurting** of one person or group by another person or group, where the relationship involves an **imbalance of power**. It can happen face to face or online.

Take these two examples below:

1. Ava is 8 and wants to play football in the playground at lunchtime with a group boys. Every time she tries, they say to her "girls are rubbish at football" and "we don't play football with girls".

- **Question 1:** Is it bullying? Yes, because it's been repeated over time, involves a power imbalance as there are many of them, and is hurtful.
- **Question 2:** Is it sexist or sexual in nature? It is sexist in nature as the boys are telling a girl that girls don't play football.
- **Answer:** This is sexist bullying because it is both bullying and sexist in nature.

2. Willow and Tom are 15 and were in a relationship briefly. Since they have split up Tom has been telling his friends that Willow is 'frigid' and 'only sent him one nude'. Someone has posted a photo on a social media site with her head superimposed on to a picture of a naked woman.

- **Question 1:** Is it bullying? Yes, because it's taken place over time, there is a power imbalance because he's spreading unkind messages and sharing private details about their relationship, it's hurtful and intentional.
- **Question 2:** Is it sexist or sexual in nature? Yes, it is both sexual in that he is sharing details about their intimate relationship and sexist because he is calling her 'frigid'.
- **Answer:** This is sexual and sexist bullying because it is both bullying and sexual/sexist in nature.

4. AT RISK GROUPS

4.1 WHO'S MOST AT RISK OF SEXUAL AND SEXIST BULLYING?

Girls are significantly more at risk than boys.

Whilst any report of sexual or sexist bullying, sexual harassment or sexual violence should be taken seriously, staff should be aware it is more likely that girls will be targeted, and it is more likely to be perpetrated by boys⁸. For example, in an Ofsted review³ of sexual abuse in schools and colleges, nearly:

90% of girls, and nearly 50% of boys,

said they were being sent explicit pictures or videos of things they did not want to see, and

92% of girls, and 74% of boys,

said sexist name-calling happens a lot or sometimes to them or their peers.

It also found much higher incidences of sexual harassment abuse and bullying behaviours than teachers and leaders were aware of, which suggests that a lot is going unreported.

Sexual and sexist bullying experienced by boys is often homophobic in nature.

Whilst girls are significantly more at risk, a significant number of boys are also targets of sexual and sexist bullying. Sexual and sexist bullying of boys is often homophobic in nature with school staff frequently hearing homophobic and sexist language³, suggesting this behaviour is driven by sexism and homophobia in society with peer enforcement of 'gender norms'. It is vital that schools take a strong approach against all forms of sexism, sexist stereotypes, and homophobia as the foundation on which to build a response to sexual and sexist bullying.

LGBT pupils are more at risk.

LGBT children and young people are particularly at risk of harmful sexual behaviour. In 2021 Ofsted found³, that staff

in schools were often not aware of young peoples' daily experiences of harmful sexual behaviour and bullying and, in some cases, despite hearing sexist and homophobic language frequently, didn't challenge it as they felt they wouldn't be supported by colleagues and their comments would be disregarded⁵. There is also evidence to suggest that lesbian, gay and bisexual young people are more likely to experience child sexual abuse and less likely to report sexual abuse than their peers⁹.

Pupils with SEND are more at risk.

Children with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND) are three times more likely to be abused than their peers¹⁰, including sexual abuse¹¹, and they disproportionately experience bullying¹² – with devastating consequences. A significant proportion of children displaying harmful sexual behaviour also have a learning disability¹³.

8 – McMaster, L, (2002) 'Peer to peer sexual harassment in early adolescence: A developmental perspective', *Development and Psychopathology*, 14, 91-105
9 – Yin Xu and Yong Zheng, 'Prevalence of childhood sexual abuse among lesbian, gay, and bisexual people: a meta-analysis', in *Journal of Child Sexual Abuse*, Volume 24, Issue 3, 2015, pages 315 to 331
10 – Jones, L et al. (2012) Prevalence and risk of violence against children with disabilities: a systematic review and meta-analysis of observational studies. *The Lancet* July 2012
11 – NSPCC, Safeguarding d/Deaf and disabled children and young people: <https://learning.nspcc.org.uk/safeguarding-child-protection/deaf-and-disabled-children>
12 – Find out more at: <https://anti-bullyingalliance.org.uk/tools-information/all-about-bullying/at-risk-groups/sen-disability/do-children-send-experience-more>
13 – NSPCC (2019) Statistics briefing: Harmful sexual behaviour

Schools have a key role to play in educating and supporting children to understand appropriate sexual behaviour – and must make sure this includes children with SEND. There may be a misconception that disabled children are not interested in sex, or that it would be somehow inappropriate to discuss sexual matters with them – however this only serves to leave children at risk of bullying and abuse.

Schools have a duty to keep all children safe from sexual harm and it's vital to talk about these issues, set appropriate boundaries, and to communicate appropriate behaviour in a way that meets the needs of all children and young people.

4.2 PREVENTING BIAS

It's really important that from the outset we challenge our own assumptions and have an awareness of our own potential biases to avoid perpetuating them. Left unchallenged, these biases and pre-conceived ideas can be particularly damaging for children and young people.

It's important that schools are aware of biases and stereotypes, including **adultification bias**, which can be described as:

“The concept of adultification is when notions of innocence and vulnerability are not afforded to certain children. This is determined by people and institutions who hold power over them.”¹⁴

Black and minoritised ethnic groups face significant overrepresentation in exclusions for sexual misconduct (as well as exclusions overall)¹⁵. Due to racism, Black children are also most at risk of adultification bias



which influences how they are protected and safeguarded from harm¹⁶.

It is vital that schools check for bias in the systems, policy and practice of all settings working with children and young people.

4.3 CULTURAL SENSITIVITIES

Child-on-child abuse including sexual and sexist bullying can happen in any environment. The safety of children should always be paramount: this means educating all children, in all environments about acceptable behaviour and being clear on school policy and procedure. This includes single sex schools and faith schools. There may be religious or cultural sensitivities associated with sexual behaviour, but this should never override the legal duty to keep children safe from harm.

Taking a clear stance makes it easier to communicate any concerns with parents and carers and creates an environment where they can also share concerns with you knowing they will be handled sensitively and with care.

14 – Davis, J. and Marsh, N. (2020). 'Boys to men: the cost of 'adultification' in safeguarding responses to Black boys', Critical and Radical Social Work, 8(2), pp. 255–259.

15 – DfE, Statistics: exclusions: <https://www.gov.uk/government/collections/statistics-exclusions>

16 – Davis, J. and Marsh, N. (2020). 'Boys to men: the cost of 'adultification' in safeguarding responses to Black boys', Critical and Radical Social Work, 8(2), pp. 255–259.

5. UNDERSTANDING THE TYPES OF BEHAVIOUR

It is important to understand that not all sexualised behaviour between children and young people is bullying or abuse. Children and young people naturally go through a process of sexual development. However, some may be impacted by harmful sexual behaviour.

There are several tools available to assist staff with understanding healthy sexual development (see the NSPCC's Hackett Continuum tool to support with responding to children who display sexualised behaviour)¹⁷. The Stop It Now! Charity also has a useful booklet¹⁸ on preventing abuse between children that describes healthy sexual development. They emphasise that children and young people with SEND may develop at different rates and care must be taken to educate appropriately according to their sexual development and to make sure they can communicate any worries they may have. The ABA definition of bullying includes an imbalance of power – and some children may be more vulnerable to coercion and control – a key characteristic of sexual and sexist bullying.

Stop It Now! describe harmful sexual behaviour¹⁸ as ranging 'from experimentation that unintentionally goes too far, through to serious sexual assault'. They write that 'often victims are uncomfortable or confused about what is happening and may feel that they are willingly involved, but not understand that the behaviour is harmful'. This can be exacerbated for children who may find it hard to understand and communicate their feelings.

This means it is vital that school staff take time to understand the context in which behaviour has taken place, the development needs of the children involved, and the nature of the relationship between those involved.

5.1 TYPES OF BEHAVIOUR

The type of behaviour within a school environment that could constitute sexual and sexist bullying, or could contribute to an environment where sexual and sexist bullying is more likely to occur may include the following, which was gathered as part of the Ofsted review³. It found that girls reported the following harmful sexual behaviours happened 'a lot' or 'sometimes' between people their age:

- **rumours about their sexual activity (81%)**
- **unwanted or inappropriate comments of a sexual nature (80%)**
- **being sent pictures or videos they did not want to see (88%)**
- **being put under pressure to provide sexual images of themselves (80%)**
- **having pictures or videos that they sent being shared more widely without their knowledge or consent (73%)**
- **feeling pressured to do sexual things that they did not want to (68%)**

¹⁷ – Hackett Continuum tool – Responding to children who display sexualised behaviour (NSPCC): <https://learning.nspcc.org.uk/media/2685/responding-to-children-who-display-sexualised-behaviour-guide.pdf>

¹⁸ – Stop it Now! Preventing abuse among children and young people: https://www.stopitnow.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/stop_booklets_childs_play_preventing_abuse_among_children_and_young_people01_14.pdf

Type of behaviour may also include sexism in all its forms; including:

Sexist name-calling - for example, in a report by NEU and UK Feminista¹⁹, pupils reported frequent language associating negative characteristics with being female such as “you throw like a girl”, and more positive characteristics with being male such as “man-up”. This was more likely to be targeted at male pupils, while female pupils are more likely to be subjected to gendered sexual name-calling – such as ‘slut’, ‘slag’ and ‘whore’.

Sexist stereotypes - such as pressure to conform to particular pre-conceived sex ‘norms’ (e.g. comments about girls not playing certain sports, pressure on boys to have multiple partners, or pressure on girls to dress a certain way).

Homophobia, biphobia and transphobia - Ofsted found that homophobic and transphobic insults and bullying occurred in various places around school and that some LGBT children and young people reported constant verbal abuse and occasional physical assault, which left them feeling physically unsafe³.

5.2 KEY AREAS TO CONSIDER WHEN INVESTIGATING CONCERNS OF HARMFUL SEXUAL BEHAVIOUR BETWEEN CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE

- Is the behaviour age appropriate and appropriate to the level of development of the children involved – or could the person have been coerced in any way?
- Is there a power imbalance between those involved (e.g. age difference, physical strength and capability, emotional development)?
- Are those involved equipped to describe their wants and desires and to give consent? Remember, a child under the age of 13 can never consent to any sexual activity.
- Is the behaviour potentially harmful or risky? (e.g. the distribution of sexual photos or video content).
- Is the behaviour appropriate to the school environment (regardless of whether you consider it to be consensual)?

Child sexual exploitation

It is also important to be aware of child sexual exploitation. This is where children are coerced or manipulated to participate in sexual activity for some kind of exchange. As with bullying, this often involves an imbalance of power, and staff should be alert to any particular vulnerabilities within relationships, such as age differentials, children with SEND, children living in poverty and other minoritised groups. Child sexual exploitation is never the victim's fault, even if there is some form of exchange: all children and young people under the age of 18 have a right to be safe and should be protected from harm.⁶

19 – NEU and UK Feminista (2017) “It’s just everywhere”: A study on sexism in schools – and how we tackle it: <https://ukfeminista.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2017/12/Report-Its-just-everywhere.pdf>

5.3 SEXTING (ALSO KNOWN AS 'YOUTH PRODUCED SEXUAL IMAGERY' OR 'NUDE IMAGE SHARING')

Sexting is when someone sends or receives a sexual message, image or video of another person, or participates in 'live' online sexual activity. For example, sending or receiving nude or semi-nude images or videos, or participating in live sexual acts such as masturbation online. Children and young people may consent to sending a nude image or video of themselves, and it may be self-generated content, but they have no control over how other people might use the content. If shared around peer groups it may lead to bullying and isolation. They can also be forced or coerced into sharing images by their peers.

Not all incidents are sexually or criminally motivated, there can be many reasons why children and young people engage in sexting, for example sometimes it can be consensual between children and young people who may be in a relationship – the Department for Digital, Culture, Media & Sport and UK Council for Internet Safety provide guidance on defining the types of incident and different motivations²⁰.

However, it is a criminal offence to create or share nude and semi-nude images of children under 18, even if the person doing it is a child. If an incident of sexting is reported to the police, they will make a record but may decide not take any formal action against a young person²¹.

This has contributed to a culture of 'victim-blaming' where children are told not to send images or participate in sexual activity rather than exploring the intention and understanding behind the activity and listening to children's experiences. This may also mean that children are less likely to tell someone if an incident has caused distress, they have been coerced into sharing or receiving images or videos, or participating in online sexual activity, or they have been subject to bullying because of an incident. It is therefore vital that staff create an environment where pupils feel safe to share concerns in the knowledge that staff will consider the individual children involved, the circumstances and the most appropriate response.

Parents and carers also play a big part in keeping their children safe online. Help parents understand harmful sexual behaviour online, why children might participate in such activity, and how they can talk to their children about it. It's important they know how to deal with any issues which their children may become involved in²².



20 – Department for Digital, Culture, Media & Sport and UK Council for Internet Safety, Sharing nudes and semi-nudes: advice for education settings working with children and young people: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/sharing-nudes-and-semi-nudes-advice-for-education-settings-working-with-children-and-young-people/sharing-nudes-and-semi-nudes-advice-for-education-settings-working-with-children-and-young-people>

21 – NSPCC, Sexting: advice for professionals: <https://learning.nspcc.org.uk/research-resources/briefings/sexting-advice-professionals>

22 – More information and guidance for parents is available from NSPCC at: <https://www.nspcc.org.uk/keeping-children-safe/online-safety/sexting-sending-nudes/>

6. SEXUAL AND SEXIST BULLYING AND CRIME

Not all sexual and sexist bullying will constitute criminal behaviour, however concerns and reported incidents must be taken seriously.

[The DfE's 'Sexual violence and sexual harassment between children in school and colleges: Advice for governing bodies, proprietors, headteachers, principals, senior leadership teams and designated safeguarding leads'](#) gives further information on how to handle reports and when to involve the police.

7. IMPACT OF PORNOGRAPHY

The young people that took part in our focus group felt strongly that the increased consumption of pornographic content was a driver for sexual and sexist bullying. In their view, pornography:

- Affected how young people thought about sex and what sex should be like
- Affected how young people thought they should behave
- Portrayed stereotypes and could affect how a young person felt about themselves (e.g. that they were not doing what other men were doing)
- Made people feel pressured to act more sexually
- Made people judge others more about their sexual behaviour
- Influenced verbal sexualised bullying about people who do not conform to stereotypes (e.g. calling a man gay, because he does not 'sleep around')

Research also highlights the impact of pornography on children and young people, such as:

- Unhealthy expectations of sexual relationships and perceptions of women and girls³
- Victim-blaming attitudes such as 'she deserved it because she was drunk' is associated with more frequent consumption of pornography²³
- Desensitisation of harmful sexual content shaping unhealthy attitudes towards women and girls over time²⁴
- Using pornography as a source of information to learn about sex and sexual relationships (60% of young men and 40% of young women)²³

It is vital that any work to address sexual and sexist bullying gives young people an opportunity to discuss and explore their experiences of pornography and pornographic content, and the influence that pornography can have on their attitudes, behaviours and relationships. [See the PSHE Association guidance on teaching about pornography for further information.](#)

23 – Our Watch (2020), Pornography, young people and preventing violence against women background paper: <https://www.ourwatch.org.au/resource/pornography-young-people-and-preventing-violence-against-women-background-paper-2020/>

24 – Government Equalities Office (2020), The relationship between pornography use and harmful sexual Behaviours: https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/976730/The_Relationship_between_Pornography_use_and_Harmful_Sexual_Attitudes_and_Behaviours_-_literature_review_v1.pdf

8. PREVENTING SEXUAL AND SEXIST BULLYING

The Ofsted Review of sexual abuse in schools and colleges³ identified the following key barriers to reporting for students:

- Fear of being ostracised by their peers
- Getting their peers in trouble
- Worried about how adults would react
- Lack of understanding about what would happen if they reported

As educators, it is your role to create a safe environment where children understand consent and appropriate behaviour; feel confident that, if they share concerns, they will be handled discreetly; and are clear on action you will take if they share concerns.

8.1 KEY PRINCIPLES FOR PREVENTION

1. Talk about sexual and sexist bullying and harm.

Sexual and sexist bullying thrives in a climate of secrecy. Create time and safe spaces to explain sexual development, harmful sexual behaviour and sex inequality in an age and development appropriate way with children and young people. Support children to share what is happening inside and outside of school, within a safe environment where trust has been built, children are clear on boundaries and expectations, and they know the action schools will take.

There may be new trends that you are unaware of. Listen – but be prepared to address behaviour that young people may see as 'normal', but you consider to be harmful. We all bring our own experiences and biases to exploration of sexual behaviour, and it is important to seek advice. If you are unsure about behaviour or have concerns talk to your Designated Safeguarding Lead, and seek external advice from your local children's services team, or organisations like [NSPCC](#) or the [Lucy Faithfull Foundation](#).

If you think a child or young person is in an unhealthy or abusive relationship, or could

be a victim or perpetrator of child sexual exploitation, it's important to take action. Consider:

- Whether you have enough information or need a further qualifying conversation with the child. Consult with the Designated Safeguarding Lead and agree who is best placed to have this conversation.
- Is it appropriate to have a direct, one-to-one conversation with the child about the relationship they are in? This will depend on the child and the relationship you have with them. It could help them open up or it could make them feel criticised and singled out.
- Is it appropriate to have a group discussion about relationships in general, making it clear that you're available to talk if anyone has a concern?
- Instead of having a long conversation about the topic, you might find it easier to have regular short chats over a period of time. This gives children and young people a chance to process the issues you've discussed.

Even if there are no reports of sexual and sexist bullying and harm in your school, it does not mean it isn't happening. Adopt an attitude of "it could happen here". It is important that all staff are trained to identify harmful sexual behaviour, and are ready to address any concerns as soon as possible, rather than relying on children to report incidents.

2. Train staff.

Make sure your Designated Safeguarding Lead is trained and supported to take a lead in preventing harmful sexual behaviour and bullying and that key staff with responsibility for safeguarding, behaviour and pastoral care can work together to train other staff and lead on whole school approaches to prevention. Create time to train all staff in how to identify and respond to incidents and for open discussion. Make sure all staff are consistent in their response – for example, staff feel empowered to address sexism and sexual comments.

Training on responding to concerns should be part of the induction for new and staff and refresher training on child protection²⁵.

3. Teach consent.

All children and young people, regardless of their age, developmental needs, or disability, need support to understand the importance of respecting another person's body, choices, feelings and physical space, and that if someone says no to them, they must respect this at all times – even if they are in a romantic relationship with this person. This is an area that should be taught in the RSE curriculum so that pupils know about consent by the time they leave secondary school. Primary schools can teach about issues such as asking for and giving permission, consent in friendships and peer pressure to do something which makes them feel uncomfortable. Younger children can be taught consent in an age appropriate way by discussing giving permission in games or sharing toys or school equipment and consent in the context of friendships, and peer pressure²⁶.

4. Teach and model respectful relationships.

Relationships and sex education is now compulsory²⁷ and provides an opportunity to explore consent as well as challenging all forms of sexism, healthy and respectful relationships and not judging someone else for their experience or preference.

This can often link to the school's ethos and values and throughout the school's approach to behaviour and discipline.

5. Do not allow sexual or sexist name-calling or comments.

The most common form of bullying is verbal bullying, it is important that all staff feel confident to and are consistent in challenging sexual or sexist name-calling or comments. Work with children to explain what you mean by sexual or sexist name-calling, and be clear that it's not accepted in your school community. Ignoring this can lead to a culture where such behaviour is normalised.

Take time to work with children and young people to explain what this means, and the types of words or comments this could include (e.g. swear words, slang words for body parts, sexual innuendo, sexual advances or comments). Challenge all forms of casual sexism that put pressure on children to behave in a particular way, or to have a particular identity.

25 – NSPCC have training available here: <https://learning.nspcc.org.uk/training/schools-safeguarding-courses>

26 – See the PSHE Association guidance for more information: <https://pshe-association.org.uk/consent>

27 – Relationships Education, Relationships and Sex Education (RSE) and Health Education Statutory guidance for governing bodies, proprietors, head teachers, principals, senior leadership teams, teachers: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/relationships-education-relationships-and-sex-education-rse-and-health-education>

6. Discuss online harmful sexual behaviour.

It is important to consider and address both face to face and online harmful sexual behaviour. Examples of online harmful sexual behaviour could include sending and receiving of sexual messages and images or participating in live sexual activity online, sharing pornographic content, making sexist or sexual comments, making homophobic, biphobic or transphobic comments, sharing sexist or sexual memes and cartoons, spreading rumours about other people's sexuality or sexual behaviour, coercing or intimidating someone into having a relationship with you or participating in sexual activity, persistently contacting someone without their consent. Be clear what is acceptable within your school community and in the eyes of the law, and communicate what action you will take to address online harmful sexual behaviour if it comes to light that personal messages, images or videos have been shared without consent. See DfE's guidance on 'Sexual violence and sexual harassment between children in schools and colleges' for further information²⁸.

28 – DfE Guidance on 'Sexual violence and sexual harassment between children in schools and colleges': <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/sexual-violence-and-sexual-harassment-between-children-in-schools-and-colleges>

29 – For full details and to download a poster to help staff remember these points visit: <https://learning.nspcc.org.uk/research-resources/2019/let-children-know-you-re-listening#>

7. Be approachable.

Any child may feel hesitant to share concerns about sexual behaviour and bullying. Some children and young people are reluctant to seek help because they feel they don't have anyone to turn to for support. They may have sought help in the past and had a negative experience, which makes them unlikely to do so again. There may also be cultural barriers to sharing concerns – particularly in relation to harmful sexual behaviour. Children with complex needs and disabilities may find it even harder to communicate how they are feeling and what has happened. It is important that children feel able to talk to the staff member they feel most comfortable with. This requires all staff to be trained to support children with their concerns. Be conscious of your own bias and how this may impact your decision making. Do not assume anything and always listen to children.

NSPCC carried out research to find out how adults can better respond to a child who is disclosing abuse and found three key interpersonal skills that help a child feel they are being listened to and taken seriously:

- Show you care, help them open up - give your full attention to the child or young person and keep your body language open and encouraging. Be compassionate, be understanding and reassure them their feelings are important. Phrases such as 'you've shown such courage today' help.
- Take your time, slow down – respect pauses and don't interrupt the child – let them go at their own pace. Recognise and respond to their body language. And remember that it may take several conversations for them to share what's happened to them.
- Show you understand, reflect back – make it clear you're interested in what the child is telling you. Reflect back what they've said to check your understanding – and use their language to show it's their experience²⁹.

8. Be alert.

Be aware of relationships developing between the children and young people that you work with. Look out for any behaviour that could cause concern – for example, any power imbalance within relationships such as age difference and developmental difference. Be aware of 'learnt' sexualised behaviour that seems inappropriate (e.g. does not seem appropriate to the age or development of a child).

Be aware of inappropriate or problematic behaviour as well as abusive or violent behaviours (see the Hackett Continuum tool¹⁴). In addition, be aware that children may not disclose bullying directly but you might notice a change in their behaviour, attitude, attendance, school work or friendships. The Ofsted review³ found that professionals still rely too much on children telling someone about abuse instead of recognising other indicators, such as emotional or behavioural changes.

9. Communicate with parents and carers.

Make sure your anti-bullying policy includes sexual and sexist bullying and that you have explained what this includes, and what this means to parents and carers. Create time and space for parents and carers to ask their own questions and share their own concerns about their child's sexual development. Work with parents and carers if you have any concerns about a child's behaviour – do not allow a situation to escalate. Remember that parents and carers might be embarrassed to talk about these issues, there may be cultural sensitivities or they may be unaware of their child's own sexual development – be discreet and respectful but always put the safety of children first. See [NSPCC's guidance here](#) for further information.

"Why shouldn't disabled young people know about relationships and know that we can have all the same kind of relationships as anyone else?"

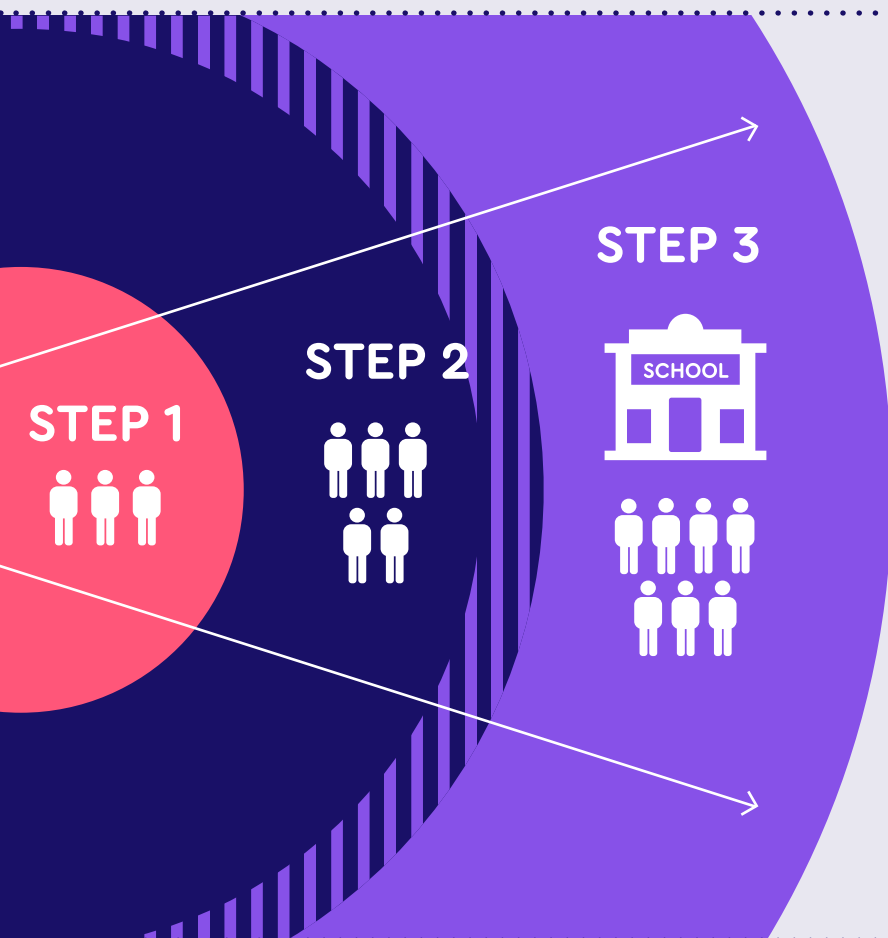
"People think disabled people are asexual as it is, so they don't talk to you about any relationships, let alone about being or acknowledging that you are LGBT."³⁰

30 – Quotes from an ABA consultation with disabled young people in 2016.

9. RESPONDING TO SEXUAL AND SEXIST BULLYING

Ineffective responses to bullying can put children and young people at greater risk of harm so it's vital that the approach to dealing with all bullying in the school/setting is carefully planned, consistent, effective and reflective, and the whole school community is clear on what the approach is.

9.1 ABA'S 3-STEP APPROACH TO RESPONDING TO ALL BULLYING INCIDENTS



STEP 1

Secure the safety of those involved

- Safeguarding
- Use reporting/recording systems
- Assure CYP (& parents)

STEP 2

Stopping the behaviour reoccurring

- Group roles
- Be clear the behaviour needs to stop
- Work with the group

STEP 3

Whole school learning

- Reflect back as a school.
What has this incident taught us?
- Who needs to be informed of the change? Parents?

Is this a safeguarding issue?

The first, and most important, thing to consider is 'Do I need to treat this as a safeguarding issue?'. If you have a concern about sexual and sexist bullying report it to your Designated Safeguarding Lead (DSL). They will decide how to respond to the concern. If you think that a child is at risk of serious harm, follow your safeguarding policies.

9.2 KEY PRINCIPLES FOR RESPONSE

1. Listen and take complaints seriously

Children and young people frequently report that they are not listened to or believed when they try to report bullying – this is particularly the case for children and young people with SEND. Take every complaint seriously, talk to the young person about action they would like you to take and respect this as far as it allows you to keep the young person safe. Be mindful not to ask leading questions as this could bias the response to a serious incident that may need further escalation.



2. Sanction as appropriate but take every opportunity to educate

The sanctions you take will depend on the nature of the incident, the age and development level of the child or young person involved, and whether this is a repeated incident. While it is important that children recognise that their behaviour has consequences, your response should also include support for all children involved: the target may be fearful of repercussions from the peer group and may need protection and help to rebuild their confidence.

The perpetrator will need support to change their behaviour and may also be at risk of harm. You should also consider what support they need and if a broader culture of sexual and sexist bullying and harm amongst the peer group needs to be addressed. It is also important to check for any bias that may be influencing your decision. Some minoritised ethnic groups are significantly more likely to be excluded for sexual misconduct, suggesting there is a worrying trend of systemic racism that can impact decision making.



3. Record and report

Record your action as soon as an incident has been disclosed to you using your school methods. Report all incidents to the designated safeguarding lead. Keep a record of incidents and actions. Bullying by its very nature is repetitive and so careful record keeping allows you to identify whether this is a one-off incident, or a pattern of behaviour. It also provides important evidence should you need to sanction a child at a later date or provide information in the event of a further incident or investigation.



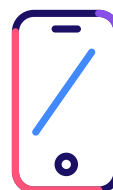
4. Confidentiality

These can be challenging issues for children and young people to share so it is very important that they trust you to take it seriously and handle it sensitively. Staff in school cannot promise confidentiality and must pass on concerns about a child's safety to the DSL and need to make a child aware that they have a responsibility to pass on the information to help keep them safe. The DSL can help you to explain to a young person what might happen next. Be aware of potential repercussions amongst the peer group. Only share on a need to know basis and consider carefully **how and when you share information with parents and carers.**



5. Do not forget incidents outside of the school environment

Bullying can occur outside of school as well as in school. Schools and colleges are increasingly aware of external factors which impact on children's safety. This is called contextual safeguarding – see the [Contextual Safeguarding Network](#) resources for further support.



All headteachers have powers to sanction behaviour outside of school to such an extent as is 'reasonable'. Sexual and sexist bullying can also happen online, on the journey to and from school and on school trips and it is vital this is included in your anti-bullying policy.

10. GOVERNMENT GUIDANCE

- **Keeping children safe in education: Statutory guidance for all schools and colleges in England. Includes advice for professionals in the education sector on how best to respond to harmful sexual behaviour.** <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/keeping-children-safe-in-education-2>
- **Tackling and preventing bullying guidance: Guidance for schools on preventing and responding to bullying.** <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/preventing-and-tackling-bullying>
- **Sexual violence and sexual harassment between children in schools and colleges: Advice for schools and colleges on how to prevent and respond to reports of sexual violence and harassment between children.** <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/sexual-violence-and-sexual-harassment-between-children-in-schools-and-colleges>
- **Child sexual exploitation: definition and guide for practitioners.** <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/child-sexual-exploitation-definition-and-guide-for-practitioners>
- **Relationships and sex education (RSE) and health education.** <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/relationships-education-relationships-and-sex-education-rse-and-health-education>



11. FURTHER RESOURCES

- **Contextual Safeguarding Network, Beyond Referrals: Addressing Harmful Sexual Behaviours in Schools** <https://www.contextualsafeguarding.org.uk/toolkits/beyond-referrals-toolkit-schools/>
- **Farrer & Co (updated 2022), Peer on peer abuse toolkit** https://www.farrer.co.uk/globalassets/brochures/safe_safeguarding-toolkit-2019-as-at-june-2022.pdf
- **Hackett Continuum tool – Responding to children who display sexualised behaviour (NSPCC)** <https://learning.nspcc.org.uk/media/2685/responding-to-children-who-display-sexualised-behaviour-guide.pdf>
- **Stop it Now! (2020) Preventing abuse among children and young people** <https://www.stopitnow.org.uk/>
- **NSPCC (2019), Harmful sexual behaviour framework** <https://learning.nspcc.org.uk/research-resources/2019/harmful-sexual-behaviour-framework>
- **Gov.UK. Upskirting: know your rights** <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/upskirting-know-your-rights>
- **Childnet, Online Sexual Harassment** <https://www.childnet.com/help-and-advice/online-sexual-harassment/%20>
- **Equaliteach, Outside the Box: A whole-school approach to promoting gender equality and tackling sexism and sexual harassment** <https://equaliteach.co.uk/education/classroom-resources/outside-the-box/>
- **Lucy Faithfull Foundation, Harmful sexual behaviour prevention toolkit** https://www.stopitnow.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/Stop_It_Now_harmful_sexual_behaviour_prevention_toolkit_Oct_2020.pdf
- **Carson and Aujila (2021), AIM Project Education Guidance 'Understanding and Managing Harmful Sexual Behaviour in Education Settings'** <https://aimproject.org.uk/>



12. WHERE TO GO FOR HELP

- **The Aim project** – The AIM Project (AIM) has been working in the field of children and adolescents with harmful sexual behaviours (HSB) for over 20 years and is one of the leading UK and international organisations in this area of work. <https://aimproject.org.uk/>
- **AGENDA** – promoting positive relationships in schools and communities Free online toolkits to help explore ideas around equality and diversity with children and young people. <https://agendaonline.co.uk/welcome/>
- **Anti-Bullying Alliance** – the ABA website has a wealth of information relating to all forms of bullying. Membership of the ABA is open to all schools and gives you access to new information and resources as they become available. The ABA can also offer bespoke training in relation to sexual and sexist bullying. <https://anti-bullyingalliance.org.uk/>
- **Kidscape** – Kidscape provide practical support to children and families impacted by all forms of bullying. This includes online and face to face workshops for children and families as well as a Parent Advice Line. <http://www.kidscape.org.uk>
- **NSPCC** – The NSPCC is a charity that works to end all forms of child cruelty across the UK. Visit their website for information and advice relating to child sexual abuse and sexual bullying. They also have a helpline for anyone that is concerned about a child. <https://www.nspcc.org.uk/>
- **Sex Education Forum** – The SEF website has a range of resources to support quality sex and relationships education. Membership of SEF provides current news, information, and advice. <https://www.sexeducationforum.org.uk/>
- **Stop it Now!** – Stop it Now! Is a child sexual abuse prevention campaign. Visit their website for range of materials to support your work in this area including leaflets and posters. They also have a helpline for anyone that is concerned about sexual abuse – including sexualised behaviour between children and young people. <https://www.stopitnow.org.uk/>
- **POSH Helpline for online behaviour** – A free helpline supporting professionals working with children and young people with any online safety issues they face. <https://swgfl.org.uk/services/professionals-online-safety-helpline/>

The Anti-Bullying Alliance provides free CPD online training courses which include a course covering sexual and sexist bullying.

Find out more at www.anti-bullyingalliance.org.uk/onlinetraining





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