

Talk About Harassment Before It Hits

by Phyllis D. Barkhurst

Recently much attention has been focused on the issue of sexual harassment in our schools. If you listen closely to school-aged youth, you will hear tales of behaviors that range from silly to dangerous.

In the past decade, I have spent time in the schools and have heard from all of its inhabitants how difficult it is to successfully intervene (let alone prevent) sexual harassment in the school setting. One successful technique used is to give information to youth with strategies and resources to use in cases of harassment.

Harassment can be defined as behaviors that are unwanted and repeated. A lot of harassing behaviors are most easily identified as “bullying” and many students in school are targeted by bullies. We define bullies as those youth that use their power (of size, strength, popularity, or by being part of a group) to intimidate, threaten, or humiliate another person or group.

It is no surprise that bullies who may target anyone for any reason contribute to the sexual (and racial) harassment that occurs in the school. They are only part of the problem. Other pieces of the picture are the levels of acceptability of harassing behaviors including name-calling, put downs, “joke” telling, and the high level of sexualizing the school environment.

The school district and the schools themselves have a responsibility to provide a safe setting for students, including a place safe from sexual harassment. They can’t do that without the cooperation of parents and students.

One way to deal with the issue is to get involved with a school’s efforts to make their school a safe place. Another way is to work with and talk with the youth in your life. Before talking to the youth you care about, it is important to realize one important fact: few children over the age of 10 will choose to talk to adults about any harassment they experience—and if they do, it is usually not their parents.

That doesn’t mean that they don’t see you as supportive; more that they are afraid of what you might do. One way to avoid this problem is by dealing with the issue ahead of time; talk about harassment in the abstract and practice skills for dealing with it.

First, we need to be clear about responsibility—youth should not be made to feel responsible, or to blame, if they are targeted for harassment. The purpose in talking about it is to give them information to make choices about when to handle it themselves and when to get other people, including adults, involved. It is also the time to let them know that if their physical safety is threatened, it is vital for them to talk to an adult.

A way to begin talking about the issue with youth is to ask them to describe acts of bullying at their school; ask them to talk about behaviors they have witnessed that have upset them or made them feel uncomfortable. You might then ask if they have ever been afraid at school, or

intimidated, offended or hassled. If they say they haven't, ask them what they would do if someone did target them for harassment.

Use specific behaviors in your questions like, "What would you do if a person hassled you every time you came near? Made rude remarks, called you names, pushed you, played 'jokes' on you?" Help the youth brainstorm options. What if the person targeting them for harassment was bigger, older, stronger, meaner, part of a group doing it, more popular?

Let them brainstorm possible responses and help them see their options. It is not surprising that the most common response to harassing and sexually harassing behaviors is to ignore it. As many students ask me, "What else is there to do?" Harassment in the schools is so common that most youth perceive it as the norm, as just something else you have to put up with in order to get through school.

What can they—and you—do?

- First, figure out what options are available in any given situation. 1. Ignore it. 2. Leave. 3. Confront by yourself, using assertiveness skills. 4. Confront with friend(s). 5. Confront with an adult(s). 6. Tell someone and ask for assistance; e.g., a peer, friends, a teacher, the school counselor, the vice-principal or principal, parents or other caring adults outside the school.

These are the basic options. Sometimes students need practice being assertive to use some of these options. We tell students that "doing it back" is not a good option as it usually escalates the situation—it doesn't resolve it. Again, if youth are afraid for their physical safety, it is vital that they know an adult to turn to.

- Second, go over different scenarios and talk about which options they would choose given the scenario. Please remember that most youth would put up with anything rather than be embarrassed. So if the option you like is perceived by youth to be more embarrassing than not doing anything, they won't do it.
- The purpose of scenario strategies is to assist youth in coming up with ways they can handle a situation when it arises—not for you to tell them how you want them to handle a situation. There are good reasons why most youth do not tell their parents or other caring adults when they are targeted for harassment. They believe that you will go and do something to make it worse. If at all possible (but not when someone's physical safety is involved) the strategy that the youth chooses is the one to go with. This may be a difficult thing. The more willing you are in your scenario strategizing to support their choices, the more likely it is that they will come to you when none of their strategies are working.
- Let children and youth know that they have the right to be safe and to feel safe at school—and anywhere. Please let them know that if anyone is interfering with their right to be and feel safe, something should happen to fix it.

Finally, brainstorm with youth about possible support people and resources available to them. Make sure the list includes more names than yours. This resource list can be used if harassment is happening; it should be specific and practical and include people to turn to in a crisis at school and in general.

When youth have information and have people and places to go to for support, it breaks the isolation and makes it much more likely that a successful intervention occurs.

Coordinator of the Attorney Oregon General's Sexual Assault Task Force, Phyllis D. Barkhurst is the executive director of Sexual Assault Support Services, a position she has held for the past six years. She has more than 21 years of experience in the field and spends her spare time on issues of public policy at the state and national level.

Original publication date: 05/26/1997 – The Register Guard, Eugene, Oregon