

HOW TO MANAGE A DISCLOSURE OF SEXUAL HARASSMENT OR ASSAULT

Managing a disclosure from a young person sensitively will support them and their healing process. The most important thing is centring the young person in your response.

You may find it useful to review the [government advice](#) which sets out what sexual violence and sexual harassment is, how to reduce the risk of it occurring and what to do when it is reported.

Remember that supporting a young person through a disclosure can be emotionally challenging. It's important that you take time to look after yourself and seek support if you need it.

DEFINITIONS:

Sexual harassment is unwanted conduct of a sexual nature online and/or offline. It can include: sexual comments, using sexualised names, displaying photos of a sexual nature, sharing nudes, unwanted sexual messages on social media and more.

Sexual assault is any act of unwanted sexual contact including rape (having sex without consent), someone sexually touching you without consent, and sexual exploitation.

PREVENTING HARMFUL BEHAVIOUR

A zero-tolerance approach to harassment must go hand in hand with an environment where young people feel safe and able to come forward if something does happen. The following whole school approaches can help to prevent behaviour that leads to harassment, as well as to ensure young people feel supported if they need to report something.

- Inclusive RSE that clearly teaches about how to recognise and report sexual abuse, harassment and violence
- Online safety lessons which address grooming and harassment
- Specialist staff/points of contact that young people are aware of
- Clear processes for dealing with incidents that young people understand
- Challenging harmful behaviour every time e.g. lifting skirts, unwanted touch
- Tackling harmful attitudes every time e.g. not accepting 'banter' / 'lad culture' as excuses
- Supporting families to reinforce the school's messages about harmful & illegal behaviours
- Display inclusive posters/social media that raise awareness of what to look out for, and how to look out for each other.

DURING A DISCLOSURE

If a young person approaches you to make a disclosure, you should bear in mind your boundaries and theirs. Don't make promises you can't keep about maintaining confidentiality and aim to offer practical support in line with your school policy.

The following approaches are useful to bear in mind when receiving a disclosure:

- Acknowledge the person has shown courage talking to you
- Give them time and your full attention: eye contact, open body language
- Recognise and acknowledge they have coped in whatever ways were available to them
- Display empathy and understanding: be clear that a sexual assault is never the fault of the person who is assaulted, and let them know they are not alone
- Convey belief: never ask why they didn't stop it.

AFTER A DISCLOSURE

Continue to centre the young person after a disclosure. Ensure they understand what steps will be taken, and inform them about who you will tell. Know that there may be tension between wanting to go at the young person's pace and following safeguarding protocol.

- Do not promise to keep the incident confidential. It will be up to the designated safeguarding lead to balance a young person's wish for confidentiality with their duty to protect them and other children
- Only share information with staff members who need to know e.g. Designated Safeguarding Lead
- Be clear about your role and be realistic about how much support you can offer
- Provide information if you can, but don't overwhelm the person
- Respect their decisions: be understanding that they may not want further support from you, but ask if you can check in again in a few weeks if so.

Someone who has been raped or sexually assaulted might feel a whole range of different emotions including but not limited to: fear, guilt, anger, low self-esteem and depression. It's therefore essential to signpost them to specialist organisations like Brook or Childline to ensure they can access support for what they're going through.

The Department of Education has launched a helpline via NSPCC for those looking for support or who want to report an incident of sexual harassment and abuse in education settings. It can be reached on 0800 136 663 from Monday to Friday 8am – 10pm, or 9am – 6pm at weekends.

For detailed training on how to teach about consent and how to manage a disclosure, head to brook.org.uk/training.