

Making spaces for young people free from sexual harassment

Top tips

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Introduction

Young people should be able to access spaces where they feel safe, relaxed, respected, and free from sexual harassment. The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child specifies that young people have the right to be free from discrimination (Article 2) and free from harm (Article 19), and to play, rest and relax (Article 31).

This resource offers practical advice to support making spaces for young people safe and free from sexual harassment. This is not an exhaustive guide and should be used alongside the other programmes and initiatives addressing gender-based violence (GBV) in Scotland.

The intention of this resource is to help prevent and interrupt behaviours and attitudes that are sexist and misogynistic. Some of these behaviours would not be defined as sexual assault or be responded to as sexual assault but nonetheless cause distress and are unacceptable.

Defining sexual harassment

In this resource we define sexual harassment as:

Unwanted sexual behaviour that would make a person feel uncomfortable, humiliated, distressed or intimidated.

It can be a single incident or a repeated behaviour, and can include a suggestive comment, gestures, banter, teasing, cat calling or an offensive joke.

Sexual harassment can take place in person and online.

Who does sexual harassment happen to?

Sexual harassment can happen to anybody however some people are disproportionately affected. Evidence shows that women, LGBT+ and those with disabilities are more likely to be victims of sexual harassment [1]. Minority ethnic women face higher rates of gender-based violence, and their experiences of sexual harassment are often more severe and include racial harassment [2].

Inequalities can impact on people's experiences of sexual harassment. It is essential to apply an equalities lens when addressing this issue.

Intersectionality recognises that people have multiple identities that overlap. Sexism and sexual harassment manifest in different ways for different groups. Reporting or seeking support can be more challenging, and individuals may lack confidence that it will make a difference.

[1] Patterns of Sexual Harassment: An Intersectional Approach, [view here](#)

[2] Out of the Shadows: An Analysis of Sexual Harassment Charges Filed by Working Women, [view here](#)
Racialized Sexual Harassment in the Lives of African American Women, [view here](#)
Sexual harassment: Who suffers and how, [view here](#)

All resources were last accessed on 25/02/2025.

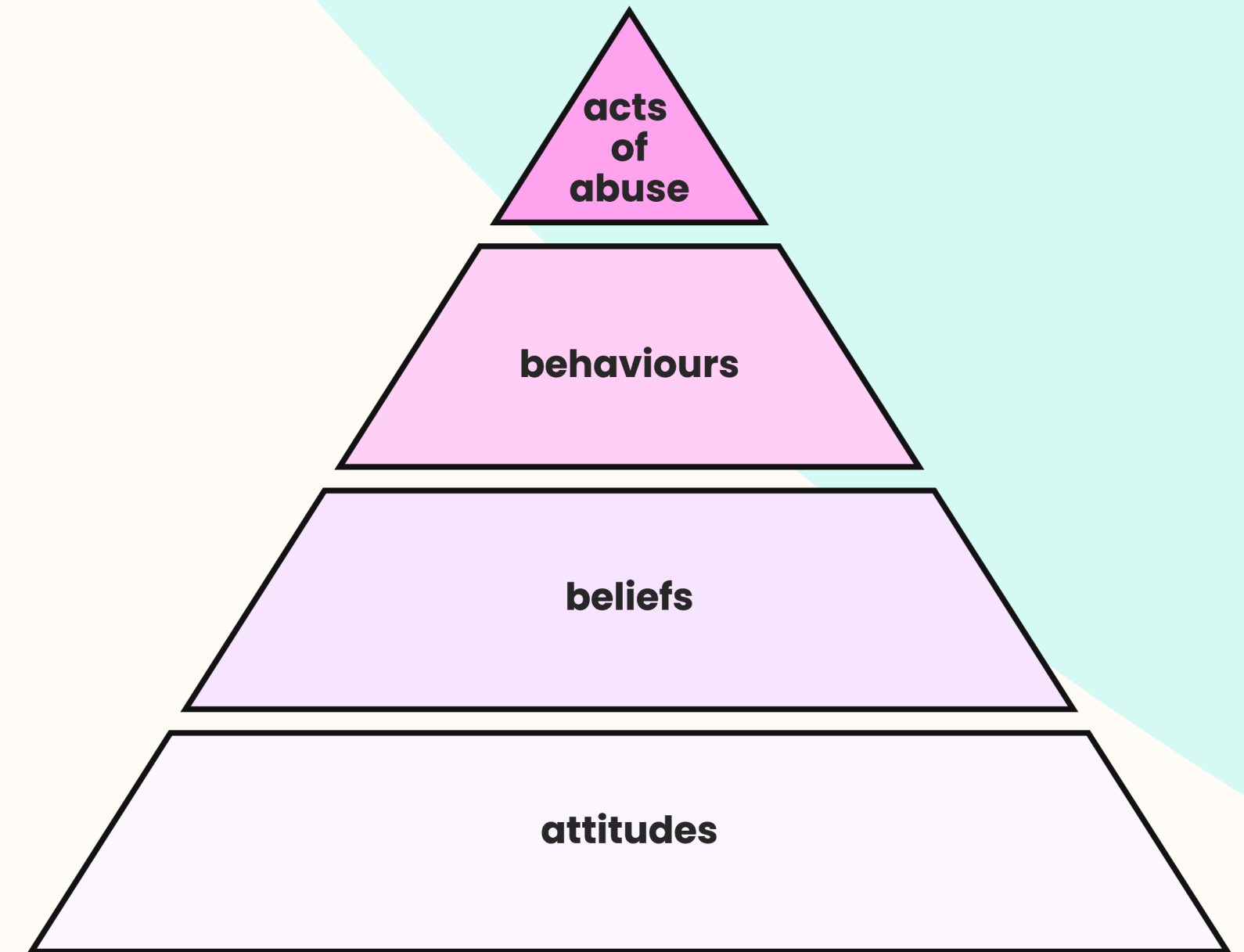
Prevention and early intervention

Prevention and early interventions seek to address behaviours that frequently go unchallenged but cause significant distress to those affected.

We need to challenge the day-to-day behaviours that are 'normalised' and brushed off as jokes or banter but have sexist and sexual undertones.

The Mentors in Violence (MVP) programme uses a helpful model, 'The Violence Triangle,' which recognises people often wait until behaviours escalate until intervening. This can be due to lack of confidence, perceiving behaviours as harmless, or deciding to take a 'watch and wait' approach.

It is crucial to intervene at the bottom of the triangle particularly around attitudes, jokes, banter, comments, or sexual gestures. The behaviours can be precursors to other forms of gender-based violence and create a culture which 'normalises' GBV allowing it to escalate.



'The violence triangle'

How to identify sexual harassment

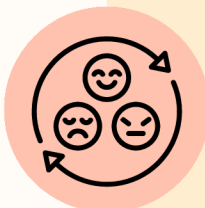
Sexual harassment takes many forms.



Physical – unwanted touching or coming too close, brushing against someone, physically blocking someone's way, gestures, looks that are suggestive.



Verbal – sexual comments, using words like *slut* and *whore*, jokes with sexual or sexist undertones, sexually propositioning, talking about or asking questions about sex or sexual activity in a way that makes someone feel uncomfortable, spreading rumours, derogatory comments related to someone's gender or sexuality.



Emotional – excessive and unwelcome flirting, making threats of a sexual nature or joking about sexual assault. An environment where people are rated and discussed in terms of their physical appearance perceived attractiveness.

Sexual harassment can happen in person or **online**.

Some of the more serious forms of sexual harassment happening online can be through direct messages (DMs), derogatory or sexual comments, unasked for images, or comments on social media.

Even if sexual harassment may not be directly happening in your setting, it may be having an impact on individuals' emotional and social wellbeing and how safe they feel.



Top tips

How to identify sexual harassment

Having a clear understanding of what sexual harassment is will make it easier to identify when it is happening. Include practical examples that practitioners and young people understand and relate to.

Consider the age of the young people, the setting you are in and what forms of sexual harassment may take place.

Pay close attention to non-verbal cues and body language of individuals in your setting. Sexual harassment does not have to be verbal it can be looks or gestures.

Be aware of changes in group dynamics and levels of engagement and the atmosphere within the group.

There is a fine line between a compliment and harassment. Compliments are typically given when trying to establish a connection and a feeling of trust. Sexual harassment is where there is a sexual undertone and makes the person feel uncomfortable.

Comments being made about sexual activity and spreading rumours are forms of sexual harassment.

Young people are navigating what it means to build healthy relationships. It is important to recognise the factors that can shape and influence young people's attitudes and behaviours.

Learning how to express feelings

Developmental and cognitive ability

Peer pressure

Trying to impress each other

Lack of appropriate role models

Mirroring behaviours and gender expectations seen online or on TV (for example programmes like Love Island)

How to address sexual harassment in your setting

Challenging inappropriate behaviour is a crucial part of the process of educating young people about the consequences and implications of their behaviour.

Young people may not be aware that behaviours they are displaying or experiencing are sexual harassment. Consider this when challenging behaviours or intervening.

The response to sexual harassment should consider the person it is happening to, the person carrying out the behaviour and the impact on the wider group.

As a practitioner you know the young people you work with best, and this should always be central to how you approach situations.

Top tips

Make a safer space agreement. Encourage ownership by developing this with the young people so everyone is aware of expectations.

Be careful not to minimise people's experiences. Validate them and do not dismiss sexual harassment behaviours as 'normal' peer dynamics and interactions.

Create opportunities to discuss with young people what attitudes, words and behaviours are sexist or misogynistic and why.

Discuss different types of harassing behaviour (including teasing, banter and name calling) and in what ways it is harmful and how this can make others feel.

If you observe sexual harassment taking place:

- Consider checking in with individuals involved privately.
- Consider the space you have. Is it confidential?
- Is this something that should be addressed with the whole group?



Top tips

Practitioner roles and responsibilities

Be mindful of your own views, opinions and experiences. This can shape how you identify, address and therefore challenge. Ensure you are not dismissing it as 'just banter' or 'normal' behaviour.

Your interactions with other practitioners, the way you challenge or call out sexual harassment or the way you talk about gender in a same sex group, how you act and what you say influences young people's attitudes and behaviours.

Approach new language with curiosity to understand the context of the language that young people are using. Use discussions as a learning opportunity for you and the young people.

Addressing sexual harassment is everyone's responsibility.

Talk to young people about sexual harassment as part of sessions and activities. As practitioners we can be proactive instead of reactive and use the relationships, we have with young people to create positive learning opportunities.

- Check the resource section



Actively listen to young people and stay up to date with popular culture and trends as much as possible so you recognise young people's understanding of the meaning and context of the words they use.

Avoid splitting groups by gender and giving roles or tasks that conform to gender stereotypes among staff and young people.

Look at examples of sexual harassment in the news, on soap operas, in films and media, as discussion points. Look at the potential consequences for the victim and the perpetrator.

Support

Young people who are **experiencing sexual harassment** will need support. They may:

- feel scared
- feel embarrassed
- feel guilt and shame
- minimise their experience
- not want to tell anyone
- worry they won't be believed
- worry the behaviours might not be taken seriously
- worry telling someone may not make any difference
- worry it might make things worse
- fear the reaction of others



It is important when working with those **displaying sexual harassment behaviours** to also support them, to understand the impact of their behaviour and how to make changes.

Supporting a young person who has experienced sexual harassment

Provide them with a safe space to share their experience free from judgement or blame.

Let them lead on what actions would be helpful to address the sexual harassment.

If appropriate, offer the young person additional support. This can include one to one support, signposting to other services, or support in club / group.

If you are concerned about the wellbeing or risk for a young person, follow your organisational safeguarding policy and procedures.

Support services

STAR

The STAR project supports young people of all genders, aged 12–21, who have experienced sexual harm in-person or online. Say 'Hi' via text: 07908 663512 or email: star@ercc.scot



Rape Crisis Scotland

Open 5pm – midnight

Call: 08088 01 03 02

Text: 07537 410 027

Email: support@rapecrisisscotland.org.uk

Webchat: www.rapecrisisscotland.org.uk



Childline

0800 1111 or chat online with a 1-2-1 counsellor. You can talk to them about anything. No problem is too big or too small.



Scottish Women's Aid

Helpline: 0800 027 1234

Contact us



Lucy Faithfull Foundation

support services to prevent child sexual abuse and exploitation by working with people who pose a risk and diverting them from causing harm.



Shorespace

A safe place for teenagers worried about sexual behaviour.



Resources

- Mentors in Violence Prevention A peer mentoring programme that uses a bystander approach.
- Equally Safe at School A whole school approach for preventing gender-based violence.
- Imagine A Man Toolkit on promoting positive masculinity.
- 'It's not okay' Toolkit for working with boys and young men to prevent sexism and sexual harassment.
- RSHP (relationships, sexual health & parenthood education) Please find sexual harassment campaigns and posters on the Healthy Respect website Sexual harassment – Healthy Respect.

Policy and guidance

- Key messages on healthy relationships and consent (Scotland)
- Working with children and young people displaying harmful sexual behaviour. Evidence Based Guidance For Professionals Working With Children And Young People
- Preventing and Responding to Gender Based Violence: A Whole School Framework (www.gov.scot)
- Tackling Sexual Harassment in Educational Establishments (eis.org.uk)
- Get it Right for Girls 2016 WEB.pdf (eis.org.uk) Challenging misogynistic attitudes among children and young people.
- United Nations Convention on the rights of the Child are now enshrined in legislation through the UNCRC (Incorporation) (Scotland) Act 2024.

Glossary

Sexual harassment – Any unwanted sexual behaviour that would make a person feel uncomfortable, humiliated, distressed, or intimidated.

Sexual assault – Any unwanted sexual touching or sexual activity that would constitute a sexual offence in law.

Sexism – Prejudice or discrimination based on someone's sex or gender. Sexism can affect anyone but primarily affects women and girls.

Misogyny – A hatred or mistrust of or prejudice against women. Often driven by attitudes of viewing women as inferior or sexually objectifying them.

Banter – For some, it's fun teasing. For others, it feels like being humiliated, especially by those with more power.

Sexual gestures – are movements that are sexually suggestive such as sexual thrusting, obscene hand motions, leering, blowing kisses and whistling.

Social norms – are informal rules about apparent acceptable or appropriate behaviours which can often reinforce expectations that men and women will occupy distinct and unequal social roles.

'Normalised' – Harmful behaviours that go unnoticed because they happen a lot and are expected and to an extent accepted by the general group.

Practitioners – staff and volunteers

Thank you!

Thanks to all contributions from young people, practitioners, LGBT Youth Scotland, and West Lothian CLD.

Thanks to the agencies involved in writing this resource:

Healthy Respect NHS Lothian



The Youth Agency



Fast Forward



Lothian Association of Youth Clubs (LAYC)



We hope you find this resource useful, and that it has a positive impact on the young people you support.