

What pupils told us - findings from pupil focus group activities and online questionnaire

Pupils' understanding of peer-on-peer sexual harassment

Most boys and girls have a clear understanding of what sexual harassment is. The majority refer to consent in determining whether behaviours are appropriate or not. Most pupils, especially girls, understand that peer-on-peer sexual harassment usually results in young people feeling uncomfortable, anxious or unhappy. Generally, girls have comprehensive knowledge of the different types of peer-on-peer sexual harassment and the direct negative impact on victims. Boys also understand what constitutes sexual harassment, but they have a narrower understanding of its effect. Girls' definitions are broad and include feeling objectified, judged and constrained, as well as being treated with a lack of respect. Boys' views are less nuanced than the girls' and tend to focus on the most obvious aspects such as use of language and behaviours that constitute sexual harassment.

Generally, there is a difference between what older and younger pupils say. Older pupils generally base their responses on what they know and have experienced over time whereas younger pupils (those in Year 8) write and speak more generally about what they think might be the case. Also, the older pupils are, the more clearly they express incidents in terms of sexual harassment, whilst for many of the younger pupils (Year 8 and the majority of Year 9) it is more about bullying in general. This is to be expected due to age, experience and degree of maturity. However, it does emphasise how quickly young people's experience of sexual harassment changes with puberty.

In response to the pupil questionnaire, 46% of all pupils say they have personal experience of some form of sexual harassment while 76% report seeing others experience this. Pupils who did not select a sex or identify as male or female report a higher rate of peer-on-peer harassment with 64% having personal experience of it. Many female pupils (86%) report personal experience of peer-on-peer harassment or seeing others experience this. This compares with a lower proportion of male pupils (74%). Twice as many girls (61%) report having

personal experience of peer-on-peer sexual harassment than boys (29%).

Pupils' experience of peer-on-peer sexual harassment increases as they get older. A greater proportion of older pupils report seeing others experience peer-on-peer sexual harassment (see Figure 1). Nearly all Year 13 pupils (95%) report seeing this harassment, with 72% reporting seeing it in school, 75% outside of school and 75% online. Only 20% of Year 13 pupils report not seeing and experiencing peer-on-peer sexual harassment online.

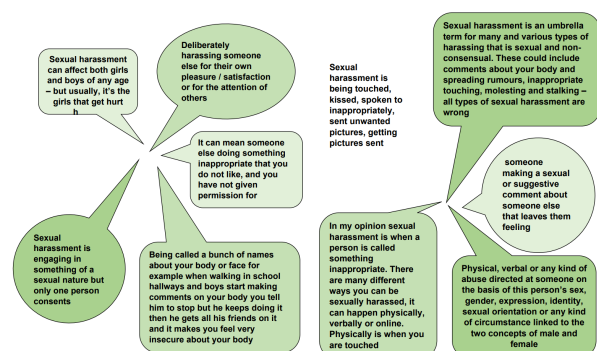
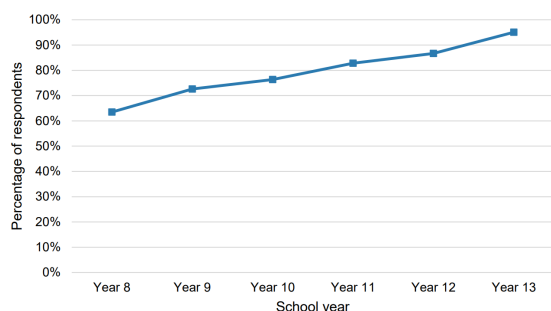


Figure 1: Pupils who reported having seen others experience peer-on-peer sexual harassment, by school year



Peer-on-peer sexual harassment in school

Across every school, the most common occurrences of peer-on-peer sexual harassment in school are catcalling, making homophobic comments mainly towards boys, and comments about the body. Most pupils across the age range

say that hurtful comments by peers about appearance is one of the most common forms of sexual harassment they experience. This type of sexual harassment happens both online and face to face. The sexualisation or objectification of the body – both for boys and girls – and issues around fitness trigger cat calling, name calling and public body shaming including ‘fat shaming’.

In nearly all cases, girls’ responses focus on what they are experiencing themselves with limited comments or descriptions on what sexual harassment may be for the boys. Many boys believe that calling people names or sending rude messages around is just for fun and happens because of peer pressure – **“everyone likes a laugh and enjoys seeing other people feel uncomfortable”**.

Nearly all pupils comment to some degree on homophobic name calling in corridors in their schools, which often pupils and a few teachers identify as **“just banter”**. Boys, in particular say that boys are the main perpetrators of homophobic, biphobic and transphobic verbal abuse. Many LGBTQ+ pupils note that homophobic bullying is happening all the time and that this is the most common type of harassment in school – **“every time we walk down the corridor, someone will call names at us”**.

Many pupils speak about peer pressure and expectations about the way they should look and the consequent body shaming and bullying if their bodies do not conform with a certain image of beauty or fitness. Generally, boys and girls say that anyone can be subject to body shaming at any time and that it has a negative effect on self-esteem and their sense of worthiness.

Girls identify substantial anxieties around being too skinny or too fat and how peer pressure and comments from other girls about body image make them feel inadequate and unattractive. Name calling such as **“cow”** or **“fatty”** and hurtful remarks such as **“starve yourself”** or **“hide your stretch marks”** can result in some girls dieting to lose weight so that they look like their slimmer peers. A few describe this as aiming to look **“prettier and sexier”**. Girls also speak about pressure from television, celebrities and social media and how seeing **“the perfect female body”** may lead to girls developing eating disorders.

Pupils understand that finding other pupils attractive is healthy and natural. However, many boys feel that girls are pressured to look good for them. They often blame other girls for this and describe the ‘cat-calling’ culture amongst girls

that exists in school and online. A majority of the boys are of the view that all the girls want a boyfriend and therefore they are prepared to alter the way they look to achieve this. Many boys are of the view that when girls show any parts of their body, by wearing short or revealing clothes, they are sending out a message to boys that they are seeking sexual attention. A minority state that girls want the boys to cat-call them or they want to be touched by boys. As they get older, there is an increasing prevalence of boys judging and ranking girls' bodies and making comparisons between them based on the body shape, size or perceived level of sexiness. Also, boys admit to staring at girls but do not perceive this as a form of sexual harassment but rather normal **"boy behaviour"**.

LGBTQ+ pupils have substantial personal experiences of verbal homophobic harassment because of their body shape or appearance. For example, lesbian girls talk of being called a **"fat lezzie"**, even though they are not overweight. The actions or appearance of homosexual boys are often called out by peers with comments such as **"that's' so gay"** or **"your hair is so gay"**. Often, heterosexual boys will tease homosexual peers saying they **"fancy"** them and want to **"bang them"**.

A few girls say that low self-esteem about their looks, or issues with teenage acne or spots can lead them to use make-up from a young age. They talk of how they **"hate the way they look"** and how upset they are because their schools do not allow make-up. This may lead to significant emotional problems for them as well as make them open to peer sexual harassment. For example, a minority of boys say that girls who wear make-up are **"picked on"** and called names like **"slag"**.

School uniform and the sexualisation of girls

Boys and girls are highly vocal about issues around clothing choices, particularly the school skirt and the sexualisation of girls in general. Most girls and the majority of boys discuss issues around the length and fit of the school skirt. They say that girls are bullied by other girls if their skirts are too long and sexually harassed by boys if they are too short.

"If your skirt is too short you are a slag or a slut. If your skirt is too long you are boring or frigid. If you are wearing a short

skirt, boys will use that as a way of consent - you are asking for it.”

The majority of girls have some experience of having their skirt lifted up during their time in school, blaming boys for **“always pulling up girls’ skirts or looking up their skirts when they sit down”**. A few girls say that boys will **“touch their bums”** if they wear tight skirts to see if they are wearing any underwear and that girls tend to wear shorts under their skirts **“to stop boys from looking”**. Other girls say they wear tight skirts to make it more difficult for the boys to lift them up. Many girls overall express annoyance that teachers tell them off for wearing tight skirts but don’t tell the boys to stop groping and catcalling. Younger pupils in Year 8 and a few in Year 9 say that younger boys always try to lift girls’ skirts up as they run by but dismiss this as boys being **“just a nuisance”** and **“there’s nothing sexual involved”**. Younger boys comment that they think lifting up girls’ skirts is mainly **“for fun”**. Boys talk of times where they have lifted skirts because they have been dared by their peers to do it and earn social approval for doing so.

Many girls report substantial peer pressure to roll up their school skirt to make it shorter and then it being sexualised by both boys and girls. They describe how they feel anxious if they follow the trend but also discuss anxieties they will experience if they don’t. Girls report that the shortness of the skirt attracts comments, ‘banter’ and attention from boys, but a few boys feel that the shorter the girl’s skirt, the more they are allowed to comment or act as they think that this is what girls want. Very few boys show empathy towards girls. However, in the sixth form, boys discuss the issue of objectifying girls and how society blames women for their choice of clothing. They agree that this is wrong and needs addressing, with one pupil saying,

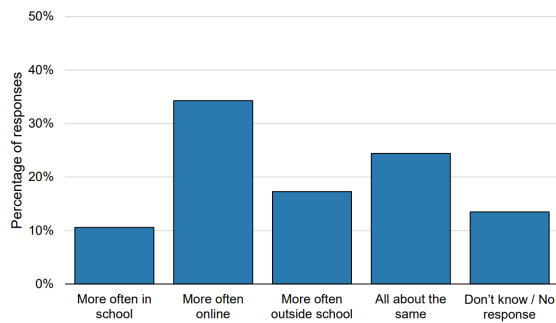
“Men believe if girls are wearing revealing clothing, they deserve what happens to them. We should teach men to control themselves.”

Online sexual harassment

Pupils say that peer-on-peer harassment happens more online than in school (Figure 2). They speak comprehensively about mobile phones, social media and

gaming sites and the issues associated with them.

Figure 2: Responses to question “Where does pupil sexual harassment happen most often?”



These are the main themes associated with online activity as identified by the pupils:

- peer pressure to have a high number of online ‘friends’, ‘likes’ and comments on profiles
- online bullying, posting hurtful comments about peers, in particular comments about appearance
- sexual objectification of photos of girls by boys
- asking for, sending and sharing nude or semi-nude photographs
- catfishing, unsolicited friend requests or demands for nude photos by strangers or those with a fake social media profile
- negative attitudes towards female characters and/or when girls play digital games

Despite the fact that young people value owning a mobile phone, they understand how the problems associated with them can impact negatively on mental health. From their comments it is clear that young people feel there is a pressure to post popular comments regularly and to be ‘liked’ on social media.

“You are made to feel like you have to post to please people and get likes. There is pressure to post 24/7.”

Boys and girls alike talk widely about online peer pressure to be popular on social

media and needing to gain 'likes' and 'followers'.

Hurtful comments by peers are more commonly made online than in school. Girls, in particular, receive negative comments from other girls because they have shared a photo of themselves on their profile page on social media. They feel pressure to conform with certain expectations about shape and looks as they perceive that attractive young girls regularly post pictures of themselves, expecting others to make complimentary comments about them and the way they look. Boys admit to sending and receiving vulgar comments and texts from other boys, often related to body shaming or making fun of other boys' posts. They perceive this to be **"normal"**.

In a few instances, there is more targeted bullying between girls where they spread rumours about other girls' sexual activity, dare other girls to have sex or send photos of themselves in their underwear. Girls then share these photos around and call them names such as **"slag"** and **"slut"**.

"There is a lot of bullying on social media. People pick on other people because of looks. This could mentally impact people, especially if someone calls you a 'whore' or a 'slag'".

A minority of girls are concerned about the effects of online bullying, saying that this can lead to anxiety, depression and body dysmorphia, which could also lead to eating disorders and self-hatred.

In terms of sexting, sexualisation of peers and sending nude photographs, nearly all pupils from Year 10 onwards identify common issues. However, many do not realise that this is a criminal act and the impact of a criminal record on their future career or aspirations following prosecution. By sending or receiving a naked picture, a child may commit criminal offences relating to the creation and distribution of indecent images of children under section 1 of the Protection of Children Act 1978 (which includes images of those aged 16 and 17 by virtue of section 45 of the Sexual Offences Act 2003), section 160 of the Criminal Justice Act 1988 and section 62 of the Coroners and Justice Act 2009. Sexting by children could also lead to causing or inciting a child to engage in sexual activity under section 8 (child under 13) or section 10 (child) of the Sexual Offences Act 2003.

It is evident that pressure to share nude photographs, the loss of control over

images once they have been shared and young people being made to feel guilty when they don't send photos is commonplace among older pupils. Most girls say that boys asking for nude photographs of them is a regular occurrence and speak about the constant pressure from boys to send photographs. For example, one girl noted, **“It is a daily occurrence - it is very common. Boys ask for nudes or keep spamming your phone.”**

Most girls are aware of the dangers of sending photos via text and the threat of anyone sharing them further. All girls who talk of their experience of sexting say that it is only boys who ask for nude photos but a few of them also blame girls for complying **“just to please boys and to be more liked or loved”**.

More than half of the boys speak about being personally involved in sexual harassment of peers, for example harassing girls with nude images of strangers or other inappropriate photos or videos. Boys also talk about the pressure by other boys to send nudes or sexual content. Many boys say sharing nude photographs of girls amongst their friends and boasting about the number of nude photographs they have in their possession is commonplace. Although they admit to doing it, the majority of boys acknowledge that this is wrong and disrespectful.

A minority of older boys say that pornography is shared around as **“boys want to impress their friends”**. Normally the content is not of someone they know. When asked if they think this is acceptable - a minority comment that it is **“ok as long as you don't know the girls in the pictures”**. Overall, only a few LGBTQ+ pupils say they have personal experience of sexting, stating that members of the LGBTQ+ community have more respect for each other than other young people. One shared...

“We are more private, and we look after each other because no-one else does. We talk about it in the LGBTQ+ club. Nothing really happens after, but we get to talk about it.”

Many boys identify grooming by older people as a significant online risk. This includes unknown people contacting boys and sending 'friend requests', which they say is a regular occurrence. A minority of boys note that random people often come online and that it is **“too easy to communicate with people you don't know”** via online games. Nearly all are aware that they shouldn't talk to

people they don't know online or accept friend requests from strangers.

Pupils speak knowledgeably about catfishing where pupils create fake accounts to send unsolicited images and harass other pupils. They state that catfishing is a common problem and usually involves older men targeting young girls. A substantial number of girls say they have been targeted, usually by receiving inappropriate pictures and texts from strangers and not from peers through a popular digital social media app.

The majority of young people know how to identify fake accounts and feel able to block them. Most young people understand the term 'grooming' and say they would report it if it happened to them. Older girls talk of receiving messages from unknown men and boys on a social media site that is popular for sharing photographs, asking them to send images of themselves, **"begging us for nudes"**.

Most boys say that they have played games that they are legally too young to play. Older boys say they play these games regularly and enjoy them whilst the younger boys say they are pressurised into swearing and **"talking dirty"** when playing these games. Boys in the sixth form have a reasonable awareness of the level of toxicity of language used in gaming fora, including the normalised use of terms such as **"slut"** and **"whore"** when referring to women. Girls who speak about this mostly identify a problem around inappropriate games that often shame women. Girls speak about the sexist portrayal of women in games that are popular with boys, where girls are treated in a derogatory and sexualised manner. A few boys adopt this tone in the way they speak to girls during online games,

"Boys treat women differently because games portray women as being inferior to men."

Why pupils don't tell their teachers about sexual harassment and where they go to for support

In discussions with young people in the focus groups and through the online questionnaire, it is evident that pupils do not tell their teachers everything about

their experiences of peer-on-peer sexual harassment. In many cases, this is because they think this behaviour is normal and not worthy of a complaint. Also, they do not wish to draw attention to themselves. In addition, pupils think that sexual harassment complaints are often ignored or not dealt with well enough by schools. They feel that, too often, verbal sexual harassment is classed as **“banter”** by peers and adults alike. Many girls say that they have had negative experiences when making a verbal complaint about boys’ attitudes or behaviour to teachers. They give examples of teachers’ dismissive responses to their complaints, such as, **“take no notice of it”**, or **“they’re just being silly”** and, most often, **“boys will be boys”**.

A minority of pupils note that sexual harassment is sometimes addressed in assemblies or lessons, and that they receive some guidance about it. However, pupils also note that complaints are often ignored by school staff or are not dealt with properly. They say that there is a lack of understanding about what sexual harassment is and how pupils should make complaints. It is clear from pupils’ responses that many of them feel that schools underestimate the prevalence of peer-on-peer sexual harassment in the lives of young people. Pupils say that teachers do not understand the extent of the problem, in particular what is happening online, **“It is happening more than you think”**.

Most LGBTQ+ pupils feel that only a few teachers would do anything about it if they heard pupils using homophobic slurs against them. A high percentage of non-binary pupils feel that their complaints are ignored or are not dealt with. Those that did not wish to disclose their sex or preferred gender generally feel that issues of sexual harassment are ignored or not dealt with well, but also acknowledge that there is some guidance for them on what to do about it.

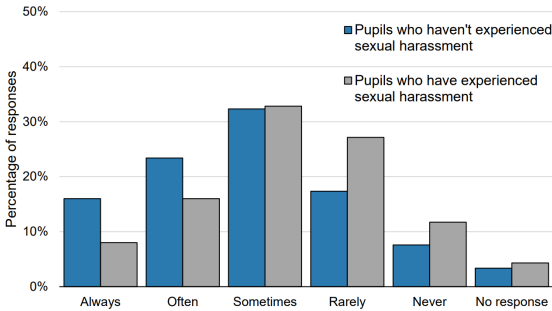
Overall, many LGBTQ+ pupils state in group discussions and in the questionnaire that they are angry or upset that their teachers do not respond when they hear homophobic names being used. Many LGBTQ+ pupils feel that their schools don’t understand the extent of the homophobic, biphobic or transphobic bullying and want teachers to be educated on how to spot it and deal with it.

According to pupils, there are only a few secondary schools who always deal well with incidences of negative or sexist attitudes when they are made aware of them.

Pupils who have experienced harassment are less likely to believe complaints

are taken seriously (Figure 3). Those who did not select a sex or identify as male or female are most likely to believe complaints are never or rarely taken seriously. Overall, girls are less likely to believe complaints are taken seriously than boys. This may be because they experience peer-on-peer sexual harassment more often.

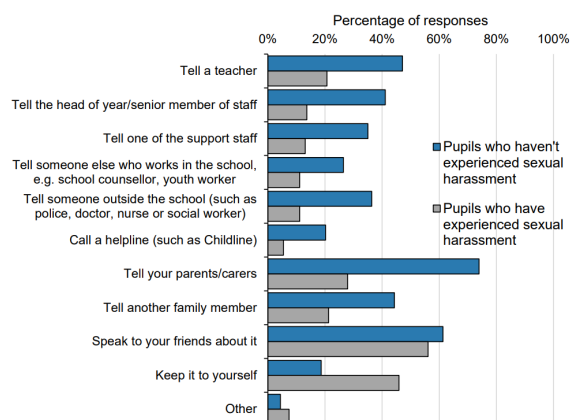
Figure 3: Responses to question “In your opinion, do people in your school take complaints about sexual harassment seriously and respond appropriately?”



In the questionnaire, 46% of pupils who said they had experienced sexual harassment from their peers report that they kept the experience to themselves. Girls are more likely to keep sexual harassment to themselves than boys and are also less likely to tell an authority figure. However, girls are much more likely to tell their friends than boys (68% compared with 36%). Only 22% of all pupils said they told a teacher and 30% told their parents or carers. Overall, the majority of pupils who had been sexually harassed had spoken to their friends about it.

When completing the questionnaire, pupils who haven't personally experienced harassment were automatically directed to a question asking them what they would do if they did experience it. More pupils who have not experienced sexual harassment believe that they would stand up to it if faced with the issue or tell a responsible adult. These results differ greatly from those who have experienced harassment as illustrated below.

Figure 4: Responses to question “How did / would you deal with sexual harassment?”



In focus group discussions about sources of support for online sexual harassment, sexting and sending or receiving nude photographs, pupils typically say they reach out to their friends as they generally feel more comfortable telling a friend about it than telling a responsible adult or family member. A few note that they are too scared to tell anyone at all.

A few note that they have had some teacher-led activities to highlight the dangers of sexting and have been encouraged to report any incidents to their head of year. Whilst many pupils understand the need to report any activity of peer-on-peer sexual harassment on social media, they do not typically state that they would tell their teachers.

In terms of more general support for any experience of harassment, more boys say they would tell a teacher than girls. Only a very few pupils – less than 10% – mention outside support services such as Childline, NSPCC and the police. A very few pupils who attend faith schools say that they would turn to their church or a religious figure for help. A minority of pupils in independent boarding schools say they would talk to their houseparent.

A few pupils, mostly girls, say they keep worries and feelings to themselves. A few of these say they would **“talk to themselves”** using a commonly used online social media platform. Many LGBTQ+ pupils also note that they would also do this as they are anxious about talking about their feelings about sex, gender and sexuality with others.

Young people's views and experience of personal and social education

Many pupils value personal and social education lessons but say they do not have enough opportunities to discuss issues that they deem important in these lessons. They feel that some of the content, such as lessons on substance misuse, is useful and important. However, most believe that schools need to spend more time educating pupils about respect, healthy relationships, harmful sexual behaviours and LGBTQ+ rights. Many say that they want to see more time given to discuss **“real life issues”** in school and that an occasional assembly about sexual harassment or another topic is **“usually not enough”**. They also say that they **“want teachers who are interested in the subject to teach it”**.

Many pupils across the whole age range say they have not had enough sex education during their time in school. Sixth form pupils, in particular, are very eager to have more sex education, with many saying they have not received any sex education at all. In a large majority of schools, older pupils say they enjoy PSE activities when they happen but would like to have more opportunities to discuss healthy relationships, body positivity and how to maintain romantic connections.

“We need PSE to be compulsory throughout school life. You need it throughout your life and therefore we need more detail about everything. LGBT, sex education, sexual harassment, gender issues - we need more detail about these subjects as well as mental health. Harassment happens due to lack of education.”

Young people particularly enjoy sessions run by external speakers who give presentations and run workshops. Nearly all pupils see the importance of hearing **“real life stories from real people”** and agree that the lessons and assemblies from the school police officer are highly beneficial. A majority of pupils recall particularly helpful assemblies delivered by the school police officer on sexting and sending or sharing nude or inappropriate images. A few older pupils talk about a video they have seen on consensual sex, known as ‘the tea video’, but feel that **“just one assembly on this isn’t enough”**. Other pupils

say that they have had **“good assemblies”** on the Pride movement and LGBTQ+ rights but that there is usually no opportunity for further discussion about these issues in lessons afterwards.

In schools where the provision for PSE is strong, pupils speak highly of valuable opportunities to discuss healthy relationships, including how to communicate appropriately and respectfully with peers, and talk about consent. Pupils also comment on how they sometimes have useful discussions around relationships in religious education lessons, especially attitudes towards women and girls in different cultures and faiths.

What pupils want their schools to know

“I want my school to know that there is a lot more sexual harassment in this school than they think there is. The main victims are girls and LGBTQ+ pupils. This is mainly why many LGBTQ+ pupils don’t come to school because they don’t want to be victimised”

“We have had hardly any sexual health or sex education lessons, we had a few in science however, they were more about how the body works”

“I want my school to know that certain students are afraid to come forward to tell you what has happened as there isn’t enough done for them or they fear that you will overlook it”

“less worrying about the smallest things like ‘nail varnish’ and how the length of your skirt matters and worry about the people making homophobic and transphobic comments”

“Bullying and harassment – lessons on how to treat people and how women should be treated and BLM”

“I enjoy my PSE lessons and I’m very interested, but I think they should talk

more about harassment and abuse”

“I would like to learn more about mental health and bullying and how it can affect people”

“I think we need more lessons on sexual health and on educating people on boundaries and why certain things are bad”

“I want my school to be more inclusive. Although it is a school, we need more representation of minority groups”

“I want to learn about how to behave and treat other people”

“Sex education, now please!”

“The school isn’t doing enough to educate boys - we NEED lessons about this”

“We absolutely need sex education”

We asked pupils what more they think schools can do to deal with peer-on-peer sexual harassment. Many believe that schools should teach pupils about sexual harassment more regularly, particularly in lessons such as the Welsh Baccalaureate and PSE. They also stipulate that organising more assemblies and bringing in external visitors would help to educate pupils about it. More boys than girls say that they believe that schools already do enough. More boys state that placing information such as posters around the school would be enough to deal with the matter.

Many pupils, particularly girls, refer to schools needing to create a safer and more comfortable environment where pupils can talk to teachers or other members of staff about their experiences. A few suggest that boys and girls should be separated during the conversations so that they feel more comfortable discussing the issues.

Many non-binary pupils also believe that a safer environment for discussions should be created.

A majority of pupils refer to the need to change staff attitudes, with many pupils believing that staff should take matters more seriously and that harsher punishments should be put in place for incidences of harassment. Furthermore, a

few pupils believe that there is a need for increased awareness and understanding, either by staff paying more attention when sexual harassment happens, or by raising staff awareness and understanding of peer-on-peer sexual harassment.

Non-binary pupils and pupils who preferred not to define their sex or gender make particular reference to increasing staff awareness about transgender matters. Many want schools to address the harmful impact of homophobic name-calling because it affects pupils' mental and emotional health.

What pupils want their schools to do



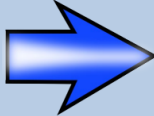
In the final focus group activity, pupils were asked to consider three things:

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<p>"sweeping incidents under the rug!"</p> <p>"portraying boys as the only perpetrators"</p> <p>"avoiding the issue"</p> <p>"telling girls off for their skirts but not educating the boys"</p> <p>"letting people get away with it"</p> <p>"repeating lessons of drugs"</p>	<p>"paying attention to LGBTQ+ issues"</p> <p>"a pupil group to talk about these issues"</p> <p>"giving more PSE"</p> <p>"Sex education lessons"</p> <p>"teaching boys about toxic masculinity and promote a culture where it is eradicated"</p> <p>"having Pride celebrated"</p> <p>"doing a lot more assemblies and having time to talk about it afterwards"</p>	<p>"talking about respect"</p> <p>"talking about it in assemblies"</p> <p>"having people to talk to in confidence"</p> <p>"lessons with the police"</p> <p>"getting people with real life problems to talk to us"</p> <p>"doing what you're doing to support us"</p> <p>"encouraging debates and discussions about sexual harassment in lessons"</p>

Key messages from pupils about the practices that they would like schools to **stop** include schools avoiding or ignoring issues of peer-on-peer sexual harassment. This includes comments about stopping schools accepting ingrained traditions of boys' making fun of each other, having sexist attitudes and making sexual references about girls. A minority of boys say that they want schools to stop thinking that only girls are victims of peer-on-peer sexual harassment. There is also a common theme of pupils wanting to stop the many similar or repeated PSE lessons they have had on the same theme, such as repeat lessons on drug and alcohol misuse.

There is a common and clear appeal from pupils for schools to **start** providing sex education lessons. Many express their desire for more PSE lessons in general and for lessons on harmful sexual behaviours and their impact on pupils' mental health. A minority mention having regular pupils focus groups where pupils could be "**encouraged to express themselves openly**". Most pupils from Year 10 onwards express the need for schools to provide better coverage on LGBTQ+ issues and for more support for this particular group of people.

Pupils are unanimous in their views that schools should **continue** with lessons and assemblies by the school police officer. It is evident that all pupils across all areas of Wales value this provision. There is a strong agreement by pupils that

schools should continue to have external speakers and **“real life people who talk about real life problems”**. Many pupils comment on the need for schools to continue to provide the support they need and to have the right staff to talk about problems with them. A minority of pupils say they want their schools to continue to talk about and promote respect. These pupils are those who attend schools with a strong ethos of respect and diversity.