

Up-to-speed on: Ofsted's 'Review of sexual abuse in schools and colleges'

Content warning: Please be advised that this article contains references to sexual harassment and abuse.

Ofsted was asked by the government to carry out a rapid review of sexual abuse in schools and colleges. Ofsted has now published its '[Review of sexual abuse in schools and colleges](#)'. This article breaks down what schools need to know.

Key points

1. [The review covers safeguarding and the curriculum, multi-agency arrangements, victims' voice, and more](#)
2. [Ofsted is concerned about the prevalence of sexual harassment and abuse amongst children](#)
3. [The report addresses the widespread nature of online sexual abuse](#)
4. [Ofsted found that school staff underestimate the scale of the issues](#)
5. [Pupils are not satisfied with the quality of their RSHE curriculum](#)
6. [Ofsted believes clearer guidance and wider solutions are needed](#)
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9. [Ofsted made a number of recommendations for the government](#)

The review covers safeguarding and the curriculum, multi-agency arrangements, victims' voice, and more

Ofsted was asked to report on safeguarding and the curriculum, multi-agency safeguarding arrangements, and victims' voice and reporting. Ofsted also considered additional factors such as the range, nature, location and severity of allegations and incidents, the extent of schools' knowledge of specific incidents and more general problems, and schools' safeguarding responses to known incidents and wider social and cultural problems.

Ofsted visited 32 schools and colleges: 14 state-funded schools, 14 independent schools inspected by the Independent Schools Inspectorate (ISI), 2 independent schools inspected by Ofsted, and 2 FE colleges. Inspectors spoke to over 900 pupils about the prevalence of peer-on-peer sexual harassment, sexual violence, and online sexual abuse in their lives and the lives of their peers. Inspectors also spoke to leaders, teachers, governors, learning support practitioners, parents and stakeholders.

The review does not report on individual schools or cases, and all data is anonymous; however, Ofsted has stated that some, but not all, of the schools it visited were listed on the

[Everyone's Invited](#) website. Ofsted has stated that this review should not be assumed as a fully representative sample across all schools nationally.

In addition, Ofsted reviewed its own practices, including the extent to which inspection has given sufficient oversight of sexual abuse in schools and considered how statutory guidance could be strengthened.

Ofsted is concerned about the prevalence of sexual harassment and abuse amongst children

Ofsted is concerned about the high prevalence of sexual harassment and online sexual abuse amongst children, stating that “for some children, incidents are so commonplace that they see no point in reporting them”. Other than some differences related to gender and age, the review did not analyse differences in the issue’s prevalence amongst different groups of pupils.

Ofsted’s conversations with pupils revealed that the extreme frequency of sexual harassment and other harmful sexual behaviours has led some pupils to consider them normal or ‘commonplace’. For example, 92 percent of female pupils and 74 percent of male pupils said that sexist name-calling happens a lot or sometimes to them or their peers.

Ofsted’s questionnaire to female pupils revealed the following statistics about harmful sexual behaviours happening between people their age:

- Sexist name-calling (92 percent)
- Being sent pictures or videos they did not want to see (88 percent)
- Rumours about their sexual activity (81 percent)
- Unwanted or inappropriate comments of a sexual nature (80 percent)
- Being put under pressure to provide sexual images of themselves (80 percent)
- Sexual assault of any kind (79 percent)
- Having pictures or videos that they sent being shared more widely without their knowledge or consent (73 percent)
- Feeling pressured to do sexual things that they did not want to (68 percent)
- Unwanted touching (64 percent)
- Being photographed or videoed without their knowledge or consent (59 percent)
- Having pictures or videos of themselves that they did not know about being circulated (51 percent)

The same questionnaire to male pupils revealed these pupils were less likely to believe these behaviours occurred between people their age, but with a similar order of believed prevalence.

Older pupils (16 and above) were also more likely than younger pupils to report that these behaviours occurred between people of their age.

When asked where sexual violence occurred, pupils typically referred to unsupervised spaces outside of schools, such as parties or parks without adults present. Some female pupils said they experienced unwanted physical contact in school corridors.



The report addresses the widespread nature of online sexual abuse

Pupils reported a wide variety of sexual behaviours happening online, including receiving unwanted explicit images, being pressured to send nude or semi-nude photographs, or being sent online explicit material, such as pornography.

Nearly 90 percent of female pupils and 50 percent of male pupils reported that being sent explicit pictures or videos of things they did not want to see happens a lot or sometimes to them or their peers. Ofsted also reported that pupils, particularly female pupils, said that sexual harassment and online sexual abuse are much more prevalent than adults realise.



Ofsted found that school staff underestimate the scale of the issues

Ofsted found that schools were dealing with incidents when they were made aware of them and following statutory guidance; however, some teachers and leaders underestimated the scale of the issues. This included not identifying sexual harassment and language as a problem, not being aware that abuse was occurring, and underestimating the prevalence of online sexual abuse, even in schools with a proactive approach to tackling in-person sexual violence and harassment.

The report states that many pupils, particularly female pupils, do not want to talk about sexual abuse, even when their school encourages them to do so. Reasons given for this included the risk of being ostracised by their peers, the risk of getting their peers into trouble, and worries about how adults will react, including that they will not be believed, will be blamed for the abuse, or that the process for dealing with the abuse will be taken out of their control. Because of this reluctance to talk about the issue, it is likely to be much more prevalent than schools would recognise from the number of incidents reported.



Pupils are not satisfied with the quality of their RSHE curriculum

Many pupils reported that the relationships, sex and health education (RSHE) that they received did not equip them with the information and advice they needed to navigate their lives. These gaps caused some to turn to social media or their peers for education and advice.

Ofsted recommends that a carefully-planned and -implemented RSHE curriculum is central to tackling sexual harassment and abuse. This curriculum should be based on the DfE's [statutory guidance](#), specifically address sexual violence and harassment, and allow time for open discussion of topics that pupils have reported as particularly difficult to talk about, such as consent and the sending of explicit images.

This should be implemented alongside sanctions and interventions to tackle poor behaviour and provide support, training and clear expectations for staff and governors, and time to listen to pupil voice.



Ofsted believes clearer guidance and wider solutions are needed

Ofsted believes that school leaders are having to make difficult decisions about tackling sexual violence that government guidance does not equip them to make. This includes being unsure

how to proceed when criminal investigations do not lead to a prosecution or conviction. Ofsted also reported that current guidance does not clearly differentiate between different types of behaviour or reflect the language that pupils use, particularly in relation to online sexual abuse.

The report also recognises that schools cannot tackle the issues of sexual violence and harassment alone, and that wider solutions are needed to address these issues. For example, the issue of pupils seeing unwanted explicit material online, or being pressured to send it, will need to be tackled through the government's Online Safety Bill and other interventions, not through the actions of schools alone.

Ofsted found safeguarding is generally covered well in its own practices

Ofsted's review of its own practices, and those of the ISI, found that safeguarding is generally covered well in its frameworks, training and handling of complaints.

Nonetheless, Ofsted recognises improvements can still be made, so both Ofsted and the ISI will be updating training, inspection handbooks and inspection practices where necessary. Ofsted and the ISI will also be releasing a series of webinars and events for schools to discuss the findings of the review.

The review recommends taking a whole-school approach to tackling sexual abuse

Due to the pervasive nature of the issue, Ofsted recommends that schools and multi-agency partners recognise that sexual harassment and online sexual abuse are widespread problems, and should act on the assumption that these issues are affecting their pupils, even when there are no specific reports.

Leaders should take a whole-school approach to developing a zero-tolerance culture where all forms of sexual harassment and abuse are recognised and addressed. To do this, leaders must ensure that:

- Staff model respectful and appropriate behaviour.
- Staff and governors receive training to:
 - Better understand the definitions of sexual violence, harassment and online abuse.
 - Identify early signs of peer-on-peer sexual abuse.
 - Consistently uphold standards in their responses to incidents.
- Teachers delivering RSHE receive high-quality training for this curriculum.
- DSLs receive support, such as protected time in timetables to engage with learning support practitioners.
- Pupils understand what is acceptable and unacceptable behaviour.
- Pupils are confident enough to ask for help and support when they need it.
- The school keeps routine records and analysis of sexual violence and harassment, including online, to identify patterns and intervene early to prevent abuse.
- The school takes a behavioural approach to tackling these issues, including sanctions when appropriate.

- The school works closely with learning support practitioners in the area so they are aware of the range of support available to pupils who are victims or who perpetrate harmful sexual behaviour.
- The school engages with multi-agency partners in the local area.

Ofsted made a number of recommendations for the government

Ofsted's review also includes a number of recommendations for how the government should tackle the issue of sexual abuse in schools. These recommendations include:

- Taking the findings of Ofsted's review into account when developing the Online Safety Bill, to ensure children are further protected from viewing explicit material online and engaging in harmful sexual behaviour on social media.
- Establishing better coordination between the ESFA, Ofsted and ISI for how to deal with complaints that inspectorates receive about schools.
- Strengthening the '[Working Together to Safeguard Children](#)' guidance to make the involvement of all state and independent schools and colleges with learning support practitioners more explicit, including their engagement in multi-agency safeguarding audits.
- Producing clearer guidance for schools to help them make decisions when there are long-term investigations of harmful sexual behaviour, or when a criminal investigation does not lead to a prosecution or conviction.
- Reviewing and updating the definitions of sexual abuse, including peer-on-peer, to better reflect pupils' experiences.
- Developing an online hub of all safeguarding guidance, with clear updates made in good time to aid schools' planning.

The report also made recommendations for what the government should do in partnership with others, including:

- Developing a guide to help children know what might happen next when they talk to an adult in school about sexual abuse.
- Developing national training for DSLs.
- Developing resources to help schools and colleges shape their RSHE curriculum.
- Launching a communications campaign about sexual abuse, including advice for parents and carers.

The DfE published a press release shortly after Ofsted released the findings of its review. The press release briefly outlines the next steps the government will take – click [here](#) to read.

What's next?

- To read Ofsted's full research and analysis of its 'Review of sexual abuse in schools and colleges', click [here](#).
- For guidance on how to tackle sexual violence and harassment at your school, read our articles on [Combating Rape Culture – Actions for Schools](#) and [Dealing with Sexual Violence and Sexual Harassment Between Children \(Peer-on-Peer Abuse\)](#).

- Use our [Child Protection and Safeguarding Policy](#) and [Child-Friendly Peer-on-Peer Abuse Policy](#) to ensure you have effective and compliant safeguarding procedures in place at your school.

Bibliography

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>> [Accessed: 10 June 2021]