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## The counselor's role in the peer sexual harassment issue : educating and empowering students concerning roles and rights

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## The counselor's role in the peer sexual harassment issue : educating and empowering students concerning roles and rights

### Abstract

Peer sexual harassment creates and maintains a hostile classroom environment. Schools must offer an inclusive scope of alternative decisions for all students. Students are entitled to support from teachers and school counselors whenever they believe they have experienced such harassment. Student victims need to be advised by encouraging adults in the school system in order to reestablish themselves as active learners.

When adults facilitate student learning regarding the issue of sexual harassment, a safe environment replaces the hostile environment created by sexual bullying. When counselors, teachers, parents, and administrators send a message of support, underlining that sexual harassment is illegal and will not be tolerated, a powerful message is also sent to all students: Adults are here to help, to understand, and to educate.

**THE COUNSELOR'S ROLE IN THE PEER SEXUAL HARASSMENT ISSUE:  
EDUCATING AND EMPOWERING STUDENTS CONCERNING ROLES  
AND RIGHTS**

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**by**

**Ann Marie Lentz**

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The issue of sexual harassment is a topic of national discussion and concern. Sexual harassment, a topic pursued by the American press, is “a sordid crisis in our country” (Couric, K., The Today Show, January 23, 1998). In the fall of 1991, sexual harassment redefined the Supreme Court nomination process. In the spring of 1998, the duties of the President of the United States were interrupted by alleged allegations of sexual harassment.

Often regarded as an employment-related topic, sexual harassment has occurred in other areas of society, including education (Wickum, 1992). In 1991 the American Association of University Women (AAUW), after having examined research studies and other publications about gender and education, issued a disturbing report noting an increase in charges of sexual harassment of female students by their male classmates. All students are entitled to unlimited educational services (Wickum, 1992). Civil rights organizations and women’s rights advocates endorse educating the public concerning the effects of sexual harassment (AAUW, 1991). The AAUW study of sexual harassment in the school system was the primary documentation that revealed dramatic effects on students from peer harassment (Shoop & Edwards, 1994). The purpose of this early study was to call attention to how students were affected educationally, emotionally, and behaviorally.

Beyond a media focused on habitually enticing national awareness concerning sexual harassment and its impact on gender relations, notable policy adjustments and practices have been introduced in the workplace across the country. Fearfulness about the occurrence of sexual harassment has increased within the school system. Peer sexual

harassment is recognized as an urgent ailment in education (Rowell, McBride, & Nelson-Leaf, 1996).

The very serious problem of sexual harassment has been overlooked for far too long (Shoop and Edwards, 1994). Across the nation today, sexual harassment is viewed as unacceptable and illegal (Cohan, 1996). School guidelines on behavior have been rewritten. Behavior formerly acknowledged as vulgar, nasty, or indecent is now actionable, and against school-conduct policy (Shoop & Edwards, 1994).

Although the majority of harassment victims are female, a significant number of males reported being targets as well (Shoop & Edwards, 1994). Statistics indicated students experienced both verbal and physical forms of sexual harassment on a daily basis (Cohan, 1996). In a 1993 survey (cited in Shoop & Edwards, 1994), four out of five students reported being the target of sexual harassment. These authors noted that same-sex sexual harassment was also a serious problem.

The concept of sexual harassment has not been completely understood by society as a whole (Shoop & Edwards, 1994). Whether or not an act is sexual harassment is often unclear, not only for students but also for adults in schools. Being liked is generally a good feeling; being made to feel uncomfortable is not. Flirting feels good; sexual harassment does not (Cohan, 1996). Problems in understanding and addressing sexual harassment demand a clear, concise, universally-accepted definition. The professional literature has failed to address the problem of sexual harassment in the classroom (Hotelling, 1991) and is inconsistent in identifying which behaviors constitute sexual harassment (Hotelling, 1991; Lewis, 1994; Roscoe, Strouse & Goodwin, 1994; Rowell et al., 1996).

The American judicial system clearly and consistently has ruled that the workplace and school must be free from sexual harassment (Shoop & Edwards, 1994). The Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC) defines sexual harassment as any unwelcome sexual advance, request for sexual favors, and other verbal or physical conduct of a sexual nature (Paludi & Barickman, 1991).

School counselors are just now beginning to address the issue of peer sexual harassment (Rowell et al., 1996). Counselors and educators are aware that younger students are experiencing sexual harassment, as Phinney (1994) noted:

I had become increasingly aware that there had been a change in the way girls in the school were being treated by the boys. There seemed to be a lot of tension, and a surprising amount of contact much of which seemed unwelcome by the girls (p. 5).

Educational institutions neglecting to implement sexual policies, training, and enforcement may be held answerable for condoned student-to-student sexual harassment. Due to the demand for action, school officials have responded and developed no-tolerance sexual harassment policies (Rowell et al., 1996).

Sexual harassment is an issue of concern for numerous developmental reasons, the least of which is that it hinders academic progress. According to a Department of Education statement in 1992 (cited in Roscoe et al., 1994), sexual harassment is a real and increasing problem. Left unchecked, sexual harassment will continue (Lewis, 1994). It can threaten emotional well-being, interfere with academic learning, and severely restrict career goal accomplishment (Roscoe et al., 1994).

This paper will provide current information about the issue of peer sexual harassment to assist school counselors in working with students, educators, and parents.

This paper will address the causes of sexual harassment, and the impact of sexual harassment on academic learning and academic self-esteem. It will also suggest proactive interventions that sensitize students to the effects of sexual harassment.

### Peer Sexual Harassment

Sexual harassment is an illegal action according to Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and Title IX of the Education Amendments of 1972 and 1976 (Hotelling, 1991). Lewis (1994) noted that over a decade ago, the Supreme Court interpreted the Title IX Education Amendment as the civil right of all students to be protected from discrimination at school.

The attitudes of society concerning sexual harassment have evolved from opinion to demand. Lewis (1994) wrote that offensive behaviors, once labeled as harmless, are now correctly stamped as illegal. Students and their families, backed by public support, no longer tolerate any form of harassment at any age level. Parents are taking action, seeking a change in behavior and attitudes (Feminist Teacher, 1992). Parents filing charges of alleged sexual harassment are seeking to eliminate hostility by creating a safe classroom environment for their children. Marczyk (1993) saw this as a challenge for school districts to develop and implement a strict sexual harassment policy.

Twenty years ago sexual harassment was labeled a 'hidden issue' (Hotelling, 1991). The Project on the Status and Education of Women (cited in Hotelling, 1991) concluded that a targeted individual assumed that there would be no meaningful response to a harassment complaint. This opinion in our society has changed.

A survey in the September 1992 issue of Seventeen magazine described the experience of sexual harassment from the high school students' perspective. Teen readers

responded, confirming with each story that they, too, had been victims of sexual harassment (Roscoe et al., 1994). The fact that a survey on sexual harassment was published in a popular teen magazine further underlined the prevalence of this problem.

Confronting one's harasser requires courage, and sharing the experience with others is a serious risk, especially for the student-victim (Hotelling, 1991). Fortunately, this Seventeen magazine survey was an opportunity for targeted teens to anonymously define the nature and extent of sexual harassment nationally. Stein (1995) compared this widespread student response to an outcry for attention, answers, acknowledgment, and justice.

### Defining Sexual Harassment

Sexual harassment can be both verbal and physical. Actions ranging from stares, remarks, ratings, and rumors to touching, assault, and attempted rape (Lewis, 1994; Marczylo, 1993; Wickum, 1992) are all examples of sexual harassment.

Junior high school students debating the issues of sexual harassment agreed that rude sounds, suggestive whistling, jokes about sex, and brushing up against bodies were all examples of sexual harassment (Higginson, 1993). Higginson (1993) added that students may defend harassing behaviors as merely flirting or joking. Mentell (1993) corrected this adolescent belief and wrote that student ignorance adds to the misunderstanding surrounding sexual harassment in the school system.

Sexual harassment is unethical and unwanted intimacy with another person (Higginson, 1993) and is an issue of power and not about sex, according to Shoop and Edwards (1994). At best it is an act of disrespect, and at worst an example of violence. Student sexual harassment is based on cultural assumptions about appropriate gender roles

for males and females (Cohan, 1996). It is a gender issue which has been active in our schools for years and is presently receiving public attention (Lewis, 1992; Mentell, 1993).

Hotelling (1991) declared that unequal power between individuals is a component of sexual harassment. The student with lesser power is the target of sexual harassment.

Crocker (cited in Hotelling, 1991) stated that sexual harassment is a social dilemma which is about power and should not be exclusively defined as a sexual issue.

The current literature defines sexual harassment from the victim's perspective. Any unwanted and unwelcome comments, behavior, or physical contact of a sexual nature, as determined by the targeted individual, is sexual harassment (Marczely, 1993; Stein, 1995).

Another element that defines peer sexual harassment is the interruption of student learning and the civil right to receive an education (Stein, 1995). Federal civil rights in education laws prohibit sex discrimination in any federally-funded school.

Before peers sexually harass other students, Stein (1995) found that peers first tend to bully. A bully is a loudmouth who teases other students and sometimes gets violent.

Bullying behaviors are learned early by very young children (Stein, 1995). Unfortunately, bullying is accepted by teachers and parents as a normal social dilemma. Left unchecked, bullying behaviors often serve as practice for peer sexual harassment in school and later for adults at work (Stein, 1995).

"Sexual bullying" is another way to outline sexual harassment. (Stein & Sjostrom, 1994). These authors further interpreted peer sexual harassment as a socialization model, or a test, in many schools.

### The Extent of the Problem

A survey by the AAUW in 1993 (cited in Shoop & Edwards, 1994) declared sexual harassment a common experience for high school students. Four out of five students in the study reported being targeted for peer sexual harassment. According to data published in 1993, 85% of the females (as young as junior high age) and 76% of the males had been sexually harassed (Mentell, 1993). Most peer sexual harassment in school remains unreported.

Sexual harassment is a recognized form of sex discrimination active among students kindergarten through high school age (Stein, 1995). Targeted students are often verbally and physically harassed daily by other students (Cohan, 1996). All students are entitled to protection from sexual harassment. Unfortunately, students that sexually harass their peers with words and actions on a daily basis are not discouraged nor restricted by the current school harassment policy (Cohan, 1996; Stein, 1993).

Sexual harassment is not just an alleged school activity, but a daily reality in most elementary schools, junior high schools, and senior high schools nationally. Sexual harassment is occurring virtually every moment of every day. Girls are spoken about sexually, groped, and solicited. Boys comment on girls' bodies and demand that girls participate in sexual activity. An alarming statistic in the sexual harassment issue is the increase in the number of incidents at the elementary level in all school systems (Lewis, 1994). Students as young as third grade "experience unwanted advances" (Shoop & Edwards, 1994).

Sexual harassment is surely a common and quite public behavior. Sadly, the roles of the perpetrator, the victim, and the bystander are shared. The AAUW survey confirmed

that 59% of polled students, or 66% of the males and 52% of the females, confessed having sexually harassed their peers, modeling what had been done to them (Stein & Sjostrom, 1994).

### What Contributes to Sexual Harassment

Researchers on sexual harassment agreed that teasing and bullying behaviors, learned at an early age, were a prelude to the hostile environment maintained by peer sexual harassers at the preadolescent and adolescent age (Viadero, 1997). There is a thin boundary between bullying and sexual harassment. Bullying is a continuing and almost routine social problem. Sexual harassment is experienced throughout the school system. The occurrence of verbal or physical attack is uncertain. Another fact that parallels bullying and sexual harassment is victim selection. Both boys and girls are victims of bullying, and bullying is predominantly a same-sex issue (Viadero, 1997).

One theory of sexual harassment is that "boys will be boys," according to the AAUW (cited in Lewis, 1994). However, sexual harassment is a dangerous wrong-doing. Too often adults in the school system entertain sexual harassment as a joke or as inevitable, and perhaps prefer not to get personally involved. The right to ridicule and embarrass anyone to the point of tears is a misconception of the harasser. When teachers and administrators ignore so-called harmless behavior, sexual harassment is silently approved and encouraged (Lewis, 1994).

The foundation of the sexual harassment problem is one of attitude based on ignorance (Marczely, 1993). Mentell (1993) stated that adolescents were unskilled as to the effects of sexual harassing actions on their peers. Social rules guide sexual interaction, and adolescents are not experienced as to how sexual harassment is interpreted by its

victims. Adolescence is a period of experimentation, a time when the purpose of behaviors is confusing. When rude, intrusive behaviors are mistaken for a definition of maturity, the experiment has gone too far (Higginson, 1993). Phinney (1994) described adolescence as a hazing ritual in our culture, a traditional period of development in which females are targeted by males in an attempt to establish control over another individual. The sexual harassing actions of adolescents may not be intentional or deliberately hurtful (Mentell, 1993). More importantly, Marczely (1993) noted that in order to replace aggressive attitudes, students must be educated in a no-tolerance, non-hostile environment. Mentell (1993) stated that adolescent sexual harassers need to learn social decision-making. Students that sexually harass their peers need to learn the rules that dictate appropriate comments and behavior.

#### How Sexual Harassment Impacts Students' Lives

Peer sexual harassment is an alarming social issue. Sadly, the acknowledgment of any harm done to the victims is rationalized away (Stein, 1993). Regrettably, sexual harassment has been elevated to an acceptable and normal developmental stage for adolescents.

AAUW research documented the effects of sexual harassment on student victims, as noted in Shoop and Edwards, 1994:

1. Not wanting to go to school (33%).
2. Not wanting to talk as much in class (32%).
3. Finding it hard to pay attention in class (28%).
4. Staying home from school or cutting a class (24%).
5. Making a lower grade on a test paper (23%).

6. Finding it hard to study (22%).
7. Making a lower grade in class (20%).
8. Thinking about changing schools (18%).
9. Doubting whether you have what it takes to graduate from high school (5%), and
10. Changing schools as a result of sexual harassment (3%) (p. 66).

School events impact a student's view of herself as an individual and as an acceptable group member. When hostility is part of the daily school experience, and sexual harassment is a fact of life, the student-victim concludes there are no alternatives. Feeling powerless, the student may incorrectly conclude she is to blame. The primary impact of peer sexual harassment on a student's life is personal, a subjective assault on one's ability to be influential. Wickum (1992) described peer harassment as a demeaning exercise that demoralized the student's developing self-esteem.

Victims of sexual harassment restructure their appraisal of the daily school experience, peers, and themselves. Fearing the reality of threats and jokes can diminish a student's sense of power and competence while lowering a student's self-esteem (Shoop & Edwards, 1994). Further, according to the National School Safety Center, student-victims, determined to free themselves from being ridiculed by their peers, schedule or plan to avoid the classes and school activities/events in which the harassment usually occurs (Shoop & Edwards, 1994). Powerlessness results in anger, humiliation, and shame issues for the victim. Students experience feelings of betrayal and aloneness. Attempts to be assertive or aggressive frequently end in defeat, reinforcing the experience of helplessness. Student-victims reason, incorrectly, the possibility of being responsible for the sexual harassment, and believe that their actions have caused the torment.

Whenever students were continuously sexually harassed, and were not able to formulate a logical plan of action, Shoop and Edwards (1994) predicted specific psychological effects:

1. Victims developed a sense of fear and helplessness.
2. Victims were at greater risk for suicide, depression, and overall psychopathology.
3. Victims' feelings of incompetence were transferred to other life areas. Student-victims doubted their ability to deal with the challenges of school. For example, grades frequently decreased. Student-victims may also have avoided any risk-taking, a necessary requirement in friendship-building. This avoidance could have added to the feeling of isolation.
4. Victims' pleas went unheeded, resulting in a lack of social support. Victims may have experienced feelings of unworthiness, concluding that they deserved to be harassed. Shoop and Edwards (1994) concluded that these symptoms of incompetence and lack-of-worth are traditional descriptors of low self-esteem.

#### Intervention and Prevention

The focus of an intervention plan is a commitment to eliminate sexual harassment (Mentell, 1993). Mentell (1993) and Shoop and Edwards (1994) stressed that children should never have to learn to tolerate harassment. The following interventions may be helpful:

##### Classroom Debate

Higginson (1993) suggested that the intervention of a classroom debate served to correct student misconceptions about peer sexual harassment. The debating process

educated the male adolescent who perhaps did not view his words, gestures, and touches as offensive or threatening to female students.

“Sexual harassment is really not such a big deal. After all, it is all in fun and no harm is intended” (Shoop & Edwards, 1994, p. 54). This male perspective categorizes sexual harassment as torment experienced by a faceless, nameless individual, someone personally unknown. Shoop and Edwards (1994) noted that as long as males misinterpreted the anguish caused by sexual harassment, they would never become sensitive to what their peers were experiencing.

Students must have the courage to listen to better understand the issue of peer sexual harassment. “Nobody has the right to make you feel awful” (Higginson, 1993, p. 94). These are the words of a junior high school girl spoken in a classroom debate on peer sexual harassment. Only when peers, teachers, and administrators are supportive and encourage a conversation of student concerns will a victim have the opportunity to express feelings of anger and frustration.

### Student Presentations

Another powerful intervention is a student presentation of the history of sexual harassment. Researching sexual harassment is a helpful tool, not only to look at the sensationalism in today’s sexual harassment headlines, but to examine sexual harassment as a fact of discrimination in this nation. Presenting the story of sexual harassment is a foundation that leads to increased understanding of the significance of this social crisis: a violation of individual civil rights.

As an intervention, students must practice listening to understand and correct misconceptions of peer behavior. It is a misconception to conclude that the victim of

sexual harassment is comfortable when he or she fails to object or point out the injustice to the harasser. Higginson (1993) explained that victims of sexual harassment, in an attempt to protect themselves, denied the problem of sexual harassment or used humor to escape the fear and discomfort caused by the event.

Rowell et al. (1996) contended that the class presentation and the group discussion on sexual harassment must deliver knowledge and teach skills that improve prosocial peer relations. A variety of programs are available for all age levels. Rowell et al. stressed that guidance materials must focus on the elimination of sexual harassment while proactively developing social skills. These authors advised that harassment interventions be integrated in the social studies, cultural awareness, vocational education, and human sexuality classrooms.

Roscoe et al. (1996) suggested that the school counselor follow a structured plan, or interactive approach, in classroom presentations to insure student comfort. Students should be invited to express comments, provide examples, and ask questions. This overall list is suggested for classroom presentations.

1. Define sexual harassment.
2. Discuss sexual harassment experiences and attitudes.
3. State who can be perpetrators or victims.
4. Explain the potential effects of sexual harassment.
5. Explain the consequences of sexual harassment to the perpetrator.
6. Discuss why people harass others.
7. Outline the plan to take if sexually harassed.
8. Specify people to contact if sexually harassed (Roscoe et al., 1994, p. 113-115).

Peer harassers need to hear of the effects of their words and actions from the targeted students. The victims of sexual harassment need to express their anger and frustration.

### Group Counseling

School counselors can respond to the needs of sexual harassment victims as facilitators of peer counseling groups (Hindus, 1995). Peer support tears down the wall of isolation, destroying the feeling of being the only girl or boy ever sexually harassed.

Rowell et al. (1996) saw the small group intervention as a safe place for student victims to discuss feelings about the sexual harassment experience. In the context of a small group, potential teen harassers are also encouraged to disclose their feelings while appraising their current behaviors and practicing new social skills. Confiding in an equal generally is a comforting, accepting experience. Peer acceptance and understanding is usually more beneficial than a discussion with even the best school counselor.

A peer is able to relate to the targeted student's experience. Hindus (1995) viewed the counselor's role as a reliable leader, providing a safe environment and instructing student-victims in appropriate ways of expressing their most guarded feelings. Rowell et al. (1996) indicated that one purpose of group counseling as a sexual harassment intervention was to eliminate unacceptable behavior through guided practice. For example, in role play reversal situations the harasser experiences the awkward feelings as the victim of verbal or physical harassment. Only then can harassers focus on strategies that resist violence and hostility.

## Classroom Guidance Lessons in Sexual Harassment

The following activities were suggested by Stein and Sjoström (1994):

Flirting vs. sexual harassment. In this lesson, the students discuss and compare examples of flirting and sexual harassment. The concept of “depends” is introduced. For example, flirting might depend on . . . (how they look at you). Sexual harassment might depend on . . . (whether the individual is a friend or a stranger).

Long-term assignment. Students are instructed to closely examine, through student observations and note-taking, the existence of flirting or sexual harassment in their school. The purpose of this assignment is to recognize, first hand, examples of sexual harassment.

Says who? In this lesson, students complete a questionnaire by agreeing or disagreeing with each statement. Working in small discussion groups, the students debate the three most difficult-to-answer items. Questionnaire items include myths about sexual harassment, statistics concerning the frequency of sexual harassment, and information on students’ legal rights. As the student groups explain their reasoning, they have an opportunity to ask for more information.

What are your rights? In this lesson, sexual harassment is defined and student rights are explained. Students have an opportunity to determine three trustworthy individuals who might assist them in dealing with a sexual harassment experience. Finally, students discuss how they might respond as the victim of sexual harassment.

Case studies and role plays. Working in teams of four to five students, each group will read actual cases of sexual harassment. The students are instructed to determine who is responsible in each situation. Next, students determine a possible choice that would stop the sexual harassment or assist the targeted individual.

Get up, stand up for your rights. In this lesson, students brainstorm how they can become activists and eliminate sexual harassment in their school. Next, working individually, in groups, or as a class, the students select three steps of action and set deadlines for their plans (Stein & Sjoström, 1994).

### In-Class and Homework Writing Assignments

Freewrites. As an interim component of class discussion, a freewriting assignment on sexual harassment guarantees an opportunity of safe expression for all students. Freewriting provides equality of expression for even the shyest students' opinions.

Role plays. This activity allows students to identify the voice of the student-target, the student-bystander, and the student-harasser. Incidents of sexual harassment are explored and defined by context: what is occurring, and how students process the meaning of the assault. Only when students become the editors of sexual harassment roleplaying will they have the power to describe how they are affected by the incident.

Dialogue writing. The purpose of this activity is to consider all possible interpersonal concerns, for example, between student-bystanders, student-target and student-harasser, parent and child.

Dialogue poem writing. Dialogue poems combine the views of the student-harasser and the student-victim. The combination of these opposing views becomes a new statement, a comparison to be read aloud and discussed for better understanding of the peer sexual harassment issue.

Response to a comment, quotation, question or fact. In this activity, students are encouraged to write in response to a phrase or a word. Writing in their own words, students may agree or disagree with the sexual harassment item.

In addition to the information, education, and training available to students through classroom guidance techniques and strategies, Phinney (1994) further encouraged school counselors and teachers to be available to meet students regarding the sexual harassment issue. Two examples of on-going interventions are the school club and the drop-in center.

School club. Phinney (1994) suggested a school club for girls as an intervention to discuss issues. The club is managed by the girls and supported by the school counselor and a team-teacher. Activities would include group discussions and speakers on relevant social issues.

Drop-in center. Another intervention designed to offer support to students is a drop-in center staffed by teachers and the school counselor (Phinney, 1994). The role of the counselor in this intervention is that of a consultant to the teacher-on-staff, during planning time. The student-teacher interaction allows teachers to better understand the effects of negative peer interaction on the students. The drop-in center is prevention in that teachers can refer potential student-victims to the school counselor.

### Conclusion

Peer sexual harassment creates and maintains a hostile classroom environment. Schools must offer an inclusive scope of alternative decisions for all students. Students are entitled to support from teachers and school counselors whenever they believe they have experienced peer sexual harassment. Student victims need to be advised by encouraging adults in the school system in order to reestablish themselves as active student learners.

When adults facilitate student learning regarding the issue of sexual harassment, a safe environment replaces the hostile environment created by sexual bullying in the school

system. When counselors, teachers, parents, and administrators send a message of support, underlining that sexual harassment is illegal and will not be tolerated, a powerful message is also sent to all students: Adults are here to help, to understand, and to educate.

Students must be given the opportunity to define peer sexual harassment and to differentiate the causes of sexual harassment within their own behavior, within their peer group, and finally, within the context of classroom environments.

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