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# **Dealing with sexual violence: a guide for teachers**

Our pupils are growing up in a world where sexual violence is almost a normal part of growing up.

A recent report for the Women and Equalities Committee found that almost a third of 16-18 year old girls say that they have experienced unwanted sexual touching at school, nearly three-quarters of all 16-18 year olds claim that they hear terms such as "slut" or "slag" used towards girls at schools on a regular basis and over half of girls and young women aged 13-21 said that they had faced some form of sexual harassment at school or college in the past year.

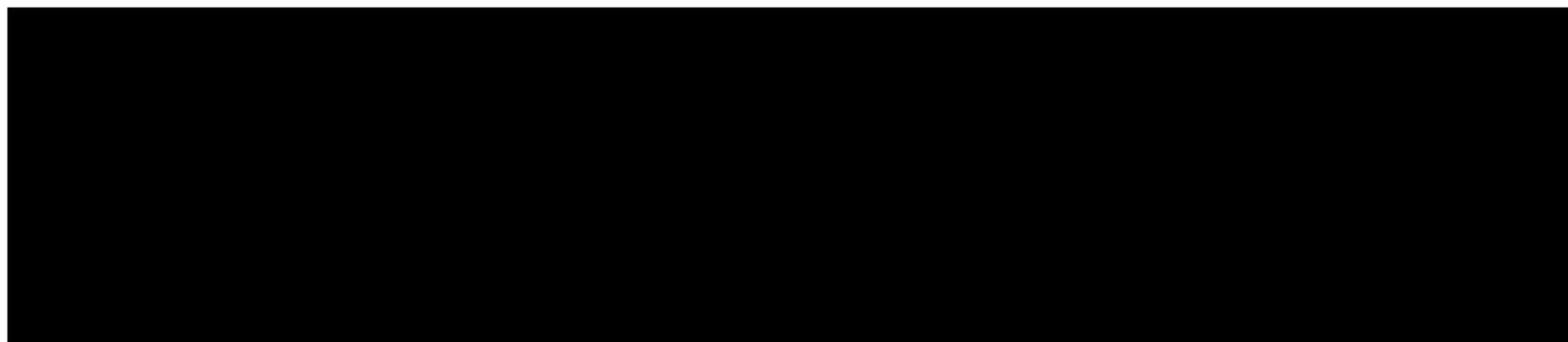
To help protect girls and boys from the negative impact of rape culture it is time to start a frank dialogue about sexual violence in schools.

Is 'slut-shaming' challenged or reinforced in your school? Do your pupils understand the clear boundaries of consent or do they believe there is a grey area? Are all staff confident in challenging sexist language and sexual assault?

Whilst this is a difficult subject for any teacher to broach, steps can be taken to make the delivery of this subject and management of class discussions both comfortable and productive. Here are some strategies for teaching your pupils to recognise, challenge and avoid sexual violence.

## **Consent**

Too often consent is viewed as a grey area. This myth must be dispelled in schools by teaching pupils about the law and by having open and honest discussions. There is *no grey area* when it comes to consent and this can be effectively demonstrated to pupils by showing them the following brilliant video:





needs to be signed but that both people must be willingly and actively participating. If they are completely impaired or unconscious they cannot give their consent. Likewise, consent given in one moment does not equal consent given at any time in the future.

Have pupils discuss different scenarios of when consent is and isn't given. Relate this not just to penetrative rape but also to other kinds of sexual assault like unwanted groping.

### **Challenging rape culture**

Rape culture refers to the social trends which normalise or even glamorize sexual violence towards women. It's 'locker-room banter' when men brag about groping women. It's objectification of women in advertising, media and porn. It's rape jokes and rape threats. It's the double standard of boys being congratulated for being promiscuous when girls are shamed for the same behaviour. It's when a rape victim is asked how much she's had to drink, what she was wearing, if she asked for it; when the onus is placed on her behaviour rather than the crime committed by her rapist.

If sexual violence is to be reduced, rape culture must be challenged in schools through explicit lessons. Pupils need to be made aware of what rape culture is and why it is so harmful. At my school we do this by linking rape culture to the staggering rape statistics in the UK. Of the estimated 78,000 male to female rapes that happen each year in the UK, fewer than 3,000 rapists are convicted (ONS, 2011). Statistically, in this country men can rape women and get away

with it.

The young people I teach are appalled by this. Show them that rape culture has a direct impact on these shocking figures and you have pupils on-board with the need to challenge rape culture. Show them rape culture in action, with case studies like the Stubenville High School rape case of 2012 and the subsequent victim-blaming from the victim's peer group, Twitter and the media. Two boys raped their semi-conscious class mate, filmed it, shared the film and bragged on Twitter about raping and urinating on her. Ask your pupils to discuss the sentences of 1 and 2 years given to the rapists and the sympathy they received as their 'lives were ruined'.

Show them this [news report](#) and ask them to analyse the language used to describe the three people involved here on social media and in the news. Reframe this as 'rapists' and the 'victim'.

## **Personal safety**

The general approach to teaching young people about rape has historically been targeted at teaching girls not to get raped. They have been told not to walk alone at night, not to drink too much, not to wear too little, to avoid strangers and to carry rape alarms. In this narrow pedagogical approach, the idea that rape is somehow the victims' fault has been reinforced. Whilst personal safety should be encouraged for all pupils, we need to be teaching them that rape is a criminal activity involving a victim and a perpetrator rather than telling girls not to get raped.

Male to female rape is by far the most common but not the only type of rape. This can sometimes come as a surprise to pupils but this is something that they should be made aware of. When teaching responsibility for personal safety, address this to all pupils and encourage them to recognise that we all have a responsibility to protect ourselves and our friends.

At my school, we teach our pupils to be responsible for their personal safety whilst still recognising that if rape happens it is the rapist's fault.

## **Double standards**

Double standards are sometimes reinforced in many schools. From a girl's skirt length to her hair length, her physical appearance is scrutinised and criticised in a way that her male peers is not.

Many schools are reluctant to reform their uniform policies, viewing them as steeped in history and an essential part of the school tradition. This is a shame as a gender neutral uniform is likely to overcome the problems described above and also make the life of trans\* and gender non-conforming pupils far easier.

If you are in a school with a gendered uniform policy it is worth reflecting on how this is enforced. Are girls being publically shamed for the way they are wearing their skirts? Is there parity in the way that the uniform of girls and boys is scrutinised? Is the language being used to address girls' skirt lengths – even privately amongst staff appropriate?

If a sexual encounter between a male and female pupil becomes public ensure that the girl and boy are dealt with in exactly the same way. The 'slut-shaming' that girls still receive for acting on their sexual desire is a form of sexual violence in itself. Challenge double standards in the language of the pupils through the curriculum and when it comes up.

## **High quality PSHE and sex education**

The non-statutory status of PSHE means that its status and delivery differs drastically across schools. PSHE, when planned and delivered effectively provides a great opportunity for pupils to acquire essential life skills and strength of character.

Teach kindness, compassion and respect. Pupils get it and they want to receive it. Ranging from small acts of kindness to grand acts of altruism, this often neglected area is an essential part of what we should be giving to pupils. Teach responsibility for friends and even strangers by making pupils aware of the bystander effect and importance of standing up for what is right.

Sex education should focus on life skills. Pupils should be given the skills to deal with the challenges of early exposure to porn which normalises sexual violence. They need to be taught the difference between fantasy and reality and be made aware of the complex reality of sex including emotions, respect

and consent.

Sexual violence is not a nice phrase. Teaching it is not always easy, or palatable, but it has never been so vital. If we want our pupils to be the torchbearers for a more enlightened, accepting and safer society, teaching them about sexual violence is our responsibility. Just as we offer kindness, compassion and respect to every pupil, we must give them every chance to enrich their own character with these attributes.

*Jo Morgan is Head of Pastoral Curriculum at The Portsmouth Grammar School. Jo provides articles, talks and training on gender, sexuality and sex and relationships education. For further information [you can contact her here](#).*

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