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Sexual Harassment at School

By TARA PARKER-POPE

Sexual harassment at school is surprisingly common. (Richard Perry/The New York Times)
More than a third of middle- and high-school students may be victims of sexual harassment by their classmates, a new report shows.

The problem of sexual harassment from peers — which can include name-calling and unwanted touching in hallways and classrooms — is often largely dismissed as normal student behavior by school officials. However, the emotional toll of sexual harassment by school kids appears to be even worse than physical bullying, according to new research published this month in the journal *Sex Roles*.

“It happens in gym, on the school bus and when kids change classes,” said Susan Fineran, study coauthor and associate professor in the school of social work and women’s and gender studies at the University of Southern Maine. “And it’s who you’re sitting next to, who’s sitting behind you and in front of you.”

To study the issue, Dr. Fineran and coauthor James Gruber from the University of Michigan in Dearborn surveyed 522 children between the ages of 11 and 18 about their experiences with bullying and sexual harassment at school. Overall, 35 percent of kids reported they had been victims of some form of sexual harassment.

Boys and girls reported equal levels of harassment, but girls and sexual minorities were far more upset by it, suffering from lower self-esteem, poorer mental and physical health, and more trauma symptoms.

Sexual harassment by classmates can be both physical and verbal. Walking through school hallways or in classrooms, girls said they must fend off boys reaching out and squeezing their breasts or grabbing their crotch or bottom. But girls also verbally harass each other, making lewd comments and writing sexually-charged allegations on Web pages or in text messages.

Openly gay and lesbian students, as well as students perceived to be gay, are victimized at much higher rates. In the latest study, 70 percent of gay and lesbian students reported that they had been sexually harassed at school. Name-calling is common, but humiliation also often plays a role, such as pulling down a boy’s pants in front of other students.

Schools often focus only on general bullying problems, but Drs. Fineran and Gruber argue that sexual harassment is a distinct problem that should be addressed separately, in part because laws, particularly the education law known as Title IX, already exists to protect students from sexual discrimination and harassment at school.

“Title IX protects everybody in school against this kind of behavior, but as soon as you call something ‘bullying,’ then it’s just viewed as ill behavior that one student does to another student,” Dr. Fineran said. “Sexual harassment is really an environmental problem for the school. The school needs to do something about stopping sexual harassment because they’re legally bound to.”