

# Sexual harassment common among middle school children, study finds

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Homophobic bullying is the precursor to sexual harassment among US schoolchildren, according to a new study by educational psychologist Dorothy Espelage, who conducted the research while on the University of Illinois' education faculty.

The recent suicide of Brandy Vela, a teen in Texas City, Texas, was a potent reminder of the sometimes tragic consequences of bullying. According to Vela's parents, the teen fatally shot herself Nov. 29 following months of bullying and sexual harassment, perpetrated in part through text messages and social media.

Sexual harassment is a prevalent form of victimization that most antibullying programs ignore and teachers and school officials often fail to recognize, said bullying and youth violence expert Dorothy L. Espelage.

Espelage recently led a five-year study that examined links between bullying and sexual harassment among schoolchildren in Illinois. Nearly half - 43 percent - of [middle school students](#) surveyed for the study reported they had been the victims of verbal sexual harassment such as sexual comments, jokes or gestures during the prior year.

The study followed 1,300 Illinois youths from middle school to high school, examining the risk factors associated with bullying and sexual harassment and the characteristics of the perpetrators. Students from four middle schools completed the surveys, and some of the youths and their teachers also were interviewed by the researchers.

Espelage, who conducted the research while on the faculty of the University of Illinois, is a professor of psychology at the University of Florida.

While [verbal harassment](#) was more common than physical sexual harassment or sexual assault, 21 percent of students reported having been touched, grabbed or pinched in a sexual way, and 18 percent said peers had brushed up against them in a suggestive manner.

Students also reported being forced to kiss the perpetrators, having their private areas touched without consent and being "pantsexed" - having their pants or shorts jerked down by someone else in public.

About 14 percent of the students in the study reported having been the target of sexual rumors, and 9 percent had been victimized with sexually explicit graffiti in school locker rooms or bathrooms.

According to Espelage, "sexual harassment among adolescents is directly related to bullying," particularly homophobic bullying.

Homophobic name-calling emerges among fifth- and sixth-grade bullies as a means of asserting power over other students, Espelage said. Youths who are the targets of homosexual name-calling and jokes then feel compelled to demonstrate they are not gay or lesbian by sexually harassing peers of the opposite sex.

About 16 percent of students in the study reported that they had been the targets of homophobic name-calling or jokes, and nearly 5 percent of youths reported that this harassment happened to them often.

On the surveys, youths were asked an open-ended question about their most upsetting experience of sexual harassment. Fourteen percent of students who reported being victimized negated their experiences by writing that their peers' behaviors were "not really sexual harassment" because the incidents were "meaningless" or intended as jokes.

"What was most surprising and concerning was that these young people were dismissive of these experiences, even though they described them as very upsetting," Espelage said. "Students failed to recognize the seriousness of these

behaviors - in part because teachers and school officials failed to address them. Prevention programs need to address what is driving this dismissiveness."

Youths who were dismissive of sexual harassment experiences also were more likely to perpetrate homophobic name-calling, the researchers found.

While students reported that large proportions of these sexual harassment incidents occurred in places such as school hallways, classrooms, gym locker rooms or gym classes where faculty and staff members ostensibly might witness them, the researchers found that many teachers, [school officials](#) and staff members failed to acknowledge that sexual harassment occurred in their schools.

Many of these adults also were unaware that they were mandated by school district or federal policies to protect students from sexual harassment, Espelage said.

"These findings highlight the importance of making sexual harassment prevention efforts a priority in U.S. school districts, and that will require the efforts of students, faculty and staff members, school administrators and practitioners such as school psychologists," Espelage said. "Schools need to have a consistently enforced policy that clearly defines sexual harassment and establishes regulations against engaging in such behavior. School officials also must provide guidelines for faculty and staff members on how to address these incidents and how to respond appropriately to student reports of sexual harassment."

Sexual harassment experiences varied across socio-demographic groups, depending on students' age, race and sex. For example, females were at greatest risk of sexual harassment, while African-American girls and boys were at greatest risk of being victimized by romantic partners, the researchers found.

Counseling techniques, interventions and prevention programs for [students](#) need to consider these socio-demographic differences and address relevant factors that contribute to [sexual harassment](#) in racially diverse [school](#) populations, Espelage said.

**Explore further:** [Boys who bully peers more likely to engage in sexual harassment](#)

**More information:** Dorothy L. Espelage et al, Understanding types, locations, & perpetrators of peer-to-peer sexual harassment in U.S. middle schools: A focus on sex, racial, and grade differences, *Children and Youth Services Review* (2016). DOI: [10.1016/j.childyouth.2016.11.010](#)

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