

What Teachers Can Do to Prevent Sexual Abuse in Schools Pegi Taylor, free-lance writer

Resources Sidebar

In 2001, the American Association of University Women (AAUW) education foundation published the results and recommendations of a report, based on a Harris Interactive survey, conducted with 2,064 public school students in eighth through eleventh grade. The report, *Hostile Hallways: Bullying, Teasing, and Sexual Harassment in School*, can be ordered by calling 207-728-7602 or at www.aauw.org.

As another outcome of the study, the AAUW prepared (2002) a guide, "Harassment-Free Hallways: How to Stop Sexual Harassment in Schools," for students, parents, and educators (www.aauw.org/ef/harass).

The Center for Sex Offender Management has many articles available online, including "Understanding Juvenile Sexual Offending Behavior: Emerging Research, Treatment Approaches, and Management Practices" (www.csom.org, Dec 1999).

Last summer, the Nevada Coalition Against Sexual Violence published some of its findings in an article, titled "Educator Sexual Abuse Statistics." (www.ncsv.org/educator_sexual_statistics.htm). S.E.S.A.M.E. (see following) Board President Terri Miller gathered the information.

The S.E.S.A.M.E. (Survivors of Educator Sexual Abuse and Misconduct Emerge) web site provides survivor stories and links. S.E.S.A.M.E. believes "the power imbalance between a teacher and student (of any age) creates a climate that can facilitate sexual exploitation behavior by the teacher, behavior that is psychologically equivalent to incest" (www.ncweb.com/org/rapecrisis/sesamehome.html, downloaded Sept 2002).

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[Because this article by Pegi Taylor (APSAC Advisor, Summer 2003) contained printing errors that rendered portions of it illegible, we are reprinting the entire article in this issue. - Erna Olafson, Editor-in-Chief]

Is there anything that makes a teacher's skin crawl more than reading in the paper or seeing on TV a story about a school employee committing a sex crime against a student? Yet, this is only one of the four types of sexual misconduct that occurs in schools. The other three happen when students sexually abuse other students, students sexually assault staff, and staff sexually assaults other school personnel. This article focuses on contact that includes minors, so it will not address the category of sex crimes against coworkers within schools.

Teachers can do a great deal to prevent sexual abuse of students. But first, just what does the term sexual abuse encompass? For the purposes of this article, sexual abuse does not include verbal sexual harassment. STOP IT NOW! (a national organization dedicated to ending the sexual abuse of children) uses a definition of sexual abuse that includes both contact behaviors, such as touching a child's genitals or forcing a child to touch a teacher's genitals, and noncontact behaviors, such as exhibitionism or watching a child undress.

Robert J. Shoop, a professor of education law at Kansas State University, has testified in over thirty court cases involving sexual abuse or harassment in schools. Every week he gets calls from school districts about everything from a teacher having sex with a student in a classroom in front of 30 pupils to multiple teachers having sex with the same student.

Shoop understands how distressing it is for teachers to consider such situations. "There is this thinking that everyone knows a teacher shouldn't have sex with a student," he said during a recent phone interview (October 2002). "It's embarrassing and demeaning to talk about it." Shoop urges teachers to get beyond their discomfort because, as far as he can determine, 5% to 10% of students will be sexually abused by a staff person between kindergarten and twelfth grade. He believes this is a conservative figure due to underreporting when older teenagers are involved.

Some simple rules Shoop advocates can go a long way to protect both students and teachers:

- "Teachers shouldn't meet students outside of school. If you choose to be in an unsupervised relationship with a student, you are doing so at your own peril.
- "No room should be without visible access from the outside. Don't cover the windows with artwork.
- "Don't transport students in your own vehicle." Like all rules, this one has exceptions. "If I were driving home in a sleet storm and saw a 15-year-old student without a coat, I would take her home," says Shoop. "But I would immediately call my principal and let him or her know what I had done."

Teachers can work with administrators to make sure schools do not become sexualized environments. A sexually charged climate can start without a teacher having any intent to harm a student. For example, a student might confide in a favorite teacher and talk about having sexual struggles. This teacher, rather than refer the student to the school nurse or counselor, might get drawn into a discussion and relate stories about his or her own sexual behavior. There are two dangers to this sort of conversation. The student might misinterpret the teacher's motives, and teachers who sexually abuse students use these sorts of situations to initiate contact.

Sexual misconduct often starts with the teacher talking about sex or brushing up against a student's genitals. "If students don't understand that this is inappropriate behavior they should report," says Shoop, "then how can the school expect students to come forward after a serious incident has happened?" By this point, students will often feel responsible and guilty for their own compliance and may be infatuated with the perpetrator.

Teachers can ask school districts to identify a specific staff person to handle complaints about sexual abuse and harassment. Shoop suggests that if a school has a counselor or social worker, this is the best person for the job. All teachers can keep an eye on the staff.

STOP IT NOW!'s web site lists a number of warning signs that might indicate improper conduct. Teachers should report staff, including administrators, librarians, bus drivers, or custodians, who spend time alone with a student, buy gifts for a particular student, or repeatedly talk about a student's developing body. Teachers who coach extracurricular sports, music, and drama have the opportunity to get particularly close to students. A study conducted by *Education Week* reported that in 244 nationwide active cases (from Mar-Aug 1998), in which staff sexually abused students, at least one-third of the teachers were leaders of extracurricular activities. Instructors can ask for more oversight of after school teacher-student interactions.¹

WHAT TEACHERS CAN DO TO PREVENT SEXUAL ABUSE IN SCHOOLS

To have school personnel monitoring each other is risky, however. No one wants to create a “Big Brother Is Watching” atmosphere. “You have a double-edged sword,” Shoop adds. “By heightening people’s awareness, you can make people believe every teacher is a bad person, and that clearly is wrong. But by pretending it doesn’t happen, you create conditions that allow it to keep happening.”

Another risk of vigilance is teachers staying at arm’s length from students. Nan Stein, a senior research assistant at the Center for Research on Women at Wellesley College, said in an interview for the *Harvard Education Letter*: “I’m in favor of teachers being able to have appropriate physical contact with kids.” She has extensively studied and written about sexual contact in schools and believes touch is especially important in elementary school. “I only have two rules about touch,” says Stein. “Don’t put any kid on your lap, and don’t give neck rubs and back massages.” Rather than having young students sit on their laps, teachers can have affectionate boys and girls sit beside them.²

As instructors and supervisors, teachers can also do a huge amount to prevent students from sexually abusing other students. Most people are unaware of the extent of sex crimes perpetrated by children. The Center for Sex Offender Management published an article (Dec 1999) that estimated the following: “Juveniles account for up to one-fifth of all rapes and almost one-half of all cases of child molestation committed each year.” Some of these crimes happen at school.³

David Prescott has assessed and treated adolescents with sexual behavior problems in Vermont for 15 years. In a phone interview (Sep 2002), he suggested that teachers can play a significant role in teaching students to plan and manage their behavior and thus help reduce sexual abuse by juveniles—both inside and outside of school.

First, teachers can address students’ “callous sexual attitudes.” For example, Prescott says male athletes may express sexual entitlement and assume, “I’m a basketball player, and if I want to have sex with a girl she should be willing and grateful.” Second, instructors can help curb impulsivity, another common feature of youths who commit sexual offenses. Such students tend to be poor problem solvers and don’t understand that actions have consequences. Third, and likely most important, teachers can help students develop positive self-esteem. Juveniles who don’t feel adequate can become emotionally detached to the point that they will say, “What do you mean I sexually abused her? She was drunk at a party and was unconscious, so I had sex with her. What’s the big deal?”

Sex education is another vehicle that can help prevent juveniles, both male and female, from becoming sexual abusers. “Kids need an owner’s manual to their own bodies,” says Prescott. Gail Ryan, director of the Perpetration Prevention Program at the Kempe Children’s Center in Denver, Colorado, agrees wholeheartedly. In a SIECUS (Sexuality Information and Education Council of the United States) report (Vol. 29/1, 2000), “Perpetration Prevention: The Forgotten Frontier in Sexuality Education and Research,” she argues, “The child’s risk of sexually abusing other children has been largely ignored in sexuality education and sexual abuse prevention programs.” She believes “children need to be given permission to talk about sexuality and to learn to define all types of abusive behaviors.” Teachers and conservative parents might agree on sex education programming if they knew it deterred sexual abuse.

The most complicated and least discussed type of sexual abuse in schools is the situation of students assaulting teachers. In Milwaukee, Melissa Bittner, convicted in 2002 of having sexual contact with a 16-year-old student at a private high school, claimed the student had assaulted her. Bittner, a first-year teacher who had attended college in Ohio, insisted she received no training about sexual abuse issues during college or when she started teaching.⁴

She might have had more of a chance to support her claim if she had worked in a public school. In a July 2002 interview, Sam Carmen, executive director of the Milwaukee Teachers Education Association, detailed what would have happened if Bittner had taught in a Milwaukee Public School. After the youth accused Bittner, the principal would have notified the Milwaukee Public Schools Central Administration. The central administration would have called the MTEA, generally within an hour or so, and the MTEA would have immediately sent a lawyer to meet with Bittner to clarify the facts in the case and make sure Bittner’s rights were protected. MPS would have removed Bittner from the school during an investigation. When the district attorney charged her with committing a crime, the MTEA’s role would have ended.

Perhaps the first step for teachers to take is to demand training. As *Education Week* recommended, “Districts should consider training for educators in how to respond when sexual abuse is suspected, disclosed, witnessed, or actually experienced.”⁵

Resources Sidebar

A three-part series with twelve articles about child sexual abuse by school employees appeared in *Education Week* in December 1998. (To access other recent *Education Week* articles related to sexual abuse in schools, search “sexual abuse” in the archive at: www.edweek.org. The series is available at www.edweek.org/sreports/abuse98.htm.)

Robert J. Shoop, a professor of education law at Kansas State University, has a forthcoming book, *Sexual Abuse in Schools* (Corwin Press, 2004). He has written other books and numerous articles and has developed a number of videos. Two sources that teachers might find most pertinent are *Preventing Sexual Harassment in the High School* (Shoop and Debra Edwards, 1995, Sunburst Publications, Pleasantville, NY) and *Sexual Harassment: It’s Hurting People* (Shoop and Edwards, 1994, National Middle School Association, Columbus, OH).

STOP IT NOW!, a national organization dedicated to ending the sexual abuse of children, has a web page on “Warning Signs About Child Sexual Abuse” (www.stopitnow.org/warnings.html).

Notes:

1. www.edweek.org/ew/vol-18/14abuse.h18, in Caroline Hendrie, “Sex With Students: When Employees Cross the Line”
2. www.edletter.org/past/issues/2000-jf/stein.shtml, *Research Online*, Jan-Feb 2000, p. 2
3. www.csom.org/pubs/juvbrf10.pdf, in John Hunter et al., “Understanding Juvenile Sexual Offending Behavior”
4. www.milwaukeeemagazine.com/112002/darkness.html; Pegi Taylor with Stanley Mallach, “The Other Side of Darkness,” *Milwaukee Magazine*, Nov 2002, pp. 58-63
5. www.edweek.org/ew/vol-18/16syst.h18, in Caroline Hendrie, “‘Zero Tolerance’ of Sex Abuse Proves Elusive,” Dec 16, 1998.