

SCHOOLS WEEK

Opinion



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Ane Vernon sets out the key policy requirements for dealing with reports of sexual abuse, and says school leaders have a duty to go far beyond them

In an environment of increasing publicity about incidents of sexual abuse and harassment between pupils, schools and colleges find themselves under enormous pressure. With all the normal pressures of the start of a new school year as well as Covid's ongoing disruptions, leaders already have plenty to contend with, but the urgency of Ofsted's June review on the topic has not abated. New statutory guidance on keeping children safe in education has come into force this month, and now is an opportune time to set the tone for the new culture that is so evidently required.

The prevalence of what has been termed 'rape culture' is not a new revelation, but that's all the more justification for the urgent need to address the issue. As a reminder of the shocking state of affairs, Ofsted's report found that "nearly

90 per cent of girls, and nearly 50 per cent of boys, said being sent explicit pictures or videos of things they did not want to see happens a lot or sometimes to them or their peers". Further, "92 per cent of girls, and 74 per cent of boys, said sexist name-calling happens a lot or sometimes to them or their peers". For some children, incidents are so commonplace that they see no point in reporting them.

One of the key points flowing from the Ofsted report is that school and college leaders should assume that sexual harassment and abuse are happening, even when there are no specific reports. They are then obliged to create a culture in which such conduct is not tolerated.

Good practice models recommend encouraging children to discuss issues around abuse and cultivating trusting and positive relationships with members of staff. Pupils can be reluctant to report abuse for fear of losing control, being ostracised or blamed, or getting their peers into trouble. They are more likely to open up to an adult when they feel their concerns will be treated with empathy and handled sensitively.

Both the complainant and the accused need ongoing support

Once a report has been made, the school is faced with many often seemingly competing considerations. Both the pupil accused of wrongdoing and the complainant require sensitive attention. Existing policies and relevant guidance should be applied with care and an effective risk assessment carried out.

When talking to the complainant it is recommended to have two members of staff present whose approach should be listening and non-judgemental. A comprehensive note is important, avoiding commentary and recording only what the child said.

Pupils will often seek an assurance of confidentiality when coming forward with a report of abuse. Care needs to be taken not to make promises that cannot be kept, although schools should do everything possible to protect the anonymity of children involved in reports of sexual violence or harassment, particularly in cases that are progressing to court.

Normally the child's parents should be informed (although there can be situations where it is reasonable or appropriate not to do so), and certain information needs to be shared with the police or social services.

Both the complainant and the accused need ongoing support. In addition to continuing provision of education, this includes counselling, pastoral support and involvement of families or external agencies.

A practical aspect that is difficult to manage is rumours spreading amongst the children, often on social media. Having clear and robust policies in place and promoting a culture of respect and empathy in the school community will go a long way to reduce the occurrence of further incidents requiring intervention. It will also avoid possible further trauma for those involved in the underlying events.

Schools have a range of sanctions at their disposal. Disciplinary measures must be applied fairly and proportionately, and take account of individual circumstances. The Ofsted report suggests that the threat of punishment can be a weaker influence on pupil behaviour than a culture in which abuse and harassment can thrive.

It may be that pupils do not know enough about the sanctions that may be applied, but it highlights the importance of creating a school-wide culture that will not tolerate abuse of any kind.

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