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## **Prevention of Sexual Harassment in Adolescences**

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**Handbook  
for  
Teachers**



# Summary

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## Introduction

School health plays a key role in health promotion and disease prevention in school settings. Its development was boosted with the Ottawa Charter in 1986, and it began to act in health promotion and not only in the prevention and control of communicable diseases. (Direção-Geral da Saúde (DGS), 2015)

Based on the needs of the school population, health promotion in schools develops teaching and learning processes that contribute to raising the level of health literacy, improving the lifestyle and academic results of the educational community (DGS, 2015).

This handbook is intended to be a useful tool to help secondary school teachers promote sexual education among our adolescents, enabling them to make informed, responsible, and healthy choices. It is also intended to alert teachers to the importance of preventing sexual harassment in a school context.



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# Sex Education in Schools

The *United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural Organization* (UNESCO, 2010), defines:

## *Sexuality Education,*

"As an age-appropriate and culturally relevant approach to teaching about sex and relationships, providing information that is scientifically accurate, realistic, and non-judgmental. Sexuality education provides opportunities to explore one's own values and attitudes and to develop decision-making, communication, and risk-reduction skills in relation to many aspects of sexuality". (UNESCO, 2010, p. 2)



**Adolescence**, on the other hand, is defined by the World Health Organization (WHO) (2022) as a stage of life between childhood and adulthood, between the ages of 10 and 19 years. Adolescence is an important period of development to acquire concepts for a healthy life. The same organization considers that for adolescents to develop healthily, they need age-appropriate information.

**School** is considered by several authors to be the privileged place for the teaching of sexual education, since it is here that adolescents spend most of their time, and school is also the place where the first amorous experiences appear. (Ramiro, Reis, Matos & Vilar, 2010; Kazdough, El-Ammari, Bouftini, Fakir, & El Achhab, 2019)

Kazdough, El-Ammari, Bouftini, Fakir, & El Achhab (2019), consider that schools also play a key role in reducing sexual risk behaviour and reducing sexually transmitted diseases.

There is no evidence that the promotion of sexuality education in school settings has contributed to increased sexual activity or increased risk behaviour. (WHO, 2018)



## Sexual Harassment in the School Context

Sexual Harassment in schools is a global occurrence and a Public Health issue, affecting adolescents of both sexes, with girls often being more harassed. (Hill & Kearl, 2011, Gadin & Stein, 2019; Sakellari, Berglund, Santala, Bacatum, Sousa, Aarnio, Kubiliutė, Propas & Lagin, 2022).

The European Union Directive (2006/54/EC) **defines Sexual Harassment** when:

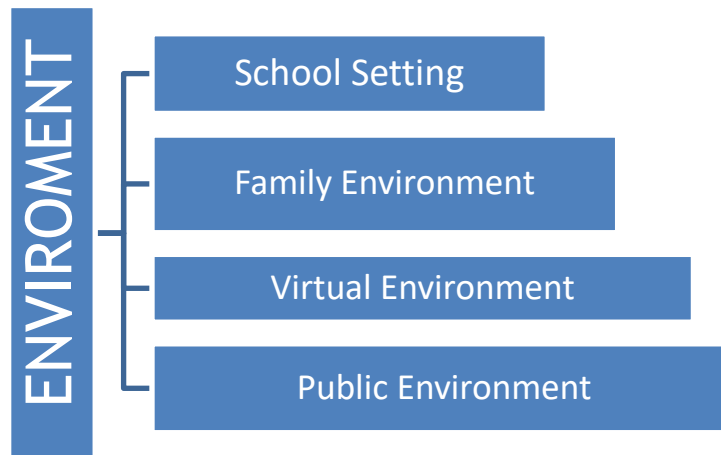
*"Unwanted behaviour of a sexual nature occurs, in verbal, non-verbal or physical form, with the purpose or effect of violating the dignity of the person, in particular by creating an intimidating, hostile, degrading, humiliating or offensive environment."*

According Matos, Machado, Morais, Rodrigues & Isaías (2022), **sexual harassment:**

- ✚ is a form of gender-based violence and discrimination;
- ✚ can seriously limit the dignity of the person and their physical and moral integrity;
- ✚ can cause various impacts at individual, social, organisational and economic levels.



The **place** where Sexual Harassment arises, is often considered a safe place. In a recent study (Sakellari, Berglund, Santala, Bacatum, Sousa, Aarnio, Kubiliuté, Propas & Lagin, 2022), adolescents identified the following as possible places where Sexual Harassment could occur:



For Matos, Machado, Morais, Rodrigues & Isaías, 2022; Hill & Kearl, 2011, Sexual Harassment, can be materialized in ways:

- 🚩 **In Person**, can be verbal, non-verbal and physical;
- 🚩 **Virtual**, through social networks, by mobile phone or by email

Several studies report (Gadin & Stein, 2019; Matos, Machado, Morais, Rodrigues & Isaías, 2022) that being subjected to sexual harassment, is associated with a set of **negative health effects**, so victims may experience:

- 🚩 anguish;
- 🚩 poor physical condition;
- 🚩 low life satisfaction;
- 🚩 fear;

- ✚ unpopularity;
- ✚ social isolation;
- ✚ trauma symptoms;
- ✚ guilt;
- ✚ shame;
- ✚ loss of confidence;
- ✚ sleep disturbances;
- ✚ eating problems;
- ✚ substance abuse;
- ✚ depression.



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These negative effects, can also spill over at school level, so according to (Hill & Kearn(2011), Gadin & Stein (2019), victims of sexual harassment, may present:

- ✚ decreased performance at school;
- ✚ reduced participation in the classroom;
- ✚ avoidance of specific locations in the school;
- ✚ school phobia;
- ✚ absenteeism.



For Matos, Machado, Morais, Rodrigues & Isaías (2022) these factors may compromise the affective-family life of the victim, as well as compromise the relational and social domain.

**Sexual harassment** is normally an **under-reported act** with the official mechanisms. For Matos, Machado, Morais, Rodrigues & Isaías (2022) the causes are due to:

- ✚ fear of retaliation;
- ✚ ineffectiveness or ignorance;
- ✚ loss of confidentiality.

At the secondary school level, the most common strategies, used by adolescent victims of sexual harassment are:

- ✚ do nothing;
- ✚ try to avoid the situation;
- ✚ go away.

As Sexual Harassment is a global problem, which may be practiced in various ways and may have multiple consequences on adolescents, it is essential that school institutions disseminate, develop, and implement strategies to prevent it. In a study carried out by Hill& Kearn (2011), some strategies were indicated to prevent sexual harassment in the school context:

- ✚ Create and disseminate a Sexual Harassment policy;
- ✚ Provide guidance on how to act upon a Sexual Harassment complaint (protocol);
- ✚ Disseminate information about Sexual Harassment, including what it is, what the school's policy is, and what students can and should do if they are harassed or witness it;
- ✚ Appoint a teacher to manage the school's Sexual Harassment policy and to receive complaints;
- ✚ To provide training on AS to the school community.



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