Sexual harassment in schools

Work Health and Safety · https://www.aeuact.org.au/Docs/sexual-harassment-in-schools/

Sexual harassment and gendered violence have no place in our schools. But we know it happens - and in schools, the person doing the harassing is often a student.

This guide helps you understand what these behaviours are, why they're a safety issue, what you can do if you experience or witness them, and what your employer must do to keep you safe at work.

This is a safety issue, not just bad behaviour

You have a right to be safe at work. That doesn't change because the person making you feel unsafe is a student.

When a student sexually harasses a staff member, it's often treated as a behaviour management issue. But it's also a work health and safety issue - and that means your employer has legal obligations to protect you.

Sexual harassment is a form of occupational violence. You should report it through the Safety Portal, just as you would report physical aggression or threats. Some members don't realise that occupational violence includes sexual harassment – it’s not just about physical violence. If a student makes sexualised comments, touches you inappropriately, or engages in any of the behaviours described below, that's occupational violence.

The AEU hears from members who feel they should just put up with sexualised comments, inappropriate touching, or degrading behaviour from students because they’re told that “they're just kids” or “that's what teenagers are like.”

That's not okay. You shouldn't have to tolerate behaviour that makes you feel uncomfortable, unsafe, or humiliated - regardless of who it comes from. Education workplaces should be safe for everyone.

Why is this getting worse?

If you've noticed an increase in sexist, misogynistic, or sexually harassing behaviour from students, particularly boys, you're not imagining it.

Research from Australia and overseas has documented consistent patterns in the experiences of women teachers that are linked to the “manosphere” - a collection of online communities, influencers and podcasters that promote sexist beliefs about women and rigid ideas about masculinity. Some of the most popular content creators actively encourage boys and young men to disrespect women, reject the authority of teachers, and treat school as a waste of time.

This content is reaching students through platforms like TikTok, YouTube, Instagram and Snapchat, and it's showing up in classrooms. Researchers have documented behaviours ranging from verbal harassment and sexually suggestive comments through to physical intimidation and assault directed at women staff. Some women teachers have reported moving schools or leaving the profession because of these experiences and the lack of appropriate support from their schools.

This matters for your work because these behaviours are not just disruptive, they are workplace sexual harassment and gender-based violence against staff. They are psychosocial hazards that your employer is obligated to manage.

You don't need to be an expert to respond to these behaviours. What matters is that you can name them for what they are, report them properly, and expect your employer to act. That's what this guide is here to help with.

For more on how online content is influencing student behaviour in schools, see ANROWS’ *An Introductory Guide to the Manosphere and the Impacts for Young People, Teachers and Schools* (2026).

Your right to a safe workplace is protected by law

There are several legal frameworks that apply to this topic. Sexual harassment in the workplace is prohibited under the *Fair Work Act 2009* (Cth), the *Sex Discrimination Act 1984* (Cth), and the *Discrimination Act 1991* (ACT), and the *Work Health and Safety Act 2011* (ACT) makes it the employer’s responsibility to provide a safe workplace. The *Human Rights Act 2004* (ACT) affirms your right to work in conditions that are safe and respectful. The WHS framework goes further to provide guidance on what is expected of employers to prevent sexual harassment and aggression.

Importantly, these laws also protect you from retaliation. Your employer (or a Manager) cannot take action against you if you make reasonable complaints about sexual harassment in the workplace.

You might have heard about changes made to laws in response to the Respect@Work report. There's now a 'positive duty' for employers to prevent sexual harassment, not just react to it. This means the Directorate must take proactive steps to eliminate harassment - they can't wait for complaints to come in before acting.

None of these laws or regulations have carve-outs if the perpetrator is a minor. Remember, it’s not about the student, it’s about your right to a safe workplace and the employer’s obligation to provide this.

You don’t need to read or know much about these laws; that’s what the experts in the AEU office are here for. What you need to know is that when an AEU member stands up for safety in the workplace, they’re doing so on very solid ground.

Understanding the terminology

Sexual harassment is an unwelcome sexual advance, an unwelcome request for sexual favours, or other unwelcome conduct of a sexual nature in circumstances in which a person reasonably feels offended, humiliated, or intimidated.

Gender-based harassment is unwelcome conduct based on a person's gender, sex, or sexuality. Sexual harassment is one form of gender-based harassment.

Hostile working environment is a workplace where sexist remarks, crude language, or degrading behaviour creates an environment that is intimidating or offensive, even if the behaviour isn't directed at a specific person.

These behaviours are all psychosocial hazards under WHS law. Your employer must manage them just like any other workplace hazard.

In schools, sexual and gender-based harassment might look like:

- Unwelcome touching or other physical contact
- Repeated or inappropriate advances
- Unnecessary familiarity, such as deliberately brushing up against a person
- Sending or showing someone sexually explicit pictures, posters or gifts

- Inappropriate staring or leering
- Suggestive comments or jokes
- Using suggestive or sexualised nicknames
- Sexually explicit or indecent emails, phone calls, text messages or online interactions
- Insults or taunts based on gender or sexuality
- Deliberately misgendering someone or using incorrect pronouns to demean them
- Derogatory comments about someone's appearance or clothing based on gender stereotypes
- Threats or sharing intimate images or film without consent

Sometimes overt behaviour is easier to identify. But a pattern of sexist remarks, crude language, or a classroom culture that feels degrading can be just as harmful.

You might also encounter behaviours that are linked to online “manosphere” content. These can be harder to recognise because they're sometimes framed as jokes or legitimate questions, but they're designed to undermine and humiliate. For example, boys telling a woman teacher to “make me a sandwich” (implying a woman's place is in the kitchen), barking or making animal sounds directed at women staff, asking pointed “baiting” questions intended to provoke rather than learn (such as “is the gender pay gap even real?” or “are you a feminist?”), or groups of boys circling or physically crowding women staff.

If you experience or witness behaviour like this, it's gender-based harassment, even if the student frames it as a joke or a question. Report it as such.

What do we mean by sexual assault?

Sexual assault is defined in WHS law as an incident that involves a sexual act without consent. It includes:

- Unwelcome or unwanted sexual intercourse;
- Unwelcome or unwanted sexual touching or acts of indecency;
- Unwelcome or unwanted acts or activity that a reasonable person in the circumstances would consider to be sexual, for sexual arousal or sexual gratification.

The employer must report all incidents of sexual assault to WorkSafe ACT.

Some workers face higher risks

While anyone can experience sexual or gender-based harassment, certain workers are more likely to experience it. Research shows that harassment is often concentrated among workers who already face other forms of discrimination or who have less power in the workplace.

Additionally, workers who experience multiple forms of discrimination may be less likely to report harassment. Schools must consider whether their reporting and support processes are accessible to all staff. This includes the time and device necessary to complete a report, as well as a culture that encourages reporting.

It's also worth knowing that some of the online communities driving these behaviours overlap with other hate-based movements, including racism, homophobia, and transphobia. This means that staff who experience sexual or gender-based harassment may also be targeted on the basis of their race, cultural background, sexuality, or gender identity. If you're experiencing harassment that targets more than one aspect of who you are, that context matters - include it in your report and let the AEU know. A school's response should address the full picture, not just one part of it.

Why does this matter for your health?

Sexual harassment and gendered violence can cause real harm. Someone could experience effects such as:

- Stress, anxiety and depression
- Feeling isolated or withdrawn
- Difficulty sleeping
- Dreading going to work
- Loss of confidence
- Physical symptoms like headaches or stomach problems

These effects can build up over time. Even behaviour that seems minor can take a toll if it's happening regularly.

Your employer has to take proactive action

Under work health and safety law, your employer must eliminate or minimise risks to your health and safety, including psychosocial risks like harassment.

This means the Education Directorate can't just wait for complaints. The WHS Code of practice requires a proactive risk management process with four steps:

1. **Identify hazards** - find out where and when harassment could occur
2. **Assess risks** - understand how serious the risk is and who might be affected
3. **Control risks** - put measures in place to eliminate or minimise the risk
4. **Review controls** - check that controls are working and make changes if needed

Your school should be identifying risks of sexual and gender-based harassment before incidents occur, not just responding after the fact. This includes looking at situations where harassment is more likely (such as one-on-one interactions, isolated spaces, or particular class groupings) and putting controls in place.

What can I expect of my employer?

WHS regulations require employers to follow a hierarchy of controls. This means they must start with the most effective measures and try to implement them.

In all WHS matters, the hierarchy of controls looks like this:

1. **Eliminate the hazard** if possible
2. **Minimise the risk of harm** through:
    - Substitution (changing how something is done)
    - Isolation (separating workers from the hazard)
    - Engineering controls (physical changes)
    - Administrative controls (policies, procedures, training)

When we’re talking about sexual harassment in a school context, this might mean:

- Establishing a formal agreement with a student that they will cease sexual harassment (elimination)
- Remove the student from the class of the person they are harassing (elimination)
- Changing class arrangements so a staff member isn't alone with a student who has previously harassed them, or arranging classes so that there are always two adults to a class group (substitution and isolation)
- Ensuring line of sight in classroom spaces (engineering)
- Having clear policies and training on responding to harassment (administrative)

Administrative controls like policies and training are important, but they’re less reliable because they depend on people following them. That's why they should be used alongside other measures, not on their own.

Examples of preventive controls in schools

WHS regulations provide examples of control measures that can be adapted for schools:

Work design

- Avoid situations where staff are isolated with students known to pose a risk
- Ensure adequate staffing so that no one is left managing difficult situations alone
- Consider class groupings and whether changes could reduce risk

Systems of work

- Maintain communication systems so staff can get help quickly if needed
- Ensure transparent processes for raising concerns
- Provide clear procedures for responding to harassment from students
- Have systems to alert relevant staff to known risks

Physical environment

- Ensure good visibility in classrooms and common areas
- Provide adequate lighting in all areas staff use
- Ensure staff have a safe place to retreat if needed
- Consider the layout of spaces where one-on-one interactions occur

Workplace culture and behaviour

- Set and enforce clear behaviour standards for students regarding respectful treatment of staff
- Address inappropriate behaviour early, before it escalates
- Ensure staff know that harassment from students is taken seriously

Training and supervision

- Train staff on what sexual and gender-based harassment looks like and how to respond

- Train staff on how to deal with students displaying inappropriate behaviour
- Provide appropriate supervision and support for less experienced staff
- Include bystander intervention training so staff know how to support colleagues

Consultation is required, not optional

Your school must consult with workers and Health and Safety Representatives (HSRs) when identifying hazards, assessing risks, and deciding on control measures. This is a legal requirement.

If your school is developing or reviewing its approach to managing harassment risks, staff and HSRs should be involved in that process.

What should I do if this is happening to me, or I see it happening to someone else?

You have options. What you do depends on the situation and what feels right for you.

Report it through Safety Portal

This creates an official record and triggers the school and the Directorate to respond. All reports are reviewed by the Education Support Office to assess the physical and psychological impact of the incident and determine the appropriate response.

You can report even if you're not sure it's 'serious enough.' If it made you feel uncomfortable or unsafe, it's worth reporting.

How to make a report

Report in Safety Portal *and* SAS. When a student is involved, you should report the incident in both the ACTPS Safety Portal (for WHS purposes) and the Student Administration System (SAS). These serve different purposes - Safety Portal triggers WHS processes and support for you; SAS records the student behaviour.

Use the right terminology. When describing what happened, use the words **“sexual harassment”** or **“sexual assault”** or **“gender-based harassment”** or **“occupational violence”** if that's what it was. This ensures your report is categorised correctly and treated with the seriousness it deserves. You can refer to the definitions at the start of this guide if you need help finding the right words.

Don't downplay it. If a student made sexual comments to you, don't describe it as just “inappropriate language” or “poor behaviour” - call it sexual harassment.

Be specific about what happened. Include:

- What was said or done
- When and where it happened
- Who was involved (you can and should identify the student)
- Who else witnessed it
- How it affected you (for example: “I felt humiliated,” “I felt unsafe,” “I am feeling anxious about returning to that class”)

Select 'Psychological' as the body part affected if you haven't suffered a physical injury but the incident has caused you distress. Psychosocial harm is just as important as physical harm.

You can note if it's part of a pattern. If this behaviour has happened before, whether from the same student or others, then say so. This helps the Directorate understand the full picture.

Aim to report within 48 hours. Your Manager should ensure you have time during work hours and access to ICT to make your report.

Here's an example of how you might describe an incident:

“On [date], during period 3 in room 12, a Year 10 student made repeated sexual comments directed at me in front of the class, including [specific comments]. This is sexual harassment. I felt humiliated and undermined in front of my students. This is the third time this student has made comments of a sexual nature towards me. I am feeling anxious about teaching this class.”

If you can't make the report yourself, your Manager can submit a report on your behalf - for example, if you need to take leave.

What should happen after you report

Your principal or Manager has responsibilities under the Directorate's occupational violence procedures. After an incident, they should:

Conduct an operational debrief: This should happen shortly after the incident, typically the same day. It's a short meeting where:

- You're supported to complete your Safety Portal report

- You can contribute to an initial risk assessment (is it likely to happen again? what controls are needed?)
- You're made aware of supports like leave, workers compensation, workplace adjustments, and EAP

Review the incident: Your Manager should conduct a review to understand why the incident occurred and what can be done to reduce future risk. This isn't about blame, it's about making things safer.

Implement controls: If changes are needed to keep you safe (like adjusting class arrangements, increasing supervision, or putting boundaries in place with the student), these should be put in place.

Check in with you regularly: Your Manager should maintain contact to see how you're going and what support you need.

Close the loop: You should be told what controls have been put in place to keep you safe. This is a legal requirement - WHS law requires employers to inform workers about actions taken following safety concerns being raised. This isn't about knowing the details of how a student's behaviour is being managed; it's about being clear on what's being done to protect you at work.

If these things aren't happening, you can raise it with your principal and/or talk to the AEU office.

Talk to your principal or a school leader

Let them know what's happening. They should work with you to put measures in place to keep you safe. If they don't have the resources to do so, they should talk to relevant staff in ESO.

Risk identification and assessment can take different forms. One tool is an Occupational Violence Risk Assessment (OVRA), which is a structured analysis that identifies controls to reduce the risk of harm. But the obligation to identify and manage risks doesn't depend on a formal OVRA being conducted - your school should be taking action to manage risks as soon as they're identified.

You should be consulted in any risk assessment process, and the controls identified should be shared with you and other relevant staff.

If your school isn't taking it seriously, that's a problem. Contact the AEU office for advice.

Contact the AEU

We're here to help. We can give you confidential advice, help you understand your options, and advocate for you if you're not getting the support you need.

Email aeuact@aeuact.org.au or call 6272 7900.

Access support through EAP

The Employee Assistance Program provides free, confidential counselling. This is a good option if you're feeling stressed, anxious or overwhelmed. You don't need your employer's permission to access it, and your workplace will not be told that you have used it.

Here’s our guide on how and why to access the EAP. Contact Converge (the EAP provider) on 1300 687 327.

Keep your own records

Write down what happened, when it happened, and who else was present. Keep copies of any relevant emails or messages. This can help if you need to escalate the matter later.

“It's just a student—should I really report it?”

Yes. Here's why:

1. **You have a right to be safe at work.** That doesn't change because the person using the behaviour is a student.
2. **Reporting creates a record.** If the behaviour is happening to you, it might be happening to others. Reports help identify patterns, both with individual students and across the school.
3. **Your employer can only act on what they know about.** If you don't report it, your school might not realise there's a problem, and nothing will change.
4. **Reporting isn't about punishment.** It's about managing the risk and putting supports in place. The response to a student is different to the response to an adult, but there still needs to be a response.
5. **It's not your job to manage this alone.** The employer has a duty to keep you safe. Let them do their job.

Even where a student may not be legally culpable for their actions (for example, because of their age or a disability), your employer still has a duty to manage the WHS risk. The student's circumstances may affect how the school responds to their behaviour, but it doesn't change your right to a safe workplace.

What if the behaviour is really serious?

Sexual assault is a crime. If a student has sexually assaulted you, you can report it to police (ACT Policing: 131 444, or 000 in an emergency).

You don't have to report to police if you don't want to. But you should still report through Safety Portal and let your school know what happened.

If you need immediate support, the Canberra Rape Crisis Centre is available on (02) 6247 2525 (7am–10:30pm, seven days).

What can HSRs and sub-branches do?

Health and Safety Representatives (HSRs) have special powers under the WHS Act. They can:

- Investigate complaints about unsafe situations
- Request information from the school and Directorate about how risks are being managed
- Represent workers in discussions with management
- Issue a Provisional Improvement Notice if the school isn't meeting its WHS obligations

HSRs must be consulted when the school is identifying hazards, assessing risks, making decisions about how to eliminate or minimise risks, or proposing changes that affect staff health and safety. If your school is developing risk assessments or reviewing its approach to sexual and gender-based harassment, the HSR should be involved.

If your school doesn't have an HSR who's an AEU member, consider nominating one. They can be a powerful advocate for staff safety.

Sub-branches can:

- Raise concerns collectively if there's a pattern of behaviour or a culture problem
- Request that policies be reviewed and improved
- Request better training on responding to sexual harassment

- Support members so that no one faces challenges alone

What if the culture at my school tolerates this behaviour?

Sometimes the problem isn't one student, it's a broader culture. This might look and sound like sexist comments in the classroom or staffroom being laughed off, crude language being treated as normal, or staff who raise concerns being told they’re overreacting.

If that sounds like your school, it's a systemic issue that needs systemic action. Talk to your sub-branch about raising it collectively. Contact the AEU office - we can help you work out the best approach.

Research has consistently found that how a school responds to incidents of sexism and misogyny makes a significant difference. When women and girls are not believed or taken seriously, or when incidents are dismissed as “just banter,” it creates further harm. On the other hand, schools that set clear and consistent behavioural expectations, with strong leadership and properly resourced whole-school approaches, are better placed to support staff who have been affected and hold those who have caused harm accountable.

Your school's response to these behaviours shouldn't fall on individual staff members to manage. It requires leadership from the top and a commitment to treating gendered harassment as the safety issue it is, not a minor disruption that staff are expected to absorb.

Remember: you're not asking for special treatment. You're asking for a safe workplace. That's a basic right.