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Guidance

Definitions of bullying and harassment

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Applies to England

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Bullying

Bullying is unwanted behaviour that can be repeated, or a one-off incident causing harm, intimidation or offence. It can affect anyone, including school and trust staff and leaders. It often involves a power imbalance, though not always.

Bullying can be:

- physical
- psychological
- emotional
- threats
- harassment
- exclusion

Harassment

Harassment is any unwanted conduct that has the purpose or effect of either violating a person's dignity, or creating an intimidating, hostile, degrading, humiliating or offensive environment for them. The behaviour may involve conduct of a sexual nature (sexual harassment), or it could relate to one or more protected characteristics under the [Equality Act 2010](#).

Protected characteristics include:

- age
- disability
- gender reassignment
- marriage and civil partnership status
- pregnancy and maternity
- race
- religion or belief
- sex
- sexual orientation

In the workplace, it is against the law to harass someone under the [Equality Act 2010](#). [Technical guidance for schools in England](#) contains advice for schools on the Equality Act.

Harassment can also be a criminal offence under the [Protection from Harassment](#)

[Act 1997](#). Police advise that repeated harassment of 2 or more incidents can be reported. You do not need to gather 'evidence' about what's been happening, such as text messages, videos or photos. Any information or evidence you can provide is helpful, but do not delay reporting an incident to gather it. [How to report stalking or harassment](#) provides information from the police on reporting harassment.

Employers have a duty to anticipate and take reasonable steps to prevent sexual harassment. If it occurs, they should act to prevent recurrence.

Harassment by association

This occurs when someone is harassed because of their association with another person who has a protected characteristic.

Example: an employee is harassed because they care for a disabled child. The harassment is not because the employee is disabled, but because they are associated with someone who is.

Harassment by perception

This occurs when someone is harassed because they are perceived to have a protected characteristic, even if they do not.

Example: a person is subjected to racist abuse because others wrongly believe they are of a particular ethnic background.

Online bullying and harassment

Online bullying and harassment can include:

- sending threatening or abusive text messages or emails

- creating and sharing embarrassing or explicit images or videos
- trolling (the sending of menacing or upsetting messages on social networks or in chat rooms or during online games)
- shaming someone online
- setting up hate sites or groups including social media chat groups
- voting for or against someone in an abusive poll
- creating fake accounts
- creating deepfake^{[\[footnote 1\]](#)} videos or images
- hijacking, impersonating or stealing a person's online identity to embarrass or cause trouble using their name
- filming on school premises

Online abuse can also escalate and turn into online harm and criminal behaviour.

Intimidation and harassment perpetrators may include:

- current or ex-pupils
- parents and carers
- colleagues
- people who are, or attempt to remain, anonymous
- those with no association to the school, including online through various social media platforms

What isn't bullying or harassment

Not all negative experiences or workplace challenges amount to bullying or harassment.

This non-exhaustive list of examples are generally considered part of normal employment practices, when carried out reasonably and respectfully:

- constructive feedback on performance or teaching practice
- reasonable management instructions related to duties, compliance or operational needs

- performance reviews or appraisals conducted fairly and professionally
- allocation of duties, timetabling or workload based on legitimate organisational requirements
- changes to policies or procedures that apply to all staff
- restructuring or role changes communicated transparently and in line with policy
- professional disagreements or differences of opinion expressed respectfully
- investigations into misconduct or safeguarding concerns carried out in accordance with procedure
- capability or disciplinary processes applied fairly and consistently

These actions, when handled appropriately, are part of effective management and organisational governance. They do not constitute bullying or harassment unless delivered in a manner that is targeted, unreasonable or intended to cause harm.

When whistleblowing is appropriate

Whistleblowing is when a person raises a concern about serious wrongdoing that they reasonably believe is in the public interest.

Whistleblowing disclosures tend to show that one or more of the following has occurred, is occurring or is likely to occur:

- a criminal offence (for example, types of financial impropriety such as fraud)
- a breach of a legal obligation
- a miscarriage of justice
- danger to the health or safety of any individual
- damage to the environment
- deliberate covering up of wrongdoing in the above categories

Concerns that are purely about an individual's own treatment, such as personal grievances, bullying or harassment, should generally be dealt with via grievance procedures, not whistleblowing policies.

Further information is available in our guidance on:

- [whistleblowing procedure for maintained schools](#)
- [blowing the whistle to the Department for Education](#)

Examples of harassment, bullying and discrimination

This is not an exhaustive list.

Category	Examples
Verbal abuse and Intimidation	repeatedly shouting or swearing at staff in public or private; spreading malicious rumours or prejudiced myths; insulting or using derogatory language, nicknames or banter; asking intrusive questions or making unwanted insinuations
Offensive behaviour	use of unwelcome or offensive imagery, graffiti, gestures, facial expressions, staring, mimicry, jokes, pranks; ridiculing or demeaning someone
Discriminatory language	racist, sexist, homophobic, ageist or disablist jokes, banter, insinuations or insults
Targeted harassment	taunting, picking on someone, setting them up to fail; making assumptions about competence and treating them as inferior
Exclusion and isolation	refusing to work with someone; exclusion, isolation, ignoring or shunning; unfairly excluding someone associated with the employee
Obstruction and undermining	making tasks unnecessarily difficult; undermining a competent worker through overload or persistent criticism; unfair work allocation; blocking promotion or training; overbearing supervision
Coercion and threats	Unwanted pressure or intimidation; threats or comments about job security without foundation
LGBTQ+ discrimination	Outing someone without consent; refusing to acknowledge gender transition; making assumptions about what is 'normal'
Invasive	Intrusive questioning about personal or sex life; victimisation for

behaviour	refusing to accept or collude with bullying or harassment
Physical misconduct	Invasion of personal space; unnecessary touching; physical abuse, attacks or violence

Examples of sexual harassment

This is not an exhaustive list.

Type	Examples
Non-verbal	offensive gestures, staring or leering, sexually explicit materials (such as pin-ups, calendars), computer pornography, unsolicited or unwanted gifts
Verbal	suggestive or explicit language (including via email or social media), unwanted propositions, sexually explicit jokes, 'pet' names, invasive comments or questions, cat calls, whistling, patronising or derogatory remarks
Physical	deliberate body contact (for example, brushing, pinching, touching), indecent exposure, groping, fondling, sexual assault
Image-based sexual abuse	the non-consensual sharing of nudes and semi-nudes
Terms such as 'revenge porn' and 'upskirting'	specific incidents of nudes and semi-nudes being shared – these terms are more often used in the context of adult-to-adult non-consensual image sharing offences outlined in Section 33 to 35 of the Criminal Justice and Courts Act 2015 , Voyeurism (Offences) Act 2019 and s.67A of the Sexual Offences Act 2003
Terms such as 'deepfakes' and 'deep nudes'	digitally manipulated and AI-generated nudes and semi-nudes

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1. An image or recording that has been convincingly altered and manipulated to misrepresent someone as doing or saying something that was not actually done or said. [What is a deepfake?](#) contains information from the police. [↩](#)

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