

Top tips on using a bystander intervention model

It's Not OK!

A toolkit for preventing sexism and
sexual harassment in schools



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Ten top tips on using a bystander intervention model: Taking a whole-school approach to developing a sense of community responsibility to prevent sexism and sexual harassment

Leadership

1. A whole-school bystander intervention approach can effect sustainable cultural change
2. School leaders and staff need to understand and support the approach

Students

3. Many young people don't understand the potential harm caused by everyday sexism
4. All pupils need to feel safe in lessons, including students who've experienced harassment and all boys
5. Pupils need to be involved in developing strategies, so they feel realistic and relevant
6. The school needs to demonstrate that it is listening to students in order to establish trust

Staff

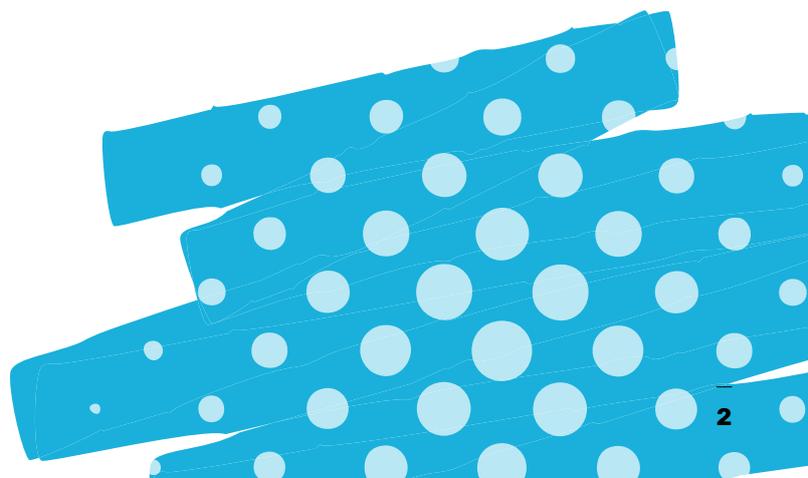
7. Staff delivering lessons need supportive training that enables them to practise key techniques
8. Bystander Intervention must be taught with empathy, or it will become a blame-game

Curriculum

9. You cannot change culture through a couple of RSE lessons in year 10

Community

10. Parents and guardians need open channels through which they can raise what they are worried about.



What is a bystander intervention?

A bystander intervention is about sending a clear message across a school that everyone in the school community can play a role in preventing sexism and sexual harassment.

It involves teaching about social norms, particularly highlighting those about gender roles and behaviour as well as the power we all have within a community to shift those social norms through our daily relationship with others.

Staff have found that this model works well as part of a whole-school approach to problematic attitudes and behaviours around sexism and sexual harassment, because it involves every member of the school community; no-one gets to sit back and assume it's not relevant to them. The model works well alongside systems that encourage pupil voice and pupil action, as well as a focus on ensuring the academic and enrichment curricula are representative and staff think about gaps.

Bystander intervention approaches have been used successfully in education, youth and community settings. For example, they are used in universities in the USA and UK¹ to tackle sexism, sexual harassment and violence. Right to Be² uses a bystander intervention approach to help people deal with bullying behaviour that targets 'difference' and to address sexual harassment in work places, in public spaces and on transport.

Public Health England produced a review of evidence for bystander intervention programmes in universities, which found that they were useful for the primary prevention of sexual and domestic violence. They concluded that bystander interventions have the potential to engage men, as well as women, positively in reducing violence against women³.

The real power behind using the bystander intervention model as part of a whole school approach to creating a positive community is that the positive school values can be reinforced over and over again from so many different angles - until it becomes culture change.

¹ For example the Mentors in Violence Prevention peer-mentoring programme has been used in some Scottish schools to address violence, including gender-based violence and bullying <https://education.gov.scot/improvement/practice-exemplars/mentors-for-violence-prevention-mvp-an-overview/>. The Green Dot programme in the USA <https://www.westminster.ac.uk/current-students/support-and-services/sexual-violence-and-harassment/green-dot-active-bystander-initiative> and the University of Worcester <https://www.worcester.ac.uk/about/academic-schools/school-of-psychology/psychology-research/bystander-intervention-programme/>

² formerly Hollaback <https://righttobe.org/>

³ Fenton, Mott et al. (2016) A review of evidence for Bystander Intervention to prevent sexual and domestic violence in universities https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/515634/Evidence_review_bystander_intervention_to_prevent_sexual_and_domestic_violence_in_universities_11April2016.pdf

In more detail:

Leadership

1. A whole-school bystander intervention approach can effect sustainable cultural change.

- A bystander intervention approach focuses on the role of those not directly involved in an incident or in problematic language or choices but who may be observers, and how the responses of these observers affect the school community's social norms.
- Staff and pupils learn that the acceptance, of potentially harmful behaviours by bystanders directly influences the social norms and the tolerance of these behaviours. The goal is to empower pupils to change harmful cultural practice by providing them with the tools and confidence to do so.
- Staff and pupils are taught when and how to supportively and effectively intervene to challenge harmful behaviour, potentially preventing more serious outcomes and/or dealing with the fallout afterwards, when emotions may be less intense and all parties more open to frank discussion.
- Teaching risk assessment is a key part of bystander intervention training. It is essential to ensure that no student ever feels they have to intervene as a bystander if they do not feel safe.
- Learning to intervene with empathy can begin early in life, for example, when learning what it means to be a good friend to someone else. In primary school, this can be about how to gently discourage a friend from bullying someone else, or how to ask a person if they are okay after someone else said something unkind. The approach

can be applied to all aspects of belittling or bullying behaviour, including racism, homophobia or in support of students with SEND.

2. School leaders and staff need to understand and support the approach.

- School leaders should be made aware of the benefits of a proactive, whole-school approach.
- All school staff should access training about sexism, sexual harassment and abuse, so that they can recognise and respond to it; it should be made clear that they are expected to challenge such behaviour every time they encounter it. It is vital that pupils can clearly see how seriously all staff take these issues.
- School behaviour policies and rules need to include sexism and sexual harassment specifically; it must be clear to pupils how these behaviours will be dealt with and that something will happen.

Students

3. Many young people don't understand the potential harm caused by ignoring everyday sexism.

- A lot of young people feel that they have to go along with sexist attitudes if they want to fit in; even where they feel uncomfortable, they see this 'joining in' as normal and harmless.
- Pupils who laugh at sexist jokes, for example, need to understand that joining in makes some people feel that abusive behaviour is socially acceptable – it becomes normalised. This can also create a pattern of escalation; the more a person

gets away with low level abusive behaviour, the more the socially acceptable norm shifts. If it is not challenged, over time the bullying and intimidating behaviour can become increasingly harmful.

- Define and explain sexism and sexual harassment, along with why they are harmful. This can be done from many angles, such as primary school pupils looking at gender-stereotyping and issues around respect, or in secondary school lessons about power balance between different social groups, online bullying, sexualised images or abuse.
- An anonymous pupil survey or questionnaire can gauge pupils' views and their experience within and beyond school with regard to sexism and sexual harassment; use this as a starting point for discussion and curriculum planning.

4. All pupils need to feel safe in lessons, including all boys.

- Pupils need to learn what victim-blaming is and why it is harmful.
- It is important that staff and pupils do not make judgemental comments about a person's negative experience. It is all too easy for others to judge 'how bad' a particular type of harassment or assault 'should' feel, and therefore dismiss 'less serious' behaviours that some students may find deeply upsetting.
- While activities aimed at stimulating empathy can be effective, beware of 'empathy exercises' that get very personal – these can make pupils feel too vulnerable and backfire .
- Pupils should be aware of which sensitive topics are going to be taught, and when. Potentially emotional content should be signposted so that pupils are not caught by surprise in a lesson.
- Pastoral support for individual disclosures and increased reporting must be planned. Details of this pastoral support and who

students can speak to for support or about problems should be reiterated in every lesson on sensitive topics. All staff need to know how to access the safeguarding team and designated safeguarding leads (DSLs).

- Sexism and sexual harassment are experienced differently by different groups of young people. Think about how to link your work on preventing sexual harassment to wider school values and to other work on challenging racism, stereotyping of LGBT+ students and valuing cultural diversity.
- You can use our **Working with boys and young men** to help you .

5. Pupils need to be involved in developing strategies so they feel realistic and relevant.

- Pupils are more likely to engage with scenarios and scripts where at least some of their peer group has been involved in the choice of language/event described.
- Using older pupils to teach younger pupils, for example through short dramas or assemblies, about why they think it's important to learn about positive values helps to foster a sense of community responsibility.
- It can be risky to use pupils to teach sensitive content in detail and this should be avoided.

6. The school needs to demonstrate that it is listening to students in order to establish trust.

- In addition to anonymous surveys, anonymous question boxes for pupils should be available, and some time set aside for pupils to write questions or evaluative comments on slips provided, as well as a time to address previous questions and discuss pupil evaluation of activities/ lessons.
- Use pilot surveys and questionnaires with groups of interested pupils to help you work out the right questions to ask.

- Other avenues for pupil voice, such as school council and year group reps, should be used for active feedback in both directions – listening is good but listening and responding is much better in generating honest feedback. School leaders and staff need to spell out how (and by when) the school plans to respond to the concerns that are uncovered .
- Surveys and related techniques also enable you to measure behavioural shifts in your school before the programme begins and then periodically after that: for example, asking questions about how often pupils experience sexist comments or unwanted touching, or overhear people telling rape jokes. Sharing the results with pupils can help to motivate them too. It is worth noting that you may see an increase in reports of these behaviours for a while, as pupils and staff become more aware of them – this needs to be explained so as not to discourage everyone.

Staff

7. Staff delivering lessons need supportive training that enables them to practise key techniques.

- Encouraging young people to intervene in difficult social situations requires a lot of sensitivity, tact and empathy. Staff should be prepared to handle difficult discussions and defensive pupils in a positive way that recognises the opportunity for real growth in these situations.
- Staff will need opportunities to discuss how to facilitate discussions between pupils and use scenarios and scripts to enable pupils to learn from one another, as this is the most effective way to shift social norms.

8. Bystander intervention must be taught with empathy, or it will become a blame-game.

- Pupils may deal with their discomfort in lessons by seeking to blame girls or other groups and/or other bystanders, or to attack those who have exhibited sexist or abusive behaviour. It is important to create a non-judgemental atmosphere in lessons, so that all pupils become keen to open up rather than becoming defensive.
- Boys may feel targeted unfairly, so they need to be supported without allowing ‘not all men’ to be an excuse to disengage. This requires making it clear that, while sexism and harassment are historically gendered and that sexual assault and harassment do happen in much greater numbers to women and girls, anyone can be a perpetrator or victim of this behaviour. It is important to draw out the fact that LGBT+ students are a group who are disproportionately affected by sexual harassment and abuse.
- Boys also need to understand how their response to their peers and friends in day-to-day situations is key to positive change; rather than them feeling judged, the aim is for them to feel empowered and that the choices they make are really important.
- It is worth letting students know that they don’t need to feel guilty if they don’t feel able to intervene.

Curriculum

9. You cannot change culture through a couple of RSE lessons in year 10

- Sufficient time must be allocated to these lessons to allow pupils to practise the conversations and discussions that facilitate change. For example, a course of 6–8 lessons exploring healthy vs unhealthy attitudes to sexism and sexual harassment, relationships and consent works well for year 9. For year 12, social norms can be shifted with a term of weekly lessons examining gender expectations,

sexism, sexual harassment and abuse, victim support and supporting attitude change. Academic subjects and physical education can contribute to cultural shift through, for example, the use of scientists/mathematicians/sports stars that are woven into lessons, and pointing out why women are under-represented in historical discoveries, world records etc.

- Time allocated for older pupils to talk to younger ones about these issues is valuable in making it seem a lot less cool to be sexist.

Community

10. Parents and carers need open channels through which they can discuss any concerns.

- Some parents and carers may be uncomfortable with, or dismissive of, teaching about sexism and/or harassment or abuse.
- You may have parents/ carers already raising a range of concerns or you may not have much engagement/ information on parental priorities. Gauge parent/ carer views via an anonymous survey or questionnaire.
- Explain to parents and carers that the bystander intervention programme is protective; it will mean that pupils are potentially less likely to engage in harmful behaviour, and more likely to gain the language and the skills to speak up if they face or witness harmful behaviour.
- Seek out networks that can support you. Engage the LA or your Trust.



Case study:

Introducing a bystander intervention programme alongside other whole-school approaches.

When the approach was introduced, a lot of pupils initially felt either defensive or cynical with regard to the programme, or in some cases, both. The focus on listening and pupil involvement outlined above proved vital in engaging wider cooperation and a sense of ownership.

However, pupil feedback improved. For example, timetabling a regular session to explore these topics was seen as an indication of the school's values. One pupil said "the fact that the school is prepared to dedicate this much timetabled time to these lessons sends a clear message about how important they believe this is – that in itself shifts social norms".

As the course of sixth form lessons unfolded, some pupils were initially very judgemental when boys voiced uncertainty about why sexism and sexual harassment were such a problem – these pupils wanted to shut down such comments as they felt the boys were being insensitive and should be punished. By the end of the course, most of the participants had realised the importance of the lessons being a safe space for communication in which all comments were heard and then discussed; it was absolutely okay to say why a comment was hurtful, but not to dismiss the person making the comment (only deliberately disrespectful comments would have been punished, which was made clear, but actually this did not prove necessary). Retrospectively, it would have been good to place greater emphasis the value of this open communication from the very start, and to have reminded pupils more frequently that stimulating defensiveness prevents culture change.

Some indicators that the programme has been useful:

- Increased reporting of harmful behaviour as awareness and trust grows, including boys coming forward with concerns about their own previous behaviour. (If trends are monitored over several years, these reports should then decrease in number if the programme is effective).
- Comments such as "no-one would dream of making a rape joke now".
- The willingness of more than 15 per cent of the sixth formers to actively involve themselves in teaching (carefully chosen) aspects of the bystander intervention approach to younger years (with staff supervision and facilitation).

Top tips devised by Dr Vicky Stubbs, consultant, speaker and trainer for RSE and PSHE in schools. Winner of the Sex Education Forum's Educator of the Year (Innovation) for bystander intervention work, one of the DfE's Expert Teachers working on new guidance in 2022, and author, in collaboration with NHS consultants and a graphics team, of teaching resources for a new testicular health website educational resources.

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