

# Funny or filthy?

Students don't see sexual remarks as harassment

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**Y**ou are hanging out in the hallway with the rest of your high school peers and the conversation is just like any other day.

Sexual jokes and comments wiggle their way into your chit chat, which is harmless.

Well, you think it is harmless because none of your classmates speak up or appear offended.

But an astounding 75 per cent of secondary school students report they have been victims of peer sexual harassment within a three-month period, according to a York University study which was conducted with eight schools in Toronto, Kingston and Montreal.

Perhaps more frightening than the findings of this particular study is the majority of incidents

go unreported, which doesn't surprise Krystle Miller, a Grade 11 student at Newmarket High School.

"I would voice my opinion if I was offended," she said. "But there is a big fear of reporting people for anything because it is seen as 'not cool' by the high school social structure."

Although she knows it does offend some, she said most students share an understanding that these sexual comments are made in jest. She has never witnessed someone being harassed in school and one of her peers, Andrew Scarff, a Grade 12 student, said he has been in the same school for four years and he has never seen it happen either.

"I am surprised there are so many (harassment reports)," he said. "Of course I make sexual jokes, but they are just jokes."

To Andrew, sexual harassment means making advances on a girl when she doesn't want it, not harmless conversation that most of his friends pick up from TV, music and the media.

The reason nothing is reported could be because students are doubtful an educator could put a stop to the harassment or some are simply too uncomfortable to speak up, according to Mary Cosentino, superin-

tendent of secondary schools for the York Catholic District School Board.

"It kind of puts students in an awkward situation to reply, 'I'm offended,' in front of all their peers that may think the joke or comment was funny," she said.

There are many instances where students don't think it is cool to tell on their peers, no matter what is going on, she added.

However, not reporting harassment may prolong the situation and be physically and mentally damaging to the victim.

The York study also stated girls being sexually harassed are more prone to depression and a lack of self-esteem, whereas boys become more delinquent (stealing, skipping school, etc.) and are more likely to engage in substance abuse.

This is why it needs to be dealt with, said Pam Turnbull, head of guidance at Richmond Green Secondary School.

"So many things in our lives have been sexualized by television that students see it as acceptable behaviour," she said. "This seems to be the way teenagers relate to each other."

While trying to determine what kind of behaviour is accepted by their peers and being at the age where some may be beginning to explore their sexuality, many teenagers want to see where the line of inappropriate and appropriate lies.

"We as teachers need to clearly state what is acceptable and enforce it," Ms. Turnbull said. "This means when walking down the hallway and hearing these comments, we need to stop and let the student know that is not appropriate."

Sexual harassment is included in many anti-bullying programs and also integrated into the curriculum to let students know what it is and its consequences, while giving them an opportunity to talk openly on the subject.

If caught harassing students can face different degrees of punishment including parental notification, suspension, recommendation for expulsion and, in extreme cases, police involvement, Ms. Cosentino said.



## WHAT IS SEXUAL HARASSMENT?

Education is the key to dealing with the serious issue of sexual harassment. In many situations, the student feels uncomfortable but is unsure if it is considered sexual harassment. It can take many different forms, but the most important defining point is it is behaviour that is unwanted.

Sexual harassment is defined by York University as unwanted sexual remarks, jokes, comments about appearance, brushing up against someone in a sexual manner and sexual rumours spread through e-mails.

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