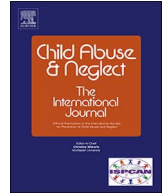


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## Research article

# Experiences of sexual harassment are associated with the sexual behavior of 14- to 18-year-old adolescents

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## ABSTRACT

Subjection to sexual harassment is associated with a number of negative outcomes, such as internalizing and externalizing symptoms and a disinclination to attend school. Among adolescents, sexual harassment may increase with both their emerging sexual desires and increased socializing in mixed-gender peer groups during early adolescence. We set out to study the possible associations between normative and risk-taking sexual behavior and subjection to sexual harassment among adolescents between the ages of 14 and 18 years. The informants included 90,953 boys and 91,746 girls, with a mean (SD) age of 16.3 (1.2) years, who responded to a classroom survey (School Health Promotion Study 2010–2011) in Finland. We found that even early steps in romantic and erotic experiences were associated with experiences of sexual harassment. The more advanced the adolescents' sexual experiences were, the more commonly they reported differing experiences of sexual harassment. These associations were particularly strong among the girls. Among the sexually active adolescents, the more partners the adolescents had for intercourse, the more commonly they reported experiences of sexual harassment. Adolescents actively interested in romantic and sexual relationships may socialize in contexts where sexual harassment is more likely to occur. They may be more sensitive to sexual cues than their non-interested peers, or sexual harassment may be a traumatic experience predisposing adolescents to risk-taking sexual behavior as a form of acting out. A double standard regarding the appropriate expression of sexuality received some support in our data.

## 1. Introduction

Sexual harassment is defined by law as gender-based discrimination that creates a hostile work/school environment and may seriously impair a victim's performance at work or his/her ability to participate in, and benefit from, education in workplaces or schools, respectively (Fineran, 2002; Gruber & Fineran, 2007). In public health research, sexual harassment may be studied as a form of sexually aggressive behavior and as a traumatizing experience for its victims. Among adolescents, the concept of sexual harassment partially overlaps with the concept of child sexual abuse, defined as any sexual encounters between a child/adolescent and an adult or a clearly older young person (Senn, Carey, & Venable, 2008; Stoltenborgh, van Ijzendoorn, Euser, & Bakermans-Kranenburg,

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2011). However, child sexual abuse research often focuses on the most severe experiences, such as on victims of acts involving physical contact/penetration (Stoltenborgh et al., 2011), whereas sexual harassment also comprises verbal and nonverbal communications with unwelcome sexual content. Sexual harassment can be divided into gender harassment, unwelcome sexual attention, and sexual coercion (Buchanan, Bluestein, Nappa, Woods, & Depatie, 2013; Fitzgerald, Gelfand, & Drasgow, 1995). Gender harassment entails verbal and non-verbal gender-based hostile/derogatory communication or gender-related name calling. Unwelcome sexual attention includes any sexual behaviors, propositions, invitations, etc., that are distasteful and unwelcome to the victim and are perceived as offensive. Sexual coercion includes not only actual sexual assault but also any behavior attempting to extort sexual compliance by means of promises/incentives or threats.

Subjection to sexual harassment is common among adolescents. In most studies, one to two thirds of adolescents reported to have been subjected to such experiences (Chiodo, Wolfe, Crooks, Hughes, & Jaffe, 2009; Gruber & Fineran, 2007; Kaltiala-Heino, Frojd, & Marttunen, 2016b; McMaster, Connolly, Pepler, & Craig, 2002; Petersen & Hyde, 2009). In a pioneering study in the field of sexual harassment among adolescents (American Association of University Women, 2001), as many as 81% of high school students had reportedly experienced sexual harassment at school. Such a widespread negative phenomenon deserves attention and intervention. Research needs to provide an understanding of the factors that are related to subjection to sexual harassment in order to find avenues of prevention.

Among adolescents, sexual harassment has also been studied as a transitional, developmental phenomenon, being considered an extension of aggressive behavior influenced and modified by the emerging sexual desires and increased socializing in mixed gender peer groups in early adolescence, when social skills and behavioral control are still under construction (Ashbaug & Cornell, 2008; McMaster et al., 2002; Pepler et al., 2006). This means that in adolescence, the adolescents who are prone to aggressive behavior broaden their repertoire of aggressive communications to the sexual domain; this notion also suggests that the adolescents who are sexually interested and seek to socialize in mixed-gender groups are most likely to become victims of peer sexual harassment. Therefore, the possible associations between sexual behavior and subjection to sexual harassment are worth exploring.

### 1.1. Pubertal maturation and sexual behavior during adolescence

Sexual development accelerates in adolescence, with rapid changes in adolescent bodies. The experiences of young people involving their changing bodies, sexuality, and the development of gender identity affect their intrapersonal, relational, and societal interactions (Romeo & Kelley, 2009). Romantic and erotic interests and behaviors gradually mature towards adulthood, and the adolescents who physically mature early also tend to progress earlier towards a more adult type of intimate (genital) sexual behavior (Downing & Bellis, 2009; Edgards, 2000, 2002). In Western countries, between one tenth and one third of adolescents experience their first instance of sexual intercourse by the age of 15, but the vast majority report having experienced sexual intercourse by age 20 (Eaton et al., 2010; Madkour, Farhat, Halpern, Godeau, & Gabhainn, 2010; Savioja, Helminen, Fröjd, Marttunen, & Kaltiala-Heino, 2015). The first instance of sexual intercourse is typically preceded for several years by various practices of kissing and petting.

Early sexual activity has been considered to be problem behavior, being associated with challenges in other domains of life, sexually risky behaviors, and emotional and behavioral symptoms and disorders (Madkour et al. 2010; Savioja et al. 2015; Savioja, Helminen, Fröjd, Marttunen, & Kaltiala-Heino, 2017). However, in the later stages of adolescent development, intimate sexual relationships have been deemed normative.

### 1.2. Sexuality and subjection to harassment and bullying

Like early advancing sexual behavior, experiences of sexual harassment have also been associated with early puberty and advanced pubertal maturation (Goldstein, Malanchuk, Davis-Kean, & Eccles, 2007; Petersen & Hyde, 2009). This seems to highlight the role of emerging sexual desires and increased socializing in mixed-gender peer groups, particularly in early adolescence when sexuality is thought to be confusing and social skills immature, in sexual harassment (McMaster et al., 2002). Physical maturation signals sexuality and may attract unwanted attention in the form of sexual harassment. Early maturing adolescents are also prone to associate with older, delinquent peers, and such associations of themselves create a predisposition to sexual harassment (Goldstein et al., 2007). However, experiences of sexual harassment have also been associated with greater attractiveness and greater perceived personal power (Petersen & Hyde, 2009). This suggests that behavior deemed as sexual harassment may sometimes be intended to express and attract romantic and erotic interest rather than to actually cause distress. Similarly, it has been found that cross-gender bullying, which may to a great extent overlap with behaviors qualifying as sexual harassment (Charmaraman, Jones, Stein, & Espelage, 2013; Shute, Owens, & Slee, 2008), often targets popular children (Sainio, Veenstra, Huitsing, & Samivalli, 2012).

Some research has further associated subjection to sexual harassment with early and frequent dating, romantic and erotic relationships, and a greater number of partners for sex (Chiodo et al., 2009; Fineran & Bolen, 2006; Gruber & Fineran, 2007; Maxwell, Robinson, & Post, 2003; Mitchell, Ybarra, & Korchmaros, 2014). More specifically, (Chiodo et al., 2009) found that adolescents reporting two or more (on a scale of six) elicited sexual harassment experiences during the three months prior to the questionnaire also reported early dating (at age 12 or younger) three times more frequently. Mitchell et al. (2014) observed that, compared to adolescents reporting no romantic relationships during the year prior to the questionnaire, those reporting only one romantic relationship and those reporting two or more relationships were twice and three times more likely to report experiences of sexual harassment in the 12 months prior to the questionnaire, respectively; similarly, compared to those who did not report any sexual relationships in the year prior, those reporting any sexual relationships reported experiences of sexual harassment twice as often.

As the distinction between (sexual) bullying and sexual harassment may be unclear, and because these phenomena may overlap (Charmaraman et al., 2013; Felix, Furlong, & Austin, 2009; Shute et al., 2008), it is also relevant to scrutinize the associations

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