

Friday April 18, 2008 2:50 PM ET



## Girls Accepting Sexual Assault At School As Fact Of Life: Reports

Friday February 22, 2008  
CityNews.ca Staff

When you went to school, chances are the worst thing you faced was the schoolyard bully, the occasional fight in the field or some less than good-natured teasing. Hard as it may seem to believe, those were the good old days. It appears a growing number of young girls are not only being sexually assaulted on campus, but have come to think of it as a normal part of their educational experience.

"It's totally unacceptable and it's unfortunate that our young teenagers feel this way. We need to take action. We need to help our young people realize that this is not appropriate behaviour," urged the Toronto District School Board's director Gerry Connelly.

Recent studies from both the [Board's Safety Panel](#) and the [Canadian Centre for Addiction and Mental Health](#) show some shocking stats at one school: 33 per cent say they've been sexually harassed in the past two years; another 29 admit to having been touched or grabbed inappropriately and seven per cent have actually been victims of a major sexual assault.

"You just hear jokes [being yelled out] all the time that have to do with girls doing sexual things," said Madison Fitzgerald, a Toronto high school student.

"There's a lot of groping and touching in our school.," said another.

But Connelly believes it's a problem that's endemic to halls of learning across the country. "One of the concerns is the alarming rate of gender-based violence, and 21 per cent of the students that were surveyed said that they knew at least one student who was sexually assaulted at school. Now there's sexual harassment, which is talking inappropriately and there's sexual harassment which is being touched inappropriately. So the 21 per cent are talking about sexual assault.

"Twenty-nine per cent of Grade 9 girls ... felt unsafe at school partly due to sexual comments and unwanted looks or touches; 27 per cent of the girls in Grade 11 admitted to being pressured into doing something sexual that they did not want to do; 14 per cent of the females reported being harassed over the Internet."

She worries that's becoming the 'new normal' and an accepted mode of behaviour that's just part of going to class everyday. "They take it for granted that this is the way they should be treated," she concludes.

Some experts believe the situation is exacerbated because most kids don't understand exactly what "sexual assault" actually entails. It doesn't have to include any intimate contact at all. "Sexual assault, from the perspective of the development of a young girl, is any unwanted sexual touching or name-calling," points out Amanda Dale of the YWCA.

What is the Board doing about the problem?

"Our first task is to talk to a lot of experts in the field and get some recommendations," commented Liz Sandals of the Ontario Public School Boards' Association.

And while that may seem like a logical first step to some, others - like School Community Safety Advisory Chair Julian Falconer - think it's time to stop talking and start doing.

"Here we sit in February 2008 and we're still talking about doing more studies. People ought to be asking the question, 'When do you we stop studying and when do we start acting?'"

"We're looking at ways of having more gender-specific programs that particularly focus on young girls and programs that focus on boys and what is appropriate behaviour," Connelly responds. "We also have set up what we call the Student Safety Line ... we have E.S.P. - Empowering Student Partnerships - in all of our schools, and they can use the Crime Stoppers or Kids Help Phone."

The [Student Safety Line](#) was set up after the [report on violence in schools was released in January](#). The early response shows the extent of the problem.

"In 20 days, we've had almost 300 calls from kids, because they feel more comfortable talking to an anonymous voice on the phone. And so we were able to help a significant number of these kids. One of them is as young as Grade 1."

The number to call is **(416) 395-7233 (SAFE)**.

[What does the Criminal Code say about sexual assault?](#)

**Examples of sexual assault from School Safety Panel Report**

Just how widespread is the problem? Here's what the kids told the safety panel. The following are just a few of dozens of excerpts they cited in their report.

"A secondary school male student was told by a female student that she wanted to be left alone. He hit her on the buttocks. While in computer class, the male student grabbed her between the legs."

"A secondary school student was arrested for sexually assaulting a female student on school property . The administration is concluding their investigation and expelling the student."

"An elementary/middle school student disclosed to her teacher that three male students forced her to perform oral sex on them . The police found that there was not enough evidence to charge the male students. The final investigation revealed that one male student received oral sex from this female on one occasion after school off school property. The other two boys were present during the act."

"A secondary school female student accused a male student of sexual assault while they were in class together. Charges were laid and the student was suspended for 20 days pending possible expulsion."

"An elementary/middle school student reported that a male student grabbed her bum on numerous occasions in school."

"Two elementary/middle school female students reported that they had been sexually assaulted by a male student in or at the school. The suspect student has denied the allegations."

"An elementary/middle school student alleged that she was assaulted physically and sexually by a male student. The male student was charged with assault, sexual assault and threatening bodily harm."

"Three female students at an elementary/middle school disclosed that they were victims of sexual abuse by a male student at the school. The police and social worker were notified and the boy was kept at home."

"An elementary/middle school female student reported that she was followed into the washroom by another male student. Once inside, he put his arms around her and began to touch her inappropriately inside her shirt. The police are investigating."

Source: [School Safety Panel Report on violent incidents](#)