



# JDiBrief – Crime

## Sexual abuse in schools: IMPLEMENTING RESPONSES (4 of 5)

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There is little existing research that tests the effectiveness of prevention techniques for sexual abuse in school settings. However the following principles are considered good practice.

**INCREASING THE EFFORT (NEEDED TO COMMIT THE CRIME):** Access to the school should be controlled. Routine employment screening should be supplemented with careful reference checks. Direct questions might be asked about any informal concerns about behaviour in previous roles and settings. Visitors should be required to report to the administration office and sign-in, and for younger children a pick-up register should be maintained. In both cases identity checks should be considered. Anyone loitering near the school should be monitored and approached as appropriate.

Students should be engaged in resilience-building activities. These may be universal (e.g. involving all students in building self-confidence and positive peer inclusion) or targeted (e.g. 'cocooning' of vulnerable students). Resistance-training models (teaching self-protection behaviours) may also be considered. Other student-focused activities may include respectful relationships education and responsible bystander training.

**INCREASING THE RISKS (OF DETECTION):** The most suitable environment is one with good natural surveillance, where routine movements of responsible adults and students provide comprehensive line-of-sight to all areas of the school. All rooms should have large, unobstructed windows and observation panels. This includes sensitive places such as the school counsellor's, chaplain's, and principal's rooms. Special random checks can be undertaken for out-of-the-way places (e.g. dressing, first-aid, or sporting grounds away from the main buildings). Formal surveillance apparatus (e.g. CCTV) may be installed in places where natural surveillance cannot be ensured – deterrent effects may be strengthened by making everyone aware of their location. An environmental audit should direct any required modifications to the physical environment.

Staff and students should be encouraged to raise even apparently trivial concerns. In the aftermath of abuse in schools it is common to find a history of unreported small concerns, none of which alone indicated a serious problem. Implementing a system of confidential recording of these concerns may help to 'join the dots'. This system must guard against vexatious complaints or creating a culture of suspicion. If abuse does occur, early detection is important to avoid compounding effects of repeated incidents. A clear policy is needed for responding to ambiguous reports, discovery, disclosure, allegations or police investigations. The first priority is to ensure the safety and well-being of the child/ren concerned, after which the rights of an alleged abuser must also be carefully protected. A graduated system of informing others, on a need-to-know basis, may be helpful.

**REMOVING EXCUSES (FOR INAPPROPRIATE BEHAVIOUR):** All staff should be provided with high-quality training aimed at establishing a clear and valid conception of the problem and its dynamics. Credentials of trainers should be carefully checked to ensure that myths and unhelpful ideas are not transmitted. Staff should be educated in a culture of extended guardianship where the responsibility for prevention is seen as an ordinary responsibility of all adults. Mentoring and support should be provided for staff experiencing personal problems. Rules about staff-student relationships should be unambiguous, widely disseminated, and supported by in-house staff training. A key focus should be on clear and appropriate personal-professional boundaries, but severe rules prohibiting any physical contact or appropriate care behaviours should be avoided.