

Boy, 5, accused of sex harassment for pinching little girl

HAGERSTOWN, Md. (AP) _ A 5-year-old boy sexually harassed a kindergarten classmate by pinching her buttocks, Washington County public school officials say.

The boy's father, who received a written notice about the incident, says he's at a loss to explain to his son what sexual harassment means.

"He knows nothing about sex," Vallance told The (Hagerstown) Herald-Mail for a story published Wednesday. "There's no way to explain what he's been written up for. He knows it as playing around. He doesn't know it as anything sexual at all."

But school system spokeswoman Carol Mowen said the pinching episode in a Lincolnshire Elementary School hallway Dec. 8 fits the state Department of Education's definition of sexual harassment as "unwelcome sexual advances, request for sexual favors and/or other inappropriate verbal, written or physical conduct of a sexual nature directed toward others."

Mowen called the reprimand a learning opportunity.

"It's important to understand a child may not realize that what he or she is doing may be considered sexual harassment, but if it fits under the definition, then it is, under the state's guidelines," Mowen said. "If someone has been told this person does not want this type of touching, it doesn't matter if it's at work or at school, that's sexual harassment."

Lincolnshire Principal Darlene Teach said any student, regardless of grade level, can be cited for sexual harassment. Mowen said school officials consider the offender's age and other circumstances in deciding what administrative action is warranted.

Twenty-eight Maryland kindergarten students were suspended during the 2006-06 school year for sex offenses, including sexual assault, sexual harassment and sexual activity, according to state data. Fifteen of the suspensions were for sexual harassment.

School administrators in Waco, Texas, recently gave a 4-year-old pre-kindergarten student an in-school suspension for allegedly rubbing his face in the chest of a female teacher's aide while hugging her. After the boy's father filed a complaint with school officials, they changed the report language to "inappropriate physical contact," removing references to sexual contact and sexual harassment.

In Austin, Texas, two parents have filed lawsuits alleging school officials failed to protect their daughters from repeated sexual assaults by another girl in their kindergarten class.

Information from: The (Hagerstown, Md.) Herald-Mail, <http://www.herald-mail.com>