

# Prevention of Child Sexual Abuse

## School and Community Efforts to Prevent and Treat Sexual Abuse

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## **Summary**

This English summary presents the main results of a research project funded by the National Board of Social Services (Servicestyrelsen). In 2007, the Danish government decided on a structural reform defining new local and regional structures. Since then, the Danish municipalities have taken over responsibility for the citizen-oriented prevention and health promotion.

Both prevention and treatment are important elements of a public policy response to sexual abuse. But child and youth sexual abuse prevention does not seem to be a matter of high priority in the municipalities. In recent research on prevention efforts of the municipalities after the structural reform the area of sexual abuse is not even mentioned.

The aim of this project has been to examine community-based efforts to prevent and treat all forms of child sexual abuse and to investigate the current efforts to prevent abuse through school-based sexuality education. The study is based on survey data collected among 54 Danish municipalities in 2009, and on qualitative interviews with key staff working in the field of child sexual abuse prevention and treatment. We also conducted a survey among 16 teacher training colleges and interviews with teachers that provide education in sexuality in public schools.

We found that there are many good initiatives aimed at preventing child sexual abuse, but there is still room for improvement regarding sexuality education, prevention and handling of sexual abuse cases. A large number of municipalities lack adequate procedures that ensure good practice in handling cases of abuse and prevent abuse from occurring. The study also concluded that teachers lack sufficient training in a number of relevant topics, such as sexual development, children's and adolescents' access to counselling (e.g. hotlines) and strategies to avoid unwanted or forced sexual relationships.

Hence, based on these findings the report recommends implementation of well-defined procedures or contingency plans in all municipalities, compulsory training in sexual education in teachers' colleges and fixed teaching in sexually related topics in the mandatory school system by trained teachers. The report is intended as a resource for policy-makers and practitioners who work within the area of child sexual abuse.

### **Strategies to prevent and handle child sexual abuse**

In the last 10-15 years, public and professional attention to child sexual abuse has considerably expanded. In 2003, the Danish government drafted an action plan to combat sexual abuse of children. It includes a strengthening of local intervention and an improved service for abused

children and their families. As part of the government's action plan, in October 2005 the Danish National Centre for Social Efforts Against Child Sexual Abuse (SISO) distributed an “inspiration catalogue” to the Danish municipalities regarding their capacity to act in relation to cases involving sexual offences and violence against children. SISO also offered their assistance in the development of an effective contingency plan.

Experience has shown that there are many barriers, personal as well as professional, which hinder early discovery and professional handling of child sexual abuse cases. Therefore, it is important to have a written plan (contingency plan) whenever there is a suspicion of intra-familial or extra-familial sexual abuse. The contingency plan shall include prevention strategies, guidelines for handling child abuse cases and counselling and treatment of victims and families experiencing sexual abuse.

By mid 2009, only half of the 54 municipalities that participated in the survey had a written plan for handling and preventing sexual abuse of children and youths. Furthermore, one in four municipalities reported having plans to develop a written strategy. Even though a number of municipalities still have not implemented strategies, it is an improvement, since previous research has shown that in 2002 only 25 percent of municipalities had such a strategy. Some prevention and handling strategies only cover extra-familial sexual abuse cases, while others cover all forms of child sexual abuse. Relatively few plans contain easily accessible procedures in cases of suspicion and notification of possible child sexual abuse. Furthermore, they do not consistently contain information on how to obtain relevant counselling from institutions such as VISO<sup>1</sup> or SISO.

### **Multidisciplinary teams**

Ideally, child sexual abuse cases have to be dealt with by a multifaceted, multidisciplinary team that has been specially trained to handle these often complex cases. The multidisciplinary team should meet regularly to review cases and make recommendations for improved handling of child sexual abuse cases. Less than half of the municipalities that participated in the study reported having a multidisciplinary team to handle child sexual abuse cases. Furthermore, only a handful of teams are active, which means that team members meet regularly and provide continuing education/staff development programmes to promote the growth of knowledge about child sexual abuse among professionals who work with children and young people.

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<sup>1</sup> VISO, The National Knowledge and Specialist Consultancy Centre.

As mentioned above, Danish Municipalities have the opportunity to consult SISO or the National Knowledge and Specialist Consultancy Centre (VISO) to get counselling on the handling of cases of child sexual abuse, e.g. on how best to treat sexually abused children and their families, but only a few municipalities make use of this opportunity. One in four municipalities offers special treatments for sexually abused children and youths. But apparently some municipalities only have treatment programmes that target specific groups of abused children and youths defined by age and sex, while other municipalities offer treatment programmes for both child and adult victims of sexual abuse.

### **Screening and selecting employees and volunteers**

The Danish national action plan to combat sexual abuse of children emphasizes that employing the right people in institutions that deal with children is an important part of preventing child abuse and building a child-safe organization. Hence, the action plan recommends hiring (hiring ???) procedures that aim to protect children and youths from sexual abuse in day care institutions. In 2005, the Danish Parliament passed a law about criminal records disclosures (Lov om indhentelse af børneattest). According to the new act, it is now compulsory (earlier only voluntary) to obtain a “children’s certificate” in connection with applications from and engagements of new employees who in their job will have direct contact with children below the age of 15. Such a “children’s certificate” will contain information on decisions such as convictions concerning incest, sexual intercourse or other sexual relations with children under the age of 15, the dissemination or possession of child pornography or indecent exposure to children under the age of 15. The aim of the act is to form the basis for further strengthening the fight against sexual abuse of children. However, such criminal background checks have limitations and do not effectively safeguard organizations from employing a potential child abuser. Firstly, because they do not identify all potential sexual offenders as most have not yet committed any criminal acts or have not been caught. Secondly, the “children’s certificate” only mentions if a person has been convicted of sexually abusing a child, it does not include information on charges of abuse. Furthermore, the law states that only when an applicant is permanently employed must a “children’s certificate” be obtained before the person starts working in the organization. If a person is not permanently employed, a “children’s certificate” must be obtained not later than three months after he/she started working and during this period of time has had direct contact with children under the age of 15 at least three times or in a continuous period of more than two weeks. That means that an employee

may be working with children for weeks before a criminal background check is done. Therefore, it is highly recommended also to do reference checks as well to gain additional information on applicants before a job offer. A reference check should include an applicant's previous employers, schools and/or colleges to learn more about his or her job history or educational qualifications. However, the interviewed municipalities had no homogeneous practice for reference checks. In the qualitative interviews with local government employees working in the field of child sexual abuse prevention, a compulsory reference check was highly recommended.

### **Guidelines for physical interaction between adults and children**

While employee/volunteer screening and selection are important, they should not be the only efforts adopted to prevent child sexual abuse. Developing a guideline on interactions between adults and children is another way of preventing child abuse. For example, some day care centres have a policy to limit one-on-one interactions between children and adults (i.e., having at least two adults present at all times with children). These guidelines are intended to protect children from situations that increase the risk for child sexual abuse and to protect employees from gossip and unfounded accusations of child abuse. Only a handful of the municipalities that participated in the survey reported that they had drawn up such guidelines for the municipal day care centres. The interviewees recommend that organizations inform applicants about the organization's policies and procedures relevant to child sexual abuse prevention. By letting applicants know that the organization is serious about protecting children, they may deter some people at risk of abusing children and youths from applying for staff or volunteer positions.

### **Fighting sexual abuse of children on the internet**

Today, many children grow up with the internet and other digital media as an integrated part of their everyday lives, and most children use it as a great tool to get information about all kinds of topics, interacting with friends etc. But the rapid expansion of internet technologies also introduces new risks into the lives of children and a need to pay attention to how they use the internet and to ensure they are aware of the precautions that these new communication and contact forms require. The Danish action plan emphasizes that it is important to be aware of children's use of the internet and the different precautions that should be taken in public libraries and schools.

One way to prevent child sexual abuse on the internet is by installing internet filters on public library and school computers and to place computers in an open space, so that it is possible to

monitor children's online activities. An internet filter is designed to restrict access to certain internet sites and resources according to their content. For example, violence and porn sites are a few of the things that any good internet filter can intercept. It is also important that teachers, pedagogues, parents, librarians etc. can enter into dialogue with children and youths about safe internet use and supervise their online activities.

### **Preventing childhood sexual abuse through school-based sexuality education**

The government's action plan recommends improving children's knowledge and skills regarding sexual abuse prevention through school-based sex education. Important skills include being able to recognize pressures from other people and to resist them and being able to seek help from professionals if one is being sexually abused. Sexuality education should include not only facts about biology and the risk of pregnancy and sexually transmitted diseases, but must also teach children to manage and enjoy relationships, make responsible choices and distinguish right from wrong.

The action plan makes assurances that the government will assess the teaching in elementary and secondary schools in terms of whether there is a sufficient degree of awareness about and focus on dealing with all forms of abuse of children in the school system. In spite of the good intentions of the strategy<sup>2</sup>, the findings from our study show that the education currently provided could be much better.

Many young people lack basic sexual health knowledge and knowledge of risk factors associated with sexual abuse. Interviews with teachers revealed that there is a need for better sexuality education at teacher training colleges. Sexuality education is not a compulsory subject in teacher training colleges, and far from all colleges offer optional courses in children's normal sexual development, how to establish institutional guidelines for physical interaction to prevent sexual abuse, how to make a notification when there is a suspicion of sexual abuse and the nature and extent of child sexual abuse. Furthermore, at the colleges that do offer such courses not all students choose them. Hence, only a small number of fully trained teachers have the required training to make them capable of providing competent and contemporary sexuality education.

Furthermore, interviews with teachers show that there is a big difference in the extent and quality of sexuality education in secondary schools. There is no fixed minimum amount of lessons or any

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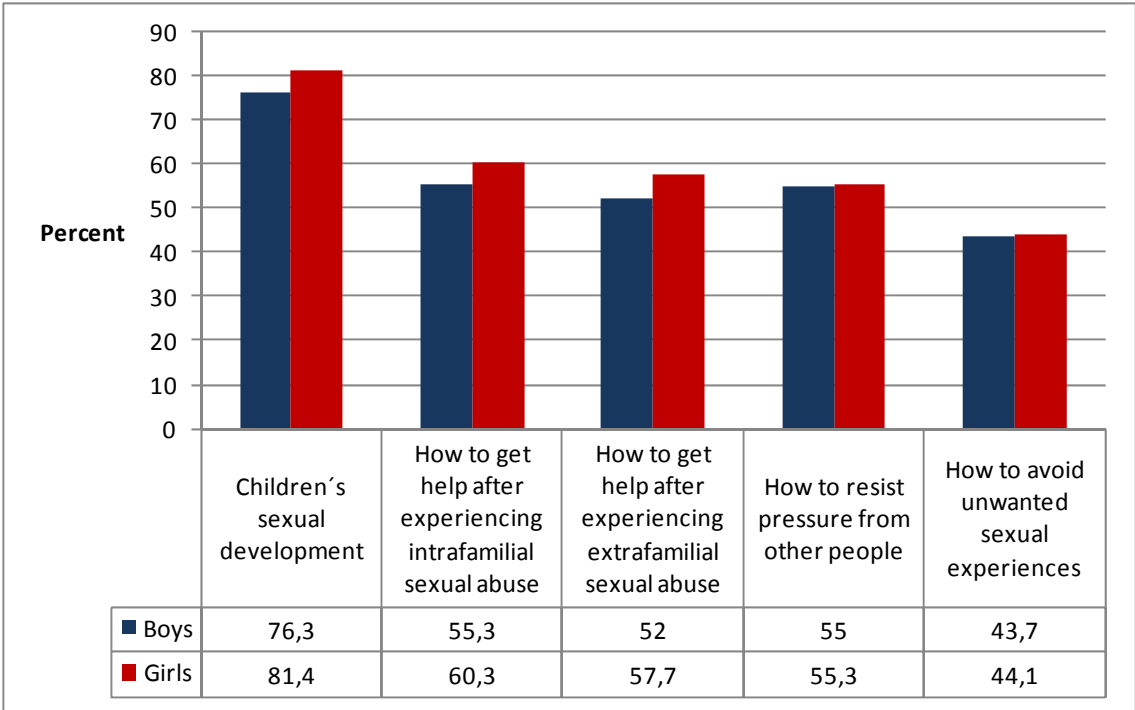
<sup>2</sup> The Minister of Justice in Denmark has initiated the work of a new National strategy to fight sexual abuse of children. The strategy is expected to be finished at the end of 2010.

written objectives or fixed content requirements for sexuality education. The extent and quality of the education depends to a large extent on the level of interest and commitment of individual teachers. The interviewees emphasize that personal barriers might also be an obstacle to good sex education. They emphasize that teachers ought to have an open approach to sex education and be very receptive to students' needs and that they must be able to talk about topics of special interest to pupils. Therefore, it is important that only those teachers who want to teach this subject do it. In some schools they have good experiences concerning external educators or school nurses, but it is emphasized that external sex education programmes should only be a supplement to existing sexuality education. The reason is that some pupils prefer to talk about subjects such as sex and sexuality with a teacher they know and feel safe with, while other pupils prefer to talk with a teacher they do not know. Gender segregation during sexuality education lessons can also offer some advantages. Both boys and girls speak their minds more freely and girls feel safer when talking to a female teacher about periods, hygiene, feelings etc. At the same time, boys can benefit a great deal from having girls in the classroom and vice versa, because they learn more about the opposite sex and the conditions of a good relationship.

In 2008, 4000 pupils (aged 15-16 years) took part in a computer-based survey regarding their wellbeing, sexual experience and experience of sexual abuse. Respondents were asked if they received formal instruction on four topics of sex education at school: children's typical sexual development, how to get help after experiencing sexual abuse, how to resist pressure from other people and how to say no to sex and avoid unwanted sexual experiences, the sexual rights of children.

- Most of the youngsters reported being taught about children's typical sexual development, but about 25 percent of male and 19 percent of female teenagers responded that they had not been taught this subject.
- More than half of pupils reported being taught how to say no to sex and avoid unwanted sexual experiences.
- In most classes 50-100 percent of pupils had been taught how to get help after experiencing sexual abuse, but there is considerable variation among schools, as in some schools only 15 percent of pupils had such instruction while at other schools all the pupils had it.

The table below shows the percentages of boys and girls receiving sexual abuse prevention education.



In general, more girls than boys reported/ recalled having been taught the above-mentioned topics at school. The ethnic origins of the pupils, the geographic location of the schools and the type of school did not have any major impact on whether or not pupils received sexuality education.



**This English summary presents the main results of a research project that describes current community-based efforts to prevent child sexual abuse. The project is funded by the National Board of Social Services (Servicestyrelsen).**

**Results are published in a Danish report:  
Forebyggelse af seksuelle overgreb mod børn.  
Kommunernes indsats og om skoleunder-  
visningen.**