



**DON'T PUSH
IT AWAY!**
An overview

Don't push the thought away!

**How you can protect children and adolescents
from sexual violence. An overview.**



Federal Ministry for
Family Affairs, Senior Citizens,
Women and Youth



Independent Commissioner
for Child Sexual
Abuse Issues

What is sexual abuse?

Sexual abuse (sexual violence) begins where someone deliberately disregards and transgresses the physical and sexual boundaries of a child. It includes any sexual act performed on or in front of children against their will or to which they cannot knowingly consent due to physical, mental, intellectual or linguistic subordination. The perpetrator uses his or her position of power and authority to satisfy his or her own desires at the expense of minors.

* From the age of 14, children are considered adolescents. No differentiation is made here in the text, but the term "children" is used throughout for the sake of readability.

In the case of children under the age of 14*, it must be assumed that they cannot consent to sexual acts. Sexual acts are always to be considered sexual violence, even if a child expresses that he or she consents or a perpetrator interprets it that way.

Sexual violence begins with sexual aggression, e.g. when a person verbally harasses a child or observes him or her in an inappropriate way, e.g. looking at intimate body parts. Accidentally touching, e.g. the breast, does not constitute sexual violence, but it is a violation of boundaries that can be hurtful for those affected. The person should apologise to the child for this.

Regardless of how serious the acts are, whether they take place online or offline, are punishable or not: sexual abuse is an attack on a young person, on their basic trust and their psychological and physical inviolability.

Sexual abuse can lead to experiences of great loss of trust and control, powerlessness, humiliation, shame and disgust for survivors.



Important: A child has a good chance of processing and healing from sexual abuse. What is important in this regard is that you listen to and believe her or him and then take the right steps. This booklet explains what you can do if you are worried about a child.

How can I tell if a child is being abused?

It is difficult to recognise sexual abuse. Only rarely do children have injuries that clearly indicate sexual abuse. There are also no other concrete characteristics or signals that occur in every case and are clear indications. Young people react very differently to such a stressful experience. However, whenever a child exhibits a significant change, adults should always be attentive.



Some affected children...

- ... become very anxious or withdrawn.
- ... always want to do everything right and not stand out.
- ... insult and hurt other people.
- ... find it difficult to concentrate and have problems at school.
- ... become ill, get headaches or stomach-aches, sleep badly or develop skin diseases.
- ... inflict injuries on themselves.
- ... eat too little or too much.
- ... take drugs, drink alcohol or develop other addictions.
- ... develop sexualised behaviour.

How can I talk to a child I am worried about?

Convey the feeling to the child that he or she is important to you. It is not enough to say: “Hey, I notice that you don’t seem to be doing well. If something is wrong, you can always come to me.” Build bridges and address the issue in concrete terms: “I’m a little worried. Would you like to tell me how you’re doing, what’s bothering you?”, “I don’t know what’s wrong with you, but I want you to know that I’m concerned.” Stay gentle, don’t give up, talk to the child several times. Show that you are resilient, that you know how to deal with difficult issues – and that the child can trust you: “I don’t know what it’s about yet, so I can’t promise you that I won’t tell anyone. But I promise you that I won’t do anything behind your back.” Try to ask questions without any underlying intentions if possible and do not ask closed questions. Closed questions are those to which the child can answer yes or no. An example of a closed question would be: “Did the person hurt

you?”. Such questions often lead to the child answering one way and then another, and you as the helper tend to become even more uncertain. Ask the child open questions if you want to start a conversation. Open questions help the child to speak about a situation in his or her own words.

Examples of open-ended questions are:

- How are you?
- What did you do together?
- What happened next?
- What kind of person was it? What did the person look like?
- And then what happened?

These three rules are important for conversations:

1

Do not pressure the child to talk about something if he or she does not want to. It can put pressure on him or her – in addition to the pressure a perpetrator may already be exerting.

2

Listen to the child without preconceptions. In other words, try to set aside your own explanations for the child’s behavior. Avoid confronting the child with your assumptions.

3

If you are afraid of what the child might tell you, do not initiate the conversation. Seek professional support (first).

What strategies do perpetrators use to approach children?

You need to know that abuse does not happen by accident. Abuse is not a mistake that just happens to someone and “could happen to anyone”. Abuse is planned, experts speak of perpetrator strategies.

Perpetrators flatter children with compliments about their appearance – especially online.

Therefore, give your children the assurance that their body is okay the way it is. The more self-evident this is for your child, the less compliments will work as part of a perpetrator strategy. Disparaging remarks about other people’s bodies should not be part of the normal family tone – not even among siblings.

Perpetrators specifically look for children who are familiar with violence.

Therefore, physical and psychological violence are forbidden and not a suitable means of education. Violence increases the neediness of children, which perpetrators take advantage of.

Some perpetrators ask children to pose – so that they can film or photograph the abuse.

Therefore, even in the family circle, only take photos of others with their consent and do not pressure a “camera-shy” child. Physical self-determination also includes the experience of being able to decide for yourself who takes your picture in which situation and what happens to the photo.

Perpetrators deliberately exploit situations where children know little about sexuality or do not dare to talk about it.

Therefore, try to talk to your child about sexuality in a way that suits their age and stage of development, as well as your own capabilities.

A great many perpetrators declare the act to be a shared secret that must not be revealed.

Therefore, communicate from the beginning that there are “good” and “bad” secrets: “Good” secrets can be recognised by the good, nice, pleasant feelings they evoke. “Bad” secrets cause stressful, unpleasant feelings – and you don’t really want them. Allow “bad” secrets to be talked about. Make it clear that this is not snitching or betrayal.

Perpetrators stir up feelings of guilt in child survivors.

Therefore, make it unequivocally clear that in cases of sexual violence, perpetrators always bear the responsibility – no child can be blamed for abuse. Not even if they have done something risky or forbidden. Be aware that many perpetrators encourage their victims to misbehave. They allow things that their parents forbid.



What do I do if I have a concrete suspicion?

Do not confront the suspected person initially.

Do not approach the person you suspect of inflicting (sexual) violence on a child about your suspicions. This is one of the most common mistakes in dealing with sexual violence! Otherwise, there is a high risk that the situation will escalate and the child will be put under pressure not to talk to anyone or claim that he or she just made it all up. There is also the risk that the suspected person has now been “warned” and will make evidence disappear. In addition, it is important to know that many perpetrators not only abuse, but also film or photograph the acts of abuse. It is especially difficult to observe this rule if you know the person well, such as when it is a family member or partner. You trust these people and hope to get a plausible explanation that will dispel your suspicions. In most cases, the person denies the crime, reacts with dismay, indignation, hurt and insists that you should know better. In short, a confrontation about a suspicion very rarely leads to “confessions” and does not prevent further offences.

Do I have to call the police and report the suspected person?

No, in Germany there is no obligation to report suspected sexual abuse. No one has to report a suspected person to the police. However, the possibility of filing a criminal complaint must be examined in each individual case, as other children could be affected. The decision to file

criminal charges is always a far-reaching decision that should focus on the child. It may be useful in this regard to seek advice and support from a specialised counselling centre and a lawyer before filing charges. If you fear that the life or well-being of a child is in acute danger, please inform the police.

Where can I find support and get help?

Do not do anything on your own and seek professional support. It is best to contact a local counselling centre that specialises in the topic of sexual abuse. The staff of such counselling centres know the subject very well and will assist you in all further steps, confidentially and anonymously if you wish. You can find an overview of counselling centres in your area here: www.hilfe-portal-missbrauch.de/hilfe-finden.



Further information can be found in the guidebook **“Mutig fragen – besonnen handeln”** (“**Courageously ask – sensibly act**”) from the Federal Ministry for Family Affairs, Senior Citizens, Women and Youth.

“Especially in acute crisis situations, it helps enormously to seek outside advice and not just stay in your own external circle. We look at everything independently and can help to assess the situation impartially.”

Pia Witthöft (head of the Mutstelle (courage centre) in Berlin)

“In my life there were so many moments when it was clear that there was something wrong with me. I would have liked the people around me to just ask me how I was doing and if everything was alright at home.”

Lisa Fahrig (Survivors' Advocate, Member of the Survivors Board)

Our two new prevention videos offer a good introduction to raising awareness about sexualised violence. The first video is aimed at all those who interact with children, e.g. parents, families, teachers and club members. The second video focuses on everyday school life and supports teachers, social workers and educators in dealing with suspected cases. The videos are suitable for internal training and further education. They can be downloaded or streamed here:



What can
parents and
adults do?



What can
professionals
do?

What else can I do to protect children from sexual violence?

Sexual violence may take place in any place where children are present. For example, in sports clubs, choirs, schools, daycare centres, in children's residential groups, in projects for the disabled, at holiday camps, in tutoring institutes, in church congregations and also in digital chat groups. As parents, you can help make these places safer for children by inquiring about what measures are in place to protect them from abuse. **Therefore, you can ask for a "prevention concept". A prevention concept regulates what is to be done if there is a suspicion and how the child in question and the other children can be protected.** Also ask whether children who need help because of problems in their family are identified and supported. Prevention concepts oblige workers to treat children with respect and to maintain their boundaries. They also oblige them to help children who are under stress. In addition, prevention concepts against sexual violence ensure that potential perpetrators encounter conditions and rules in institutions that prevent them from committing their planned acts or make it significantly more difficult for them to do so.

Where there are children, for example, you can ask:

- Are there rules about how adults should respect children's personal and physical boundaries?
- Are there similar rules for how children interact with each other?
- Are there rules for chat groups in the institution?
- Are parents' evenings offered on the topic of sexual violence and on possibilities of prevention?
- Are there prevention projects for girls and boys?
- Are the staff of the institution trained on the topic?
- Are there good opportunities for children to confide in someone inside and outside the institution?
- Are there guidelines for action that staff can follow in an emergency?
- Does the institution have contact with a counselling centre on sexual violence?

If there is no prevention concept yet, your questions may be an important impetus to change this. Institutions must be aware that the protection of children from violence, including sexual violence, is important to parents. This happens above all when many parents ask about it.

Important: It is not about having general mistrust, but blind trust is not a solution – because that is the best thing that can happen as far as perpetrators are concerned. It's hard to tell at first glance whether a place is safe and whether the people there are trustworthy. But sometimes you have a strange feeling and you are not sure if your children are in good hands. Then you should ask yourself: 'What's bothering me? What would I like to be different?'

Don't push the thought away! Follow it up.



“Courage is always needed with this sensitive and personal topic. Nevertheless, I am convinced that it helps to make a call. It is a first step, a beginning to “trusting oneself”. And that alone often makes all further steps much easier.”

Tanja von Bodelschwingh
(counsellor at the Sexual Abuse Support Helpline)

Free help services at a glance

Sexual Abuse Help Portal

The Sexual Abuse Help Portal provides information for survivors, family members and professionals, and all those who are concerned and provides contact with local help and counselling.

www.hilfe-portal-missbrauch.de/en

Sexual Abuse Support Helpline

If you are worried about a child, have a suspicion or are affected yourself, you can contact the Sexual Abuse Support Helpline.

Counselling is confidential and free of charge. The Sexual Abuse Support Helpline also offers counselling in English.

The telephone hours are:

Mon, Wed, Fri: 9:00 to 14:00 and

Tue, Thu: 15:00 to 20:00

0800 22 55 530

The Sexual Abuse Support Helpline also provides confidential and secure online advice on any questions you may have and on how to proceed in cases of suspected abuse.

www.hilfe-telefon-missbrauch.online

Legal notice

“Don't push it away!” is a campaign by



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