



National Rapporteur on Trafficking in  
Human Beings and Sexual Violence  
against Children

# Effective prevention

*Prevention of sexual violence  
against children by providing comprehensive  
sexuality education at school*

## SUMMARY



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## Introduction

One in three girls and one in five boys in the Netherlands experience some form of sexual violence before they reach the age of eighteen. The victims can continue to suffer the effects of what has happened to them deep into adulthood. Sexual violence not only harms the victims and their loved ones, but also imposes financial burdens upon society. It is therefore important to take steps to prevent sexual violence, in relation to both victims and perpetrators. A commonly used method of preventing sexual violence against children is providing comprehensive sexuality education at school. According to the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), comprehensive sexuality education is recognized as an age-appropriate, culturally relevant approach to teaching about sexuality and relationships by providing scientifically accurate, realistic, non-judgemental information. International research has shown that interventions at school can help to increase children's assertiveness (their ability to protect themselves) while enhancing their knowledge of sexual abuse prevention. To that end, there are various teaching packages, also known as interventions, available to teachers.

The report '[Effective prevention](#)' is concerned with interventions designed to prevent sexual violence against children, with the focus on their 'effectiveness', as the use of effective interventions can prevent the creation of new victims and offenders. But research is needed to make any judgment about the effects of a measure; and an intervention that research has shown not to have the desired effect should be discontinued.

This summary contains the most important findings and subsequent recommendations in the report 'Effective prevention', which looks at what is being done in schools to prevent new victims and perpetrators of sexual violence, whether the measures being taken are effective and the identification of room for improvement.

## The study

Preventive measures can help curb sexual violence against children and the accompanying physical, psychological, sexual and financial consequences – for victims, for perpetrators and for those close to them. To this end, schools can make an important contribution by providing comprehensive sexuality education, which should cover topics such as the prevention of sexual violence in order to protect the sexual development and sexual integrity of children. While it is often believed that comprehensive sexuality education should only be provided to adolescents or adults because sexuality only develops at a later age, that is an erroneous view. A person's sexual development starts at birth, so children can and should be encouraged to start learning about sex and relationships from group 1 of primary school. The competences (knowledge, skills and attitudes) that schools can teach their pupils to foster their positive sexual development are described in guidelines developed by the European Regional Office of the World Health Organization (WHO) in association with the *Bundeszentrale für gesundheitliche Aufklärung* and experts from a number of West European countries.

### [What are schools and the government obliged to do by law?](#)

In the Netherlands, schools in primary education, special education and lower general secondary education are all required by law to include lessons on sexuality and sexual diversity in their curriculum. This requirement is based on the core objectives of the education system, set by the Minister and State Secre-

tary of Education, Culture and Science, which have included these subjects since 2012 with the intention of strengthening the sexual assertiveness of young people. Schools are free to decide how they will achieve the core objectives and, thus, also how they will provide instruction on sexuality and sexual diversity.

The core objectives only apply for primary education and lower secondary education; the obligation for schools to teach sexuality in order to strengthen the sexual assertiveness of pupils therefore only extends to pupils up to the age of 14 or 15. In other words, the core objectives do not apply for 16- and 17-year-olds, young people who are generally in upper secondary education or starting a course in secondary vocational education. However, young people in this age group actually face a greater risk of experiencing sexual violence than younger children (in terms of both becoming a victim and a perpetrator) and would benefit most from an effective intervention on the prevention of sexual violence.

In addition to schools' statutory obligations, the Dutch government is bound by European legislation and international treaties to adopt legislative or other measures to ensure that public information is provided with a view to preventing sexual violence. The Council of Europe Convention on the Protection of Children against Sexual Exploitation and Sexual Abuse (Lanzarote Convention) explicitly mentions providing information to children about the risks of sexual exploitation and sexual abuse during primary and secondary education. Sexuality and sexual diversity are among the core objectives of education in the Netherlands, so the government appears to comply with that obligation. The curriculum, and therefore the core objectives, are currently being reviewed on the advice of *Platform Onderwijs2032*, a body that was asked by the State Secretary for Education to investigate what pupils in primary and secondary education will need to learn in order to participate fully in the society of the future. The House of Representatives has agreed to reform the curriculum, and a proposal for a new curriculum is expected to be presented in May 2018. It is essential that the revised curriculum still includes lessons in sexuality and sexual assertiveness and the provision of the information required by the Lanzarote Convention.

#### *What do schools want?*

As discussed above, schools are obliged to cover sexuality and strengthening sexual assertiveness in their curriculum. Furthermore, the Inspectorate for Education (hereinafter: the Inspectorate) for the Minister of Education, Culture and Science recently carried out a survey into how the core objectives of sexuality and sexual diversity are implemented, which showed that school directors and teachers in primary and secondary education, primary special education and secondary vocational education consider it important for schools to address sexually transgressive behaviour.

#### *What do schools do in practice?*

The core objectives merely provide that schools must devote attention to sexuality and sexual diversity, not how they should do so. The survey by the Inspectorate provides a clearer picture of how schools implement these core objectives.

The Inspectorate selected a sample of schools in primary education, primary special education, lower general secondary education and secondary vocational education for the survey. A total of 214 directors and 439 teachers completed a questionnaire in which they indicated how much attention they devoted to 'sexually transgressive behaviour'. The responses showed that 77% of the directors of primary schools, 91% in primary special schools, 79% in lower secondary general education and 57% in secondary vocational education devote some attention to sexually transgressive behaviour. Remarkably, in view of the fact that they are obliged to do so, this means that almost one in four (23%) of primary education direc-

tors, almost one in ten (9%) in primary special education and one in five (21%) in general secondary education indicated that they did not address sexually transgressive behaviour and its prevention at all.

There is no obligation for schools in secondary vocational education to provide information about sexually transgressive behaviour, so it is not surprising that over two in five (43%) directors of secondary vocational schools said they do not do so. However, in light of the large number of minors entering secondary vocational education every year and the fact that 16- and 17-year-olds experience or commit sexual violence more often than younger children, secondary vocational schools should place more emphasis on protecting the sexual integrity of their students.

The subject of sexually transgressive behaviour is covered most often in specific lessons in schools at every level of education. Teachers in all four streams covered in this report also frequently discuss it in response to incidents. Almost one-third (32%) of the teachers in primary special education said they use teaching materials they have designed themselves. The teachers who said they address sexually transgressive behaviour in their lessons generally do so at most several times a year. Teachers in primary special education seem to discuss the subject more regularly than in the other streams: roughly one in six (16%) say the subject is raised at least once a week during lessons, and the same number say they discuss the subject several times a month.

#### *Do we know whether schools contribute to the effective prevention of sexual violence against children?*

As previously mentioned, the key term in this study is 'effective'. Do schools use interventions that research has shown to have the desired effect? To answer that question, a brief explanation of how interventions are evaluated is required.

In the Netherlands, developers of interventions can submit their intervention for certification (i.e., verification of the intervention's quality and effectiveness) in the Interventions Certification Process (hereinafter: the certification process), a joint programme of seven research institutes<sup>1</sup>. To qualify for certification, the developer of an intervention must provide a clear description of the intervention: for whom it is intended, what its purpose is and what is needed to carry it out. If they are available, the developers of interventions must also provide theoretical underpinning of the intervention and a description of the results of any studies carried out into its effectiveness. The independent members of the Interventions Certification Committee (hereinafter: the certification committee), who are practitioners, policymakers and academics, evaluate whether the intervention is properly described, feasible, theoretically sound and/or effective on the basis of a set of criteria used to assess the quality of interventions. If the application is successful, the certification committee recognises the intervention as 'well-founded' or 'effective'<sup>2</sup> and the description of the intervention is deposited in a database with the accompanying certification. The interventions relating to sexuality education and sexual violence are mainly to be found in the databases of the Netherlands Youth Institute, Movisie and the Centre for Healthy Living (which is part of the Netherlands Institute for Health and the Environment, RIVM). Our own survey of certified interventions that have been deposited in these databases showed that none of them have actually been shown to prevent sexual violence against children.

1 They are the Netherlands Youth Institute, the Centre for Healthy Living, the Netherlands Centre for Youth Health Care, the Netherlands Centre for Social Development (Movisie), the Netherlands Institute for Sport and Exercise, the Trimbos Institute (mental health care) and Vilans (care for the disabled and the elderly).

2 Interventions are not merely recognised as 'effective'. Recognition is broken down into 'initial indications of effectiveness', 'good indications of effectiveness' and 'strong indications of effectiveness'.



Therefore, returning to the question of whether ‘schools use interventions that research has shown to have the desired effect’, the answer is no. There is still no intervention available today for Dutch schools that has been proven to be effective in preventing sexual violence against children. This means that there are still no interventions that schools *can* use where research has shown that they achieve the desired effect.

### *What can schools then do?*

Research into the effectiveness of an intervention requires a major investment of the developers’ time and money. It is therefore not surprising that the effectiveness of many interventions has not been investigated. Nevertheless, these investments must be made – if it is not known whether an intervention actually achieves its intended purpose, using it might be pointless. But the argument ‘nothing gained, nothing lost’ does not apply here. In the first place, applying an intervention takes time and money, both of which are wasted if the intervention does not achieve its purpose. More importantly, interventions can in fact be counter-productive and therefore have harmful effects. In other words, it really does matter what interventions schools use. How then can schools find their way around the range of interventions on offer so that they know which they should use, or would be better advised not to use? With the heavy workload that teachers face, resources should be used in an efficient manner.

In the absence of effective interventions, the best alternative is to use interventions that probably *could* work on the basis of their theoretical underpinning. The certification committee has recognised fifteen interventions as ‘well-founded’.<sup>3</sup> It is of course essential for these interventions to be developed further and for their effectiveness to be investigated. The focus should then be on the following aspects, which are still not adequately covered in many interventions: preventing people from becoming perpetrators, preventing online sexual violence and preventing sexual violence against children in domestic situations and in other relationships of dependency.

The interventions certified as well-founded are targeted at both younger and older children and at young people who are attending both lower (secondary special education, practical education, secondary vocational education) and higher levels of education (havo, vwo). That said, none of these interventions are specifically intended for children under the age of twelve in primary special education, even though children with a disability (mental and/or physical) have a greater chance of becoming a victim of sexual violence than children without a disability. Effective lessons in sexuality and relationships that also cover prevention of sexual violence are therefore particularly important for these children. The findings of the report by the Inspectorate show that this need is recognised in practice. The school directors and teachers in primary special education indicated in the questionnaire that a) they find it very important to address sexually transgressive behaviour, b) they devote more attention to it and do so more often than the other levels of education that were investigated, and that c) they use self-designed teaching materials most often. In view of the effort required to investigate the effectiveness of an intervention, it is unlikely that these teaching materials have been proven to be effective.

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3 In addition to these fifteen interventions, one more (*Lang leve de liefde - onderbouw*) has been rated as ‘good indications of effectiveness’. Research into the effect of this intervention showed positive significant effects in relation to safe sex (use of the pill and condom, STD risk perception and knowledge about sexual health), but no effects in terms of preventing sexual violence.

### *Do schools use theoretically well-founded interventions?*

In the questionnaire the Inspectorate asked what specific methods, projects, teaching materials and/or external experts schools use. The responses showed that the 439 teachers who took part in the survey reported using an intervention 44 times in all, and that 214 directors mentioned a total of 37 interventions. Of the 81 responses showing that directors and teachers used an intervention, 18 referred to one of the interventions certified by the Interventions Certification Committee and deposited in one of the databases, which is a negligible number in relation to the number of directors (N: 122)<sup>4</sup> and the number of teachers (N: 168)<sup>5</sup> who said they devote attention to sexually transgressive behaviour.

The success of an intervention is not linked exclusively to the method used, however. The competence and expertise of the person using the intervention is just as important. Not every teacher is capable of raising the issue of sexual violence and its prevention for discussion, so schools can also choose to hire external experts.

### *What is the significance of the use of non-evaluated interventions?*

If most schools do not use certified interventions, the question is whether they are making optimal use of the resources that are available to them. Using interventions that have not yet been evaluated by the certification committee is possibly a waste of effort because it is unclear whether they will actually help in achieving the core objectives, and might even be counter-productive.

### *Is it easy for schools to find information about differences between interventions that have not been evaluated and certified interventions?*

Our own research into interventions that are to be found in the databases of the Netherlands Youth Institute, Movisie and the Centre for Healthy Living, as well as the School and Sexuality Toolkit and the website [www.seksuelelevorming.nl](http://www.seksuelelevorming.nl), has shown that there are more interventions designed to prevent sexual violence against children that have not been evaluated (N: 25) than there are certified interventions (N: 18).<sup>6</sup> It should be noted that neither this study nor the survey by the Inspectorate reviewed the extent to which schools are familiar with the certification process and the registration of certified interventions in the databases.

The three databases generally clearly describe which interventions are certified and which are not and what that means. Other sources that provide an overview of interventions designed to prevent sexual violence against children do not say, or clearly explain, what is known about the quality of their underpinning or their effectiveness. The School and Sexuality Toolkit is a product of *Stichting School en Veiligheid*, an organisation that receives a subsidy from the Ministry of Education, Culture and Science. However, the list of interventions it offers to schools contains no certified interventions or information about the different levels of recognition that can be awarded in the certification process. Other materials that have

4 54 (primary education), 30 (special education), 30 (lower secondary education) and 8 (secondary vocational education).

5 50 (primary education), 44 (special education), 52 (lower secondary education) and 22 (secondary vocational education).

6 A total of 45 interventions were identified. Fifteen interventions are 'well-founded', one is 'good indications of effectiveness' (see footnote 3) and two are recognised as 'well described', the lowest level of certification. There is also one intervention which was explicitly not certified, while one intervention is currently being evaluated and 25 have not yet been evaluated.

been published on behalf of the ministry, such as the curriculum proposal with examples of teaching materials from the National Institute for Curriculum Development (SLO), also contain no information about the differences between certified interventions and interventions that have not been evaluated. On [www.seksuelelevorming.nl](http://www.seksuelelevorming.nl) (the website of Rutgers and SOA Aids Nederland) there is information about which interventions are certified, but no explanation of the different levels of certification.

In addition to the recognised and non-evaluated interventions, the certification committee can also explicitly refuse to certify an intervention that has been submitted if it does not meet the assessment criteria. One intervention designed to prevent sexual violence against children was explicitly not certified because ‘the problems the project addresses are too broad and too serious for the chosen approach. Furthermore, it has not been adequately shown that the objectives can be achieved with the approach. There is also a risk of a potentially harmful side-effect from the intervention for pupils who at the time of participation are already victims of an abuse of power’. Non-certification provides valuable information for schools, but non-certified interventions are only mentioned in the database of the Netherlands Youth Institute and not in the other sources containing lists of interventions.

If the information provided about interventions designed to prevent sexual violence against children is not uniform and does not always show the level of certification granted by the certification committee (or its significance), the question arises of whether one can expect schools to be aware of the differences in the quality and effectiveness of interventions. If schools are not aware of certified interventions, one cannot expect schools to use them. Schools are under enormous pressure, and therefore need help and support to enable them to use their resources efficiently.

## What is needed to effectively prevent sexual violence?

On the basis of the above findings, the National Rapporteur presents four recommendations. The first, third and fourth are directed at the government. The first and third will enable the government to equip schools better to provide effective education about sexuality and relationships in order to prevent sexual violence against children. The fourth recommendation calls on the government to ensure that the sexual protection of minors in the education system does not end at the age of 14 or 15. The second recommendation is addressed to schools in primary, secondary and special education.

### **RECOMMENDATION 1** *Invest in effective interventions that prevent sexual violence*

The National Rapporteur recommends that the Minister and State Secretary of Education, Culture and Science and the State Secretary for Health, Welfare and Sport ensure that interventions that have been proven effective are available at every level of education to prevent the creation of both victims and perpetrators of sexual violence against children. These interventions must encompass every form of sexual violence, including the prevention of online sexual violence and the prevention of sexual violence between peers and within relationships of dependency.

The two ministries could collaborate with developers of interventions, research institutes and the education sector in developing effective interventions.



**RECOMMENDATION 2** *Choose interventions that effectively prevent sexual violence against children*

- a. The National Rapporteur recommends that all schools in primary, secondary and special education choose an effective intervention in meeting their statutory duty to ‘teach children to deal respectfully with sexuality and sexual diversity’ and to that end study the available information about the quality and effectiveness of interventions.
- b. As long as no proven effective interventions are available, the National Rapporteur recommends that all schools in primary, secondary and special education preferably choose an intervention that is theoretically well-founded.

**RECOMMENDATION 3** *Ensure that information about the quality and effectiveness of interventions is uniform*

The National Rapporteur recommends that the Minister and State Secretary of Education, Culture and Science harmonise the provision of information to schools about interventions designed to prevent sexual violence. This information must make it clear which interventions are not-certified or have not been evaluated. In this way schools will be better equipped to distinguish between interventions on the basis of their quality and effectiveness, which will make it easier for schools to use certified interventions.

The Minister and State Secretary could collaborate with the research institutes that are members of the Interventions Certification Process and the education sector in harmonising the information and making the information easier to find for schools.

**RECOMMENDATION 4** *Take measures to protect 16- and 17-year-olds against the risk of becoming victims or perpetrators of sexual violence*

The National Rapporteur recommends that the Minister and State Secretary for Education, Culture and Science adopt measures to encourage schools to continue providing effective information relating to the prevention of sexual violence to students in higher secondary education and in secondary vocational education.

Given the absence of proven effective interventions in the Netherlands and in light of the methods currently used by schools to implement the core objectives on sexuality and sexual diversity, it is clear that a lot of attention is still required for the effective prevention of sexual violence against children through sexuality education in schools. Adopting the above recommendations will help to improve the protection of the sexual integrity of children and young people and, thus, prevent new victims and perpetrators of sexual violence.

**The National Rapporteur reports on the nature and scale of human trafficking and sexual violence against children in the Netherlands.**



### **What does the National Rapporteur on Trafficking in Human Beings and Sexual Violence against Children do?**

The National Rapporteur reports on the nature and scale of human trafficking and sexual violence against children in the Netherlands. The Rapporteur monitors the effects of policy conducted in these domains, identifies bottlenecks and makes recommendations to improve the measures taken to address these themes. The National Rapporteur has no investigative authority and is not a complaints agency.

### **Who is the National Rapporteur?**

The National Rapporteur is Corinne Dettmeijer-Vermeulen. She is supported by a team of researchers from various disciplines.

### **What activities does the National Rapporteur carry out?**

The National Rapporteur collects quantitative and qualitative data by means of independent research, through intensive contact with other bodies, by organizing and participating at meetings and conferences and by participating in task forces and groups of experts. The Rapporteur publishes the results of her research and the ensuing recommendations in reports, which also contain descriptions of the phenomena of human trafficking and sexual violence against children, relevant legislation and the measures taken in the areas of prevention, investigation and prosecution of perpetrators and help for victims. The Rapporteur monitors

the practical implementation of her recommendations. The Rapporteur is also active at international level.

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