

Safeguarding children and youth in residential and foster care: Supporting healthy sexual development

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Background

- High prevalence of sexual abuse in residential and foster care
- Professionals working in residential and foster care perceive very few cases of sexual abuse
- Professionals are incapable of discussing and supporting healthy sexual development of children and young people
- Competences on how to support a healthy sexual development in children and young people should be gained during (social work) education

Project goal

To develop **education and training for (future) professionals** to help them to **build competences on guiding young people's healthy sexual development** and to interact with children and young people, their (foster) parents, colleagues and other professionals on the topic of sexual behaviour, intimacy and inter-personal relations in order to **prevent for sexual abuse of children and young people in care**

Research question

Which competences (knowledge, skills, attitude) do (future) professionals working in residential and foster care need in order to guide young people's healthy sexual development?



Method

Literature study

Review study of publicly available materials developed for professionals working in residential and foster care (e.g. guidelines/policy documents, interventions, tools, etc.)

Semi-structured interviews

- 5 experts
- 8 policy makers (national and institutional level)
- 35 professionals working in residential (N=23) and foster care (N=12) (focusgroups)



Results - literature study

Type of materials	Included	Analysed
Guidelines and policy documents	50	14
Interventions	36	7
Training programs for professionals	15	1
Educational programs	2	1
Tools and instruments	187	5
Websites	53	3

Weerbaarheid en
grensoverschrijding



Seks en de media



Relaties



Seksuele diversiteit



Results – interviews + materials

Knowledge on:

Your own development, own values and norms on sexuality & intimacy and 'value free' criteria to be used to talk about it

The questions, issues and prejudices young people have, what they need to make responsible decisions and the vocabulary to speak with distinct subgroups

Healthy sexual development (all age groups), groups at risk for unhealthy development, roles & tasks of professionals in stimulating a healthy sexual development and identifying abuse, the instruments & interventions available

Plus: in residential & foster care

Residential care

Importance of a *positive living group* climate and the importance of cognitive behavioural techniques in this respect
Risks involved for each *individual* child

Special needs of vulnerable and neglected children and young people or with autism spectrum disorder

Existence and forms of sexual abuse & unsafety plus the risk factors involved

Foster care

(Methods & tools for) psycho-education on the topic to foster parents

Results – interviews + materials

Skills

General skills

- Conduct conversations on sensitive topics
- Self reflection
- Give and receive feedback

Residential care

Speak with children and young people about:

- Healthy and unhealthy sexual behaviour (e.g. apply Flag system)
- Norms and values (in non-judgemental way)
- Feelings, interpersonal distance, personal boundaries
- Practical things

Speak with colleagues about:

- Norms and values
- Difficulties and insecurities

Create safe environment, timing of conversation, use appropriate terms (e.g. intimacy vs. sexuality), cope with diversity, be a role model, stimulate and confirm adequate behaviour / discourage unacceptable behaviour

- Create possibilities to experiment with (sexuality related) behaviour
- Influence interactions and group dynamics

Foster care

- Speak with foster parents about their role in sexual development of foster child
- Coach and teach foster parents

Results – interviews + materials

Attitude

- Open and curious attitude
- No prejudice
- Self-reflection
- Courage to talk about sexuality

Conclusions

- (Future) professionals need to have general knowledge, practice based knowledge and self knowledge to guide healthy sexual development of young people in residential and foster care
- (Future) professionals need to have general skills (e.g. conversational skills) and specific skills to speak about sexuality with young people, other professionals and (foster) parents, create a safe environment and room for experimentation
- (Future) professionals need to have an open, curious and non-judgemental attitude, the willingness to reflect on ones own behaviour and the courage to talk about sexuality

Thank your for your attention!

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