



Sexualised Violence Using Digital Media

Basic Knowledge and Approach



take action | **beyond**
against cyber | **digital**
sexual | **violence**

Beyond Digital Violence (ByeDV)

The project ByeDV aims at developing quality criteria for the implementation of professional standards for dealing with sexualised violence using digital media committed against children and adolescents. The distinguishing feature of the project is the close collaboration between research and practice. Colleagues from counselling centres validate the usability of empirically developed recommendations for professionally dealing with sexualised violence with digital media.



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Basic Knowledge and Approach

Many young people post about their lives on social networks. They curate their lives through (profile) pictures, likes, comments, groups, playlists, and much more. They use digital media to listen to music, stream movies and television series, communicate with friends, play online games and do research for school assignments. They use the Internet to find out about current events and to search for answers to questions that concern them. Young people consider online communities and educational websites valuable resources for information about sexuality and sexual diversity. More and more young people are meeting their romantic partners online; dating apps are the second most common place to meet. In their romantic relationships, they exchange intimate messages. In short, digital media are an important experiential space for children and adolescents.

At the same time, perpetrators of violence use digital media to circulate intimate images or deepfakes of children and adolescents, to comment on young people's posts on social networks with sexist jokes, or to confront them against their will with porn links. This constitutes

digitally perpetrated sexualised violence against children and adolescents.

With this in mind, we would like to provide orientation to professionals from the fields of education, psychosocial counselling and psychology, child and adolescent psychotherapy, child and youth welfare as well as child and youth association work in response to the following:

- What is sexualised violence using digital media?
- What are its consequences?
- What should be taken into consideration in the context of support services?
- How can we balance the conflicting demands of providing protection and supporting self-determination?

This brochure provides information about sexualised violence using digital media and imparts professional standards (so-called quality criteria), which are highlighted in grey.

What is sexualised violence using digital media?

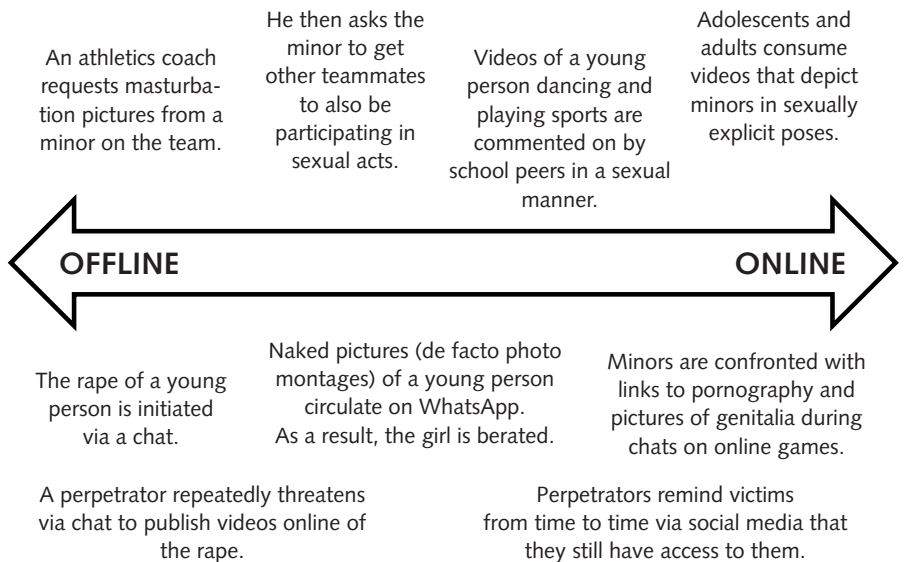
We define sexualised violence using digital media as:

- a) violating acts with which
- b) perpetrators intentionally assert their own needs
- c) at the expense of the sexual self-determination and/or consent of children and adolescents
- d) aided by digital media (e.g., initiation of physical assaults via chat) or in a digital

setting (e.g., crime scene in the case of circulating nude pictures).¹

As a blanket term, sexualised violence using digital media includes intentional boundary violations that are initiated, perpetrated, accompanied, and/or sustained by digital devices or digital media.

¹ Vobbe, F./Kärgel, K. (2022): Sexualised violence and digital media. Reflexive recommendations for action for professional practice. Wiesbaden: Springer VS.
DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-658-35764-1>



The various forms of sexualised violence using digital media move fluidly between online and offline environments. Naked pictures may circulate online, but children and adolescents experience the consequences and stresses both online and offline. Rape takes place offline, but when footage of it is uploaded to the Internet, the rape is also online. Whether the focus of the violence is online or offline depends on the individual case.

The image on page 2 depicts the fluidity of online and offline experiences by situating examples of sexualised violence using digital media along a continuum.

Taken collectively, the following situations constitute sexualised violence using digital media:

- Photos or videos of children and adolescents become the subject of sexualised comments.
- Children and adolescents become enmeshed in sexualised conversations via digital media.
- Children and adolescents are encouraged to share intimate photos or videos in which they are lightly clothed or nude.
- Blackmail or threats are used to pressure children and adolescents to spread intimate chats, pictures or videos.

- Children and adolescents are encouraged to be photographed or recorded (live) while performing sexual acts on themselves and/or third parties.
- Digital media are used to keep sexualised violence secret—for example, by monitoring or controlling those affected.
- Intimate photos or videos depicting children and adolescents are consumed and/or disseminated.
- Children and adolescents are confronted with pornography (via links) and/or abuse images or such images and videos are consumed together with them.

How is sexualised violence using digital media assessed from a legal standpoint?

European countries differ in how they legally assess sexualised violence using digital media. However, some orientation is provided by the EU Strategy to Combat Sexual Abuse of Children and Sexual Exploitation of Young People.

[You can find out about the current EU strategy and EU directive on combating the sexual abuse and sexual exploitation of children and child pornography, including its progress on the European Commission's website.](#)

All forms of sexualised violence using digital media endanger the well-being of the child, regardless of the legal assessment. They violate, among other things, the right to protection from all forms of violence and the right to sexual self-determination. The perpetrators of violence always bear the responsibility. Children and adolescents are never to blame, even if they have sent intimate images.

What role do perpetrator strategies play?

In the context of a relationship between adolescents of the same age, it can be difficult to assess whether intimate pictures and videos are shared consensually. For example, if nude pictures are circulating

in an adolescent peer group, it could be that the photos were previously shared consensually in a romantic relationship. However, it could also be that pressure was exerted to share the photos. When young people engage in romantic or sexual relationships online, it is often assumed that they are both around the same age and have similar expectations. However, it is also possible that perpetrators of violence are manipulating victims by deceiving them about their age, gender and/or motivation (so-called cybergrooming).

It is not uncommon for young people to maintain online relationships and friendships over several months or years. They experience these relationships with the same level of trust and intimacy as relationships formed offline. Especially because sexting – the consensual exchange of intimate messages, photos and videos – is often part of seeking out and cultivating romantic relationships for adolescents as well as for adults. Perpetrators of violence take advantage of this fact. Regardless of whether or not they were part of the victim's social environment before the violence was initiated, the goal of *cybergrooming* is to facilitate online and/or offline sexualised violence using digital media. When perpetrators react to hesitation or a 'no' with disappointment or indicate that they have lost interest in

further contact, the victim's fears of losing the relationship grow, as does the feeling that they have to fulfil the expectations of the other person. Perpetrators often exploit victims' feelings of shame and guilt by feigning romantic intentions or threatening to publish intimate photos. They may have previously established trust with and paid attention to their victims, for example by giving gifts, such as digital devices (e.g. tablet, drone) as a sign of their supposed affection.

When young people establish and/or maintain romantic and sexual relationships online, they have just as many challenges recognising the boundary between sexual self-determination and sexualised violence as their adult relatives and professionals. If you are uncertain about the nature of a relationship between children or adolescents, or if you suspect sexualised violence using digital media, it is important:

- a) to remain calm**
- b) to consult with a centre specialising in sexualised violence ²**
- c) to get advice on how to classify the situation and take action.**

² We refer to institutions that regularly work with people affected by sexualised violence as specialising in sexualised violence.

Who perpetrates sexualised violence using digital media?

Sexualised violence using digital media can be perpetrated by adults or adolescents, men or women, persons from within the same social environment (e.g. family, friends, neighbours, classmates, athletics coaches, tutors) or unfamiliar perpetrators, as well as offline contacts or online contacts. However, very often, perpetrators do belong to the social environment of those affected.

When considering who is a perpetrator, the role played by the peer group must also be taken into account. When intimate pictures or videos surface in peer groups, they are usually quickly forwarded, posted or commented on in a way that is hurtful to those depicted.

Young people participate in shaming and blaming those affected to avoid becoming victimised and/or ostracised themselves. This so-called bystander behaviour perpetuates the violence.

How widespread is sexualised violence using digital media?

According to national and international surveys, one third of the young people between the ages of 12 and 27 report that intimate pictures or videos of them have been disseminated against their consent. Around a quarter of those surveyed say they have forwarded intimate images or videos without the consent of those depicted.³ According to Europol, the number of abusive images circulating on the Internet has been increasing across the EU for years.⁴

Just as crime statistics do not show the entire picture, surveys also offer only an orientation. The number of unreported crimes is presumably much larger.

German institutions that work with children and adolescents affected by sexualised violence and/or young people who perpetrate boundary violations report that digital media play a role in almost all cases.

³ Powell, A. / Scott, A. / Flynn, A. / McCook, S. (2022): A multi-country study of image-based sexual abuse: extent, relational nature and correlates of victimization experiences. *Journal of Sexual Aggression*. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1080/13552600.2022.2119292>.
⁴ Negreiro, M. (2020): Curbing the surge in online child abuse. European Parliamentary Research Service. Available online: [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2020/659360/EPRS_BRI\(2020\)659360_EN.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2020/659360/EPRS_BRI(2020)659360_EN.pdf).

When working with children and adolescents and their guardians, it is always important to consider that digital media may have played a role. This is a prerequisite for correctly classifying a (violent) situation and planning adequate action steps and interventions.

It must be taken into account that feelings of shame and guilt may prevent children and adolescents from volunteering information about chatting or sharing pictures via digital media.

What are the consequences of sexualised violence using digital media?

The publication and dissemination of intimate photos, videos and chats can never be completely ruled out.

Sexualised violence using digital media can be perpetrated anytime and anywhere via mobile devices. Take the following example: At age 14, a girl was asked by her athletics coach to send him nude pictures.

When he kept demanding more, she refused. He proceeded to forward her nude pictures to some club members. To protect herself from further abuse and recrimination, she moved to a distant town. There, the photos circulated in a group chat three years later.

Intimate pictures, videos and chats can be published/distributed years later and across national borders. Thus, publication and dissemination can never be ruled out beyond a doubt.

Likewise, it is possible that after many years, a violent experience – as in the above example – is disclosed unexpectedly, i.e. uncovered, without the knowledge and against the will of those affected.

Even a criminal investigation does not provide absolute protection from dissemination in this regard. When intimate photos, videos or chats are published, the distribution chain and thus the number of possible copies, cannot be fully traced by the police.

Affected children and adolescents often suffer in multiple ways.

When intimate recordings circulate in the

social environment of affected children and adolescents, they are often exposed to (further) blame, humiliation and sometimes ostracisation (so-called victim blaming).

This secondary victimisation puts a strain on victims and can (re)traumatise them, particularly when photos or videos are repeatedly circulated. Each circulation constitutes a new violation (so-called revictimisation) via sexualised violence using digital media.

Affected children and adolescents can be pulled back into their experiences of violence.

Victims often feel that they are haunted by their violent experiences wherever they go.

Perpetrators often spread rumours about victims when intimate pictures or videos circulate. However, children and adolescents also relive experiences of violence when perpetrators try to contact them again via digital media. Mostly, this outreach serves to signal control and/or omnipresence, to assure secrecy or to remind them that intimate recordings can be published.

Affected children and adolescents are afraid.

The knowledge that intimate pictures, videos and chat histories can be published is no less stressful for those affected than recordings that have already been published and/or circulated. They often feel powerless and trapped in a hopeless situation. Is/was something published? When? Where – on the darknet, in a group chat? Who will know about it? What will parents, siblings, friends, etc., think and do? When will it stop? Where will I be safe? Will the perpetrators show up again?

It can be frightening and traumatic to feel unable to control whether and when a violent experience will lead to further consequences. It is not uncommon for victims to report anxiety even into adulthood.

Victims feel threatened for very different reasons by the possibility that intimate photos and videos or published chat histories may circulate. For example, they expect name-calling and blaming (victim blaming), accusations, scepticism, ostracisation from the peer group or family, perpetrator-victim reversal or stigmatisation, for example related to sexuality, derogation, victimhood). The consequences

of most concern depend significantly on a person's social environment, including the groups (so-called social systems) they belong to outside of their (foster) family or residential group (e.g. daycare centre, school, club, social networks)? What experiences have they had there? How do they experience being with others as well as their own role in the group? Which norms and values are formative? At the same time, fears are often accompanied by strong feelings of shame and guilt.

Affected children and adolescents have mixed feelings about using digital media.

It can be stressful for affected persons to use digital media.

For example, news about cases of sexualised violence or attempted contact by a perpetrator can awaken memories of their own experiences of violence, i.e. triggering. This can unleash uncomfortable feelings, often the same feelings as during and immediately after the acute violence they experienced. At the same time, digital media can bring a sense of control. Some victims specifically search the Internet looking for their photos and videos to:

- a) make sure they are not circulating,
- b) gather evidence of the violence they experienced, or
- c) to cope with negative feelings (e.g., panic). In any case, digital media are an important way for children and adolescents to take part in social life.

[The EU Kids Online study provides regular information on young people's media use via its website.](#)

What should be considered in the context of support services?

Help in cases of sexualised violence using digital media requires a clear approach. The approach means the way in which helpers address affected persons. It is about dealing with one's own emotions – how helpers deal with their perceptions and their reactions to what they perceive. Their approach is demonstrated through the behaviour that results (e.g. in the form of questions, silence, intervention). The (further) development

of an approach towards sexualised violence using digital media necessitates a process of analysis.

Quote

"I would like to promote acceptance of the fact that media is part of people's lived experiences. Recognition of this and a sympathetic interest in young people and their experiences should be the cornerstone of any approach. To this end, it is necessary to constantly reflect on one's own attitudes toward media consumption, Internet use, sexuality and body awareness. In my opinion, the approach towards sexualised violence using digital media is based on these parameters. This is often the decisive factor in determining how we provide counselling."

(Specialised counsellor)

Prevention and intervention respect the right to sexual self-determination when using digital media.

In order to be perceived by children and adolescents as a trustworthy resource, an adult must demonstrate a positive attitude towards digital media. Even if you personally are not very enthusiastic about online dating, sexting and posting pictures

on what feels like constantly changing trendy apps, young people need to feel that their media behaviour is taken seriously and respected by you.

Show interest and approach the conversation without prejudice.

| Quote

“What I find difficult is the constant changes and new things, which quickly give you the feeling that you’re not ‘up to date’ again after all; in the end, I’m trying to understand more and more the pattern behind it [...] and to see the individual features and platforms as instruments, which don’t necessarily all have to be known by name and content.”

(Specialised counsellor)

You can express criticism of media formats with regard to problematic structures (e.g., provider profits), restrictive norms (e.g., unattainable ideals of beauty, traditional role models) and behaviour that violates boundaries. However, it is not advisable to focus exclusively on the dangers of the Internet or to criticise the way “today’s youth” tend to use media.

Doing so risks making young people feel that you do not accept them, their experiences and thus their self-determination. At the same time, a media-sceptical and/or rejecting attitude often inhibits young people from confiding in adults. This can make affected people feel all the more ashamed and (partly) guilty.

You can find out more about the principles of prevention here.

Being affected by sexualised violence using digital media should not result in losing out on using digital devices and media. Temporarily taking away a digital device or prohibiting them from using (certain) applications is generally not effective and restricts their right to self-termination.

The goal of support services must be to enable children and young people to use digital media without negative associations. To this end, it is advisable to figure out together which forms of media use are (less) good for them by discussing the following:

- How do you feel about being on digital media?

- Is there anything you don't like about using social media or that you don't like to do on digital media?
- When you think back to the situation where you didn't feel so good about using digital media ...
- What would happen if you only used the apps and social networks you like the most? What would happen if you didn't look at the other apps and networks for a while?

Intervention takes into account that sexualised violence using digital violence occurs fluidly between online and offline environments.

As outlined at the beginning of the brochure, sexualised violence using digital media often takes place both online and offline, or its consequences take place both online and offline (e.g., violence in a sports club that is exposed at school due to the circulation of nude pictures online).

As a professional, you are also (partly) responsible for supporting those affected when you learn of acts of violence against children and adolescents that take place online and thus seemingly outside your own institution or working hours.

Intervention takes into account that digital media can play a role in almost all cases of sexualised violence.

Since children and adolescents do not necessarily volunteer information that they chatted or shared intimate pictures via digital media, it is the responsibility of professionals to always consider this as a possibility.

When victims of sexualised violence seek counselling from a specialised centre, it is important to ask in a non-judgmental manner during the initial conversation whether, for example, they chatted or shared pictures via digital media. For this purpose, it can be useful to work with illustrations that show children and adolescents chatting or taking pictures of themselves.

Intervention takes into account that the publication and dissemination of intimate images, videos or chats can never be completely ruled out.

In order to include victims and their guardians in decision-making processes within the framework of support and

to provide them with opportunities for co-determination, the following steps must take place separately for each party and through a centre specialised on sexualised violence:

- They must be informed about the possibility that intimate pictures, videos or chats are/were published and/or distributed.
- They must be prepared for the consequences of being caught back up in the violence, revictimisation and secondary victimisation, taking into account their stresses and resources with the goal of protection and agency.
- This also includes the potential that criminal charges may be filed by third parties (e.g. school, club, residential group).

When talking to those affected, it is important to leave it up to them whether or not they want to directly process and work through the risk of dissemination. It is, however, more important to create a space for this discussion to take place in the future. For this purpose, it is sufficient to sensitise them to the risk of dissemination by means of factual information. By contrast, discussions with guardians

must focus on developing immediate protection measures.

Information on the risk of dissemination must be preceded through a professional assessment.

The aim of this is to assess, together with guardians and professionals,

a) how likely it is that intimate photos, videos or chat histories will be published and/or disseminated in the foreseeable future and

b) what consequences one should anticipate with regard to the protection of affected persons as a result of dissemination.

Intervention strengthens agency.

In order to empower victims and their guardians despite the risks of dissemination, they must be informed about technical and legal options for action. This includes counselling on pressing criminal charges, and potential consequences (e.g., *possibilities of hash value searches or a search for abuse images using web crawlers, duration of court proceedings, reactivation of stresses, indeterminable prospect of a conviction, psychosocial support*). In

this context, it is important to explain that abuse images cannot, in principle, be permanently deleted with absolute certainty.

This knowledge can be used to work together with those affected to determine which options are available for dealing with the events in question. Doing so can help to reduce feelings of powerlessness and hopelessness and strengthen the sense of empowerment.

At the same time, it is fully legitimate for those involved to feel a sense of powerlessness. As a professional, you can integrate this sense of powerlessness into your work through collegial case consultations, help networks and supervision.

Intervention aims to work out protection measures together with those affected.

Protecting children and young people from sexualised violence using digital media requires the following:

- working with affected individuals on how they can feel protected

despite the possibility of getting caught back up in the violence

- working with those affected on how they can prepare for feared scenarios and be empowered to act if the worst happens
- working with victims on how to cope with their anxieties

In the context of support services, it is important to take into account that stresses and anxieties affect each person differently. This can be achieved in therapeutic and pedagogical work with affected persons by means of the so-called systemic approach, which considers affected persons in their social environment. Affected persons are best able to assess what burdens them and the extent to which their fears are justified.

Quote

"The individual experience of the client forms the basis for further interventions and professional methods (e.g. trauma-sensitive work). Victims of sexualised violence using digital media [need] individual professional support according to their experiences."

(Specialised counsellor)

Ideas about how to work with affected persons on their fears and stresses or how to work together with them to develop protection measures can be found in our brochure

["Quality Criteria for Developing Coping Strategies"](#).

The foundations for systemic work can be found [here](#).

Intervention takes into account the perceived pressure to act, multi-layered consequences and existing uncertainties.

In order to do justice to the complexity of cases of sexualised violence using digital media, it is necessary that, regardless of the perceived time pressure, sufficient time and space is taken during the first stage of support in order to do the following:

- Act in a thoughtful and planned manner that includes those affected.
- Make use of expertise from the team (collegial case consultation).

- Obtain the necessary expertise by setting up a support network (e.g. specialised unit against sexualised violence, youth welfare office, legal counsel).
- Define your mandate and its limits.

| Quote

"The requirement is not to be or to become an expert on sexualised violence using digital media. But, it is important to know the relevant contact points."

(Specialised counsellor)

RECOMMENDATION:

If your institution works on sexualised violence against children and adolescents, we recommend that your case statistics explicitly reflect how frequently digital media played a role (e.g., through grooming, sharing/requesting photos and videos). This can strengthen your position vis-à-vis politicians and funding institutions.



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Authors | Editors | Copyright:
Katharina Kärgel | Frederic Vobbe |
Rachel Cylus | www.byedv.de
Translated from German by Rachel Cylus

Editing | Implementation:
Ralph Bruder | Julia Hopf | Sonja Kroggel |
Anna Polzin | Marco Roock | Maj Walter |
Claudia Wienand

Production: Druckerei Maulbetsch GmbH |
74939 Zuzenhausen | Layout: Ellen Müller

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