



Sexualised Violence Using Digital Media

Quality Criteria for Prevention



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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Quality Criteria for Prevention

Put yourself in the shoes of a young person and let the following advice sink in: "Think carefully about how you dress. Otherwise, don't be surprised if you are harassed."

It is safe to assume that this advice sounds reproachful to young people, because it ascribes responsibility for sexualised violence to those in need of protection. The following is another piece of advice that is used in a similar way in many current prevention approaches: "It is best to never send sexy pictures of yourself to anyone. You cannot be certain in whose hands the pictures or videos will end up."

At first glance, these two tips differ only slightly.

During a two-year project, specialised practitioners worked together with researchers and looked at methods for preventing sexualised violence using digital media against children and adolescents.¹

¹ Sexualised violence using digital media includes intentional violations of young people's sexual self-determination that are initiated, perpetrated, accompanied and/or maintained by digital media or digital end devices.

The project partners noticed that it is common for prevention efforts to include directions, commands and prohibitions along the lines of the second piece of advice. We discussed the extent to which these types of prevention messages, which are primarily risk-oriented and seek to place accountability for protection first and foremost in the hands of potential victims and their media usage, are effective. Ultimately, we discussed professional factors for success and minimum requirements – so-called quality criteria – for the prevention of sexualised violence using digital media. With this brochure, we would like to offer guidance to educational staff, social workers, professionals in child and youth welfare services as well as other professionals working with young people with regard to the following questions:

- How can prevention take into account the (online) realities of young people's lives, including any previous experiences of sexualised boundary violations?
- What should prevention teach?
- What prevention messages are useful to reach young people?

We consider the following as suggestions for future prevention work. It should be noted from the outset that the prevention of sexualised violence does not have to be completely reconceived. Rather, our aim is to discuss which aspects of prevention should be reconsidered due to the dynamics of digital media, and in which cases a reversion to established principles is sufficient. Basic knowledge of sexualised violence facilitates the better understanding of this brochure.

What is prevention?

Prevention encompasses a wide range of measures aimed at preventing, deterring, recognising and stopping sexualised violence using digital media as well as making it easier for those affected and their social environment to get help. Although it would be ideal to endeavour to prevent violence completely, this is unfortunately unrealistic. Perpetrators of violence will always find ways to defy protection measures, including laws and resistance, both from young people and their adult caregivers.

There is likely no aspect of the everyday lives of children and young people that is devoid of digital media. It goes without saying that young people play on and with digital media. They conduct relationships with friends, romantic partners and family via digital media. Various adolescent developmental milestones now correlate to the use of digital media. At the same time, online communities and peer groups are a resource for young people. They allow young people to share experiences, participate, get information and make connections. They foster a wide range of interests and are conducive

to promoting a diversity of lifestyles and sexuality.

Sexual exploration is a part of adolescence. Young people today face the challenge of concurrently expressing themselves in the media, where expectations closely align with gender stereotypes and sexuality. An intimate photograph can be quickly taken and sent. This is a behaviour that can be consensual between adults or between young people and is perceived as normal because of its common occurrence. Sharing intimate pictures and videos, therefore, does not in principle indicate naivety or irresponsibility.

At the same time, a perpetrator of violence can use this reality and exploit it by emphatically demanding a nude photo or simply forwarding one. Doing so violates the sexual self-determination of the person depicted. Of course, perpetrators of violence also chat with victims in cases of intra-family sexualised violence to reinforce feelings of dependency through uninterrupted communication. Abuse images are also produced for the purpose of trading them in perpetrator networks in exchange for other abuse images. Victims often experience renewed confrontation with images of

abuse or perpetrators of violence even if protection has been established.

Sexualised violence using digital media is characterised by the following:

- It responds to the reality of young people's lives, their relationships and their sexual development.
- It can be perpetrated by persons from within the social environment.
- It can also be perpetrated by persons who are not known in the close social environment of those affected, but whose relationship with those affected may come to be perceived as close.
- It violates the sexual self-determination of affected persons regardless of place and time.
- The violence and its consequences are often repeated as soon as perpetrators of violence are in possession of text, sound, image or video material. Finally, dissemination/publication and/or victim-blaming and experiences of ostracisation – in cases of disclosure – can occur at any time.

You can read about the consequences and characteristics of sexualised violence using digital media in the brochure ["Basic Knowledge & Approach"](#).

Thus, prevention takes the following into account:

Prevention is **not** limited to efforts to inhibit sexualised violence. It prevents sexualised violence by being aware of the fact that violence will be perpetrated despite all efforts and can easily be initiated and perpetuated through digital media.

Prevention strengthens the sexual self-determination of young people. It makes it easier for those affected to recognise and disclose boundary violations. Prevention enables helpers in the social environment of those affected to identify and recognise signs of sexualised boundary violations.

Prevention comprises offers (e.g. workshops, websites, apps or information) for young people, adults, parents/guardians and educational staff.

It takes place in everyday interactions with children and young people, in families or in institutions (e.g. schools, clubs, homes, child and youth psychiatric institutions).

Prevention changes how institutions work with young people. It improves their approaches to educational and institutional procedures by involving children and young people, taking into account mediatised boundary violations, the circumstances of those affected and their needs, and initiating appropriate support services when needed.

Prevention also aims at changing the nature of social structures that are conducive to violence. However, this is at most a marginal aspect of this application-oriented brochure.

What tensions come with prevention efforts?

Prevention leads us into a conflict. We want to protect children and young people by encouraging them to recognise when someone is trying to shift the boundaries of their sexual self-determination. At the same time, we do

not want to incapacitate young people, but encourage them to be aware of their boundaries and to seek support.

Sexualised violence using digital media can happen to anyone. Children and adolescents are particularly at risk to be affected by it. Adult caregivers can at best try to strengthen and protect children and adolescents. But, they can never completely eliminate the threat of violence.

Several (inter)national studies have concluded that one third of the young people surveyed have already experienced violations of their sexual boundaries through digital media – for example, receiving unsolicited pornography from peers, sexist comments on social media or even the production and dissemination of images of abuse that are relevant under criminal law. In discussions between the project partners and young people, the young people reported confrontation with unsolicited pictures of erect penises (so-called dick pics) of acquaintances and strangers with such frequency that this seems to be an almost everyday occurrence for them. It must therefore always be assumed that there are victims of

sexualised violence among the target audiences of prevention programmes. From this point of view, numerous rules of conduct – for example on sharing intimate pictures, videos or messages – become problematic. The advice to “be very careful in online relationships” may sound reasonable at first glance. However, it runs the risk of reinforcing feelings of guilt or helplessness among those affected and their friends, as the message can be interpreted as critical of media behaviour or as an insinuation of shared responsibility for experiences of violence.

When considering the conflict between protection and empowerment, all efforts to prevent sexualised violence using digital media must be assessed to ensure that they do not reinforce feelings of guilt in those affected and do not promote a reversal of guilt – so-called victim blaming.

What should prevention teach?

Depending on one's pedagogical convictions towards the media, prevention efforts can try to teach young people that they can behave more deliberately and anxiety-free in the context of digital media use, communication and self-presentation; that they should consider more carefully what they reveal about themselves and let themselves be constrained as little as possible by the judgement of others; that they should be critical of beauty ideals and that they share responsibility for the norms of social media through what they do and post.

Apart from this, the quality of all prevention measures is assessed according to the conviction that children and adolescents affected by violence never bear the responsibility for sexualised violence using digital media, and that they have the right to a violence-free life and to support. These principles apply regardless of how they behave or act online.

Prevention thus refutes attempts to reinterpret sexualised violence with

excuses such as "it's somehow the victim's own fault, just look at the pictures on their profile", "I was just kidding" or "I didn't mean it that way".

In order to counter trivialising reactions to sexualised violence using digital media, young people and adults must be informed through targeted programming about what sexualised violence using digital media is and what consequences it has for those affected. The contents of prevention are therefore as follows:

Sexualised violence using digital media refers to intentional violations of young people's sexual self-determination that are initiated, perpetrated, accompanied and/or maintained by digital media or digital devices.

Sexualised violence using digital media ignores the lack of consent given by children and young people. It violates the rights of children and young people. At a minimum, it violates personal rights and laws protecting the well-being of the child.

Sexualised violence using digital media is painful, frightening and shameful, but something can be done about it.

Because sexualised violence using digital media is embedded in relationships and/or communication, prevention measures should educate about the strategies used by perpetrators.

This includes, among other things, age-appropriate information on how perpetrators use digital media to establish intimidating scenarios (e.g. threatening to distribute intimate images), feign trusting and/or romantic relationships, reinforce dependencies, build up expectations, foster fears and blackmail victims, for example by threatening to publish intimate content or terminating contact. The target audiences of prevention programmes are taught that consent is also a prerequisite for (sexual) communication in digital contexts.

Children and young people are informed that

- a) sexualised violence using digital media takes place in close relationships (e.g. romantic relationships, family),
- b) but that there are also perpetrators of violence who are not previously known in the social environment, and
- c) that there are other young people and adults who are violent.

What characterises a preventive approach?

A preventive approach intends to promote the self-determination of children and young people online. Accordingly, it accepts digital media as an important part of children's and young people's everyday lives, their relationships and their participation.

Failing to recognise this can risk losing touch with children and young people and not being able to offer them orientation for the excessive demands that digital media can make on them. If, on the other hand, children and young people perceive that their views on digital media, including their feelings of conflict and burdens associated with digital media, are taken into account, that the rules created around using digital media are justified and can be negotiated as they mature, this stands in contrast to the arbitrariness that characterises sexualised violence.

Participation is thus a protective factor of prevention. Through it, young people experience their own self-efficacy.

Prevention takes into account that communication through pictures and videos is usual for young people and plays a role in sexual development, as long as it is age-appropriate and without coercion. Classifying age-appropriate behaviour is challenging for sexual education. If, for example, it is perceived as normal for a group of thirteen-year-olds or younger to demand nude pictures in the context of peer relationships, the question arises as to where this norm comes from, to what extent it can be considered consensual for the majority of those involved and whether it is in fact a violation of boundaries. The basic assumption that digital media can play a positive role in the lives of children and young people does not mean ignoring all criticisms. We recommend involving a specialised counselling centre when assessing concrete problems.

However, prevention should refrain from sweeping prohibitions of media use in the context of youth sexuality and should not denigrate the media behaviours of young people.

| Quote

"How can the topic of digital media be integrated [into prevention] in an age-appropriate way without prescribing rules of conduct and at the same time consider the needs and development of children/adolescents?"

(specialised counsellor)

Prevention is critical of norms that foster violence and are promoted through online service providers, algorithms, advertising, challenges, influencers or peer groups. Prevention counters onesided, sexist group norms. It identifies denigration as injustice.

It is problematic when young people are pressured to believe that they have to present themselves in a sexually provocative way. Prevention is critical of everyday sexism, constricting gender and body ideals and (violent) pornography. We see the greatest need for prevention concepts developed through collaboration among media education, sexual education and the prevention of sexualised violence.

The website "[safe4me](#)" provides various resources and toolkits for professionals and parents on different topics related to sexualised violence using digital media and online (sexual) relationships.

Prevention supports (potential) victims. It relieves victims of the idea that they are responsible for the violence they have experienced and expands their scope of action as well as that of their friends and supporters.

What prevention messages and visuals are useful to reach young people?

Concrete messages that authentically represent a preventive approach towards young people are presented below. The selection is meant to give examples.

Formulations by the PETZE Institute for Violence Prevention (Germany) in the brochure "[Sex. Where does the fun end?](#)" show solidarity with those affected by pointing out that sexualised violence using digital media takes place in relationships of dependency and intimacy:

- "Our sex photos are making the rounds now – totally embarrassing. They were just for us."
- "They made him take off his pants, grabbed him and filmed it all."

The following prevention message is closely related to this:

The perpetrators of violence are responsible for the violence, but they act as if the victims are to blame.

A noteworthy example of taking responsibility for sexualised violence is provided by the video **"Consent. It's simple as tea"** by Blue Seat Studios. It can also be applied to the production and distribution of intimate images.

Clear messages regarding responsibility for violence are also conveyed by a poster campaign of the Council of German-speaking Youth Belgium against the forwarding of nude photos:

- "That was my token of love and you abused it."
- "I was so sure of you. But, you took advantage of me."

The PETZE Institute for Violence Prevention (Germany) formulated an example of awareness-raising of perpetrator strategies on its German-language website **"Simply safe online"**:

"Not all perpetrators act in the same way. For example, contact can look like this: Perpetrators offer help with problems and seem to listen especially well. Perpetrators give you the feeling that you are very special. Sometimes pictures are sent that show sexual content with the expectation that the recipient should also send a picture of themselves naked. Perpetrators blackmail the person with the picture."

During the ByeDV project, specialised professionals considered chat threads in which subtle pressure gradually builds up with young people aged 15 and older. They discussed whether this type of behaviour was okay, problematic or violent and in this way conveyed where sexualised violence using digital media begins. Due to dependency relationships, deception and coercion, affected persons are often insecure, afraid, ashamed and experience mixed feelings. In part, digital communication makes young people and victims less attentive to their feelings and body signals. The realisation that something is wrong is delayed. Prevention starts with addressing these ambivalences with young people including those affected by sexualised violence.

These ambivalences can be addressed by the following questions:

- How can I recognise that I want something badly?
- How can I recognise (when using a mobile phone) that I don't want something?
- Why is it sometimes so hard.../ What makes it so hard sometimes ...
 - ... not to reply immediately when someone else texts?
 - ... not to post sexy pictures?
 - ... not to send a picture of yourself?

These questions expand on messages that focus on paying attention to one's feelings. They draw attention to connections between mixed feelings and their triggers, for example peer pressure or a guilty conscience. The discussion can awaken memories of boundary violations. It is particularly suitable for programmatic offerings in which it is possible to have direct contact with professionals, for example prevention specialists. As part of brochures, apps, online games or when working with younger children, the following examples offer orientation: "because I don't want to disappoint someone", "because I enjoy it ... at least

most of the time", "because that's what you do, isn't it?", "because someone made me feel guilty".

Prevention emphasises for affected persons that they have a right to help, no matter what has happened, what they have done, and regardless of whether they have promised not to tell anyone. It identifies who can provide support: for example, friends, adult caregivers – including educational staff – or counselling centres. It lists contact options for professional support services (e.g. QR code² for chat counselling).

The encouragement of the **„Safer Sexting“** website by the Media Authority of North Rhine-Westphalia (Germany) is as follows:

“You've been sent nude photos that you don't want? Get help. There are many services available to help you if something didn't go your way when you were sexting.”

The approach and messages of prevention are reflected in preventive visuals. Images allow non-verbal access. That is why they are an important medium of communication.

² „QR Code“ is a registered word mark of DENSO WAVE Incorporated.

Images that are suitable for prevention work show the entire spectrum of young people's digital everyday life. In this context, they address sexualised violence using digital media. They open up conversations about boundary violations and allow young people to speak.

The imagery used in prevention avoids shocking depictions of violence or scary pictures of perpetrators. Such images tend to frighten children and young people and they can trigger those affected, leading to a sense of paralysis and powerlessness.

The Irish website "Webwise" has a relatable and professional [collection of videos](#) on various topics related to Internet safety that can be used in prevention work with children and young people.

What should be considered in prevention work with adults and parents?

In the context of prevention, parents/guardians who are not perpetrators of violence are usually considered responsible for the protection of children and young people. This should not lead to the misconception that adults, especially parents, are ultimately responsible for ensuring that children and adolescents are not subjected to violence. In light of the fact that sexualised violence using digital media cannot be completely prevented, it would be hypocritical to expect parents to do so.

Prevention that is limited to addressing the risks of digital media can give this impression if it exclusively advises adults to find security gaps in online games, to install tracking apps on mobile phones or to constantly monitor what young people are doing. The same applies when parents are advised never to forward a child's picture to friends or relatives without first obtaining written consent from the person depicted. In this exaggerated form, prevention overlooks:

Parents/guardians are themselves potential victims of sexualised violence using digital media – namely through violence against young people close to them or their own children.

Prevention work for adults and parents follows similar guidelines to prevention services for young people, with the exception that parents are additionally empowered to support protection efforts on behalf of young people.

With this in mind, adults/parents should be informed about forms of sexualised violence using digital media and perpetrator strategies. It should be made clear that sexualised violence using digital media can be perpetrated by strangers as well as people in one's own social environment. They should be made aware that perpetrators entangle victims in a state of dependency.

It is important to point out that affected young people may find themselves in a seemingly hopeless situation, regardless of whether they are chatting with an

Internet acquaintance or a person who they know from their social environment.

Parents/guardians are advised that the development of strong relationships with the children and young people in their lives plays a particularly important role in the prevention of sexualised violence using digital media. This cannot be achieved by controlling their media use, but rather through the following:

- Adult caregivers can explore digital media together with children and young people, thereby signalling interest in their online experiences.
- They can strive to set a good example by reflecting on situations in which they have restricted mobile phones, despite using the devices themselves.
- They can take into account that posting images and videos featuring children and young people may violate their boundaries or contribute to shifting the boundaries of their self-determination.

- They can explain why they sometimes limit young people's media use while remaining open to discussion and compromise.
- They can demonstrate tolerance of the fact that the mobile phone represents a private sphere for young people as they grow older.
- Adult caregivers/parents can strive to remain calm and matter-of-fact when children or young people break rules of media use. They can seek out opportunities for discussion to explain their reactions and intentions.

The criteria described for working with caregivers are intended to make it clear that adults should not arbitrarily disregard the needs of children and young people, but strive to be approachable and even react consistently when something does not go as planned in child-rearing.

In cases in which there are indications of sexualised violence using digital media, adult caregivers/parents are to be given the following advice:

- The disclosure of sexualised violence is so disturbing and frightening that the adult caregivers/parents of the affected young person also need help.
- To the extent that it is possible, there should be no pressure on children and young people to talk about experiences of violence, share their mobile phones, show embarrassing chats or look at evidence of abuse images together.
- Adult caregivers should take into account that banning the use of mobile phones is perceived by young people as a further loss of control, blame and the loss of social contact.
- They, as adults, are entitled to help even if they have not followed any of the recommendations and feel ashamed and powerless because they were unable to protect a child or young person.

What are the minimum requirements that preventive structures should fulfil?

Quote

“Institutions, such as schools, should deal more with the issue, as it happens again and again that intimate recordings are disseminated among children and young people in these settings.”

(specialised counsellor)

Sexualised violence using digital media can trigger considerable subjective pressure for helpers and educational staff to act. This is especially problematic when one's own helplessness becomes the yardstick for the child's well-being.

In this sense, preventive structures do not represent spaces that are inaccessible to violence, but rather dependable relationships and help structures in which affected persons know that they will experience solidarity, relief and active support according to the following standards:

- Violence is not trivialised.
- Institutions such as schools, clubs or child and youth welfare institutions share the responsibility for crisis intervention and support of victims even when the acts of violence do not take place at their site if they are perpetrated against children and young people who are involved in their institution.
- Affected persons do not experience any blame, regardless of whether they have personally sent pictures/videos.
- If possible, affected persons should not experience media bans.
- They are taught that something can be done against sexualised violence using digital media, even if a definitive deletion of images cannot be guaranteed.
- Affected persons are involved in decision making even when an institution feels obliged to follow a certain course of action according to established procedures.

- Affected persons are informed about the criminal liability of violence and other legal options for action.

- The institution is well-networked. Those affected are provided with support services in which psychoeducational and therapeutic-pedagogical support is available.



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