



Save the Children

# PREVENTING **CHILD SEXUAL ABUSE**

**SUPPORT FOR ADOLESCENTS  
SEXUALLY ATTRACTED TO CHILDREN**

An Introductory Guidebook

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The guidebook is an introductory tool for professionals in contact with adolescents on how to prevent child sexual abuse by helping adolescents who are sexually attracted to children. The guidebook is a product of a research collaboration on child sexual abuse prevention between MSc, PhD-student Mikkel Rask Pedersen, Save the Children Denmark and Save the Children Finland.

If you are an adolescent, who is worried about sexual thoughts concerning children, visit **[en.ctrl.redbarnet.dk](https://en.ctrl.redbarnet.dk)**

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# Introduction

This guidebook is an introductory tool for professionals in contact with adolescents to help prevent child sexual abuse. The guidebook consists of three parts, each with a distinctive focus:

1. What does it mean to be an adolescent sexually attracted to children? *Identifying a problem and the necessary help.*
2. How can I help raise awareness among adolescents sexually attracted to children to help increase help-seeking? *Combatting the negative effects of a stigma.*
3. What information can I give to help adolescents sexually attracted to children? *Answers to important questions aimed directly at adolescents.*

Though each part has a separate focus, the guidebook is written so that each part necessitates having read its previous part. Parts one and two are more introductory to the problem and can be read by all those curious about the topic, while part three is mainly relevant to professionals in contact with adolescents in general.

This guidebook is not exhaustive, nor is it a reference list for what to do in a specific situation. It is a general framework of knowledge and competences to help you act more efficiently and confidently around the topic of child sexual abuse prevention and adolescents sexually attracted to children. Due to differences in national legislations and options, some topics and cases to come will also require more specific information than this guidebook can give. Throughout the guidebook, we will help make you aware of when you will need to consult your local/national knowledge to act in the best way possible.

To resolve potential confusion, throughout this guidebook, when we write 'adolescents', we primarily refer to a group in or around puberty (11-19) with developed sexual thoughts. However, when we write 'children', we primarily address an age group to which sexual objectification is worrisome. In general, we believe all people under 18 are children and should have the rights of children, but we differ in definitions of terminology here to better communicate the topic when adolescents' sexual attractions toward children are concerning.

Furthermore, the guidebook focuses on adolescents sexually attracted to children rather than focusing on preventing child sexual abuse in general, regardless of a paedophilic individual's age or motives. This is because the context and motives in an adolescent's sexual thoughts about children can have different implications for the type of help both necessary and available to that person to be effective. Here, we focus on interventions that aim to help prevent abuse related to the early development of paedophilic interest. Interventions for adults sexually attracted to children may look different.

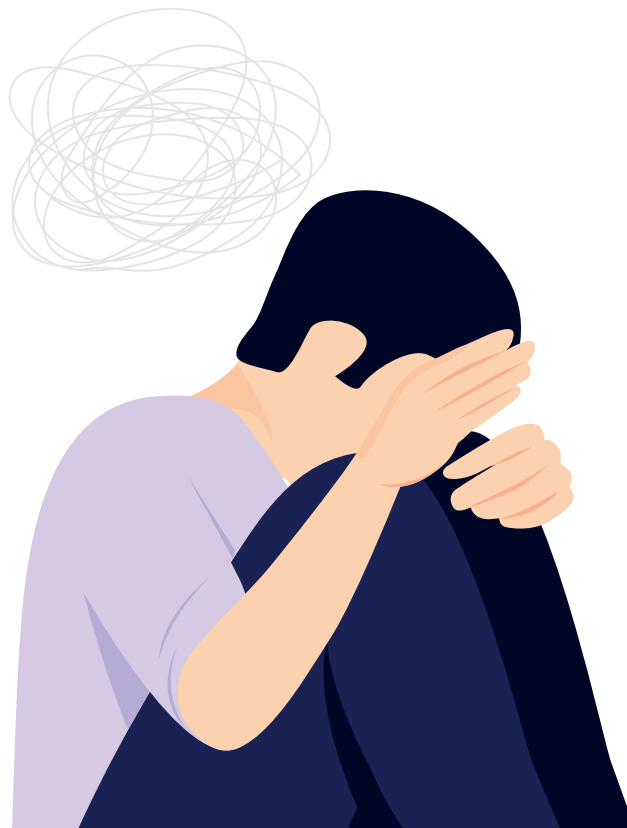
However, many of the topics covered will also be relevant for people over 19 and sexually attracted to children. Any appliance of information in such cases should first consider the original context carefully.

## Why is this **guidebook** important?

Sexual attraction to children—commonly referred to as paedophilia—is not only a controversial and taboo subject for many but also complex and difficult to encapsulate fully. When we attempt to understand adolescents with sexual attraction to children, we may find that this only adds to this difficulty and complexity. Yet it is increasingly important to understand this very group of adolescents for those very reasons. Imagine that if you find this subject difficult, or perhaps even uncomfortable to think about, this is likely what adolescents with sexual thoughts about children must go through daily, only with the ever-present risk that making the wrong choice could end up ruining both their own and another child's life.



Despite common belief, many people who experience sexual attraction to children manage to live lives without abuse. Yet, when adolescents start to experience these sexual thoughts, the fear of committing the abuse or the fear of social rejection for just having the thoughts make many avoid seeking help and thus end up facing this struggle alone.



Facing this struggle alone is often cause for feelings of depression and loneliness and can lead to social isolation. Unfortunately, when this happens, not only do we find worrisome increases in self-harm and suicidal ideation, but also that children become at risk of being abused. Because when facing mental distress alone, some find that acting on their thoughts could be the only solution to their distress or that they would not have anything to lose in their current state as they think the world already sees them as outcasts. This is sometimes referred to as the 'stigma of paedophilia', and it is a risk factor we need to take seriously as it can make bad even worse. If we do not manage to find ways to better inform, reach, and help adolescents sexually attracted to children, we may instead find that all that we find worrisome and difficult in this topic is dealt with by adolescents alone. However, if we succeed in finding ways to better provide information for adolescents sexually attracted to children to receive help and support without judgment, we may find that we can help both them and the children simultaneously.



**The very central matter of working with adolescents sexually attracted to children to prevent abuse is always two-fold, and it is crucial that we find ways to help those sexually attracted to children in their own right while also protecting the children at risk of being victims of child sexual abuse if we fail this task.**



# PART 1

## What does it mean to be an adolescent sexually attracted to children?

Here we will first go through what to be aware of when identifying a problem related to sexual attraction to children, and, next, what you can do to understand the problem to better identify the necessary help to the person in question.



## Concerning or not?

First, let us try to define some boundaries for when sexual thoughts about children in adolescents are part of a natural human sexual development and when it is something worrisome in need of attention. Adolescents typically begin to develop sexual interests in others in and around the pubescent phases, and some might experience sexual urges or interests even earlier. Having a sexual interest in your peers when growing up is entirely normal and nothing to be worried about in general. Still, there are many factors to consider regarding an adolescent's sexual thoughts or actions, such as, for example, transgressive behaviours or compulsive thoughts. However, when we speak of concerning thoughts or behaviours in adolescents sexually attracted to children, it refers to when their sexual interest is age-motivated and focuses on children significantly (five or more years) younger than themselves, who most typically are in a pre-pubescent stage. However, it is not always possible to identify cases in which concerning sexual thoughts about children in adolescents are so easily categorized. The reason for this is that many who experience sexual thoughts about children do not start with a sexual interest in people five or more years younger than themselves but may find that their sexual thoughts have stagnated, so as their age group of attraction stays the same while they get older, thus making what started as normal thoughts *progressively/increasingly* worrisome. More so, it may also be the case that an adolescent will experience both concerning thoughts of significantly younger people and normal sexual thoughts of age-group peers. There will, of course, also be cases where an adolescent develops a sexual interest in very young children, for which concern will be immediately present and easily recognizable.



When identifying concerning sexual thoughts or behaviours in adolescents, the context and development of the thoughts must always be considered. They are more likely to fluctuate in a continuum between normal and concerning than easily defined as either. In other words, it means many different things to be sexually attracted to children, and we should always pay attention to the particularities of each person to identify a potential problem.

With this in mind, the five-year age gap—or the ‘significant age gap’—should function only as an early measurement tool to indicate concerning thoughts. From here, it is important to take multiple factors into account. First, there will be many cases of concerning sexual thoughts and behaviours towards children which fall beyond the scope of this guidebook. For instance, there may be many cases where inappropriate sexual thoughts and behaviour towards significantly younger people result from an adolescent’s stagnated or diminished psychological and physiological development or mental pathologies related to transgressive behaviour. While this should be taken very seriously, as abuse victims do not differentiate between mental stages of motives of assault, such cases would call for interventions that this guidebook does not address. ***The concerning characteristic we will engage primarily in this guidebook is when sexual thoughts towards children would indicate paedophilic risk factors.***

### **The nature of the concern**

Many might think that the pressing question to decide a degree of concern is whether adolescents with sexual thoughts about children are paedophiles. Sexual attractions to children are often debated as to whether these resemble a psychiatric diagnosis (paedophilia) or a sexuality, meaning an age-fixed and permanent sexual attraction. When aiming to learn how to improve help to adolescents sexually attracted to children, these debates might, however, both miss the target of what is important here and now and, in the worst case, end up adding to adolescents’ concerns. The fact of the matter is that sexual thoughts in adolescents are both diverse and volatile, and pre-emptive diagnoses and concepts such as ‘paedophilia’ or ‘sexuality’ would prematurely indicate permanence and life-long problems. While this can end up true in some cases, ***the first and primary thing needed to be ‘classified’ by non-clinical professionals is what kind of help the adolescent needs and not what kind of ‘problem’ they suffer from.*** When we work in the early stages of prevention, such as working with adolescents sexually attracted to children, we, therefore, focus on signs of concern and development of these to identify tools to help rather than categorize problems.

Therefore, for professionals who want to take a more active role in helping adolescents sexually attracted to children and preventing child sexual abuse, the first goal is to be aware of how different characteristics can indicate different types of problems, help, and intervention.

## Different characteristics of sexual thoughts and what they could indicate

When identifying the need for help in adolescents who are sexually attracted to children, though the context and individuality of every adolescent are important, several more general characteristics can be helpful to establish this context and help estimate the degree and type of intervention. The list below will sketch out common differences in people having sexual thoughts about children. While this might serve as general knowledge for you as a professional to better identify problems, the following might also be used deductively in a conversation with an adolescent to make you both understand better the problem of concern. Notably, ***if you are in contact with an adolescent because of an act of abuse, the following considerations are not sufficient, though they will still apply to enhance your understanding of some of the potential underlying reasons for the abuse.*** Furthermore, If the considerations below indicate that the cause for concern is likely to be less serious than expected, it is generally a good idea to do follow-up checks to verify this or help guide the adolescent to different types of help more relevant to their situation. In any situation, this information is meant only to help guide you in accordance with your professional assessment, and no advice is to be taken as definitive or without exceptions.



There is no evidence that adolescents with sexual attraction to children are a homogenous group. While the harm from sexual abuse is universal, sexual thoughts about children present themselves differently in different individuals and pose varying degrees of risk .





### Does the adolescent experience his or her sexual thoughts as pleasurable and arousing or as intrusive and painful?

If you have reason for concern or an adolescent confesses to you having sexual thoughts about children, the first thing to identify is whether the thoughts are repetitive, intrusive, and painful or erratic and arousing. The reason is that obsessive-compulsive disorder-like (OCD) sexual thoughts about children are not uncommon due to the widespread taboo of paedophilia. ***Therefore, the thoughts might sometimes exist because they resemble 'the most wrong thing you could think about' rather than being caused by a genuine sexual attraction.*** However, this distinction will be difficult to make so clearly, as the said taboo will also often invoke feelings of guilt and shame even in sexually motivated thoughts, making them very complicated for the adolescent. In a conversation with an adolescent, it is not the goal to successfully distinguish between anxiety-based or sexual thoughts. However, if you have reason to believe the thoughts are more intrusive than sexual, acknowledging this can end up easing the burden for the adolescent, as ***it might often be the fear of being a stereotypical 'paedophile' or that you can never achieve sexual attractions to peers that cause a lot of pain.*** Without assuming a diagnosis, you can use this knowledge to better direct expectations of what kind of help would be beneficial for the person, and even if the thoughts are primarily sexually motivated, you can reassure the person that thoughts do not make bad people, and that many manage to live successful lives despite their attractions.

## Does the adolescent experience sexual thoughts exclusively about significantly younger persons?

Some people who are sexually attracted to children will have sexual attraction only to a specific younger age group, but for many, they will also have sexual attraction to age peers. Identifying whether an adolescent's thoughts are exclusively related to significantly younger people or not is by no means trivial. ***Neither research nor mental health professionals have successfully found a way to make paedophilic thoughts go away but have found that interventions that focus on how to cultivate sexual interest and activities with peers (or legal age groups) have a great effect on the person's well-being***—and thus minimize risks of offending. Sexual relationships are a crucial part of being a human, and the fear of never being able to have sexual relations when you are sexually attracted to children is likely to cause massive distress. Using this information about non-exclusivity can help you ease some of this anxiety in adolescents and manage their expectations of what help can do for them.

## When did the person first get the thoughts, and how have they developed since?

When an adolescent begins to have sexual thoughts about children, this is likely to cause much distress, and therefore, it is not unlikely that if this comes to your attention, the problem will be relatively novel. Newly experienced thoughts should not be taken lightly, but it is important to remember that, ***because of the taboo nature of these thoughts, even just one instance of having experienced sexual arousal towards a significantly young child can provide reinforcing and distressful thoughts for a long time after.*** Perhaps the sexual arousal an adolescent felt in a taboo context was more or less arbitrary and insignificant, yet the experience can still manifest and become more frequent. This is similar to what happens when you say, 'Don't think of an elephant'. Using this information in a conversation with an adolescent, you may together try to discuss how the thoughts started and how they have developed. Are there multiple different encounters or situations which include sexual arousal, or do the experiences in the adolescent more likely resemble a constant 'test' for sexual arousal to see if what happened in a specific situation will happen again? ***If the thoughts have been stable over time and relate to general sexual arousal toward pre-pubertary characteristics, this would indicate more permanent concern than if the thoughts revolve around a specific episode.***

Sexual thoughts are bound to be confusing for adolescents in general, and it is important to be aware of when the adolescent may be ascribing more significance to a situation, which could be more or less random. Speaking about the development of the adolescent's thoughts may help both of you have a better indication of the problem at hand. ***In any case, and as mentioned before, sexual thoughts about children should never be taken lightly, and though you might help ease an adolescent's thoughts if a problem does not at present indicate a more permanent problem, scheduled follow-ups are always recommended.***

### **Do the thoughts revolve around one or more specific children, or are they defined by age-related characteristics more generally?**

Building on the descriptions of 'development' in sexual thoughts in the above section, some of the same considerations apply to differences between specific subjects of sexual attention versus general age-related characteristics. That is, does the case concern a specific context of sexual attraction or is it frequent in several different contexts? However, we might pay attention to additional circumstances in the scenarios described here. First, if the adolescent's thoughts and experiences revolve around specific children in their everyday lives, though this should make you reflect on the development of this the same way as in the previous section, this should also heighten the level of concern for you as a professional, as the risk of abuse is likely more prominent. Similarly, however, it might, for the very same reasons, also heighten levels of stress for the adolescent, especially if the subject of the sexual attraction is a child whom the adolescent cannot avoid. This may occur if the child or children go to the same school or afterschool activity as the adolescent, and other times it could be that they live close by or live together. In a conversation with an adolescent attracted to a particular child, it can be fruitful to keep in mind that the adolescent might also experience romantic feelings as well as sexual, such as being in love—which, again, would likely heighten both your concern and their distress. Importantly, ***an adolescent can feel both romantically and sexually attracted to a specific child and to pre-pubescent characteristics in general, as neither excludes the other.***

Your role here is to help uncover the particularities of the specific problem at hand and use this information about particularity or generality to help the adolescent set

rules and borders where possible and necessary. For example, it is a good idea to recommend avoiding spending time with children they are attracted to, and if not possible, it is a good idea to recommend that there are other people present to minimize time spent alone with the child. ***Though it is difficult, try to remember that even when your concern for a specific child rises, understanding and helping to reduce distress in the adolescent sexually attracted to that child and set boundaries are important preventive actions.***

### **Do the thoughts come from either involuntary online exposure to child sexual abuse/exploitation material or as part of an increasingly transgressive online sexual activity/behaviour?**

Most adolescents are curious and explorative online, and in their early sexual development, this is even more true. For some people who are sexually attracted to children, their first encounters with sexual attractions to children (and to sexual abuse material of children) come from involuntary exposure to sexual abuse material of children online, primarily when they are early teenagers themselves, adolescents. This means that adolescents who have sexual thoughts about children will, in some cases, find that they first experienced these thoughts when they were searching for sexual material online and encountered child sexual abuse material. The material might have aroused them or inspired them to seek it out again. This is not the case for all adolescents sexually attracted to children, but you might pay attention to two important implications in such a scenario. First, though it is not necessarily so in your country, in some places, any admitted watching of illegal child sexual abuse material online means you as a professional need to report this to the local authorities. In a conversation with an adolescent who has sexual thoughts about children, if you choose to ask about their online behaviour, you should always have cleared these issues first with the adolescent. ***Make as transparent as you can what they can and cannot say regarding your confidentiality and/or mandatory reporting .***

With that said, understanding whether an adolescent's online behaviour results from voluntary or involuntarily exposure to online child sexual abuse material or their behaviour is a result of increasingly transgressive behaviour could have important implications for the problems they face and for the help here to. The characteristic you should pay most attention to is whether their description of their behaviour and its development shows signs of compulsivity and addiction.



***For some adolescents, their engagement with sexual abuse material of children online (and thus their thoughts) may first and foremost result from excessive use of pornography rather than an inherent sexual desire toward children.*** Similar to the earlier descriptions of OCD-like symptoms in which thoughts are enabled because of their taboo status, child sexual abuse material is sometimes consumed because it is regarded as the most extreme ‘pornography’. It thus satisfies a growing sexual desire that regular pornography can no longer do because the person’s addiction has desensitized them to it. Excessive use of pornography is likely to require different interventions for the adolescent than if the person experienced signs of a more classic paedophilic development. Again, excessive use of pornography and general paedophilic development are not mutually exclusive, but using this information in a conversation with an adolescent can help you better understand the problem at hand and thus identify the best help possible.



Paying attention to exclusivity, particularity, compulsivity, anxiety, development, stability, and transgressive online behaviour may provide better nuances for you to understand, identify, and deliver help to adolescents who are sexually attracted to children to both help them and protect children.

In the next two sections, you can learn more about how to use this knowledge. This includes how to connect with and educate adolescents to help them feel safer and more confident as they seek help when experiencing sexual thoughts about children. The ensuing text also addresses how to help adolescents answer common questions they may have and cope with fears they may harbour.

# PART 2

## **Raising awareness in adolescents sexually attracted to children to help increase help-seeking**

Here you will read about how the stigma of paedophilia is negatively associated with preventing child sexual abuse and how help-seeking practices for people sexually attracted to children should be better prepared to engage in this.

## Stigmatization as a risk factor

As discussed in [Part 1](#), the stigma of paedophilia is a significant risk factor for professionals to face head-on as they help adolescents sexually attracted to children and also protect those children. The genuinely critical part is that the derived negative psychological consequences from the stigma of paedophilia increase the need for help for adolescents; it also decreases the likelihood that they will pursue it.



Despite professionals' best intentions, people sexually attracted to children may experience these intentions as only concerning safeguarding potential victims, thus making them the bad people that need to be caught. Child safety must extend to both helping children and adolescents with involuntary sexual thoughts about children.

Preventing child sexual abuse is such an important task that when saying this includes helping those sexually attracted to children rather than punishing them can seem counter-intuitive. Furthermore, preventing child sexual abuse is such an important task that we might not even realize when our best intentions become counterproductive. There is a reason this guidebook avoids terms such as 'paedophiles' or 'potential abuser/perpetrators' and instead uses the term 'adolescents who are sexually attracted to children'. 'Paedophiles' or 'potential abusers' hold the implicit assumptions of a horrible act doomed to happen without intervention and an inherent flaw in the character of the people sexually attracted to children. When we communicate the importance of child sexual abuse prevention, we might often unknowingly add to these expectations that people with sexual attraction to children are bad people and children will suffer if they do not get help. First of all, no one is a bad person for experiencing un-chosen thoughts. Secondly, the narrative that people *will* offend or want to offend without help —despite that this may be true for some—situates poor expectations for what an adolescent sexually attracted to children can receive when seeking help.



People need better lives, not simply the promise of less harmful lives. If we want to encourage help-seeking, we need to make both visible and credible that adolescents who are sexually attracted to children deserve help and can benefit from it in their own lives too.



## Motivating information

It is entirely possible to say that adolescents sexually attracted to children deserve to live good lives without saying that children do not need to be protected from abuse in the best way possible. Furthermore, this perspective is possible to take without compromising or negating the effectiveness and importance of child sexual abuse prevention. When raising awareness to improve help-seeking and combat child sexual abuse, the following things should always be included first:

1. You can be a good person and live a good life despite feeling sexually attracted to children, and you deserve the right to. You are not responsible for your thoughts, only your actions.
2. Mental distress and negative thoughts are not uncommon when experiencing sexual thoughts about children, and sometimes they even show that you want to and can do the right thing.
3. People want to help YOU, and you do not have to fight your problems alone.

We might know that these three points will also help protect children better, but as mentioned, we do not increase any effectiveness of prevention by saying so directly when trying to improve help-seeking in people sexually attracted to children. In fact, by doing so, we might make a person less likely to seek help, which harms the prevention of child sexual abuse overall.



It is tempting to think that risk assessment and management are the first and most important things when preventing abuse, but motivating people to do the right thing and seek help is sometimes the necessary precursor to establishing a conversation, to then talk about these matters.

Improving help-seeking is, however, not done by setting expectations alone. Sometimes, adolescents will be more likely to seek out information on their own first before they decide whether they want to pursue help from others. In the next part, you will read about and find examples of what kind of information adolescents sexually attracted to children could be pursuing and how you can use this information to help either reach them or talk to them, should they confess their troubles to you.

# PART 3

## What information can I give adolescents who are sexually attracted to children?

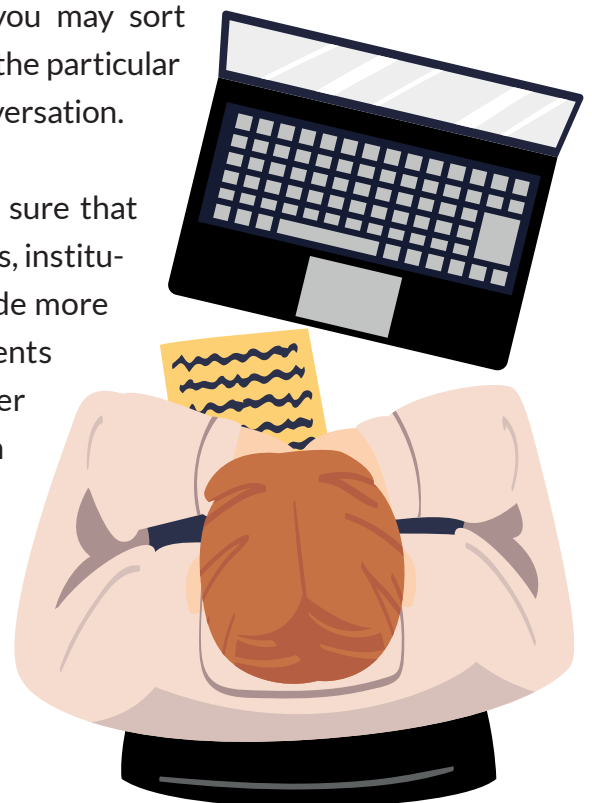
In this part, you will read about frequently asked questions from adolescents who are sexually attracted to children and how to answer them. The following information may also serve as educational material as well.

## General Information

When you communicate the importance of help-seeking to adolescents, such as the previous part suggested, you can also use the information on the many differences in being sexually attracted to children from part one. Generally, this information can help give the adolescents a better idea that being sexually attracted to children does not mean that you become an evil stereotype, but that your thoughts can mean many different things. This will then also be useful in helping to manage the motivation and expectation to seek help. In this part, we will give further examples that, just as in part one, may serve as general information and as examples of points of attention in a conversation with an adolescent who is sexually attracted to children. However, this time, the focus is not on identifying a problem but on answering questions that will likely cause concern for the adolescents in question. Some information in the following examples may repeat information you already know, but the examples here are also to help communicate this information to an adolescent. Therefore, the ***following examples are phrased as communicating directly to an adolescent for you to either disseminate broadly—such as textual handouts, online on a website, or through conversations in an educational room—or for you to use as information directly in a conversation with an adolescent who has sought help.***

The examples appear in no logical order, and you may sort through the questions in each headline to identify the particular concern relevant to your teaching situation or conversation.

Whenever you use the information below, make sure that you have identified beforehand what organizations, institutions, or people in your country are able to provide more standardized counselling or therapy for adolescents with difficult sexual thoughts. In this way, whenever the advice would be to seek further help, you can provide the necessary follow-up information—be that in a classroom or a conversation—on how to go about this for the people or person with whom you are communicating.





## Information for adolescents who are sexually attracted to children

### What is a Paedophile?

'Paedophile' is often used as an insult, a creepy man who preys on children. That is not how a doctor would describe a person who is sexually attracted to children. The doctor would say that paedophilia is a diagnosis for people over 16 who are primarily sexually attracted to children who have not reached puberty. Just because you have sexual thoughts about children now does not necessarily mean that you are or will become a paedophile. There are many unknown factors, and professionals can help you sort this out. No matter what, when you are young, we just call it people who are sexually attracted to children because your thoughts do not define the person you are. You can get help to control your thoughts and decide the person you want to be. People attracted to children can also be attracted to both boys and girls, and if you are attracted to children, being attracted to your sex is not uncommon. Even if you are sexually attracted to children, you can also be attracted to people your age. Therefore, a person can have a sexual life with a peer even if they have sexual fantasies about children. People sexually attracted to children do not necessarily commit sexual abuse of children. Nor do they necessarily use child sexual abuse material online (so-called 'child pornography'). Many people sexually attracted to children live a life where they do not act on this sexual attraction.

### What are 'sexual thoughts about children?'

You might be unsure about whether your thoughts about children are sexual or if something else is at stake, so here you can read more about what could be worrying you.

#### *What do we mean by 'sexual thoughts?'*

Thoughts go through our heads, and they are not dangerous in themselves. We know that it can be difficult to control our thoughts on our own. Sexual thoughts are typically thoughts that 'turn you on' and can arouse you sexually.

#### *What do we mean by 'children?'*

It is entirely normal for adolescents to have sexual thoughts about each other. However, if you feel sexually attracted to children who are a lot younger (around five or so years) than you, it may be a good idea to be aware of this.

### What does it mean if I have sexual thoughts about children?

It is important to remember that our thoughts can come and go. Maybe you have sexual thoughts about a specific child right now, and maybe they are gone again tomorrow. If you are worried about your sexual thoughts about children, it is important that you listen to your concerns.

### Notice the following things about your sexual thoughts about children:

*How long have you had your sexual thoughts about children?*

*How often do you have these thoughts?*

*Have your thoughts developed during the period you have had them?*

If you find that your thoughts are uncontrollable and you experience difficult feelings about them, you can seek help. Remember that your thoughts do not make you a bad person, and no one chooses their thoughts. Thoughts are just thoughts, and you can get help to deal with them. However, some people do find their sexual thoughts and feelings for children to be frightening, confusing, and shameful. Discovering that you are sexually attracted to children can make your life difficult. You might not dare to talk with others about your thoughts. You might also experience restlessness and anxiety. Some even experience suicidal thoughts. ***No one should feel this way for thoughts they do not choose, and you can get help. If you have done something you are ashamed of, it is not too late to get help.***



### **Can I stop my thoughts?**

Our feelings of sexual attraction can come and go. The same goes for sexual thoughts; they can pop up as impulses and make us want to do something we did not expect or do not want to do. It is difficult to prevent these feelings. Talking about being sexually attracted to children can be shameful and difficult. You may, therefore, experience your sexual thoughts about children as extremely painful, and you may feel lonely. It, therefore, makes good sense if you would like to ‘change your thoughts’. While you cannot just change your thoughts, you CAN get help to deal with your sexual thoughts and live a good life without being a danger to yourself or others. This is difficult to do on your own. That is why we recommend that you get support from people around you—but before you tell those closest to you, try to say it to a professional first, and have them help you tell them in a good way, so you can maybe also answer some of their questions.

### **Why does a person have sexual thoughts about children?**

We do not know exactly why some people feel a sexual attraction to children, but we do know that there can be many different causes. Moreover, the cause is almost never that someone wants to hurt a child. We know that many of our emotions are formed from experiences early in our lives. This also applies to sexual feelings. We also know that, for example, adults with sexual fantasies and sexual contact with children have been more exposed to abusive experiences or sexual abuse in their childhood than the rest of the population. However, being a survivor of child sexual abuse does not mean that you will have sexual thoughts about children, as many factors are involved in creating a person’s sexual preferences.

Many of those who feel attracted to children say that they have felt this way since they were teenagers. They may have experienced that their sexual attraction to their peers stopped at a specific age—even though they themselves are getting older, those to whom they are attracted are not. Some people might feel that they are more themselves when together with children. Furthermore, they experience a stronger emotional bond with children than with their peers. People who feel sexually attracted to children often wish they did not feel that way. Every person is different, and there is no simple reason why you feel as you do. This also means that it is not true to simply say that only bad people feel sexually attracted to children.

### **Are there others like me?**

Most people do not have sexual thoughts about children. However, you are not alone. It can be very difficult to discuss with others, and it can therefore be a very lonely experience because you rarely hear others talk about it. There are others who have sexual thoughts about children, even though it is not something that is discussed. If you talk to a professional about your thoughts and feelings, it may even be that they can tell you how they have met others with the same difficulties as you. Perhaps they will also know places you can go online to read more about others with the same thoughts as you, where people share stories of how they have managed to live good lives despite having difficult thoughts.

### **What is sexuality?**

Sexuality, in general, is about what and to whom you are attracted. Sexuality is also about love, intimacy, and relationships. Our sexuality is affected by a combination of biological, psychological, and social factors. We are all born with a sexual disposition. You might say that we all have potential sexuality in us, but that it is not certain that it will manifest itself the way we expect. Our sexuality develops over the course of our lives. Not all intimacy is sexual. For example, children can experience love and ordinary kisses and hugs from their parents, but children do not have sexuality in the adult sense. Moreover, they do not want sex. Typically around puberty, we become aware of our sexuality and begin to associate it with sexual pleasure. Our sexuality can change throughout our life. For example, one's sexual fantasies may change. Several things affect how we function sexually and what attracts us. What we experience throughout life—what we see on TV, in movies, and in digital media—all affects our sexuality. This is why talking to someone who knows how to help you with your thoughts can also help you feel better about yourself and help you healthily manage your sexual thoughts.

### **Am I going to hurt children when I have sexual thoughts about them?**

Your thoughts and actions are two different things. You can have a healthy life even if you are sexually attracted to children, but for many, this is difficult without any form of personal support and professional help. Many people believe that if you have sexual thoughts about children, you will inevitably abuse them sexually. Fortunately, that is not the case. Having sexual thoughts about children does not mean that you are a bad person or a monster. It is your actions that are crucial. By seeking help or

information, you will already have demonstrated that you want to and can do the right thing. Some people are sexually attracted to children but never act on these thoughts. If you reach out for help, you can learn to deal with what attracts you. We recommend that you ask for professional help and personal support, even if doing so may be difficult.

### **Can I have a good life even if I can never act on my sexual attraction?**

Even if you have sexual thoughts about children that you can never and must not act on, you can still have a good life. Remember that your sexual thoughts do not define your whole being. Your thoughts and your identity are two different things. We know that there are a lot of extra challenges when you are sexually attracted to children. Creating a good life where you are not a danger to yourself and others requires a lot of control and faith that it can work. Many people with sexual thoughts about children live a good and satisfying life without acting on their worrying sexual impulses. You also have that option. It requires effort on your part, together with support from others, such as professionals, friends, and family. Many skilled therapists can help you have a good sex life with peers, even though you may still have sexual thoughts about children that you are not acting on.

### **Collective responsibility**

It is important to remember that if you choose to use the above information or the guidebook to educate adolescents in general, this will also have a preventive effect even if no one in a classroom is sexually attracted to children. As you have read, stigma and taboo are very serious prohibitors to seeking help.



Teaching people in general that you can get help and that it is not your fault for having sexual thoughts about children can help ease help-seeking, as the fear of social rejection from seeking help will decrease in those who are sexually attracted to children. It is an individual responsibility to seek help and avoid committing abuse, but it is a collective responsibility to make both parts as easy as possible.

Whenever possible, when you use the information in this guidebook to communicate to adolescents, try to do some research in your local environment prior to this to concretely identify where it is possible to get help. Are there specialized psychologists? Can a doctor refer a person to specialized clinics? Are there online resources, such as information, chat, a digital mailbox, or something similar available? If nothing specialized exists, you can also point to yourself if you are available to provide conversations, perhaps simply for emotional support. Emotional support is also an important preventive factor.

Regardless of what options are available in your country, remember that ***just informing adolescents who are sexually attracted to children that people care and that it is possible to live a good life without committing abuse is preventive—for adolescents who struggle and children alike.***



## Final words

Regardless of how you wish to go forward and use this knowledge, know that coming this far is already a large step towards increased prevention and child protection. Whenever you make the voice in this guidebook heard, you make a difference. When it comes to solving challenges in such taboo and hidden subjects as preventing child sexual abuse, we should not forget the importance of just being a voice of information and inspiration. Just being a person willing to work to try and help adolescents who are sexually attracted to children can be a help and comfort, even though you might never speak to one directly. Just knowing that people want to help you is sometimes the help a person needs. Moreover, if you should reach an adolescent in need of your help directly, know that you have the possibility of changing at least one life for the better.

We might often measure our successes in the visible differences we make and in how many people we know that we have reached. However, at other times such as here, we should also find comfort in knowing that the people we never see or hear—adolescents and children alike—are sometimes the beneficiaries of your actions right here and now.

**Thank you.**