

The flag system: pedagogical and ethical intervention

Introduction

Aster, 8, draws big penises at the playground and asks the babysitter if she has ever had a penis in her butt. Mien, 5, makes copulation movements as she lies on her brother. Boris, 14, asks girls to show their breasts via a webcam. Marina, 15, dresses like a “slut” and acts provocatively vis-à-vis adult boys and men... Children display sexual behaviour; that is a fact. However, in recent years, parents and professionals have been signalling that the sexual behaviour of children is more “obvious”, “worrisome” or “extreme” more often. Are children more sexualised than before, and does this lead to more inappropriate sexual behaviour? What are the effects of this on children? And, in connection with this: How should we react to this.

Sexualisation

It is a fact that children and youngsters are coming more easily into contact with sexual contents, images, and behaviour. The Internet is increasingly gaining ground as a source of information and children, as young as 8, are actively looking for information. The information on the Internet is available, accessible, visual and concrete, but is unfortunately rarely suited to their level.

There is still little research about the influence of these

images on the perception, behaviour and attitudes of children and young people. And yet one agrees that something needs to be done not only in terms of prevention but also with respect to sexual education. What values and standards do we want our children to have when dealing with sex and relationships? How do we make these explicit for specific stages in sexual development? And how do we explain things?

Understanding behaviour

The first question that we must ask is how to judge the sexual behaviour of children and young people. To what extent is a certain behaviour part of sexual development? What can we deem to be “normal” and when is guidance necessary? And what does this “normal” developmental behaviour mean in light of the use of “new” media such as the Internet and webcams? Firstly, we will base ourselves upon findings of research into the sexual development of children and young people, broken down into age categories. This will produce an extensive list of sexual experiences, perceptions and behaviour that have recently been observed in at least twenty percent of children and young people. We can therefore assume that these forms of behaviour and experiences are functional for development.

Playing doctor in secret at four, behaving provocatively and seductively towards adults at ten, explicit sex conversations at thirteen, flirting on the Internet at fifteen: these are examples of sexual behaviour frequently occurring in development. This means that this behaviour also disappears on its own without intervention,

About a third of all sexual situations mentioned by children and young people are situations that are listed

as “normal” developmental behaviour. And yet educators are asking questions. Does this mean that we as educators are too worried and have too little training to correctly judge these situations? That we are looking at children’s and young people’s behaviour through an adult prism and ascribe meanings to it that are incorrect? The fact of the matter is that these forms of behaviour receive a “green flag”, as you shall see further down, which means that we regard them as acceptable. Hence there is nothing wrong with the children and young people who display this behaviour.

More sexually inappropriate behaviour?

Nevertheless situations of slightly or very severely inappropriate sexual behaviour do also take place. The question whether this occurs more than before cannot be answered at the present time. But it should not really come as a surprise. Sexuality is present far more explicitly in social interaction, and children and young people are part of that. They use low-threshold information sources such as the Internet or friends, where the wheat cannot be distinguished from the chaff. Moreover a lot of information is commercial and designed for adults, which increases the probability that young people are receiving unsuitable messages about sexuality. There is a need for clear criteria to be able to distinguish significant from senseless messages about sexuality.

Criteria

When can one speak of inappropriate sexual behaviour? We consulted Rayn and Lane, who in a chapter in their book titled *Juvenile Sexual Offending*, provide criteria to make clear to young offenders when sexual behaviour is “inappropriate”.

The **first criterion is consent**, which means mutual agreement. If one party leaves, misleads, tricks or takes the other party unawares in a state of uncertainty, then it is not consent. What is difficult about this criterion is the fact that consent is often given non-verbally, and that it can change or stop in the course of the contact. And the fact that both parties have to bear this in mind. So it is not easy for children and young people: interpreting signals correctly, giving signals clearly oneself, and to stop the moment the other party pulls out.

A **second criterion is equality**. In a sexual interaction both parties must be evenly matched, so that one does not dominate the other. The possibility of abuse of power and authority is real, even unconsciously. The question here is when a lack of equality becomes problematic. Can a ten-year-old play sexual games with an eight-year-old? Can a normal eight-year-old do so with a seven-year-old girl with a learning disability? Two boys with one girl? One shall have to look case by case to see whether the parties are equal enough in the interaction to exclude authority of one party towards the other.

A **third criterion is free will**. Ryan and Lane use coercion as a criterion, and I have chosen to translate this into a positively-worded criterion, free will, as I have done with the first two criteria. What is meant here is that one party does not put pressure on the other party, or use a form of coercion in the sexual interaction. This coercion can be very subtle, such as to promise a reward or to announce a loss or punishment: "If you don't do it, then you can't come to my party, or I won't be your friend any more." Sometimes the coercion is a threat of aggression and pain, or the expectation of these.

The first three criteria primarily fulfil the necessary

conditions for a positive sexual interaction between two parties. They do not suffice however: just because these criteria are met does not mean that the interaction is guaranteed to be a success for both parties. But the likelihood of damage or pain to one (or both) parties is limited thanks to them.

Additional Criteria

When working with the three aforementioned criteria we noticed that we could not assess every situation, and so it was necessary to make some additions. Sexual behaviour can also happen solo, and will be judged in a different manner depending on the context, the age of the parties concerned and the type of behaviour. In the past two years we have spoken about this with parents and professionals, and the following three criteria were the result:

Appropriate for age: Is this behaviour expected at this age, or are we witnessing the behaviour of younger or older children or young people? These are situations like bed-wetting, walking around naked, clamber onto someone's lap, fiddling with genitals, use of language, etc.

Appropriate for context: Rules can change according to the context. For instance, less sexual behaviour will be tolerated in the school context than in the home context.

Self-respect: Sexual behaviour can be harmful to oneself, physically and/or psychologically; for example, demeaning oneself, hurting oneself, having risky sex, etc.

The flag system

If we list all the six criteria and have a gradation per criteria from green (perfectly acceptable), to yellow (slightly inappropriate), red (seriously inappropriate) to black (severely inappropriate) we get the following “flag diagram”. For each flag we provide a description to what extent the boundary has been transgressed for the criterion (left column).

This diagram is a guideline and serves as a structure for the more extensive, normative list. In the normative list there are examples of behaviour mentioned per category and age. In doing so we have based ourselves on literature and the logical application of the six criteria.

The breaking down in colour “flags” ought to permit an educator to be able to judge sexual behaviour in a nuanced manner and to speak about it with others. We should also like to stress that the values that are valid for children are also valid for adults, but the standards ought to be somewhat adjusted to the different stages of development. We have summarized this continuum in the overview below.

A green flag means that the sexual behaviour meets the six criteria. A yellow flag means that there are occasional and slight transgressions in one or several criteria. A red flag means more serious or repeated transgressions. A black flag is tantamount to sexual abuse or seriously risky sexual behaviour.

Mutual agreement

Clear mutual agreement (all parties derive pleasure from it): Green flag

Unclear mutual agreement: Yellow flag

One-off (unique) lack of mutual agreement : Red flag

Repeated lack of mutual agreement: Black flag

Free will

Voluntary (no coercion): Green flag

Light coercion or pressure: Yellow flag

One-off (unique) use of manipulation, blackmail, (position of) power: Red flag

Repeated use of manipulation, blackmail, (position of) power, aggression, violence or threats to that effect: Black flag

Equality

Equal partners: Green flag

Slight inequality in terms of maturity, age, intelligence, etc.: Yellow flag

One-off bigger inequality in terms of maturity, age, intelligence, etc.: Red flag

Repeated, great inequality on terms of maturity, age, intelligence, etc.: Black flag

Appropriate for age

At least 20 percent of children and young people display this behaviour: Green flag

Behaviour of somewhat younger or somewhat older children or young people: Yellow flag

Behaviour of children or young people with a greater age difference: Red flag

Behaviour of children or young people with a major age difference: Black flag

Appropriate for context

Behaviour disturbs nobody; privacy is respected

Given the context the one-off behaviour is slightly offensive (impolite)

Behaviour is more offensive (hurtful or insulting) and no longer suited to the context at all

The repeated behaviour is severely offensive (shocking)
– public violation of morality

Self-respect

Sufficient self-respect (there is respect of personal integrity): Green flag

Behaviour can be self-harming: Yellow flag

Behaviour has physical, emotional or psychological damage as a consequence: Red flag

Behaviour has serious physical, emotional or psychological damage as a consequence: Black flag

Feedback on the list

The purpose of the normative list and the flag system is that in practice it can help judge the sexual behaviour of children and young people. Our initial experience with these is promising: People are saying that the list is a genuine tool allowing teams to talk about situations in practice more objectively. Because one has a normative list, one is more nuanced in judging and one thinks more thoroughly about the relevant criteria. A vague feeling of "This is not quite right" is given a name and a place. The list is also a reference for parents.

The criteria and the break-down are seen to be logical and coherent, and up to now all the situations mentioned have received a place on the list. This provides a perspective and a frame of reference shared by all parties concerned.

Asked whether the flag system was logical and consistent, Experts replied as follows:

- "Generally speaking, yes, it is something to go on, but it will have to be used with common sense."
- "Very interesting; it provides a better picture of everything."
- "This provides major added value and is easy to use."
- "Detailed and yet effective."
- "It's good that it's based on a positive approach."
- "The flags do what they're meant to do: they provide tools to judge behaviour and they make it easy to speak about behaviour with colleagues, educators, parents."
- "Coherent and virtually comprehensive."

To the question whether the six criteria can be used to judge the behaviour of children and young people the answer was generally positive. The criteria provide arguments as to why certain boundaries are needed and when they are transgressed. It offers a generally

applicable framework of standards without being judgemental. The extension to six criteria makes it possible to situate sexual behaviour.

The comments relate to the description of some criteria. In the initial version of the list, "offensive" is used, and after receiving the feedback it was changed to "appropriate for context". Furthermore, the "equality" criterion is not always considered clear. Is an age difference of four years for instance too big? Moreover, a number of additions were suggested that were added to the list: use of drugs, homosexual experimentation, child pornography, prostitution, rape, etc. There were suggestions to shift certain forms of behaviour to another flag (from yellow to red or to black).

Questions about the policy

A surprising effect of the list is that people in work situations are saying that they are happy that sexual behaviour has finally been standardised for the first time. "That's what I've thought for a long time. And now I finally have confirmation that we judge the sexual behaviour of children far too strictly." Some of them go further and question the current policy and rules in light of the list, which are often geared towards putting one's sexuality out of action. One does not accept young people looking for information about sex on the Internet, there are strict rules about boyfriends and girlfriends, kissing or visiting in the bedroom. The fact that "green" sexual behaviour is so extensively documented is seen to be very important, and it is a necessary counterbalance against the problematisation of sexuality in children and young people.

A pedagogical answer

Depending on the flag colour assigned to a situation or behaviour, pedagogical guidelines can be given about what a pedagogical answer should be. Simply put, the green flag is about respecting or confirming, the yellow flag about limiting (not forbidding), the red about forbidding and the black about forbidding and following up with setting boundaries, punishment or treatment (see table)

Green flag

Examine/listen

Name

Confirm

Explain

Yellow flag

Examine/listen

Name

Limit/divert

Explain

Observe

Red flag

Examine/listen

Name/confront

Forbid

Explain

Observe more

Black flag

Examine/listen

Name

Forbid

Explain

Punish/refer on

Observe more

For each reaction there is an explanation whether something is permitted or not or should be done differently, and the criteria are used for this.

Examples:

- Bram, three, is walking around the garden naked, and has an erection. He goes to his Grandpa who is reading the newspaper and says: "Look what a huge willy I've got, Grandpa!" "Great!" says Grandpa, and goes on reading the paper. There is no intervention because all the criteria are fulfilled, and the child gets no warnings.
- Aster, eight, uses bad words and gestures: a lot of "sex" and "arse" and "fanny" and "screw" and "fuck"... Mum explains that there are other, nicer words to talk about sex, and that she does not like Aster using these words (consent). What is more, says Mum, you do not talk about sex to everyone and everywhere (context).
- Remi has crept into his younger brother's bed and asked him whether he can play with his willy. Remi is told that he is not allowed to do that because his brother is much younger than he is (equality), that he does not like it (consent) and that he does not dare say 'no' to his older brother (free will). Remi is forbidden to do it, otherwise he will no longer be able to share a bedroom with his brother.
- Toon has recorded his girlfriend's breasts on a webcam, and he has distributed the pictures to annoy her. His girlfriend did not give her consent; she did not volunteer for the pictures to be released. Toon may no longer use the webcam as a punishment.

Although in practice one is almost always capable of giving a "flag" to a form of behaviour, the pedagogical answer can be trickier. And strangely enough it is mostly the pedagogical answer to green behaviour that is difficult. Often there is a "red" reaction to green behaviour, which means that one has prohibited behaviour that is actually acceptable and age-appropriate. The reasons for this is the fear that if one does not forbid this sexual behaviour from the outset it will escalate and worsen. One anticipates the possibility and nips things in the bud. To the question where sexual education should take place, the answer is the same: somewhere else, not here.

In providing a pedagogical translation to the flag system, counsellors come face-to-face with their own practices, beliefs, customs, feelings and capacities and

a lack of support. The following is brought to bear:

- The myth that sex is an urge and hence always degenerates in boundless and selfish lust, whereas sexuality is a form of behaviour with various motives (imitation; pleasure; intimacy; role play; tenderness; experimentation; etc.) which follows the patterns of other forms of behaviour.
- The fear of being criticised by colleagues, parents or management. Through a lack of self-assurance one takes the safer course and forbids sexuality where one can.
- The avoidance of emotional discussions in teams. The fear of disagreement results in one following directions and not questioning these, even if there are doubts about these.
- The fear of having to talk about one's personal experiences and feelings at the workplace. My own sexual experiences, my experiences with my children are too intimate and I do not want to be judged.
- Not knowing how to explain things. "When I have to explain it to the parents, to my colleagues, I need the right words and examples."

A lack of vision and thinking patterns to screen policy critically, which means that sometimes one "tolerates" situations because one thinks that one cannot exert any influence on them.

Sexuality out of bike shed

The objective of the flag system is to place sexuality back into pedagogy for children and young people. The feeling that a pedagogical void has been created out of a fear to reacted wrongly has been confirmed. At the same time the thresholds for young people to take part in a (commercial) sexual culture have become lower. Whether they solicit it or not, they can be confronted with images and practices of adult sexuality, without a framework to tell good from bad, right from wrong. By setting standards and teaching them the principles and criteria that are the foundation of acceptable and positive sexual behaviour, we also teach them what they can expect from others at the same time: Others have to respect their consent, free will and equality, and the standards concerning context, age and self-

respect are also valid for others. This means that they can denounce any transgressions and that we, as counsellors, are also responsible for a safe and positive climate in the area of sexuality.

But a lot still needs to be done. We will continue trapping young people in the bike shed whilst they are actually in each other's pants if we do not provide space where this "green" behaviour can take place without the fear of being "caught". We must clarify the legal position of under-16s who experiment sexually. Half of young people are doing it, but they are considered too young to be given consent in the eyes of criminal law. Where does that leave those young people, their parents and their educators?

We must still bridge the gender gap in attributing freedom and responsibilities: Are the standards as valid for girls as they are for boys, or are we inclined to make exceptions to this now and again? And what about young people from different cultural backgrounds where equality between men and women is less of a priority?

Last but not least, we must shepherd children and young people in the search for good information on the Internet, especially about sexuality. We have to talk about it with them; they must inform us about what they find there and how they experience it.

Limitations of the flag system

The flag system is primarily a normative and pedagogical framework. It does not have a diagnostic value and certainly does not provide causes for behaviour. Hence one cannot derive from it that inappropriate sexual behaviour is a signal of an underlying problem.

The data from the normative list are based on research

from Western Europe and North America. The developmental ages for sexual behaviour cannot automatically be generalised to for other cultures and educational contexts.

And the examples come from children and young people with a "normal" development. Young people with special needs will sometimes show a different developmental pattern. The issue is whether the criteria apply to special needs people just as well. What is sure is that specific coaching and communication tailored to the level of young people will be needed.

Bibliography

- Ryan G., Lane S. (ed), Juvenile sexual offending. Causes, consequences, and correction. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1997.

Barbaree H.E. en Marshall W.L., The juvenile sex offender, 2nd edition. New York: The Guilford Press, 2006.