

Safe places for children

Development of a safety concept to protect children from sexual assault and staff from false suspicions

By Meta Sell and Fred Krüger

1. Why is a safety concept important?

The sexual abuse¹ of children is a topic that every educator has to deal with on many different levels: He or she imparts knowledge about sex-related topics and the prevention of sexual abuse to children, responds to their questions and informs adults about this topic at parents' evenings.

He is often the first point of contact for abused children and their relatives or caregivers.

One of the most difficult tasks arises when there is an allegation of sexual abuse in the context of an institution. Institutions can unintentionally offer optimal opportunities for criminal activity, which is why perpetrators often specifically choose to work in the field of education: In general, they can easily obtain preliminary information about the potential victim and the associated family structures and can therefore prepare their acts in a targeted manner, also by exploiting personal dependencies. Particularly vulnerable or particularly accessible children can be easily identified, and boundaries can be slowly pushed. Pacts of secrecy with the children can be established, and the risk of detection for sexual assaults can be assessed with the help of test situations. The reactions of potentially protective individuals can be observed, and dependencies can be created within the institution. After sexual abuse has been discovered in institutions, there are often divisive processes in the team, meaning that one can also speak of traumatised organisations.

At the same time, false accusations can also be a recurring problem: Particularly in cases of sexual violence in the immediate family, it can happen that victims, out of fear, name other people from their social environment as perpetrators when first confronted. In this respect, people with social contacts to children, including educators, are at risk of becoming victims of accusations that are difficult to refute. False accusations can also occur when educators treat certain children differently, thereby carelessly placing themselves in situations that can be misinterpreted.

Every educational institution should therefore develop a safety concept as soon as possible after it is founded – to protect not only children from transgressions, violence and sexual assaults, but also staff from false suspicions.

This is especially important for independent alternative schools: The educational concepts they follow often include strong and trusting relationships between adults and children as an important prerequisite for learning. It is now known that this closeness also carries risks if it is not well-thought-out and defined, or if it is even exploited – as in the example of the Odenwald School², among others.

Accordingly, independent alternative schools should also counteract general suspicion by following a safety concept – communicating a clear stance against sexual assaults, with rules on relationships between adults and children, and with stipulations on structures and responsibilities.

¹ Other authors use the terms “sexual violence”, “sexualised violence” or “sexual exploitation” synonymously.

² Boarding school in Germany where sexual abuse of pupils by teachers took place

A safety concept like this has not only a protective effect, but also a positive side effect, in that it helps prevent situations in which some children feel a sense of injustice when witnessing how other children are given special treatment.

2. Who is responsible for the development of the safety concept?

The safety concept should be legally binding for staff members. It must therefore be wanted, supported, co-designed and controlled by the school's management (responsible body, board, employer, school administration). At the same time, it must have the support of the school staff and be easy for them to understand and implement. Therefore, a safety concept should ideally be developed by the founding group and/or staff and management cooperatively, or at least in close collaboration.

It should be made clear: The development of such a concept is not a quick undertaking, but instead requires considerable time, patience and work – and is never completely finished. New situations will always arise for which readjustments have to be made. Nevertheless, it is advisable to set a time limit by which at least the basic framework of the concept must be developed and put down in writing. Otherwise, as experience has shown, the concept-development process to get lost in the busy daily routine.

It is important that the concept is oriented towards the specific structures and circumstances within the school. Safety concepts from other institutions can be used as an inspiration but should never be copied: Firstly, the educational concepts and structures used by different institutions are never completely identical. Secondly, a concept is easier to implement at the institution if the people affected have also played an active role in its development.

Ideally, the school should also seek feedback and support from experts and/or guides in the concept-development process. Otherwise, dealing with the issue of sexual abuse can easily take those involved to their personal limits due to issues like shame, defensiveness or past experiences, or it can be seen as irrelevant for one's own institution due to a lack of experience and credulity.

3. Guidelines of the safety concept

In cases of sexual abuse, a central role is played by dependencies, unclear communication and secrecy. Accordingly, the establishment of transparency in decision-making processes, procedures, roles, rules and actions is an important milestone on the way to creating a safe place for children.

Transparency includes an appropriate communication culture. In this context, “appropriate” means that communication structures are created internally and externally that allow for a constructive discussion of the topic of transgressions and an effective system for dealing with accusations. Internally, this means that in the school – without the accusation of sexual abuse already being in the room – regular opportunities are created to openly address and reflect on suspicious behaviour, if necessary with an external facilitator.

Externally means, for example, contacting specialised counselling centres in advance of conflicts. They can serve as guides in the concept-development process and as conveyors of expertise. An additional effect arises in the building of mutual trust, meaning that quick and effective help is available when accusations or situations of uncertainty arise.

Transparency and communication are key words and values of the safety concept: they are not only a prerequisite for its development, but also a component and consequence. Accordingly, they should be reflected in or required by concrete regulations.

The purpose of these rules is to take a clear position on child protection and against sexual violence, to discuss the issue, to raise awareness for professional closeness and distance, to ensure transparency and communication in the work process, to counteract typical perpetrator strategies and, last but not least, to have a means of terminating the employment relationship if the rules are violated.

4. What principles should apply when setting rules?

The concrete design of the regulations will always depend on the context in which the school is integrated: What is the legal structure? Are parents also the founders and/or employees of the school, or are they involved in running the school? What official requirements exist? What is the mission statement? What culture is to be cultivated with regard to the issues of physicality and sexuality? An analysis of the organisation that clarifies these questions should precede concept development and rule-setting.

This analysis should also address the following questions: Are our structures particularly authoritarian or particularly vague, and therefore conducive to sexual assault and, as a result, in urgent need of overhaul? Do unclear roles and responsibilities possibly open up safety gaps that need to be closed? Authoritarian structures can be recognised by the fact that individuals or small groups within an organisation make decisions without a democratically legitimised mandate and do not allow possible discussions about these decisions. They use their formal or informal power to suppress critical questions. Vague structures can be characterised by an unclear distribution of tasks, competences and roles. This creates spaces to make oneself indispensable or the possibility to change roles depending on the situation and necessity.

Irrespective of this, however, there are general principles that should be observed in any case when making rules:

Adults bear the main responsibility

Helping children develop into critical thinkers and well-informed, strong personalities who can defend themselves against transgressions of any kind is an important task of educational institutions. However, this does not absolve adults from taking the main responsibility for the protection of children themselves! Adults have more experience, knowledge and power, which they could always use against children or for their own interests – if they wanted to. A safety concept must therefore start with the behaviour of adults and the structures of their institutions.

Set rules beforehand

In educational institutions, it can be extremely difficult and stressful to criticise and restrict adults' actions and behaviours that are seen as transgressive – and the longer such actions and behaviours have been practised and tolerated in the institution, the harder it is to restrict them. In this context, criticism is often held back owing to a fear of being misunderstood as a "general suspicion" and rejected with a counter-accusation.

Institutions should always be aware of the possibility of follow-up intervention. Nevertheless, it is preferable to set clear rules and agree on ways of dealing with the situation BEFORE the accusation of

transgressions or sexual abuse is made. From then on, the rules form a good basis for further communication on the topic and facilitate reflection on concrete behaviour worthy of criticism.

Prevent perpetrator strategies

Typical strategies used by perpetrators include manipulating the way they are viewed by people around them, insidiously sexualising the relationship with the child through verbal and physical desensitisation, isolating and controlling the child, acting with secrecy, blaming the child, earning the child's affection and making them dependent, e.g. through gifts, special attention and exclusive appointments.

Rules should be written in such a way that they thwart perpetrator strategies or at least make them more difficult. It is true that the restrictions will also apply to the actions carried out by well-meaning adults under different conditions. However, they also eliminate the risk of getting into situations in which such actions could be misinterpreted. This contributes to professional confidence and the protection of adults.

Design rules in a differentiated and practicable manner

Before designing the rules, it should be clarified which adults come into contact with children in which roles within the school. In addition to pedagogical staff and parents, this usually involves other adults such as caretakers, secretaries, freelancers and kitchen staff. The clarification of roles includes functions, responsibilities, subordinate relationships and the resulting boundaries. In addition, it should be identified where individuals are playing multiple roles (e.g. board member, educator and parent), what conflicts could arise from this and how this can be dealt with.

It is advisable to develop different rules for the different groups of people, each adapted to their specific roles and tasks: For a technical staff member, for example, whose job clearly does not include pedagogical work, this can be agreed upon quite clearly, including the resulting greater distance from the children. This helps them to distance themselves from children's wishes and prevents unclear situations. For parents, other arrangements will make sense. The general question could be: Who is allowed to do what with whom and how should this be anchored in the rules?

This question is most difficult to answer for the educators, whose most important task is to build close relationships with the children. Consequently, protection can only be achieved to a limited extent through distance. First and foremost, the closeness, which is so important to the educational concept, must be managed in a protective way – above all through the transparency and communication of educational actions!

Particular attention should be paid to contacts and actions that involve an educator being alone with a child or that take place outside of school and the planned educational routine – situations where transgressions can most easily go unnoticed.

The rules must be oriented towards the context in order to be realistic:

For example, in schools that are founded by parents for their children and that employ the parents as staff members, there will almost inevitably be a close intermingling of personal and professional matters. How can safety nevertheless be ensured, and how can the school prevent this closeness from being exploited?

In schools without this overlapping of roles, stricter rules for the separation of private and professional matters can and should be established in order to avoid or minimise certain conflicts from the outset.

In general, it makes sense to identify situations that could be misunderstood or potentially dangerous – if necessary with the support of an expert – and to agree on how to deal with them. Certain contacts between adults and children, e.g. inviting school children to staff member's homes, could be generally prohibited. What should not or cannot be prevented or is in a grey area should be agreed upon in advance by the team and in any case be linked to a transparency requirement (obligation to report)!

Determine sanctions

Violations of the rules should be punished with disciplinary consequences up to and including termination of employment and banning the individual from the premises. These sanctions must be clearly communicated in the rules.

A rule is urgently recommended to require salaried and volunteer staff members to submit not only a police clearance certificate, but also a self-disclosure of ongoing proceedings or offenses that no longer appear on their criminal record, insofar as they relate to the endangerment of the welfare of the child, and to sanction false statements with the immediate termination of employment.

Legal examination

It makes sense to set out the rules in an annex to the employment contract and have it signed by the employee. In order for this document to be valid in the event of a labour court dispute, it is advisable to have the document checked by a lawyer!

5. What else is important?

Publish the safety concept

Everyone who is interested and involved in the school should be provided with information about the safety concept with its measures and binding rules: Via the website, in interviews with new employees and students, at parents' evenings, in contacts with the responsible authorities, in the school assembly, in conversations with the children and through notices in the school.

Everyone should know the standards by which the school wants to be measured and by which it can then be measured – by adults and children alike!

At the same time, it is important to provide clarity and information about where and how complaints about violations of standards and rules can be made (school court, contact with children's mentors on the school staff, "worry letterbox", school assembly, morning circle ...) and how they will be dealt with.

Procedure for dealing with suspicions

A procedure developed in advance for dealing with accusations helps everyone involved to deal professionally with a difficult situation.

The procedure should specify: Who (team, management, board...) talks to whom and when? How are observations and conversations documented? What external help (counselling centres, process coordinators...) is necessary and possible for the various participants? Who (parents, supervisory bodies...) must be informed about the incidents?

In the case of accusations, the level openness in communication is limited by the personal rights of those involved. Obviously, those affected need protection so that no information about the name and

the actions taken should be made public outside the circle of people professionally involved in the accusation. The same applies to the rights of the accused, because such an accusation could tarnish someone's reputation, even in the case of a proven false accusation. Ultimately, public discussions are burdensome for everyone and can massively hinder an objective clarification of the accusation.

Regular reflection, improvement and updating

Experience shows that it is not enough to develop a safety concept "once and for all" and to sign an annex to the employment contract. Agreements can be forgotten, conditions can change, and new requirements can become relevant.

Therefore, the review and updating of the safety concept, as well as the monitoring of its compliance, should be on the agenda on a regular basis, with the help of group facilitator if necessary and if conflict is expected.

It is also important to keep getting input from external experts – e.g. from counselling centres – for all salaried and volunteer staff members, and especially to think about the training requirements for new staff members.

Prevention, dealing with cases of sexual assault among children

The safety concept should include not only measures and agreements that apply primarily to the adults, but also components that directly address children: such as prevention workshops led by external experts that deal with topics like "My body belongs to me" or "Good and bad secrets" and provide children with a set of tools for taking action against transgressions without putting them under pressure and making them feel ashamed if they fail to use them.

It is also important for staff to address the issue of sexual assaults among children. It is highly recommended to seek professional advice in advance on how to prevent such incidents, how to deal with them professionally and how to address them with children and parents.

In summary, there is never a total guarantee of safety. However, it is important to create a climate in the school in which there is an awareness of the dimension of the topic and of the responsibility of each individual. The basic attitude should not be: How can I detect gaps in the safety concept and use them to my own benefit? But rather: How can I help to close gaps in the system in order to improve child and staff protection?!