



Opening by mr. Alida Oppers

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- *“Breaking the silence together”*. A well-chosen title for a program on such a severe matter as sexual child abuse. This horrific form of child abuse is one of the most difficult to discuss publicly. First and foremost for the children themselves. Most victims do not feel comfortable discussing this matter with their parents, with other family members, with friends or with their teachers. In many cases, the abuser is close to the child, which makes it even harder for children to talk about it. Feelings of shame, guilt, fear and self-blame are important causes of this silence.
- However, the silence is not limited to the children involved. For parents, teachers and school-leaders sexual child abuse is a very delicate topic to discuss as well. As a consequence, this kind of abuse often remains unnoticed for too long, or is not reported at all.
- We cannot find solutions for problems we are not aware of. As a consequence every solution starts with creating a safe environment in which children and other parties feel safe to address the issues. Today is a small but meaningful step in this process.
- Therefore I am grateful for the opportunity provided by the European School Heads Association allowing me to contribute to breaking the silence by addressing you here on behalf of the Dutch Ministry of Education, Culture and Science.
- Fighting Sexual child abuse is a matter of priority for our ministry. For many years, we have been working to tackle this issue in the most effective manner. We have created several policy plans, conducted research, distributed information, implemented laws and created a task force. But despite all those sincere and commendable efforts we have not been able to reduce the amount of cases sufficiently. In the Netherlands 3 percent of the children under 18 have experienced abusive behavior. A small decline compared to earlier figures. Nevertheless, on average every classroom has a child who experienced abusive behavior. A frightening realization. Besides, we know numbers are even more dreadful in reality, because a significant part of the abuse remains unreported, especially sexual abuse.
- This is not due to a lack of effort or commitment. For policymakers, school-leaders and teachers it could be difficult to cope with the complexity, magnitude and sensitivity of these problems. It is my responsibility to enable schools to detect sexual child abuse at an early stage and make sure they have sufficient information and knowledge to follow-up in an appropriate and effective way.
- To enable schools and other professionals properly we have to unravel some of the complexity of the issue and create more clarity in the dilemmas they are coping with.



To this end, I would like to discuss three of those dilemmas with you and hopefully you can elaborate further on this during the forum. Afterwards I will elucidate the Dutch approach on opposing child abuse.

Dilemmas

1: The responsibility dilemma

- In current times, schools are no longer just an institute to transmit information to the next generation. Every time a social issue is detected, schools end up with a new task; let us call it responsive responsibility:
 - a. Children suffer from obesity? → Schools have to provide healthier food and increase their weekly hours of physical exercise.
 - b. Fake news is a threat to our democracy? → Schools have to teach children to distinguish fake from fact.
 - c. Radicalization of our youth? → School must create de-radicalization programs
- With sexual child abuse we tend to respond in a similar manner; schools should inform, detect and prevent at the same time. I do believe schools are part of the solution. They possess a great amount of relevant knowledge and expertise, they are well aware of the emotional situation of a child and most importantly, they are dedicated to their well-being. By signaling signs of emotional or physical abuse teachers have a very important role in detecting child abuse at an early stage.
- At the same time schools cannot be solely held responsible for fully resolving these issues. If we want schools to take responsibility, we need to provide them with sufficient means to help the victims adequately.
- Furthermore schools do not have the same expertise as social workers who are trained to specifically deal with those kind of issues. Hence, the responsibility lies not only with schools, but it is a shared responsibility together with social organizations and the judicial system.



2 The intervention dilemma

- When dealing with a delicate issue such as sexual child abuse, timing is of the utmost importance. Therefore, the second dilemma I would like to address is the right moment of intervention. Serious conversations with children about sexual abuse on the very first sign could cause unnecessary harm. While at the same time, signals of misconduct can be misleading and claims could be false. Those of you who have seen the prizewinning movie Jagten know how devastating such a claim could be for someone's life, in this case a teacher.
- Yet, the consequences of inaction could be even more grave than of premature action. We can probably all agree that the moment of intervention is of critical importance. But how can we agree on what the right moment is? How many signals should there be before one intervenes? And what is the right moment to involve law enforcement and the child protection services ?

3 The capacitation dilemma

- The last dilemma I would like to address is how we can properly capacitate our teachers. If we can conclude that there is a responsibility for schools in preventing sexual child abuse, we should be asking ourselves: what do they need to adequately execute this responsibility? What kind of intellectual tools are needed? What particular kind of knowledge is required for a teacher? Or should teachers just teach and do we need to increase the amount of professional aid workers at schools? And what kind of legal framework is desirable?
- If we give schools some kind of responsibility, we need to make sure they are provided with sufficient means to perform this task.
- These are three dilemmas we are all confronted with on a regular basis. I hope we can create a bit more clarity on them during the forum. With all the expertise and knowledge which is present today I am convinced you will. Unfortunately my schedule does not allow me to participate myself, but I am looking forward to receive your input on these dilemmas at a later time.

Dutch policy

To conclude I would like to share the essence of the Dutch approach on contesting child abuse with you. Although we have similar problems and common concerns, every country has its own way of tackling the issue. By sharing our policy experiences with each other, we enable ourselves to improve our own policies.

- One of the main characteristics of our approach is our aim to detect misconduct as early as possible.



- One way of achieving this, is by legally obliging all parties involved to report signals of sexual abuse at a very early stage. This law, which we implemented in 2013, describes five very specific steps involved parties must take when signals of sexual child abuse are detected. This law is also applicable to all other forms of child abuse and domestic violence.
- In 2015 we investigated the results of this law with a quick scan. The scan demonstrated that the involved professionals were very well aware of the content of the law. They admitted their part of the responsibility and were very pleased to have some specific guidance on how to contribute to a solution.
- In 2019 we will implement an assessment framework which facilitates the monitoring and helping of children who have experienced sexual misconduct .
- Without elaborating too much on the specifics of de Dutch approach, I would like to emphasize the importance of *'The Movement Against Child Abuse'*. This movement includes several parties in the Dutch society who committed themselves to a holistic approach on opposing child abuse. They provide relevant information and organize several activities on the subject. The Dutch government highly values the close cooperation and determination of these parties and therefore we facilitate this movement.
- My ministry also subsidize initiatives which are created on the municipal level. Several municipalities took their responsibility and created a common approach. The results of this program are promising and are implemented in our national policy.

Conclusion

- I truly believe the Dutch approach will diminish the cases of sexual child abuse in the Netherlands. At the same time, I am also convinced that there is always room for improvement and that the Dutch approach is not necessarily a template for the solution in your country. Every situation demands a specific approach.
- However, I do believe in spreading and sharing our ideas to improve our transnational knowledge to opposing the issue of sexual child abuse in a more effective matter. This issues cannot be tackled by the interaction between policymakers alone, the collaboration with professionals is of critical importance as well.
- That is the task to which we should commit ourselves today. We need to keep an open mind towards each other and our own ideas. To be critical without being judgmental.
- By listening carefully to each other we can create a safer environment for children to speak and we will break the silence together !