



Report on Breaking the Silence Together European conference

Sexual abuse of children and what schools can do against it was the central theme of the ESHA European Conference for European school leaders. The conference was held on June 15th 2018 in Noordwijk, Netherlands under the title Breaking the Silence Together.

After a warm welcome of the ESHA president Clive Byrne to the 75 people that attended the conference, Natalia Fernandez of the Vicki Bernadet organisation pointed out the importance of improving openness about child sexual abuse. The school has the task to signal that a child is in trouble. You often see multiple problems coming together in the family or in the child. The school may not be able to tackle the problem but it can signal and report. A confidential counsellor has been appointed at many schools. But that is not enough according Natalia Fernandez. Children tell when it suits them, to someone they trust. That might be someone other than the confidential adviser. That is why it is important that all teachers know how to respond and what they can do. There must also be clarity about the further steps and where it needs to be reported and who will follow up? If this is unclear there is a high chance that the child has to tell his or her story again and again and that is harmful for the child.

We were very honoured to have Alida Oppers, General Director of the Ministry of Education, Culture and Science giving an inspiring speech on the severe matter child sexual abuse and the importance of the role of the school. Child sexual abuse is a difficult topic for both the children themselves and parents, teachers and school leaders. As a result, child abuse is often not detected or too late. But we cannot find solutions if we are not aware of the problem. That is why it is important that we create a safe environment in which children can tell their story. Alida Oppers pointed out a few dilemmas. How far does the responsibility of schools go? Schools have relevant knowledge and expertise in-house. But they cannot do it alone, they have to work together with civil society organizations and with the legal apparatus. Child sexual abuse is a matter of shared responsibility. In addition, it is important to intervene at the right time. How do you determine that moment? You cannot accuse someone with a vague suspicion. But at the same time you cannot let it go on with the risk that the child remains in an unsafe situation. What does this mean for the professionalization of teachers. In other words what is needed to equip teachers adequately? Or should we need to call in more aid workers in schools?

Signalling and reporting are important components in the fight against child sexual abuse, as well as the protection of children's rights. Dr. George Nikolaidis, psychiatrist and chairman of the Lanzarote Committee, an organization set up by the Council of Europe to protect children against sexual exploitation and sexual abuse, argued for an interdisciplinary and intersectoral approach. Evidence-based approaches should be used based upon empirical data. Preventive activities, which are aimed not only at victims but at all children, systematization and standardization of procedures and child-friendly assistance are needed. Since the nineties we no longer look at the victim alone, but we want to reach all children. Abuse can take place in the family or in the school. The school and health organizations have a duty to help children. Prevention, protection and prosecution are needed at all levels. The Lanzarote Committee therefore argues for various measures that governments could take, such as good screening of professionals working with children, sex education at schools and in health centres, relocation of the offender or suspect and not of the child and minimizing the number of contacts a child must have with follow-up authorities such as justice. Raising awareness in schools is one



of the most important elements according to Nikolaidis. If you as a teacher are aware that in your class there also is a child that is sexually abused, you pay more attention.

Children's rights in Europe

The project Breaking the Silence Together, of which Vicki Bernadet is the project lead, has developed a program for schools to deal with child sexual abuse and the awareness of children of their rights. Adults must respect these rights. It is important that children know and feel that way.

Good sex education is the foundation for conversations about sexual abuse. Conversations must first be about healthy sexual relationships before starting to talk about what can go wrong. We should do this in the context of regular sex education, in which we not only discuss the biological aspects but also the affective ones. In addition, children must explicitly learn what their rights are.

However European countries differ in values and norms. Openness about sexuality is not always self-evident, there are countries where there is no talk about sex at all. In traditional cultures in countries such as Poland, Italy, Greece, Portugal, sex is a taboo topic. When you talk about it in schools, parents get angry. In this context you cannot tell what a healthy sexual relationship is. There are also differences in cultures within the society of a country. Although countries and cultures differ in values and norms, the phenomenon of child sexual abuse is universal and requires action. ESHA can contribute by sharing knowledge and experiences on the subject and thus increasing awareness. Not every country will work in the same way, but we should develop and use methods and tools to protect children's rights.

Breaking the Silence Together provides a program for schools and the community on prevention and detection of Child Sexual Abuse.

In a forum discussion 5 persons from different organisations attended and gave their view on Child Sexual Abuse and the role of the School Leader; Clive Byrne as ESHA President representing school leaders, Eszter Salamon from Parents International, Dr. George Nikolaidis, psychiatrist and chairperson of Lanzarote Committee of CoE, Natalia Fernandez of the Vicki Bernadet Foundation as well as Petra van Haren on behalf of the Dutch movement against child abuse. A lively discussion in which views on prevention, approach and responsibility as well as the importance of sharing experiences European wide, were shared from different perspectives.

Following the discussions the project group of Breaking the Silence Together presented the materials of the program. These materials are currently available via the website www.preventingchildsexualabuse.eu

After lunch break an ESHA strategy discussion was held in two groups divided into representatives from primary and secondary schools as well as researchers, policy makers. Results were presented in the whole group.

The European conference has been a small but meaningful step in the process of prevention and detection of child sexual abuse. Thanks to all who attended and contributed to the success of the conference.