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Preventing New Perpetrators



Each year, about 20,000 German children are sexually abused

While German programs to prevent sexual abuse of children have so far mainly focussed on awareness among parents and educators, a new project in Berlin plans to offer treatment to people before they become perpetrators.

Standing in a swimming-pool and surrounded by children, he could sense the others eyeing him suspiciously. He felt as if a huge slippery ball was floating on the water in front of him, a ball he was struggling to submerge so that no one else could see his shame.

Losing control over his life because of his sexual fantasies involving children, the man sought help from Christoph Joseph Ahlers, who works as a clinical psychologist and sexual therapist at the Institute for Sexology and Sexual Medicine at Berlin's Charite hospital.

At the time, Ahlers informed him that specialized treatments exist. Unfortunately, however, the institute didn't have enough funds nor the manpower to offer therapy, he regretted.

"We can tell people what they have, we can tell them what can be done, but we cannot do anything," Ahlers told DW-WORLD. "We have to send people back on the street without treatment."

Preventing new victims

That's bound to change now that the institute has secured private funding for a unique project to treat pedophiles before they end up in a courtroom, and before they are caught molesting a child. Starting in January, Ahlers and his colleagues hope to sign up 120 people for the three-year program.

It's a significant step, because by and large potential perpetrators -- people who sense they have sexual fantasies involving children -- have been off the radar screen. Therapy money primarily flows into victim's groups and the treatment of imprisoned sex offenders.

Although a German government initiative has set aside money for a 2005 project that will work with teenage offenders, it resembles previous programs in that most of the participants have already come to attention as



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"We're just starting to be aware of the problem and are still lacking adequate perpetrator prevention programs," said Kai Sachs, the executive director of the German Society against Child Abuse and Neglect, which advises professionals who deal with cases of child abuse. According to him, the Berlin project could provide data that might help jump-start similar programs elsewhere.

Ahlers is already convinced that early intervention could help prevent the suffering of the 550 German children, who are sexually abused each day, according to the Federal Criminal Police Office.



"In the end it's about victims and the prevention of new victims," Ahlers stressed, adding that few therapists are qualified or interested in taking on people with sexual fantasies about children.



"We're doing this to protect children and help the patients," he maintained.

"We want to prove that they are patients, that they can be treated and that the treatment helps," he said.

Will people sign up?

While welcoming the new project, others questioned whether enough people would sign up for the treatment.

"The question is: 'How do you reach them,'" Michael Osterheider, the director of the department of forensic psychiatry and psychotherapy at the University of Regensburg, told DW-WORLD.



He noted that some pedophiles are convinced that they are doing nothing wrong and would like to see sex between adults and children legalized.

Ahlers countered that he was not worried about finding participants, because the project targets pedophiles who suffer from their sexual desire and are looking for help.

"They are waiting for treatment," he said. "We're trying to offer something where there was no help before."

The Berlin institute plans to launch a publicity campaign with newspaper ads in the fall to alert people to the program.

"We hope to appeal to all those who have realized that children play a role in their sexual fantasies," Ahlers said.

Promoting responsibility

During the project, participants will be split in three groups: In addition to a control group, which will not receive treatment right away, one section will receive group therapy and those people in another will engage in one-on-one therapy.

The sessions are geared to helping people identify their own sexuality and begin accepting the way they are, Ahlers said, describing the treatment.



"They have to learn that they bear no guilt for their feelings, but that they are responsible for their actions," he said, explaining that patients had to learn to stop mistaking children's behavior as sexual overtures.



During the therapy, patients are required to talk about their sexual desires and can receive medication that lowers their sex drive. All participants must also sign an agreement, promising not to have sexual contact with children.

Helping, not protecting

That's a promise that's hard to police, argued Georg Kohaupt, a member of the executive committee of the Federation of Child Protection Centers in Germany, which also offers some help for sex offenders.

"There can be no absolute protection of confidence as far as I'm concerned," Kohaupt told DW-WORLD, adding that he's seen cases where people continue to have sexual contact with children during treatment.

"If it were that simple for them to stop, they would not need therapy," Kohaupt said.

But Ahlers said that a certain level of trust between patient and therapist was necessary to start treatment in the first place. Participants who don't comply with the abstinence rule would be asked to leave the program, he said. He noted that while German therapists are prohibited by law from reporting patients to the police for crimes they reveal during therapy, participants in the program would be no more protected than anyone else.

"They still face the same prosecution by law enforcement authorities as before," he said, adding that the only realistic therapeutic goal is to help people regain control over their sexual desires at all times.

"No pedophile can stop being a pedophile because of treatment," the psychologist said.

Mathis Winkler

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The German government wants to lock away particularly violent criminals and sex offenders with a law that would allow them to be held indefinitely in preventive detention even after they have been sentenced to prison. (March 11, 2004)

[www Berlin Institute for Sexology and Sexual Medicine](#)

An English version of the Web site is planned

[Federation of Child Protection Centers in Germany](#)

[German Society for Prevention of Child Abuse and Neglect](#)

Includes links to other English-language Web sites on child abuse

FEEDBACK

► **Do you think treating potential perpetrators could help prevent sexual abuse of children? Please include your full name and country in your reply.**

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