

# Sexual assault on children and adolescents in Switzerland

**Forms, extent and circumstances**



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Yours sincerely,  
UBS Optimus Foundation

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## The Optimus Study: A valuable contribution for our children



With the Convention on the Rights of the Child, ratified in 1989 and now accepted as the most important document of international law worldwide relating to the survival, nurture and protection of children, the international community has managed to create a solid normative base from which to approach issues of child protection and to better protect children from violence, abuse and exploitation. In all regions of the world, wide-reaching legal, political and institutional reforms have been put in place and the willingness to commit to the implementation of children's rights continues to grow. Hand in hand with this goes a deeper understanding of the various risks that can threaten the development and safety of children.

Violence against children is among those offences against children's rights that represent a crucial inhibiting factor for the physical, mental and social development of the child. Violence can be found anywhere, be it open or concealed, and often society turns a blind eye. Protecting children from violence is therefore one of society's most important duties. A violence-free childhood is the fundamental right of any child, and every country that has ratified the Convention on the Rights



**Elsbeth Müller**  
Head of UNICEF Switzerland

**“Breaking taboos and casting light into the darkness.”**

of the Child is obliged to guarantee this everywhere and at all times – including in Switzerland.



Violence against children affects many young people who see this violence, along with sexual abuse and exploitation, as the most serious issue affecting them. This became known as a result of a European Union survey of 15- to 18-year-olds. Combined with this comes an appeal to put violence against children on the political agenda and to secure a child protection system based on children's rights.

The Optimus Study is an important building block for Switzerland on the path to effective child protection. The Study gives insight into the form, prevalence and frequency of sexual abuse in our country. Thus the UBS Optimus Foundation is helping to break apart a taboo and shed light on a dark subject. The figures prove this is not only important, but essential: Experts estimate that between 20 and 30 percent of all children and adolescents have been victims of sexual abuse at some time in their lives. However, fear, shame and loyalty prevent many victims from reporting the abuse. The data now available thanks to the Optimus Study enable further conclusions to be drawn: Sexual abuse does not happen elsewhere, but here and now, at home, in

our neighborhoods. The fact that children's lives can take a different course as a consequence of abuse is underpinned by other studies.

In addition, the Optimus Study of school students clearly confirms that sexual victimization should not be viewed as an isolated issue. Anyone who experiences sexual violence is often the victim of other forms of violence, too. A prevention strategy should therefore not focus on sexual violence alone. Rather, prevention should be based on a comprehensive approach, and should include assessments of potential child protection offences and the individual powers of resistance of children and adolescents. Worldwide, barely five percent of children are protected from violence through the law. The vulnerability of a child is therefore particularly marked where national child protection systems present gaps and thus the nurture and the protection of the child is limited. The establishment of a comprehensive child protection policy is essential for Switzerland, too. Only this can bring about the protection so urgently needed. The Optimus Study provides information and thus creates a basis for discussion

and perspectives for action – a valuable contribution for our children.

Elsbeth Müller  
Head of UNICEF Switzerland



# Summary



## **A solid foundation for better child protection**

Children are our future; they deserve special protection. It is the state's responsibility to ensure their rights are safeguarded and, according to the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, this includes a duty to protect them from sexual assault. Unfortunately, states are not always successful in doing so. Experts estimate that here in Switzerland, between 20 and 30% of all children and adolescents have experienced sexual assault at least once. Yet sound data about the actual extent, forms, circumstances and possible consequences of sexual assaults on children and adolescents have been almost impossible to come by until now.

The UBS Optimus Foundation has set itself the aim of changing this and improving the protection of minors against sexual assault sustainably and for the long term. To this end, it launched the Optimus Study, an internationally-orientated, large-scale academic project spanning ten years. In various countries, representative data about the extent and forms of sexual assault against children and adolescents will be gathered and compared with data from child protec-

tion organizations in the relevant country. This way, the fundamental gaps in the relevant child protection systems are revealed and, based on this, effective prevention and intervention strategies can be developed. To do this, the UBS Optimus Foundation aims to work closely with all significant stakeholders in the field of child protection, provide information for policy makers, child protection practitioners, educators, parents and children and create new platforms for the exchange of information and ideas.

## **Data surveys in Switzerland and China**

The first cycle of this long-term project has now been completed, and data has been gathered in China and Switzerland. This publication provides an overview of the most important results of the Optimus Study Switzerland. More than 6700 school students from the Swiss ninth grade provided information about their experiences of sexual assault, possible consequences they suffered, the context of the incident, the perpetrator and the circumstances of their personal lives. In addition, 324 institutions from the field of child protection gave information about cases reported to them. The result was

likely the most comprehensive picture so far of the extent and forms of sexual assault against minors in Switzerland.

### **Outcome**

Unfortunately the assumptions mentioned above were confirmed by experts. Thus the survey of school students revealed that almost 22% of girls and 8% of boys admitted to having experienced sexual assault with physical contact at least once in their lives. It was also revealed that assaults on adolescents via electronic media constitute a widespread phenomenon. 9.5% of boys and 28% of girls said they had been sexually harassed in this way. Many, however, experience sexual assault not just once but time and again. 27% of girls and 33% of boys said they had already been victims at least five times or more.

### **Risk factors**

Much points to the fact that the parental home and the social environment surrounding adolescents play an important role. Students who are harshly dealt with at home or even mistreated are more likely to become victims of sexual violence. They are more often surrounded by violence-oriented friend-

ship groups and use their free time in contexts that are more likely to give rise to assaults, for example through regular consumption of alcohol and/or drugs or frequent surfing of the internet. Adolescents are more likely to experience sexual assault by people of the same age rather than by family members – this shocking result emerged from both the school and the agency surveys. Almost half of all the students who had at some point been victims of sexual assault with physical contact said that the perpetrator was a current or former boyfriend/girlfriend or a date.

### **Consequences of sexual abuse**

Victims of sexual assault are more likely to develop subsequent psychological disturbances. In the Optimus Study, signs of post-traumatic stress disorders as well as internalization and externalization problems were measured. Those adolescents who said they had already experienced sexual assault showed above-average values on this scale. However, many victims of sexual assault do not seek any professional help. Most of those who wish to talk about what has happened to them turn to friends or family members. Very

few contact official assistance centers, doctors or the police.

### **Experts' comments**

Many of the results from the Optimus Study Switzerland tally with the personal experiences of specialists who work with children and adolescents every day, be it in schools, in children's hospitals, in youth work, in offender therapy, in prevention and intervention or in support for abuse victims. For this publication, fifteen of these were asked to comment on the most important results and relate them to their own day-to-day work. Their accounts and opinions illustrate the specific circumstances in which sexual assaults can arise and they give a more profound insight into the concerns and needs of victims, but also those of adolescent sexual offenders. You will find the most important results of the Optimus Study Switzerland and the opinions of experts from in the field on the following pages.



# Introduction



# Why are studies on sexual abuse needed?

**Sexual victimization of children and adolescents is the cause of enormous suffering and considerable health-related costs. Despite this, we know almost nothing about the scope, form and context of sexual victimization. The Optimus Study is an attempt to shed light on the subject and thus contribute to better protection of children.**

“Nobody knows the true extent. There are no reliable data.”

**Christoph Häfeli,**  
lawyer and social worker

The very worst cases make it into the headlines. The Fritzl case in Amstetten, Austria, was one such example: a father who locked his own daughter in a secret basement and abused her for years, making her pregnant several times. As the story came to light all were shocked and horrified – and yet somehow apathetic. Sexual abuse is something that happens to other people – people we don’t know. Sadly it is precisely the opposite that is true. As cases like that of Amstetten show, sexual violence takes place in our midst, at our neighbor’s house or even in our own homes. Yet all too often it goes unnoticed, because nobody wants to acknowledge it, and because victims of abuse know how to hide what happens to them – due to shame or fear, or because they have promised to keep quiet. Sexual abuse is the everyday madness that is the reality for a shockingly high number of children. Experts estimate that between 20 and 30 percent of all children and adolescents have been victims of some kind of sexual assault at some time in their lives. But how many girls are abused by their own fathers? How often are the offenders strangers? How often are they acquaintances and who ever finds out about it? What forms do assaults take, how widespread are

each of these forms and just how bad is sexual victimization for young people?

## **High costs, yet virtually no data**

Nobody is entirely sure. “Nobody knows the true extent. There are no reliable data,” says Christoph Häfeli for instance, a lawyer, social worker and an expert on the child protection system in Switzerland. The fact that so little is known is perhaps obvious given the largely taboo-like nature of the subject – and is, at the same time, astonishing. Sexual abuse is a tragedy not only for the victims; it affects the whole of society. Studies from the USA have shown that all forms of physical and psychological neglect and abuse of children result in costs of more than 103 billion dollars per year. That corresponds to around one percent of America’s gross domestic product (see nearby table).

Most of these costs arise because abuse and neglect lead to psychological damage. Victims are more likely to suffer from depression, to end up unemployed or to become criminals. The general public bears a large proportion of the costs through corresponding publicly-financed welfare costs or through taxes. The situation in Switzerland is no different.

Against this background it is difficult to comprehend why there are virtually no reliable data on the actual extent of sexual abuse of children and assaults among adolescents. Yet the reason is straightforward: There is simply a lack of usable sources. Scientific studies do exist, yet they are often insufficiently comparable and representative: In many studies already carried out worldwide only students were questioned. It is difficult to accurately apply such figures to the relevant total populations which do not consist of students alone. However students do display specific social characteristics which can have an effect on how likely someone is to be a victim of sexual abuse. In addition, from study to study and from country to country, different definitions of sexual violence apply and the data vary a great deal depending on the study carried out: "Some are based on telephone surveys, others on written questionnaires and others still on personal interviews. This means that they cannot be compared even where the same definitions of sexual abuse apply," explains Christoph Häfeli. To highlight the extent of the uncertainty, he likes to quote a meta-analysis from 1996 in which the Swiss researchers Regula Gloor and Markus Pfister tried to esti-

mate the extent of experiences of sexual abuse from studies that had been carried out up to that point. They evaluated 12 studies. In them, the proportion of children and adolescents affected fluctuated between 6 and 62 percent among

women and 3 and 16 percent among men. "Their validity with regard to the actual extent of sexual abuse is therefore zero," notes Häfeli. A new meta-analysis carried out on behalf of the UBS Optimus Foundation by a research team from

Illustration 01: **The estimated cost of child abuse and neglect in the USA 2007**

	<b>Estimated Annual Cost (in US \$)</b>
<b>Direct<sup>1</sup></b>	
Hospitalization	6 625 959 263
Mental Health Care System	1 080 706 049
Child Welfare Services System	25 361 329 051
Law Enforcement	33 307 770
<b>Total</b>	<b>33 101 302 133</b>
<b>Indirect<sup>2</sup></b>	
Special Education	2 410 306 242
Juvenile Delinquency	7 174 814 134
Mental Health and Health care	67 863 457
Adult Criminal Justice System	27 979 811 982
Lost Productivity to Society	33 019 919 544
<b>Total</b>	<b>70 652 715 359</b>
<b>Overall</b>	<b>103 754 017 492</b>
<b>~1% of gross domestic product</b>	

<sup>1</sup> Costs produced by abuse itself  
<sup>2</sup> Costs produced by long-term consequences of abuse  
 Source: Wang, C.-T., Holton, J. (2007). Total estimated cost of child abuse and neglect in the United States. Chicago, IL, Prevent Child Abuse America (PCAA)

the University of Zurich, led by Ulrich Schnyder<sup>1</sup>, established that due to varying definitions and approaches it was virtually impossible to get an accurate picture of the effective extent of sexual abuse in Switzerland.

### **Switzerland's complex child protection system**

Are we therefore better placed relying on criminal statistics instead of the results of surveys? Since any sexual act involving children is a criminal offence, police statistics could be used as a source of information. Yet this is not a good idea either, says Christoph Häfeli. "These are even less reliable. With sexual violence, the dark figure of unreported cases is very high and even if cases are reported, the suspected offenders are often not prosecuted, at least here in Switzerland," the child protection expert explains.

A third source remains in the form of the authorities and social services who are obliged by law to investigate cases of abuse. In Switzerland, the problem here is a lack of standardization in these bodies'

organization. In the context of child protection enshrined in civil law, social services or youth welfare offices support the tutelary authorities in investigating reports of abuse, yet they are structured and funded in very different ways. Switzerland's federal system means the cantons are responsible for child protection. How they organize themselves is largely up to them. "The result is an unbelievably heterogeneous system with, in places, very professionally equipped teams, but also with many lay authorities who are often overburdened and pushed to their limits," explains Häfeli.

### **Everyone's outcome is different**

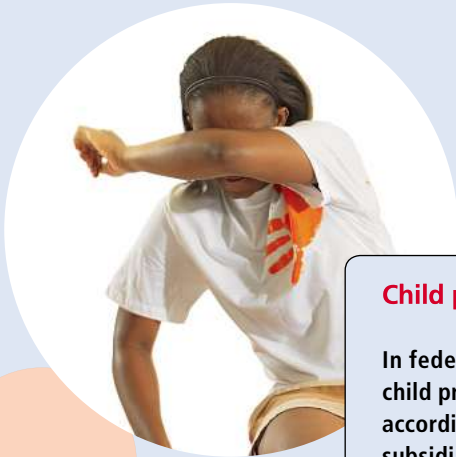
The authorities do generally compile statistics on reports of abuse. According to Häfeli, though, they often have gaps and are not in any way standardized. The same applies to the numerous volunteer and specialist organizations that are also an important part of this complex system (see overview in box on page 15) and which also work to protect children and adolescents from sexual abuse. Most of these organizations also produce statistics, but there are no uni-

form criteria: "Everyone's outcome ends up a little bit different," says Häfeli. It is therefore impossible to create an overall picture of the extent and form of sexual violence against children and adolescents in Switzerland.

Reliable data are urgently needed. If better information were available on the contexts surrounding sexual abuse and the form it takes, then intervention and prevention strategies could be improved. The more that is known on the subject, the more precisely programs and campaigns can be tailored to the underlying issues. With the correct expertise, time and money can be used in a much more targeted and ultimately effective way. It is precisely here that the Optimus Study can play a role, helping to bring light to this murky subject and thus improving the protection of children and adolescents.

<sup>1</sup> Schönbucher, V., Maier, T., Held, L., Mohler-Kuo, M., Schnyder, U., Landolt, M. A. (2011). *Prevalence of Child Sexual Abuse in Switzerland: a Systematic Review*. Swiss Medical Weekly, (140), w13123





## Child protection in Switzerland

**In federalist Switzerland child protection is regulated according to the principle of subsidiarity. Responsibility is shared between the federal government, the cantons and the municipalities. There are also a large number of private, non-profit associations and foundations that work in child protection. In general four sub-areas can be identified where responsibility lies for protecting minors from maltreatment, abuse and neglect at various levels.**

### Child protection under civil law

Civil law obliges custody authorities to protect children whose physical, psychological, mental or social development is at risk. As a civil law body, it is the custody authorities that issue corresponding orders at this level. The authority intervenes if it receives a risk warning and can, for example, remove the child from the cus-

tody or protection of the person who poses the risk or provide other assistance if the child's welfare is threatened. In many German-speaking Swiss cantons the relevant municipal executive is also the custody authority. In urban areas it is customary for specialized committees to investigate risk situations, for example family assistance centers, social centers or youth welfare offices. These organizations are generally arranged professionally with staff of various disciplines including social workers, lawyers and psychologists. The custody authorities, who issue orders for child protection measures on the basis of these investigations, are also semi- and in a few cases fully – staffed by professionals in these areas.

### Child protection under criminal law

This area comprises all institutions that deal with the prosecution of offences against children. These include courts and public pros-

ecutors, youth lawyers and the police. Some police corps operate a specialist child protection team.

### Specialized child protection

This includes organizations and assistance centers which pursue a broad mission in terms of child protection, helping for example to investigate suspect cases or providing support for victims of sexual assault. These include, for example, child protection groups at public hospitals or the victim assistance centers recognized at cantonal level.

### Volunteer child protection

This category includes all private associations, organizations and foundations that work on a voluntary basis for the protection of children but cannot be publicly mandated.

# Objectives and approach

**The Optimus Study aims to help better protect children and adolescents from sexual violence. In the first phase, knowledge is generated that can then be used in a targeted way to improve prevention and intervention strategies in the long term.**

The overriding aim of the Optimus Study is to reduce the number of victims of sexual victimization. To do so, the extent of various forms of sexual abuse and their specific circumstances are to be investigated along with risk factors. On this basis child protection efforts can then be improved.

It's obvious that none of this can happen overnight. The Optimus Study is a long-term project which runs for a period of ten years. In an initial phase (cycle 1, see nearby graphic) scientific data will be compiled using a representative survey of school students and a survey among organizations and institutions involved in child protection. This will enable a more detailed insight into the scope, consequences, number of unreported cases and services available in the area of child sexual abuse. To raise awareness of the problem in politics, among the public and in practice, these results are processed and distributed for relevant stakeholders in a manner appropriate for the target group.



In a second phase (cycle 2) discussion should be launched among experts. The creation of new networks and working groups is crucial here. Using new platforms, stakeholders from politics and practice are to be offered the opportunity to identify the most pressing problems and challenges in the area of child protection, and to develop and carry out appropriate measures in line with an action plan. As part of the Optimus Study, the changes introduced will be recorded and monitored.

In the final cycle the aim is to monitor whether the measures have been effective and where there is a need for further action. As in the first cycle, new data will be compiled as part of a long-term study. A comparison will then highlight changes and existing gaps. The Optimus Study guarantees scientific guidance and places great emphasis on including the greatest possible number of stakeholders from the field of child protection. This is the only way to achieve and demonstrate the effective protection of children and adolescents from sexual abuse.

### International orientation

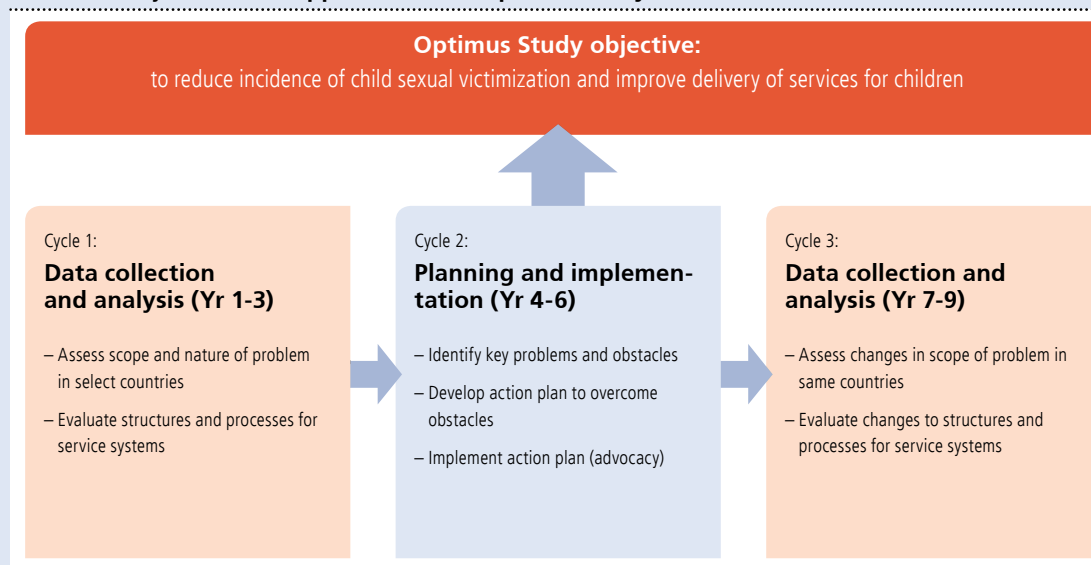
The focus of the Optimus Study is international. Even though the countless other studies already produced in individual countries are not comparable with one another, the figures are shockingly high everywhere, meaning a frightening number of people have personal experience of sexual abuse. Previously carried out research does highlight one thing very clearly: Abuse is not limited by cul-

ture, and children and adolescents are abused everywhere in the world. The Optimus Study is also an attempt to compare the extent, forms and circumstances of sexual abuse of children and adolescents in various countries. In this way it will ultimately be possible to create a picture of any cultural differences between, for example, the specific characteristics of sexual abuse or the risk factors involved, and thus to develop any

specific intervention and prevention measures – for better protection of children and adolescents across the world.

During the last two years data was compiled in China and Switzerland by the University of Hong Kong (Edward Chan) and at the University of Zurich (Ulrich Schnyder, Meichun Mohler-Kuo, Markus Landolt, Thomas Maier). In order to increase leverage on an international scale,

Illustration 02: **Objectives and approach of the Optimus Study**

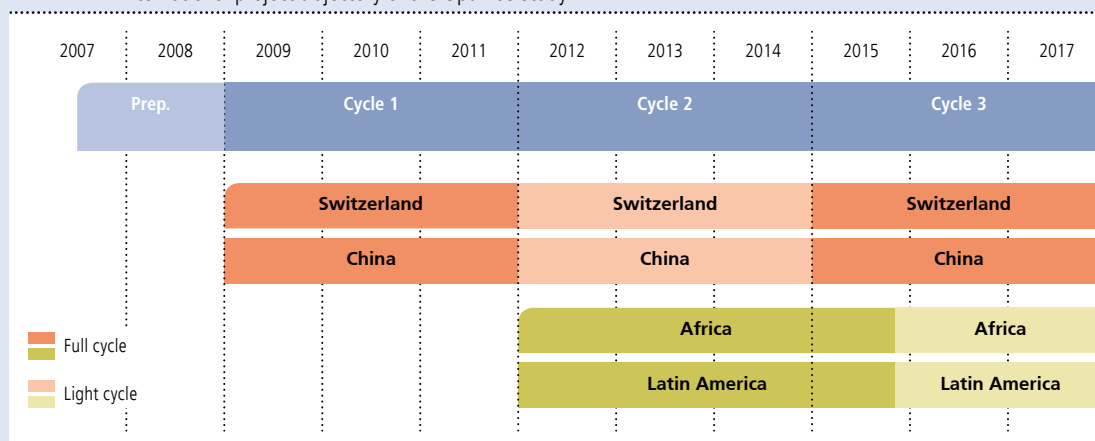


data will also be gathered on two additional continents in 2012, namely Latin America and Africa. This publication provides an overview of the most important results of the first cycle of the Optimus

Study Switzerland. It is based on a comprehensive report produced by Margit Averdijk (ETH Zurich), Katrin Müller-Johnson and Manuel Eisner (both University of Cambridge).<sup>2</sup>

<sup>2</sup> **Averdijk M., Müller-Johnson K. & Eisner M.** (2012). *Sexual Victimization of Children and Adolescents in Switzerland (Final Report for the UBS Optimus Foundation)*. Zurich: UBS Optimus Foundation. [www.optimusstudy.org](http://www.optimusstudy.org).

Illustration 03: **Cross-national research initiative for the protection of children and adolescents**  
International project trajectory of the Optimus Study



# Details on data collection

**More than 6700 school students gave information on their experiences of sexual abuse for the Optimus Study. In addition, 324 child protection organizations were asked about cases reported to them. The researchers deliberately used a relatively broad definition and surveyed various forms of sexual abuse in order to be able to investigate the extent and the circumstances in a sophisticated way.**

Data collection as part of the first cycle of the Optimus Study in Switzerland consisted of a survey among school students and a poll of child protection organizations and institutions.

## School survey

During the 2009/2010 academic year, the research team from the University of Zurich surveyed almost 450 school classes throughout Switzerland. More than 6700 students from all levels of the Swiss ninth grade (around 16 years old) completed a questionnaire on their experiences of sexual abuse on a laptop brought by the researchers. The random sample was drawn from a list of all classes in state schools and is representative of Swiss adolescents at the end of compulsory

## Key features of the school survey

For the survey of school students a random sample was taken of all ninth grade classes in state schools in Switzerland. The sample covered 215 schools with 562 classes and a total of 9857 children. Some cantons and schools refused to participate in the study and some individual children did not want to fill in the questionnaire. The response rate among the participating classes was 91%; in the end the sample of usable answers covered 6749 adolescents aged between 15 and 17 years from 161 schools. 48% of those questioned were girls, 52% were boys.

## The school survey – advantages and disadvantages

Like any scientific study, the Optimus Study had various advantages and disadvantages. One of the significant advantages of the student survey is the large, nationally representative sample. The participation rate is also very high and infrequent incidents are also taken into account. The many questions cover a broad spectrum of sexual victimization in a refined way.

The survey also has certain limitations, however. On the one hand, sexual victimization of younger children is insufficiently covered. Information on this had to be gathered retrospectively, which harbors the risk of distortion, as those responses might not have reflected incidents in the distant past. It is also conceivable that using the school as a place of questioning meant that respondents were more likely to remember sexual victimization in this context and incidents which take place within the family are pushed to the background. Another point is that the school survey is a victim survey, meaning it provides relatively little information about the perpetrators.

### Key features of the agency survey

For the agency survey a total of 1267 organizations from all sub-areas of child protection in Switzerland were invited to fill in an online questionnaire. In it they were asked to provide details on the number of cases of child abuse, neglect and sexual abuse that they dealt with, as well as information on the victims, their family backgrounds and – where available – the suspected perpetrators. Agencies were also asked about the intervention measures they had implemented. 324 of the organizations contacted complied with the request, which corresponds to a return rate of 27%. 47% of them were custody authorities, 28% were involved in voluntary child protection and 25% in child protection under criminal law.

education. The survey was authorized by the cantonal ethics committees and departments of education, and participation was voluntary for the students.

#### Agency survey

In parallel to this, the scientists carried out a survey of 324 organizations and institutions that are involved with child and youth protection. These included tutelary, guardianship and criminal law authorities, not-for-profit foundations and associations and specialized organizations, for example victim assistance centers or child protection groups in hospitals.

#### A definition from the victim's point of view

So what exactly is sexual abuse? Many criminal lawyers would probably say sexual abuse is what is laid down as such in criminal law. Where children and adolescents in Switzerland are concerned, this means any sexual act with persons aged under 16 unless it is consensual in nature and the age difference between the two parties is not more than three years (for more on the legal situation in Switzerland see box on p. 21). On the other hand, when defining abuse some sociologists would align their positions more closely with what society sees as abusive.

They may thus reach a definition that is either more or less easily summarized. Both approaches produce different definitions that can vary from society to society and from country to country, which, as mentioned, makes it difficult to draw comparisons.

In the context of the Optimus Study, therefore, a definition has been decided upon that is aligned not only with the law or society's attitude, but with the experience of the victim. Sexual victimization comprises all experiences where a child or adolescent has had to endure or experience sexual acts to which he or she cannot freely agree due to his/her emotional or cognitive development. Here too, though, we have to differentiate: There is a big difference between a girl being harassed by a stranger indecently exposing himself on the way home from school and another being raped at home by her own father for a period of many years. This was also taken into account in the Optimus Study. The study initially differentiates in a very general fashion between victimization with and without physical contact. The latter includes various forms such as indecent exposure, voyeurism, display of pornographic material against the victim's

The Optimus Study is based not only on the law but, more importantly, on the experiences of victims.

will, verbal or written harassment or the dissemination of explicit images of the victim via electronic media. Where victimization with physical contact is concerned, the Optimus Study differentiates again between assaults where the perpetrator has penetrated the victim's body (including with objects) and those where no penetration is involved (see box on p. 22 on this point).

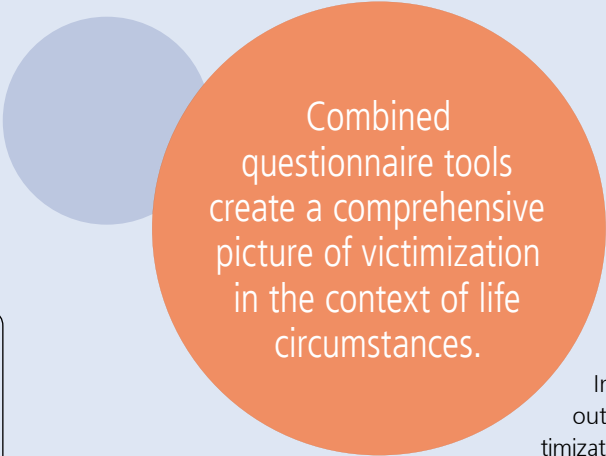
### Sexual abuse of minors – the legal situation in Switzerland

From a purely legal perspective, in Switzerland sexual acts are always an offence if one of the people involved has not yet reached 16 years of age. This applies regardless of whether a person was forced into sexual acts or whether both parties have consented. It also applies, therefore, if the initiative originally came from the subsequent victim. An exception is made where the act is consensual and involves teenagers between whom the age difference is no more than three years. Sex between adolescents is therefore not automatically an offence provided that those involved are around the same age.

Sexual acts with those over 16 but under 18 are illegal if the victim has a dependency relationship to the perpetrator (who may be a parent/guardian, a caregiver or a supervisor at work) and the perpetrator carries out a sexual act for which he or she exploits this dependence. What is key here is the "abuse of power" aspect.

Under criminal law an act involving minors is sexual if, in the opinion of an independent observer, it serves to increase or satisfy sexual lust and involves the touching of erogenous zones. Anyone showing pornographic material to minors, producing pornographic material that involves minors or storing, soliciting, making accessible, displaying or disseminating such material is also committing an offence.

Regardless of the age of the persons involved, sexual acts are always illegal if one of the persons involved exerts physical or psychological pressure or incites submission using drugs or other substances. Rape, human trafficking, indecent exposure and sexual harassment also count as offences regardless of age.



Combined questionnaire tools create a comprehensive picture of victimization in the context of life circumstances.

### Forms of sexual victimization

Various forms of sexual victimization were investigated in the Optimus Study. An important distinction was made between sexual assaults involving physical contact and those that did not. In addition, the following distinctions were made:

#### Sexual victimization with physical contact

- > Without penetration: kissing and touching of intimate parts of the body by the perpetrator or by the victim to the perpetrator where forced to do so
- > With penetration: includes the introduction of objects or the perpetrator's body parts into the vagina, mouth and/or anus of the victim

#### Sexual victimization without physical contact

Includes indecent exposure, voyeurism, confrontation with pornographic material, verbal sexual innuendos or harassment, sexual acts via electronic media (e.g. disseminating photos featuring nudity or pornographic films, verbal advances in chatrooms or similar).

#### How do we measure?

In order to find out about the victimization experiences and their nature, the Optimus Study applied two specific tools. One was the Juvenile Victimization Questionnaire (JVQ) developed by American expert David Finkelhor, which comprises a sequence of seven questions. The other was the study's own series of questions, the Sexual Abuse and Victimization Questionnaire (SAVQ) developed by the group of researchers at the University of Zurich (Ulrich Schnyder, Meichun Mohler-Kuo, Markus Landolt, Thomas Maier), which contains 15 additional questions. Some sample questions can be found in the box on page 24. Adolescents who marked one or more forms of victimization then answered a series of related questions on the specific circumstances, their own age at the time of the assault, the circumstances of their lives at that point (how they spent their spare time, parenting style at home, parents' jobs and similar issues), the age of the perpetrator, the relationship to the perpetrator and the location of the assault. The survey of school students thus ultimately



delivered a sophisticated picture of the extent of various forms of sexual victimization, their nature and their circumstances. The questions covered all forms of sexual victimization including those where not only adults but also children and adolescents can be perpetrators; some questions referred specifically to certain perpetrator age groups.

The survey among child protection organizations should, most importantly, give insight into how many cases are handled every year, how often the various forms of sexual abuse are encountered, which characteristics the victims and – if information is available – the suspected perpetrators display, what

> Continuation on page 25



### Abuse or victimization: The terms used

In the discussion about sexual victimization of children and adolescents terms such as sexual abuse, sexual violence, sexual exploitation and sexual assault are used to mean more or less the same thing. This often leads to confusion and a lack of clarity. The research team that carried out the scientific report (Margit Averdijk, Katrin Müller-Johnson, Manuel Eisner) proposed a sophisticated definition of terms, differentiating, most importantly, between sexual abuse and sexual victimization.

#### Sexual abuse

Sexual abuse can be seen as a sub-area of child abuse. The World Health Organization (WHO) defines child abuse as 'all forms of physical and/or emotional ill-treatment, sexual abuse, neglect or negligent treatment or commercial or other exploitation, resulting in actual or potential harm to the child's health, survival, development or dignity in the context of a relationship of responsibility, trust or power.' It is the power and dependency between the victim and perpetrator that is crucial here, as is the abuse of trust. The WHO also de-

finer sexual abuse as follows: 'Child sexual abuse is the involvement of a child in sexual activity that he or she does not fully comprehend, is unable to give informed consent to, or for which the child is not developmentally prepared and cannot give consent, or that violate the laws or social taboos of society.'

#### Sexual victimization

Among teenagers, in particular, it cannot be assumed that all incidents of sexual victimization occur within the context of an authority or dependency relationship. This is the case, for example, with cyberbullying between peers, sexual assaults within the context of a sexual relationship or sexual harassment on the playground. Hence the author has used the term 'sexual victimization' as a general umbrella term for all forms of acts against children or adolescents where their sexual and personal integrity is threatened and violated.

## How was sexual abuse measured?

In order to investigate the extent and the circumstances of sexual victimization among adolescents two questionnaire tools were used, namely the Juvenile Victimization Questionnaire (JVQ) and the Sexual Abuse and Victimization Questionnaire (SAVQ), developed specifically for the Optimus Study. A total of 22 questions were asked, for example:

### Victimization with physical contact

- > Did a grown-up *you know* ever touch your private parts when you didn't want it or make you touch their private parts? Or did a grown-up *you know* force you to have sex?
- > Now think about kids your age, like from school, a boy friend or girl friend, or even a brother or sister. Did another child or teen ever make you do sexual things?
- > Has someone ever urged or forced you to take his penis or another person's penis in your mouth?

### Victimization without physical contact

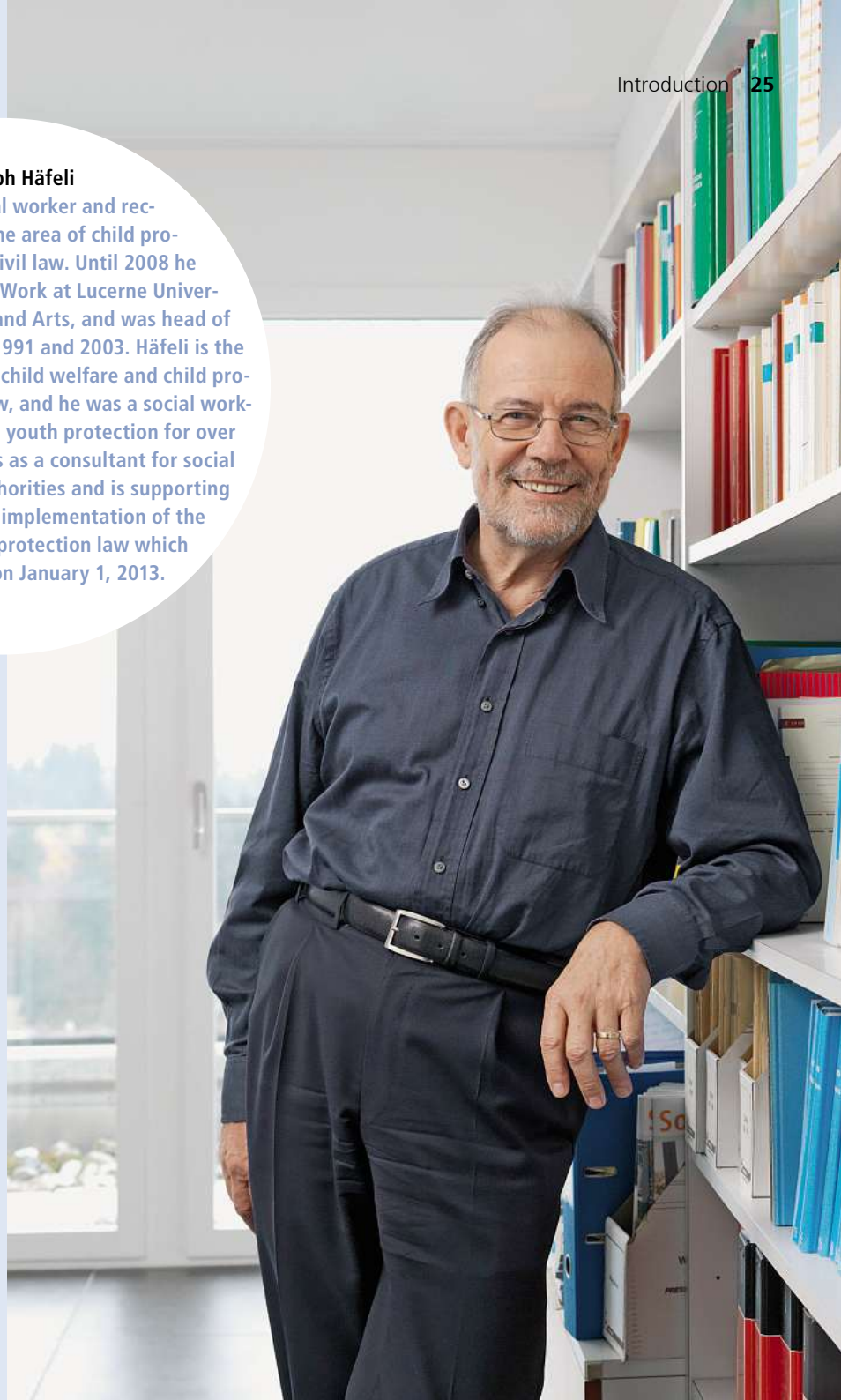
- > Did anyone ever make you look at their private parts by using force or surprise, or by "flashing" you?
- > Did anyone ever hurt your feelings by saying or writing something sexual about you or your body?
- > Were you ever forced or pressured to undress yourself and to show your genitals to an adult or another kid? Have you ever been forced or urged to look at pornographic pictures, drawings, films, DVDs or magazines (also on a cell phone)?
- > Did someone ever pass on intimate pictures of you to other people or even publish them on the internet?
- > Have you ever been clearly sexually harassed or molested when you were chatting (MSN, Netlog, etc.) or during some other type of internet-based communication?

**Christoph Häfeli**

is a lawyer, social worker and recognized expert in the area of child protection under Swiss civil law. Until 2008 he was Professor of Social Work at Lucerne University of Applied Sciences and Arts, and was head of the department between 1991 and 2003. Häfeli is the author of various works on child welfare and child protection under Swiss civil law, and he was a social worker in the area of child and youth protection for over ten years. Today he works as a consultant for social services and custody authorities and is supporting several cantons in the implementation of the new child and adult protection law which comes into force on January 1, 2013.

relationship exists between the victim and the perpetrator and whether the abuse was a single assault or occurred on many occasions. This part of the Optimus Study gives an even more comprehensive picture as it contains information about cases involving younger victims.

The most important results of this survey are presented on the following pages with commentary by various individuals from the field of child protection. This much has already been revealed at this point: The results of the Optimus Study clarify how pressing the issue is and shed light on new forms of sexual violence particularly prevalent among adolescents.





# Result 1



# How many become victims?

**Result 1 >** Sexual abuse of children and adolescents is a taboo subject. However it would be wrong to conclude that these are isolated cases. The Optimus Study shows: In any average 9th grade class in Switzerland there will be two or three adolescents who have already experienced a sexual assault involving physical contact at least once in their lives.

But how widespread is sexual victimization among children and adolescents exactly? Although there are many agencies that deal with the protection of minors from sexual assault, and although there have been various victim surveys carried out among adolescents over the last 20 years, there are actually no current data on how frequently and in what circumstances such assaults take place. The existing prevention and intervention strategies are therefore lacking a secure basis. The Optimus Study makes a contribution towards filling in these knowledge gaps.

## **Abuse with physical contact: every seventh young person affected**

The school students were first asked about which forms of sexual abuse or harassment they had ever experienced in their lives. The result: Almost every seventh young person has been forced into intercourse or been touched in an intimate place against his or her will at some point. In an average Swiss school class of 21 children there will therefore be two to three children who have been victims of sexual abuse with physical contact at some time. Girls, the study also showed, are more likely to be affected than boys: Almost every fourth girl (217 out of

1000) admitted to having had such an experience before, yet among the 1000 boys surveyed, the figure was 81.

Something that is particularly harmful and difficult to comprehend is sexual abuse resulting in penetration, when the victim's body is somehow forcibly penetrated. This includes penetration with objects or oral intercourse. Here too the results are shocking: Almost 3% of girls (26 out of 1000) have already experienced assaults involving complete penetration, and a further 5% had experienced at least an attempt. Again boys are less affected according to the survey: 0.5% (5 out of 1000) of them were sexually abused with penetration, 0.7% without.

## **30 percent have experienced abuse without physical contact**

Even more widespread is victimization of children and adolescents not involving physical contact. This includes incidents such as indecent exposure, verbal and written sexual harassment, the showing of pornographic material or suggestive remarks or actions via electronic media. In total almost 30% of all school students surveyed admitted to having had such experiences at some point in their lives. Again girls are

Every seventh young person has been forced into intercourse or been touched in intimate places against his or her will at some point.

affected more than boys: Almost 40% of girls and 20% of boys had been victims of sexual acts not involving physical contact.

#### **Abuse via electronic media**

The most frequent form in this category was victimization via electronic media. Almost every third girl had at some point experienced suggestive comments, received pornographic photos or films, been urged to carry out sexual acts in front of a webcam or been victimized in a similar fashion. Among boys this had been experienced by around one in ten. Verbal or written sexual harassment outside of the internet is also widespread: 21% of girls and 8% of boys had faced this at some point.

In a final question the students who had experienced victimization were asked about incidents in the preceding year. Almost 10% had experienced abuse involving physical contact over the previous twelve months; 20% had been victims of sexual harassment without physical contact being involved.

Many adolescents have been victims more than once, however. Around two thirds of those questioned had experienced victimization repeatedly. Over



#### **The most important data in brief**

- > Around 15% of school students surveyed admitted to having experienced sexual assault with physical contact at some point in their lives
- > 3% of girls and 0.5% of boys have been forced into intercourse with penetration at some point
- > Around 30% of all adolescents surveyed have at some point experienced a sexual assault without physical contact
- > The most significant sub-category in terms of sexual assault without physical contact was cyber-victimization
- > Girls were considerably more likely to admit to having been the victim of sexual abuse at some point than boys
- > Around two thirds of those adolescents who had been victims of sexual assault experienced this repeatedly; 32% of boys and 27% of girls said they had been sexually abused or harassed in some form five times or more in their lives



32% of victimized boys and 27% of victimized girls said they had been abused or harassed in some form five times or more in their lives. □

#### Illustration 04: Lifetime prevalence of sexual victimization

Of each 1000 respondents

Type of victimization	Male	Female	Total
<i>Victimization with physical contact</i>	81	217	146
Attempted or completed penetration	11	65	37
Attempted penetration	7	46	25
Completed penetration	5	26	15
<i>Victimization without physical contact</i>	199	397	294
Indecent exposure	45	89	66
Verbal/written harassment	83	213	145
Forced to witness sexual acts	30	34	32
Intimate pictures/content passed on to others	18	44	30
Cyber-bullying (sexual)	95	277	182

**Reading example:** Of each 1000 adolescent male respondents, 81 reported having been the victim of a sexual assault involving physical contact at least once in their lives

Source: Averdijk, M., Müller-Johnson, K., Eisner, M. (2012). Sexual Victimization of Children and Adolescents in Switzerland, Table 3.1



# “Now nobody can still claim we don't have a problem”

**Expert discussion 1 > The figures on the extent of sexual assaults among adolescents do not surprise child protection expert Myriam Caranzano or Martin Boess from Swiss Crime Prevention. They do prove, though, that there is a need for action.**

Myriam Caranzano has had a long day involving a number of academic presentations and discussions with colleagues. The pediatrician and director of the Ticino child protection organization, ASPI, took part in a symposium organized by the UBS Optimus Foundation in Zurich on the subject of sexual abuse of children. The week before, ASPI had itself organized an international conference in Lugano on the subject of violence against children. Now Caranzano sits in the cafeteria of the conference center in Zurich, showing not a trace of exhaustion or fatigue. As she talks about her work, she gets straight to the point and is extremely animated and engaging. “Every abused child is one too many,” she says decidedly with an eye on the data supplied by the Optimus Study. The figures revealed may be considerable, she says, yet they do not surprise her. “Sadly,” she adds. The ASPI Foundation operates various prevention programs for children, parents and teachers within Ticino. “We often hear of new cases. Children tell us about sexual abuse, and during or after workshops adults tell us about past incidents from their childhood,” she says. Nobody has managed to produce statistics on this. “But when I think of how many cases we come

across in our work, the Optimus Study's figures don't surprise me,” says Caranzano. In other studies, too, similar figures have been revealed. However, Caranzano claims the Optimus Study is very important: “As far as I know, it's the first survey that is representative of the whole of Switzerland. Now really nobody can continue to claim we don't have a problem with child abuse.”

## “Studies confirm expectations”

Her view is shared by Martin Boess, head of Swiss Crime Prevention in Berne. “The study is very important. It confirms what is expected but could not previously be convincingly proven.” At the same time, though, he warns against dramatizing the situation: “The high prevalence is also linked to the relatively broad definition used in the study. And we should also remember that 15% affected also means 85% not affected,” he says. Boess also emphasizes that not all children and adolescents are equally at risk. “It concerns a particular group of children and adolescents who, in the course of their lives, find themselves in ever different situations and circumstances. This also explains the very high level of children affected on more than one occasion.” For prevention, it's very important

to note: "We need to concentrate on this target group and its specific problems."

In a way Boess is also surprised, however, that figures revealed through the Optimus Study were not higher, namely concerning sexual abuse without physical contact. "I would have expected more than 30%, which is perhaps due to the fact that my work means I deal closely with the issues of cyber-bullying and sexual assaults over the internet and am therefore acutely aware of them," he says. Over the last few years, Swiss Crime Prevention has launched various programs and campaigns on the subject, and has published leaflets for parents, teachers, children and adolescents on the issue of how to deal with new media and the internet. Where cyber-victimization is concerned, Martin Boess identifies the problem as predominantly the lack of media competence on both sides, but particularly among parents. "We have a generation gap between children, who grow up with computers, cell phones and the internet, and parents, who only came into contact with these things later in life and often know and understand much less about them than their chil-

dren." An important characteristic of the internet is also its supposed anonymity. "You're just alone at home in front of the screen; nobody questions you directly. Many children and adolescents believe what they write and do online is private; they don't realize that the internet is a public space."

### **A deficit in sexual education**

It may be the case, therefore, that children come across pornographic material entirely unintentionally. "Sometimes, though, it is teenagers in particular who, because they are naturally very interested in sexuality as part of their development, deliberately ask for answers to questions that their parents won't answer," says Myriam Caranzano. It really should be the job of parents and educators to enlighten children, yet too few do so. "We have a great void when it comes to sex education," says Caranzano. Often adolescents imitate what they see on the internet because they believe that is the norm. "Parents should emphasize the idea that what their children know about sexuality should not be based entirely on such sources. We must give children the tools they need." One thing Caranzano sees as crucial is the teaching of values, predominantly respect: "Many

"Too few parents and educators talk to their children about the issue."

Myriam Caranzano,  
pediatrician

**Myriam Caranzano**

is a qualified pediatrician and, since 1997, has been director of the Fondazione della Svizzera italiana per l'Aiuto, il Sostegno e la Protezione dell'Infanzia (ASPI) in Breganzona. She is also a member of the board of trustees of Child Protection Switzerland (Stiftung Kinderschutz Schweiz) and the International Society for Prevention of Child Abuse and Neglect (ISPCAN).

> [www.aspi.ch](http://www.aspi.ch)





**Martin Boess**

studied business management, is a human resources manager and, since 2005, has been head of Swiss Crime Prevention in Berne. He has collaborated with the cantonal police corps on prevention campaigns covering issues such as sexual assault and child pornography on the internet, youth and violence as well as domestic violence.

> [www.skppsc.ch](http://www.skppsc.ch)

adults do not accept the sexual integrity of their children. How can children learn to respect others, when they are themselves not respected?" Caranzano also points out that examples for children and adolescents do not necessarily only come from pornographic material. "Just look at any music video by Britney Spears or Rihanna."

### **Girls more affected**

Like other studies, the Optimus Study revealed huge differences between the sexes with regard to the frequency of incidents of sexual victimization. Girls are considerably more likely to be affected by abuse than boys. The question arises as to whether boys or young men are actually affected less frequently or whether they are simply less likely to talk about it. "Ultimately we can only speculate on this, but I have come to no longer believe that there really are differences," says Myriam Caranzano. Her experience shows that men are often very ashamed, she claims. "Over the course of time I have met many men who tell me they have never before spoken to anybody about what they experienced as children. It simply doesn't fit with their role as a man." Martin Boess believes that boys are more often brought up to put

up with things without talking about them. "However there is also the idea that boys are less sensitive and are less likely to see an incident as an assault, although I do rather suspect that girls are more often affected. Teenage boys and men represent by far the majority of offenders when it comes to sexual crimes and most of their victims are female."

### **"It's all about respect"**

One way or another, the figures in the Optimus Study show that sexual abuse of children and adolescents is widespread even in Switzerland. The implementation of child protection laws, such as those in the area of pornography, but also preventative measures must be improved, according to Martin Boess. "There needs to be more education about male and female sexuality, including in school, and not just through the class teachers but also using external experts," he says. Myriam Caranzano also appeals for greater efforts in the area of prevention, which she says must be approached in a more holistic manner: "Prevention should not be based only on sexual violence, but other forms of violence too." Also, prevention does not just mean abuse-focused measures, but rather taking children seriously and

accepting them as independent beings. "In the end it all boils down to one thing: respect." ■



## Result 2



# Who are the victims?

**Result 2 >** The Optimus Study disproves the widespread assumption that adolescents from lower socio-economic status are more likely to be affected by sexual violence. The parental home does, however, play an important role: A harsh atmosphere, neglect and maltreatment increase the risk of adolescents becoming victims of sexual assault.

Sexual violence can affect anybody. There is no typical victim. However, findings from previous research show that sexual victimization is linked to other forms of violence and to certain personal and social characteristics. The Optimus Study aimed to determine these risk factors and therefore questioned the school students on their specific living circumstances. Using this information, the study looked into which factors are linked to the likelihood that a young person had been a victim of sexual abuse in the year preceding the study.

## Gender and the situation at home do have an influence on risk

On the one hand, the results confirm previous studies and show that girls are generally around two to three times more at risk than boys. When it comes to serious sexual victimization involving physical force, this difference is even more marked: For attacks with penetration the ratio was around 1 to 6. Like other studies, they also show the crucial impact of the situation in the parental home: A rough and aggressive

approach by parents, violence between them or parental neglect and non-sexual physical abuse all increase the risk of a child becoming a victim of sexual assault. This connection could signify that one parent carries out the sexual abuse themselves, yet it is also conceivable that negative and aggressive behavior by parents over many years can lead to psychological damage as well as an unstable and low level of self-esteem. This, in turn, is linked with an increased risk of victimization, including by other people.

On the other hand, though, the Optimus Study was unable to confirm certain widespread assumptions. A family's socio-economic status, for example, had no bearing on the risk of its children becoming victims: Adolescents from all social strata are affected to a more or less equally significant extent. Children who had grown up with a single parent are therefore no more likely to become victims of sexual assault in general.

## Risky lifestyles

In addition, the Optimus Study sheds light on important links between the lifestyle of young people and their risk of becoming victims of sexual abuse. Adolescents who go out a lot, are surround-





A family's social strata has no bearing on the risk of its children becoming victims.

ed by a violence-oriented environment, consume drugs or alcohol and often surf the internet are considerably more likely to be victimized than others. This applies to a similar extent both for incidents with physical contact and those without. The pattern of everyday life does affect whether young people come into contact with potential perpetrators or find themselves in situations in which they can be easily exploited.

This finding from the Optimus Study is largely consistent with numerous other studies. It does not mean that the victims are "guilty" as far as their experience is concerned, but it does show that adolescents with a risky lifestyle are also exposed to an increased risk of sexual victimization. On the one hand, here there is again a link with the home situation: If children are neglected and treated harshly at home, they are more likely to develop problems with alcohol and drugs in their teenage years, or to spend a lot of time on the internet. This also corresponds to an increased risk of suffering abuse.

The interplay of the risk factors investigated in the study can lead to big differences between groups of people. For



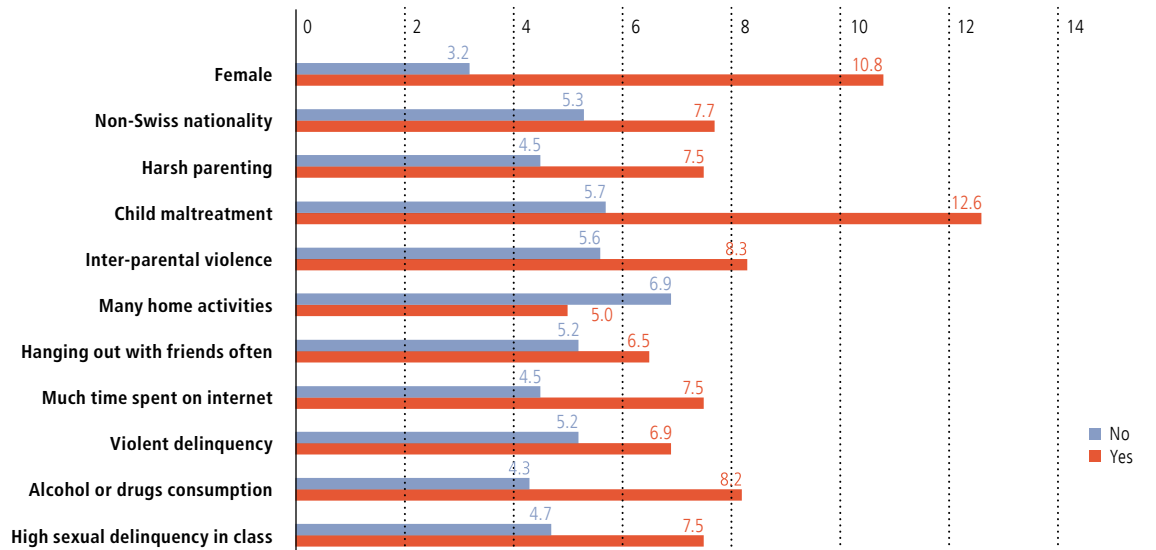
### The most important data in brief

- > The probability of becoming a victim of sexual abuse is two to three times greater for girls than it is for boys.
- > Adolescents who go out a lot, consume alcohol or drugs, spend a lot of time surfing the internet and move in violence-oriented circles are more at risk of experiencing sexual abuse.
- > A harsh atmosphere at home increases the risk of an adolescent experiencing sexual assault.
- > Sexual victimization is often linked to other forms of violence: Physical and verbal threats, bodily harm and neglect go hand in hand.

example the risk of victimization involving physical contact is just 2% for a boy who is not physically mistreated or subject to a harsh parenting style and who does not consume alcohol or drugs. For a girl who experiences mistreatment or a

harsh parenting style and who consumes alcohol or drugs, the risk rises to 35%.

Illustration 05: Risk factors relating to the likelihood of sexual victimization with physical contact (in %)



**Note:** The chart illustrates the results of a multi-variant logistic regression of 11 risk factors relating to victimization with physical contact. All results presented are statistically significant.

**Reading example:** For a female adolescent the risk of victimization with physical contact stands at 10.8%, for a male adolescent it is 3.2 %. This difference prevails once all other risk factors have been statistically controlled.

Source: Averdijk, Müller-Johnson, Eisner (2012), Figure 5.2

### Caution when identifying causes

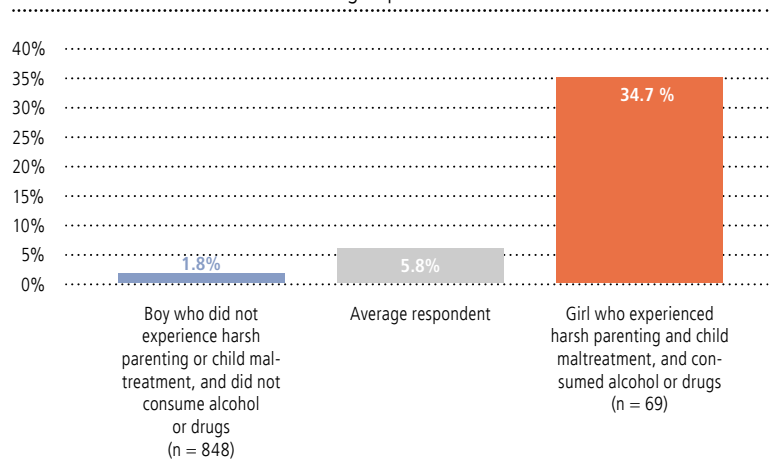
Nonetheless, caution is generally required when interpreting these results: The data from the survey of school students does not allow one to say with certainty whether specific free time and consumption behaviors existed before the person became a victim of sexual abuse for the first time, or whether it was a consequence thereof. Therefore no clear causal relationship can be determined. However, the school survey does clearly confirm that sexual victimization should not be viewed as an isolated issue. Anyone who experiences sexual violence is often the victim of other forms of violence too. The comparison between adolescents who have already experienced sexual abuse at some point and those who have not had such experiences shows clear differences with regard to other forms of violence. Victims of sexual abuse are twice as likely to have suffered physical and verbal bullying or bodily harm from their peers at some point. The data also show that sexual violence within the family is closely linked to both neglect and physical and verbal abuse by parents or guardians. Victims of sexual abuse within the family are five times more likely to also be victims of neglect. A similar figure applies to adolescents who suffer sexual violence

within a relationship. They also experience non-sexual violence from their partners. Perpetrators of sexual assaults therefore often cover a broad spectrum of different forms of violent behavior. □

Illustration 06:

### Victimization with physical contact

Victimization risk for two selected risk groups



**Note:** Probability to be victimized predicted through the adapted logistic regression for the characteristic combinations listed. All characteristics not taken into account were set to an average value.

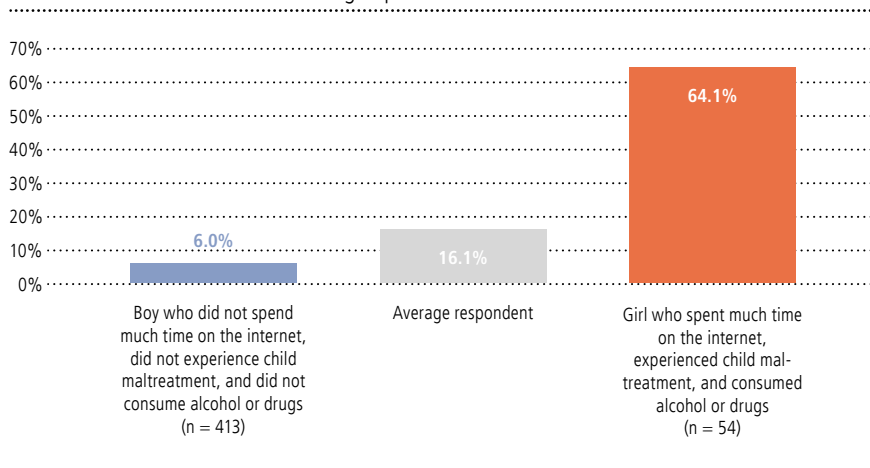
**Reading example:** For a boy who does not experience maltreatment or a harsh parenting style and who does not consume drugs or alcohol the victimization risk stands at around 2%. For a girl who experiences mistreatment or a harsh parenting style and who consumes drugs or alcohol, the risk of victimization with physical contact is 35%.

Anyone who experiences sexual violence is often the victim of other forms of violence too.

Illustration 07:

**Victimization without physical contact**

Victimization risk for two selected risk groups



**Note:** Probability to be victimized predicted through the adapted logistic regression for the characteristic combinations listed. All characteristics not taken into account were set to an average value.

**Reading example:** For a boy who spends little time on the internet, has experienced no mistreatment as a child and who does not consume alcohol or drugs the victimization risk is 6%. For a girl who spends a lot of time on the internet, was mistreated as a child and who consumes alcohol or drugs, the victimization risk is 64.1%.

Source: Averdijk, Müller-Johnson, Eisner (2012)

# “The distinctions between perpetrator and victim are blurred”

**Expert discussion 2 > When it comes to sexual assaults between adolescents, alcohol is often involved. This theory is backed up by the experience of Basel youth workers Michele Salvatore and Waltraud Waibel. Yet, they say, many adolescents are not aware of the effect that their own behavior has. It is not always clear just who is the victim and who is the perpetrator.**

Things are running full steam at the Riibistro: It is lunch time and the six teenagers who are preparing curried vegetables and rice in the kitchen, taking orders at the bar and working on the till have really got their hands full. They are taking part in an employment program offered by the Basler Freizeitaktion youth organization at the Dreirosen recreation center. The center is located at the head of the Dreirosen Bridge, in the heart of multicultural Kleinbasel, and consists of a hall with various games and climbing equipment for all age groups, plus the bistro and a youth club. The teenagers seem to enjoy the work behind the counter; even if things do not go completely to plan they are always smiling and seem to be happy and friendly.

## **“Sexual violence has increased”**

Nothing points to the fact that this environment occasionally sees scenes that some of them would rather forget. Sexual assault is something that happens among adolescents even here. “Actually a girl came to me recently saying she had been pushed into a corner, harassed and groped by a boy,” explains Waltraud Waibel. The youth worker, affectionately known as “Waldi,” is almost part of the furniture here. For almost 25 years she

has worked passionately for “her” boys and girls in Basel, and for 24 years has been head of the Dreirosen youth club. She claims that sexual violence among adolescents has increased considerably over the last few years. “This is expressed, for example, even in the sexual language they use. You wouldn’t believe what kind of words I have to hear on a daily basis – words that I wouldn’t dream of using myself and which the teenagers use quite naturally.” Her colleague Michele Salvatore from the Basel/Riehen mobile youth unit nods in agreement. He and his team do not operate traditional youth centers, but seek out the adolescents where they are, sitting around in squares, in their districts or anywhere in public. “A new phenomenon is so-called ‘sexting’. Teenagers send one another photos of themselves naked.” Many are not aware, however, of the consequences this can have. “So they’re shocked when individual images suddenly appear on websites and can’t be deleted,” explains Salvatore. Many adolescents are very unrestrained in the way they deal with intimate information, without being fully aware of the consequences, he says. This has an effect on their specific behavior. “Often it is no longer entirely clear who is the victim and who is the

**Waltraud Waibel**

is a qualified teacher for primary and secondary levels in Germany and for 24 years has been head of the Basler Freizeitaktion youth center at various locations in Basel, since 2006 at the Dreirosen Youth Center. The center is open to all young people aged between 12 and 20, and the team of youth workers regularly carries out workshops, projects and events.

> [www.bfa-dreirosen.ch](http://www.bfa-dreirosen.ch)

**Michele Salvatore**

is a trained socio-cultural animator and has led the team at the Basel mobile youth unit for eight years. The team carries out mobile youth work, visiting young people in Basel and Riehen, and also offers various types of advice and counseling for adolescents and implements projects and events with them.

> [www.mjabasel.ch](http://www.mjabasel.ch)

perpetrator when it comes to sexual abuse. The distinctions are increasingly blurred," says Salvatore.

### **The problem of alcohol**

The fact that adolescents who go out a lot and consume alcohol and drugs are more likely to experience sexual assault does not surprise the two youth workers. "It's simply a question of there being more opportunities. The girl that came to me recently also said she had consumed alcohol, and for this reason she didn't want to go to the police. She also feels that she herself shares some of the blame," explains Waltraud Waibel; an assertion that Michele Salvatore would also confirm. "They drink alcohol precisely to be able to lose their inhibitions. And that's exactly what happens: The boys give themselves free rein whilst the girls allow a lot to go on." Many situations arise from an initial "bit of fun": "They play around a bit and make verbal innuendos and all of a sudden someone goes too far."

However it is not only the alcohol that is to blame in such situations. Sex is a burning issue among adolescents, pornography is freely accessible – and this circulates superficial knowledge. Many allow

themselves to be misled by images that have little to do with reality. "Girls learn that they are better accepted if they 'put out' more easily," Michele Salvatore has noticed. It is girls in particular that are likely to have low self-esteem and therefore find themselves in trouble when it comes to being able to say no. "I've found that teenagers are less at risk if they do more than just hang around in their free time and have another focus, being a member of a club, for example or having a hobby," says Waltraud Waibel.

Both experts confirm that parenting styles play an important role. Waibel and Salvatore are familiar with two basic patterns among at-risk girls: Some have parents that do not dedicate enough time to them, so the children can do more or less whatever they want. Others have very strict parents who forbid a lot of things. "Many of these girls live in two different worlds: At home they are the well-behaved daughters who follow all the rules, yet when they go out they slip into the role of 'sexy party-girl'," says Michele Salvatore. "You can recognize it: I see her first when she comes out of school or leaves work, then later when she goes out. It's like meeting a different person."

### **Lack of communication in the parental home**

Regardless of whether parents are too lax or too strict, in both cases the home is lacking one thing above all: communication and a genuine interest. "An important point is whether such issues are spoken about at all, whether they are discussed or whether it is simply a taboo subject or the parents are simply not interested," says Waltraud Waibel. And Salvatore Michele agrees: "The best context in which to learn about sexuality is and remains the family. Up to a certain age, it is first and foremost the responsibility of parents."

That does not mean, however, that the youth workers do not get involved. When they hear of incidents they always try to make their position clear: Abuse is a definite no-no, even if alcohol is involved or where the dividing lines between victim and perpetrator are not always crystal clear. Both workers only instigate concrete legal proceedings, however, if the victim is prepared to do so. "We have an obligation to the teenagers; they put their trust in us. Anybody who comes to us must not be worried that anything will be passed on," Waltraud Waibel stresses. Nobody is under pressure to go to the

police or take any other measures against the perpetrator. The victim must come up with the idea themselves. "Youth work involves building up relationships. It's about getting the teenagers to tell us about such incidents first and foremost, and this can only be the case if we manage to build up trust," says Michele Salvatore. When the youth workers hear of a case they try to guide the victim to the point where it makes sense to want to initiate proceedings against the perpetrator. "Sometimes that takes quite a while and at times it can be difficult to be patient, but we don't pressure anyone into going to the police," says Waltraud Waibel.

### **Boosting prevention**

In the area of prevention, too, the workers say they are active. Recently, a team led by Michele Salvatore was able to implement the "Sex we can" project with the Basel branch of the Swiss Aids Federation: Adolescents were invited to discuss sexuality openly together with experts. "This was predominantly all about knowledge transfer. Teenagers think they know all about sex, but often just spread nonsense and half-truths," explains Salvatore, "we want to offer clarification." As part of the project,

"black boxes" were placed in libraries. Here adolescents could post an anonymous question about sexuality and also fill in a questionnaire about pornography.

Waltraud Waibel believes youth work, with its building of relationships and simply by its very nature, has a preventative effect. In specific workshops on very different subjects, it basically all boils down to the same objective: "We want to improve teenagers' self-esteem and activate central resources within them. Even if a workshop is covering an entirely different issue, in the end it can help protect against sexual abuse," she says with conviction. ■



## Result 3



# Who are the perpetrators?

**Result 3 >** Children who experience sexual assault are often abused in close family circles – by a brother, father, mother, uncle or a close friend of the parents. Among adolescents, of course, this is different. According to the Optimus Study, sexual violence among this age group is much more likely to come from a partner or date among the peer group. The perpetrators attend the same school or hang out at the same disco.

Abuse is not all the same. Young children, primary school children and adolescents at the start of sexual maturity are all very different and all are vulnerable in various ways. We can therefore assume that different groups of perpetrators are prevalent depending on the age group. For this reason the Optimus Study aimed to find out more about the relationship between perpetrator and victim. The school and the agency survey of both concurrently revealed something quite astonishing: Among adolescent victims the perpetrators were, in most cases, not adult family members as is often assumed, but peers – often partners in a relationship or dates. Specifically, of each 1000 girls questioned 86 admitted to having been victimized at least once with physical contact where a person over 18 years old was involved. This corresponds to 34% of all female victims. Of 1000 boys, 15 said they had suffered abuse from an adult at least once. This corresponds to 14% of all male victims. From an overall perspective, of the 1000 respondents of both sexes 49 admitted to having experienced such victimization. However, the majority of cases of abuse involved perpetrators aged between 14 and 18. 152 of each 1000 adolescents said they had already experienced sexual

assault with physical contact perpetrated by somebody under 18 at least once in their lives.

## Assaults within relationships

Almost half or, more precisely, 42% of abuse cases with physical contact were victimized by a current or former partner or a date according to the affected victims; for 39% the perpetrators were people they knew well but were neither partners nor family members and for 21% they were strangers.

A particularly serious form of sexual violence is abuse of minors by family members. Comparatively few of the adolescents surveyed, namely 13 of each 1000, admitted to having experienced such victimization. This corresponds to 9% of all victims of assault with physical contact. Girls are around five times more likely to be affected than boys. Contrary to widespread assumptions, however, biological fathers were not the most significant perpetrator category. Girls were more likely to name a male relative, such as a cousin, uncle or brother, as the perpetrator. An equally high risk applies for sexual abuse by a stepfather or a mother's partner.

Where the victim is an adolescent, perpetrators are not, as is often assumed, adult family members, but rather acquaintances of the same age group.



The comparatively small proportions applying to victimization in the family environment must be interpreted with caution, however: For methodical reasons it is possible that the proportion of perpetrators from victims' own families is underestimated (see also box on page 49). However – and this speaks for the plausibility of the data – similar results were obtained from the agency survey. Among adolescent victims, in 39% of cases the perpetrator was a person of a similar age, in 19% a stranger and in 22% a family member.

### Perpetrators

Respondents were also asked about the sex of the perpetrator. It was revealed that in most cases they are male, although there are female perpetrators. The majority of male victims therefore admitted to being sexually abused by women. This could be in the form of suggestive e-mails or text messages, for example. The proportion of female perpetrators was highest for this form of sexual abuse. The abuse may involve physical assaults in the context of a relationship, however. Girls are often more

advanced in their sexual development than boys of the same age. Nevertheless, the proportion of male perpetrators is also relatively high among male victims. Girls, on the other hand, are almost exclusively abused by male offenders. It is worth considering here, though, that girls are far more likely to be victims overall.

Most sexual assaults take place in the victim's home or in another household. This is unsurprising, bearing in mind that partners and current acquaintances were often cited as perpetrators. Many also say they have been harassed in school, on the street, in parks or in establishments such as restaurants, pubs or clubs.

Those students who have experienced sexual assault at some point were also asked to give information on the nationality of the perpetrator. Almost half, namely 47%, admit to having been abused by a Swiss person. However 39% of victims of abuse without physical contact also said they did not know the nationality of the perpetrator. This may predominantly concern harassment over the internet.



### The most important data in brief

- > Adolescents often experience sexual abuse from acquaintances of the same age. The majority of adolescent victims stated that the perpetrator was aged between 14 and 18.
- > 42% of young victims admit that the perpetrator was their then boyfriend/girlfriend or a date. Only 9% cited a family member as perpetrator.
- > An overwhelming proportion of perpetrators are male. However, male victims are more likely to have been abused by a girl or woman.
- > Sexual violence emerges from a general context of violence and neglect. Young sexual offenders often perpetrate other forms of violence and experience violence themselves at home.

### Perpetrators as victims

In the school survey three questions were asked on whether the adolescent concerned had themselves carried out a sexual assault at some point. Given that the questions only covered a limited area of abuse, they cannot be compared with the figures on victimization. The evalua-

tions show that boys are around six times more likely to perpetrate sexual violence than girls. Around 7% of boys and 1% of girls admitted to having forced another person into sexual acts at some point. However, sex is not the only decisive factor here. Adolescents who perpetrated sexual violence were much more likely to

Illustration 08: **Victim-perpetrator relationship relating to victimization with physical contact, lifetime prevalence**

Victimized one or more times by the following perpetrator group	Of each 1000 girls	Of each 1000 boys
A stranger	44.1	18.4
A (former) boyfriend/girlfriend	84.4	40.5
A person the victim knew well	88.8	28.2
A person the victim knew vaguely	44.9	10.6
A family member	22.4	4.3
Of which ...		
Biological father	3.7	0.3
Biological mother	0.9	0.3
Stepfather etc.	2.8	0
Stepmother etc.	0	0.6
Biological brother	6.5	1.5
Stepbrother etc.	0.9	0
Stepsister etc.	0.2	0.3
Other male relatives	9.3	0.9
Other female relatives	0.2	0.6
Another person	25.4	9.8

Source: Averdijk, M., K. Müller-Johnson, M. Eisner (2012). Sexual Victimization of Children and Adolescents in Switzerland, Table 4.4

Illustration 09: **Victim-perpetrator relationship relating to victimization without physical contact, lifetime prevalence**

Victimized one or more times by the following perpetrator group	Of each 1000 girls	Of each 1000 boys
A stranger	272.7	75.6
A (former) boyfriend/girlfriend	75.0	67.1
A person the victim knew well	113.1	81.0
A person the victim knew vaguely	79.0	28.3
A family member	22.2	6.0
Of which ...		
Biological father	5.6	1.4
Biological mother	4.4	1.2
Stepfather etc.	0.8	0
Stepmother etc.	0	0.2
Biological brother	9.5	2.4
Stepbrother etc.	0.4	0.6
Stepsister etc.	0	0.2
Other male relatives	2.8	1.2
Other female relatives	0	0.8
Another person	7.9	3.4

Source: Averdijk, M., K. Müller-Johnson, M. Eisner (2012). Sexual Victimization of Children and Adolescents in Switzerland, Table 4.4

be involved in other forms of violence, to have consumed illegal drugs and to spend more time surfing the internet. This points to the theory that adolescent sexual abusers carry out their actions mostly within the context of a generally delinquent and aggressive tendency. It also emerged that these perpetrators were more likely to have been abused as children, to have been raised with a harsh parenting style and to have fewer friends and therefore be socially isolated. This points to the idea that negative experiences as the victim of violence and exclusion contribute to the risk of a person becoming conspicuous for their aggressive assaults in adolescence. Sexual violence is not born of nothing, but emerges in a context that is generally marked by violence and neglect.

The study shows differentiated results with regard to the background of adolescent sexual abusers. Contrary to widespread conceptions, being raised by parents with a low social standing or by a single parent is not linked to an increased risk of suffering a sexual assault. □

#### Illustration 10: Sexual victimization according to suspected age of the perpetrator, of each 1000 respondents

Of each 1000 respondents

Age of the perpetrator	Total	Male	Female
<b>Victimization with physical contact</b>	<b>146</b>	<b>81</b>	<b>217</b>
Under 18	105	63	152
Over 18	49	15	86
18 to 25	30	9	53
Over 25	23	7	40
<b>Victimization without physical contact</b>	<b>294</b>	<b>199</b>	<b>397</b>
Under 18	203	157	254
Over 18	102	37	172
18 to 25	81	24	143
Over 25	35	1.6	56

**Reading example:** Of each 1000 girls questioned, 152 admitted to having experienced victimization with physical contact by a perpetrator who was younger than 18. 40 out of 1000 girls experienced victimization with physical contact by a perpetrator who was older than 25.

Source: Averdijk, M., K. Müller-Johnson, M. Eisner (2012). Sexual Victimization of Children and Adolescents in Switzerland, Table 4.1

# “Good therapies also represent prevention”

**Expert discussion 3 > Adolescent sexual perpetrators have one thing in common: They are disadvantaged in some way in advance and, although they know what they are doing is wrong, they continue regardless. Forensic psychotherapist Monika Egli-Alge, who offers therapies for young offenders in Frauenfeld, knows why.**

What makes a young man force his girlfriend into sex or touch her in intimate places against her will when he genuinely loves her? Why does he not stop himself when she makes it clear to him that she's not ready for it? Do adolescent sexual offenders have a conscience at all? Are they, to a certain extent, themselves victims of their circumstances, their own urges or the social context in which they grow up? Do they have similar family backgrounds; is there such a thing as an offender personality? One person who knows the answers to such questions is Monika Egli-Alge. The psychotherapist and legal psychologist is head of the Forensic Institute of Eastern Switzerland where she and her team offer various services including therapies for adolescent sexual offenders. In an old residential building by the river Thur, around 16 to 20 adolescents come and go each week, each of which has been convicted of sexual assault. The therapy is part of their sentence. Via a creaking staircase they make their way up to the upper rooms, which boast a large amount of wood, comfortable sofas and armchairs and even a wood-burning stove – yet coming and going from here is not an easy experience. For a period of eighteen months to two years, the young sexual

offenders must turn up here week after week and spend 90 minutes in groups of four or five talking about one thing above all: their offence and how they deal with it.

## “There is no perpetrator profile”

So that they never forget why they are here, the psychologists who lead the discussion in pairs always greet them in the same way: “Hello everyone, welcome to this therapy session for sexual offenders.” Clarity, says Monika Egli-Alge, is the name of the game. Evading the issue, gossiping or moaning is not allowed. The aim of the therapy, says Egli-Alge, is that the adolescents ultimately acknowledge their offences profoundly themselves – offences that they initially justify and trivialize. “They are not primarily victims, even if some of them are traumatized; when they come here they do so as offenders. They need to understand that and admit it to themselves. In the course of therapy we try to point out their justification strategies to them,” says Egli-Alge.

She has been working for more than 16 years with young people, mainly young men, who have committed sexual offences. She claims they do not show common characteristics. “We see all



**Monika Egli-Alge**  
is a qualified psycho-  
therapist and legal psychol-  
ogist. She is head of the Foren-  
sic Institute of Eastern  
Switzerland, which specializes in  
therapy for adolescent sexual  
offenders.

> [www.forio.ch](http://www.forio.ch)

“Perpetrators can come from any level of society, any country and can have any IQ level. There is no perpetrator profile.”

Monika Egli-Alge,  
psychotherapist  
and legal psychologist

sorts, all classes, all IQ levels, all nationalities,” she says. The perpetrators come from one-parent families, two-parent families and patchwork families. In short: “There is no offender profile and no text book abuser.” However, it does appear that all offenders do show some kind of disturbance factor. There are many, she says, who suffer from ADHD, which can also go hand in hand with an inability to control impulses in sexual behavior. Adolescents who have assaulted younger children are often particularly alone and introverted, she goes on to say. Domestic violence is also a risk factor, and incest between brothers and sisters often emerges in families with blurred boundaries, in which the roles of parents and children are unclear. “But of course you can’t say anybody who harbors these disturbances automatically becomes a sexual delinquent. And they most certainly cannot justify such acts,” Egli-Alge stresses.

#### **“Lack of knowledge hinders the setting of boundaries”**

The results of the Optimus Study, according to which assaults take place overwhelmingly between adolescents and also within existing or incipient relationships, surprise her only to a limited

extent. “Against the background of the previously known victim statistics, this result is new and quite astounding. However when I look at the specific context, it actually doesn’t surprise me,” she says. Adolescents are having their first experiences in the area of sexuality and are therefore unsure. “The risk that boundaries are not communicated, not recognized and overstepped is therefore very high,” says the specialist.

#### **“Offences develop in parallel to technical progress”**

The question arises as to whether initial sexual experiences were always characterized by the overstepping of boundaries or whether this is a growing problem. “I don’t believe that the way in which adolescents have their first sexual experiences has changed all that much. And there has no doubt always been abuse too,” says Egli-Alge. But the social environment in which adolescents discover their sexuality has changed drastically, she claims. “Previously, the page-three girl was the most young people saw of nudity and permissiveness. Today adolescents have free access to the hardest pornography, sex is a recurring topic and a great many half-truths circulate. Young people are also under a certain amount



of pressure from their peers to gain experience," says Egli-Alge. In addition, the possibility of overstepping the boundaries has increased, she claims. Over the last few years numerous new offences have emerged, particularly in the area of electronic media. Fifteen years ago, for example, there were simply no cell phones with which you could take photos and create videos to then upload to the internet. "The development of the offences has basically run in parallel to advances in technology. Given this environment, many adolescents are not always aware of when they cross the line," says Monika Egli-Alge. To a certain extent they are also traumatized by their own offence when they get here, she explains. "They have been taken from school or from their own home by the police, which has a big impact and shocks them."

All this represents not excuses, but explanations, Egli-Alge stresses. Most young offenders know or sense they are doing something wrong during the offence. "But for various reasons they are unable to stop," she says. At a certain point the urge no longer allows them to, and some develop a sort of addictive behavior: "For the sake of the kick they ac-

cept the possible consequences more or less consciously." Others ignore not only the signals of their counterpart but also their own: "An inner voice may tell them what they're doing is wrong, but they don't listen." After a while, most are happy to come to therapy. "They appreciate the atmosphere, the open attitude and discussions in the therapy groups, but also the respectful confrontation," the therapist explains.

#### **"Too many turn a blind eye"**

What still shocks Monika Egli-Alge even after all these years is just how many people turn a blind eye and believe steadfastly that sexual crimes among children and adolescents do not exist. "And this is despite the fact that we have long known from surveys among adult sexual offenders, for example, that they often begin to carry out sexual crimes as teenagers," she says. Conversely, many of the adolescents she treats say they would have continued to offend if they had not been caught. "Sadly many parents and teachers turn a blind eye. It's good that the Optimus Study now means there is scientific documentation showing how widespread sexual assault among adolescents is." And it is precisely among adolescents that there is still a chance to alter behavior.

Therapist Monika Egli-Alge is appealing above all, therefore, for an expansion and broadening of the therapy available. Because not all adolescent sexual offenders are the same: "You cannot apply the same therapy we use with average adolescents to the mentally disabled or to very young offenders," she explains. In Frauenfeld therapy is available for each of these three groups. "But as far as I know, we are the only institution in Switzerland to offer it." Overall, opportunities for adolescent sexual offenders are thin on the ground. In other words: "Anybody living in the wrong canton may have no chance at all of steering their behavior in the right direction – and that represents real prevention." ■



# Result 4



# Victimization over the course of a person's life

**Result 4 >** According to the survey in schools, adolescent victims are sexually harassed predominantly by friends and acquaintances of the same age. Nevertheless, the survey among the child protection agencies shows that the patterns of victimization change over the course of a victim's life. Younger children are more likely to be abused in the family environment. Due to their generally high dependence on the abuser they are particularly defenseless.

The school survey gives a good insight into victimization of adolescents at the end of compulsory education. However, due to the method of questioning used, it is only able to give a limited insight into any abuse that occurred in the victim's distant childhood. The location of the survey, i.e. in school, and the powers of recollection required can lead to distortions (see also box on page 19). The survey among the various child protection agencies delivered an additional insight into victimization of children and adolescents in Switzerland and shows particularly how a victim's experience changes over the course of his or her life.

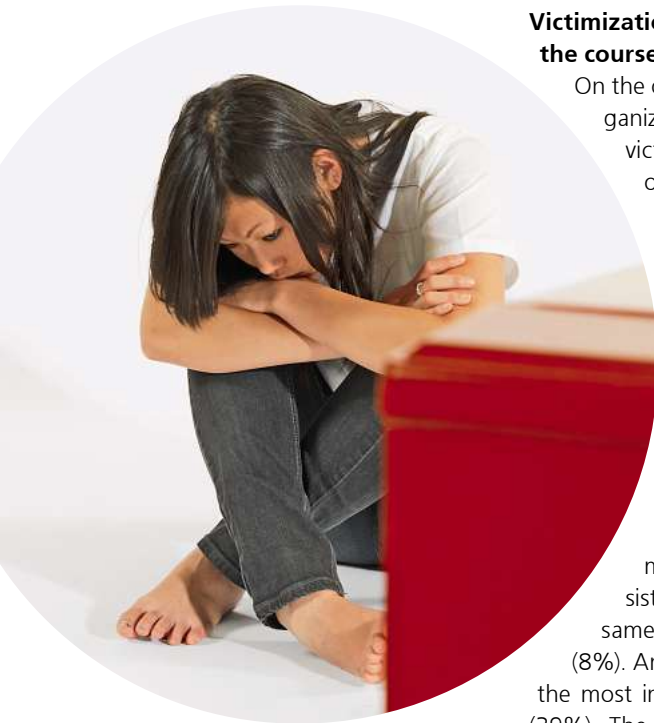
Most recorded cases concerning girls affect the age group between 12 and 17, concerning boys it is six to eleven.

## Survey of child protection organizations

According to projections made on the basis of the survey among child protection organizations, the official advice, support and intervention bodies in the field of child protection handle around 4000 reports of abuse each year. The low participation rate in the survey does mean, however, that

this estimated value is tainted with uncertainty. Estimates based on the responding institutions suggest that 27% involved sexual abuse with penetration, 43% were assaults with physical contact but without penetration. Most reporting victims, around 70%, went directly to voluntary child protection organizations. The custody authorities handle around 4% of all cases whilst 24% end up with the criminal law institutions, i.e. the police, youth attorneys, the courts or the public prosecutor's office.

The results of the agency survey reveals, on the one hand, gender-specific age differences among victims: Among girls, most recorded cases concerned victims aged between 12 and 17, whilst among boys the majority are younger, namely 6 to 11 years old. It is unclear whether this corresponds to an actual difference between the sexes – for example because boys are stronger as teenagers and are able to defend themselves more effectively as they grow – or whether male adolescents are simply less likely to contact an institution.



### **Victimization changes over the course of a person's life**

On the other hand, the survey of organizations also shows that the victimization is likely to change over the course of a person's life: Those children of pre-school age who had reported abuse to the organizations were more often abused by their own fathers (45%), mothers (3%), an adult close to them (5%) or another adult (26%). Once the child has started school, the perpetrator is more likely to be a brother or sister (15%), a person of the same age (20%) or a stranger (8%). Among adolescents, peers are the most important perpetrator group (39%). The pie chart here clearly illustrates how the proportion of peers among perpetrators rises with the increasing age of the victim. A changed sphere of activity means patterns of victimization change with age. Therefore intervention and prevention strategies are required that are tailored according to the various abuse experiences of children and adolescents: For pre-school



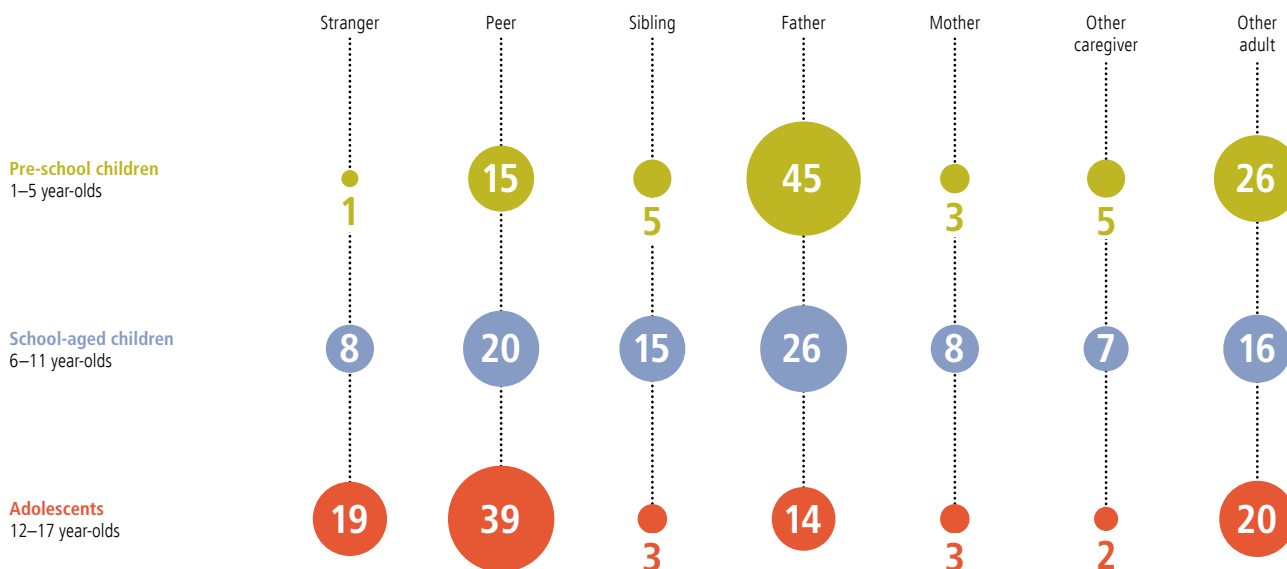
### **The most important data in brief**

- > The official advice, support and intervention bodies in the field of child protection handle an estimated 4000 reports of sexual abuse every year.
- > The victimization changes according to a person's stage in life: Of the cases reported, children of pre-school age were abused more frequently within the family environment, whilst adolescents were more often subject to assaults by their peers.
- > Of the cases reported, girls were most often sexually abused between the ages of 12 and 17, boys on average between 6 and 11 years old.

children these data point to a far-reaching concentration on the family, whilst from school age the extended environment becomes more important. From adolescence, prevention and intervention measures should primarily be direct-

ed at where adolescents spend most of their time, namely often outside the family environment. □

Illustration 11: **Perpetrator's relationship to victims in various age groups according to the agency survey**  
(in %)



# “Children who know their rights are better protected”

**Expert discussion 4 > Abuse within families has a particularly negative effect on the development of children, says Joseph Aerschmann, deputy head of the youth welfare office for the Canton of Fribourg. He identifies a need for action in the area of prevention, where he is appealing for more and earlier clarification of children's rights and for more opportunities for children to have their say.**

“Service de l'enfance et de la jeunesse” is written in large letters on the building's facade. This sounds somewhat more appropriate than “Jugendamt” – the youth welfare office – as the institution is known in German within this bilingual canton. This is not really an office, but a place which aims to safeguard, promote and protect the rights of children and teenagers. It provides services rather than performing official processes, although there are some of these to deal with too, namely when sexual abuse comes into play. “It is our duty to intervene and to lodge a risk report with the custody authorities immediately. They are authorized to press charges and to issue orders for child protection measures. The management of the youth welfare office can even press charges itself if we hear of such a case – even if the victim does not want us to,” explains Joseph Aerschmann. You can tell from his voice that he believes this is rightly so.

## **Guaranteeing child protection**

Aerschmann is deputy head of the youth welfare office and is responsible for the area of child and adolescent protection: “We have to ensure children are protected. We cannot and must not overlook that,” he stresses. Logically, therefore,

staff members at the center, mainly trained social workers, psychologists or therapists, are given the title “specialists in child protection.” However there are exceptions to the procedure of pressing charges. “Where adolescent victims are strongly opposed to bringing charges, we may wait a little while until they are ready for the prosecution process and can stand by the statements they make,” he explains.

The child and adolescent protection unit at the Fribourg youth welfare office consists of a team that offers standby services, can intervene immediately where cases are particularly urgent and can apply to the relevant authorities for measures to be taken to protect affected children or adolescents. The team also acts on risk warnings issued by the custody authorities, carrying out social investigations and proposing suitable child protection measures. In general, however, it is only the local custody authority that can order specific measures to be taken. “The youth welfare office is not a judicial authority,” Aerschmann emphasizes.




**Joseph Aerschmann**

is a trained social worker, family therapist and mediator. He has been working for nearly 40 years at the youth welfare office of the Canton of Fribourg and is its deputy head. He is responsible for the child and adolescent protection department, which carries out investigations following risk reports on behalf of the local custody authority and also implements child protection measures ordered by the same.

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“We are now confronted with cases of sexual abuse more frequently than before.”

Joseph Aerschmann,  
deputy head of the Fribourg  
youth welfare office

### **Active on various levels**

Alongside the regular standby service the youth welfare office operates a 24-hour on-call service. “This can also be called upon by the police and intervenes when children or adolescents are at risk and must be removed from their situations urgently,” explains Aerschmann. There are also three regional teams, he goes on to say, which execute a large proportion of the child protection measures ordered. The service’s duties include the accompaniment and supervision of young offenders. As far as sexual offences are concerned, Aerschmann and his colleagues see the full range of manifestations of sexual abuse: When it comes to protection measures, it is generally younger children that are involved. In the area of offender supervision it is more likely that adolescents who have committed offences against other adolescents will be the targets.

### **“Where victims are younger, perpetrators are more likely to come from within the family”**

In line with the results of the Optimus Study, Aerschmann’s day-to-day work reveals that perpetrators of offences against younger children are likely to come from family circles. “Often the

abuse is repeated over a long period of time. Perpetrators build up a close relationship with their victims, so that the victims are dependent on them, and it is these younger children in particular who often don’t realize that what is being done to them is wrong. For the development of the child, abuse like this is far more tragic than an isolated assault by a victim’s first boyfriend or girlfriend during adolescence,” he explains. In most cases the perpetrators are male. However, again and again I am shocked by the fact that even mothers often do not realize such long-term abuse is going on, or occasionally even choose to turn a blind eye. “Unfortunately it is occasionally the case that a mother comes down on the side of the perpetrator, failing the child immeasurably,” he says.

What are almost worse than the clear-cut abuse cases, though, are situations where suspicions have been aroused, but cannot be confirmed. “If you have your suspicions and yet can do very little in terms of child protection, then that really takes it out of you,” he says. He remembers a case over twenty years ago when a father misled the authorities for years on end and was even able to exercise his sole right of custody – although

Joseph Aerschmann suspected he was abusing his daughter. "I was told I was seeing ghosts." It was only several years later that the girl was ready to talk about the abuse and the perpetrator could be charged. "That was most definitely one of the toughest cases I've seen in the forty years I've been here," says Aerschmann.

#### **"Reported cases have increased"**

Another thing he has established over this long period of time: The number of cases of sexual abuse reported to the office is growing. "We don't have any data, but I have the feeling we are faced with it more often than ten or twenty years ago," says Aerschmann. Whether children are actually abused more often than before or whether it is predominantly the handling of the issue that has changed remains to be seen. "Nowadays we certainly talk about it more and children know better what's right and what's not. Also, some incidents that are now considered abuse would perhaps have been judged differently in the past." However, Aerschmann believes that adolescents in particular come into contact much more easily with sexuality and thus with sexual abuse. "The age of the children and adolescents who themselves commit offences has gone down.

Nowadays children reach sexual maturity earlier and grow up in a sexualized world." The fact that they now face sexual assaults more frequently arises simply from technical developments, which have meant that countless new ways of sexually "crossing the line" have emerged. "Cell phones, internet with freely available pornography, chatrooms – all these simply did not exist until not that long ago." Correspondingly, it also seems that parents or other third persons call the youth welfare office ever more frequently for advice. "I had a mother contact me, whose daughter was receiving anonymous text messages and who wanted to know what she could do about it. We sent her to the police," explained Aerschmann. In general there is a huge void, particularly on the part of adults, when it comes to dealing with new media. "We need to ensure we point out to parents that they should control what their children do with the internet."

#### **A need for education among parents and children**

However the children and teenagers should also be better informed about their rights. "A lot can be done in the area of prevention. But we need resources and

the will to do so." Joseph Aerschmann is appealing in particular for more co-decision rights for children and adolescents, including politically. "I'm convinced that if children and teenagers know their rights, if they can be involved in decisions and see that their specific interests are taken seriously, then this will protect them against assaults and sexual abuse." ■

## Result 5



# Sexual abuse within adolescent relationships

**Result 5 >** For adolescents, first relationships and sexual experiences are important and often enriching steps on the path from childhood to adulthood. The transition is also accompanied by risks, however, as the Optimus Study shows.

The student survey showed that sexual assaults occur more frequently among adolescents of the same age, often also within couple relationships.

With adolescence comes an awakening of sexuality, and teenagers gain their first experiences in this area on the path to becoming an adult. And they do so intensely. According to the Swiss Health Behavior of School-Aged Children study (HBSC) from 2006<sup>3</sup>, 21% of Swiss teenagers aged 15 had already experienced sexual intercourse. In 1994 this proportion still stood at around 10%. The discovery of one's own sexuality is often both a difficult and a positive experience for adolescents. This phase is, however, marked by uncertainties. And occasionally this context can give rise to abuse. The Optimus Study shows that sexual assaults by peers play an important role among adolescents (see also chapter 4). The students questioned were asked to give information about their relationships to abusers. An evaluation of their responses suggests that a considerable proportion of sexual assaults take place between adolescents, who know one another through school or leisure activities. A considerable proportion of these involve victimization carried out by a

current or former boyfriend or girlfriend. Since sexual assault within adolescent relationships is clearly widespread, the Optimus Study also paid particular attention to the corresponding risk factors. Do victims of such assaults share common characteristics? Do they differ from other victims who have been abused not by their partners, but by somebody else?

## Risk factors

A separate risk factor analysis for adolescents who admitted to having been sexually abused by a partner or a date at some point aimed to shed light on this issue. Assaults with and without physical contact were considered as one category for the purposes of this analysis. Corresponding with the other results on general risk factors, the risk of being abused by a partner or a date is almost three-and-a-half times as high for girls as it is for boys. Patterns of behavior during leisure time also influence this risk: Given that adolescents form relationships predominantly with people from a similar circle of friends and with a similar lifestyle, risky activities like going out a lot, violent criminal behavior or drug and

<sup>3</sup> Kuntsche, S., Windlin, B. (2009). *Enquête HBSC 2006 – La sexualité chez les jeunes [Feuille-info]*. Lausanne: Institut suisse de prévention de l'alcoolisme et autres toxicomanies (ISPA).

alcohol consumption increased the risk of a person being abused by their own partner. The risk is particularly high for those who spend time in an environment where there is a high propensity for sexual violence. This was measured using the corresponding level in the same school class: All students in a class were asked if they had at some point perpetrated sexual violence themselves. The more people answering yes to this question, the higher the level of propensity for violence in a class. The risk of being abused by one's own partner is several times higher in a class like this than in a less violence-oriented environment. This is obvious in that adolescents often enter into relationships with their classmates. The findings may also suggest, though, that negative sexual experiences within relationships are more likely in classes or in schools where sexual bullying is widespread on the schoolyard.

### **Physical disabilities and unhappy family circumstances as risk factors**

A good 5% of adolescent respondents admitted to having a physical disability. What is shocking is that this in particular increases the risk of being abused by one's partner. When one examines the risk of being sexually abused regardless

of the victim-perpetrator relationship, the victim's physical constitution does not play a role. However, when it comes to sexual violence with physical contact in intimate relationships, the picture is suddenly very different: Adolescents with a physical limitation are almost twice as likely to be abused by their partners as adolescents without limitations. The study cannot give a verdict on why there is such an increased risk. Possibly adolescents with a physical disability are exposed to the risk of being ridiculed sexually or being humiliated.

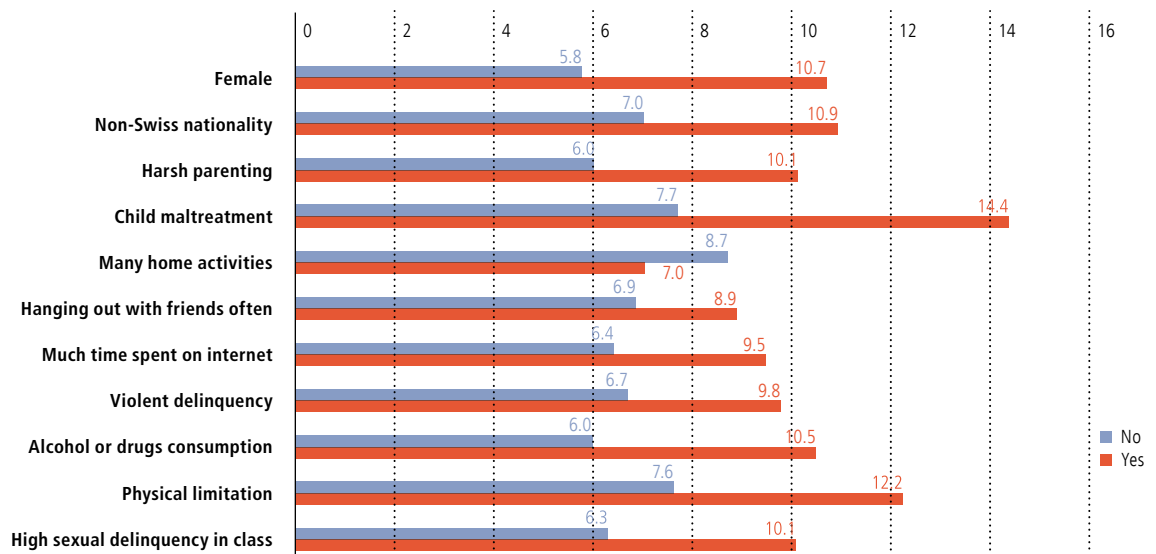
The evaluations also show that the atmosphere in the parental home plays an important role when it comes to abuse by a partner too. A harsher style of parenting can point to the idea that a person generally gets little support at home. This may make adolescents more accessible to sexually violent partners: According to the data from the population survey the risk of being abused by a partner is twice as high for adolescents from unhappy family backgrounds as that of others. □



### **The most important data in brief**

- > Adolescents often experience sexual violence in the context of their first relationships with people of a similar age.
- > Adolescents who move in violence-oriented circles, go out a lot in their leisure time and consume drugs or alcohol are more likely to be abused by a partner or a date.
- > Girls experience sexual assaults by partners around three times as often as boys.
- > Adolescents with a physical disability are particularly at risk of being abused by a partner or a date.
- > Adolescents with parents who adopt a harsh style of parenting are more likely to find themselves in a violent relationship.

Illustration 12: Risk factors relating to victimization by a current or former partner (in %)



**Note:** The chart illustrates the results of a multi-variant logistic regression of 11 risk factors relating to victimization with physical contact. All effects presented are statistically significant.

**Reading example:** For a female adolescent the risk of victimization by a partner stands at 11%; for a male adolescent it is just under 6%. This difference prevails after all other risk factors have been statistically controlled.

Source: Averdijk, M., K. Müller-Johnson, M. Eisner (2012). Sexual Victimization of Children and Adolescents in Switzerland, Table 5.5

# “Many adolescents have stereotypical preconceptions of roles”

**Expert discussion 5 > Relationships are the context in which adolescents gain their first sexual experiences. It is therefore unsurprising that it is often among peers that assaults take place. Often, though, other forms of violence also play a role. A combination of poor preparation and countless myths is to blame, say sociologist Jacqueline De Puy and physician Marie-Claude Hofner, who specialize in violence within relationships.**

The staircase of the former polyclinic in Lausanne seems a little gloomy, but it is vast. As you enter it almost feels like the house has swallowed you up. This is the place where Jacqueline De Puy and Marie-Claude Hofner work in premises on the third floor, and the vast old building almost makes you forget that the sociologist and the physician deal with truly dark subjects here. This is about people, mainly women and children, who have been driven into a corner, who want to run but cannot break free, who are suffocating in a violent relationship. Jacqueline De Puy and Marie-Claude Hofner research violence in relationships and families.

## **Sexual violence as one of many forms of violence**

The results of the Optimus Study basically prove what they have been preaching for years: Sexual violence cannot be separated from other forms of violence. “Sexual abuse occurs in a generally violence-oriented, hazardous context. Anybody who moves in such circles is also likely to find a violent partner,” explains Marie-Claude Hofner, who heads the research department of the Unité de Médecine des Violences in Lausanne’s university hospital. These partners often

carry out more than just one form of abuse on their partners, also exerting physical violence or putting the victim under psychological pressure. Among adolescents this seems to be a new and increasingly widespread phenomenon. In the clinic, at any rate, they are seeing more and more young girls who say they have been abused by their boyfriends, the physicians explain. “Their number has increased significantly over the last few years.” What is uncertain is whether violence, including sexual abuse, has generally increased among adolescents or whether girls are now more trusting about defending themselves and telling someone about the problem. “Probably both,” believes Hofner, who has been working on the issue of violence in relationships and families for over 20 years.

## **Adolescents overwhelmed**

What is certain is that the circumstances in which adolescents gain their first sexual experiences have changed. “There is great discrepancy between what adolescents are presented with as normal by the media and what they are in any way able to deal with themselves from a purely physiological point of view,” says Marie-Claude Hofner. This inevitably means the adolescent is overwhelmed

and overtaxed. Also on the part of the perpetrator: "Many do not even know that what they are seeing on the internet is not normal. They believe they have to behave in exactly that way." Many of these young men are generally poorly equipped for real life. "Anybody who grows up in a parental home where violence is an everyday occurrence will automatically think that using violence is normal."

Jacqueline De Puy, who has collaborated on a special prevention program against violence in adolescent relationships, agrees. "It's a kind of coping strategy. They have not learnt to deal with being overwhelmed like this any other way." Added to this is the problem that many adolescents also have increased stereotypical preconceptions of roles, she says. "Some discussions and workshops have revealed, for example, that many young men believe that when a woman says no she really means yes, or they think that when a woman agrees to a relationship she must automatically be available sexually." Yet when it comes to sexuality, many girls also believe in myths, for example that a man is helplessly at the mercy of his sexual urges. "In terms of prevention there is still

much that can be done and a great deal of effort is needed, for example for more and better sex education in schools," Marie-Claude Hofner believes.

### **Learning to recognize risky behavioral patterns through prevention programs**

So far, Jacqueline De Puy's prevention program has proved successful in its implementation predominantly in youth centers and individual schools in western Switzerland. It is an adaptation of a program from the US and consists of nine workshops, each lasting 60 minutes. One meeting is dedicated entirely to the subject of sexuality. The adolescents discuss positive and negative aspects, and through exercises learn to listen to one another correctly. They also do a quiz about perceptions of roles. "The main objective is to promote vigilance, so that the teenagers identify dangerous behavioral patterns early on," explains Jacqueline De Puy. Ultimately, violence within relationships is, from many points of view, a deceitful issue. Once you are in it, it is hard to get out. "There is a very particular dynamic and there is no black and white. Victims still have good times with their partners, and many even have the feeling that they themselves are guilty or

#### **Jacqueline De Puy**

is a sociologist who collaborated on the program "Sortir ensemble et se respecter." This is an American prevention program adapted for circumstances in western Switzerland, which prepares adolescents for violence-free relationships. Jacqueline De Puy is currently leading a research project on violence in the workplace at the Institute for Work and Health at the Universities of Lausanne and Geneva.

> [www.seesr.ch](http://www.seesr.ch)





**Marie-Claude Hofner**

is a physician and works at the Unité de Médecine des Violences des Centre Universitaire Romand de Médecine Légale (Lausanne-Genève) in Lausanne's university hospital. There she is head of the research department. She is also president of the Charlotte Olivier Foundation, a non-profit organization that supports interdisciplinary research in the area of preventative healthcare.

> [www.curml.ch](http://www.curml.ch)

> Violence Medical Unit

that this is their lot in life, or they simply don't even recognize the abuse as such," explains De Puy. Adolescents are particularly affected by experiences like this: "Admittedly, for teenagers the whole thing has an experimental character and, unlike adults, they don't live in the same household, which diffuses the situation somewhat. But at the same time they are having their first experiences with relationships, which marks them for the rest of their lives," says De Puy.

There is a high probability that a person who has fallen into such a relationship in their younger years will either be unable to get involved with anyone ever again or will always find similar partners. The latter is influenced predominantly, though, by the way one is brought up, says Jacqueline De Puy: "Neglect plays a significant role. Girls who are not valued at home, for example, and are not taken seriously or are ignored often seek a strong shoulder to lean on." This also helps to explain the findings of the Optimus Study, according to which physical disabilities particularly increase the risk of being abused by one's own partner: "It is young women with physical weaknesses that are particularly vulnerable. They have low self-esteem. They often

think that they should be happy to have found a partner at all and think that if they say no then nobody else will want them." In surveys many young women admitted to having been at least pressured into sexual intercourse in their first real relationship. "Teenagers," says Marie-Claude Hofner, "are under enormous pressure today, including in the area of sexuality. This applies to victims as well as perpetrators." What is needed above all, she says, is enlightenment: "Knowledge instead of myths." ■

# Result 6



# How are the victims affected?

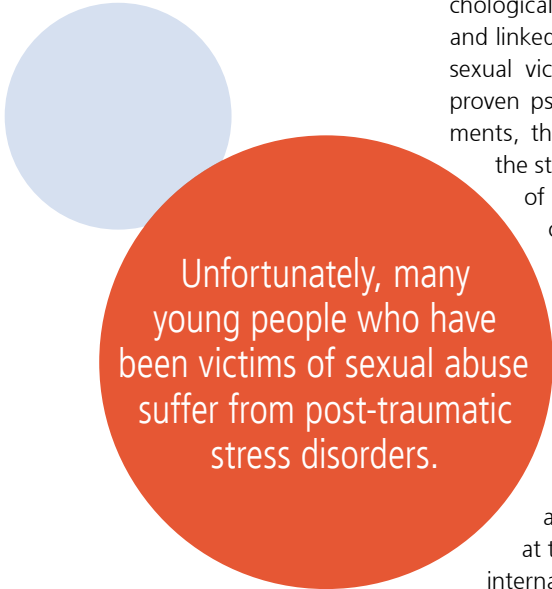
**Result 6 >** Psychological suffering can have many causes, but sexual abuse is particularly hard to deal with. The Optimus Study confirms previous assumptions that victims of sexual abuse often develop psychological problems and suffer from post-traumatic stress disorders.

Anyone who was abused as a child or adolescent often suffers the consequences their whole life long. Alongside the physical discomfort that can result from some forms of victimization, sexual abuse can have a particular effect on psychological well-being. The Optimus Study looked into certain possible psychological consequences of sexual abuse and linked them to the various forms of sexual victimization. With the help of proven psychological measuring instruments, the study investigated whether the students surveyed showed signs of post-traumatic stress disorders or symptoms of so-called internalization or externalization problems. People with internalization problems have a negative sense of self-worth and are also depressive and feel alone. They have trouble building relationships with others and allow their worries to eat away at them – which is why it is called internalization. In people with externalization problems, their troubles manifest themselves in the form of aggressive behavioral patterns. They become angry very quickly, often argue and lie to or steal from others. They offload their in-

ner problems externally. Post-traumatic stress disorders often appear as sleeping disorders or nightmares; those affected find it hard to concentrate or pay attention. Traumatized people also often try to avoid the issue, not wanting to be reminded of it, and often suffer from flashbacks.

## The consequences of sexual victimization

The Optimus Study revealed that those who have experienced sexual victimization show considerably higher values on the scale of post-traumatic stress disorders as well as that of internalization and externalization problems. A form of sexual victimization that is particularly hard to come to terms with is that involving penetration – this was also confirmed in the school survey. 34% of all those adolescents who have experienced this form of abuse at some point show signs of internalization problems, and 40% of them have externalization problems. Yet other forms of sexual abuse, including those with no physical contact, are also psychologically damaging for those affected. 30% of all those who have, for example, experienced nude photos of themselves being circulated against their will also show symptoms of low self-esteem,



Unfortunately, many young people who have been victims of sexual abuse suffer from post-traumatic stress disorders.

depression and loneliness. Around 32% of them show aggressive behavior. Not quite so high is the proportion of adolescents with internalization problems, which affect 19% of victims of indecent exposure. For externalization problems, the proportion is lowest among victims of sexual harassment linked to electronic media, calculated at 23%.

### Problems can also be related to other factors

However, among those adolescents who have never experienced sexual assault, internalization and externalization problems are shown by 8 and 14% respectively. This is not surprising, since psychological problems can also have very different causes. It is well known, for example, that both forms of this consequential psychological distress is also linked to gender. Girls are more likely to store up their troubles within them than boys. On the other hand, problems among boys are more likely to emerge in the form of aggressive behavior. Bullying in school can also lead to psychological

problems. However, the difference between those who have not had previous experience of abuse and those who have been victims of a sexual assault at some point is considerable. At any rate, a great deal points to the fact that sexual abuse gives rise to internalization and externalization problems.

To find out how strongly sexual abuse is linked to post-traumatic stress symptoms, the students were asked about other possibly traumatic experiences they had had, such as the death of someone close to them, experience of war, a natural disaster or a tragic accident (also see box on this point). Another question also asked whether they had ever been touched in the genital area by a familiar or unknown adult or forced to do the same to the other person. In this part of the survey, therefore, it was only sexual abuse by an adult involving physical contact that was surveyed as a traumatic experience. From a list with a total of twelve possible traumatic experiences, this was cited least often. Only 3% of all students surveyed ticked the corresponding option. This confirms the finding discussed in chapter 4, according to which adolescents experience harmful victimization by adults only relatively



### The most important data in brief

- > 34% of adolescents who have been victims of a sexual assault with penetration at least once are isolated, depressive and have trouble building relationships with others. The same symptoms are shown by just 7% of adolescents who have never experienced a sexual assault.
- > 40% of all adolescents who have experienced sexual abuse with penetration show excessively aggressive behavior and often argue with others. The same applies to just 14% of adolescents who have never been victimized sexually.
- > Among the twelve possible traumatic experiences polled, it is sexual abuse that is linked to the highest figures for post-traumatic stress disorder.

rarely. In contrast 13% have experienced a bad accident and 22% cited the death of somebody close to them. Experiences involving non-sexual abuse within the family were cited almost three times as frequently: Around 9% of adolescents admitted to having once experienced a

family member being heavily beaten, pushed or kicked at home.

### Post-traumatic stress disorders brought on by sexual abuse

Using numbers on a scale, all respondents were asked to provide information

Illustration 13: Proportion of male and female victims showing an increased level of internalization problems (anxiety, depression)

Type of victimization	Girls (%)	Boys (%)
<b>Victimization with physical contact</b>	<b>29.5</b>	<b>8.6</b>
Attempted or completed penetration	32.5	8.3
Attempted penetration	28.5	4.8
Completed penetration	38.8	11.8
<b>Victimization without physical contact</b>	<b>24.4</b>	<b>7.9</b>
Indecent exposure	25.8	6.7
Verbal/written sexual harassment	31.7	9.6
Forced to witness sexual acts	27.7	11.3
Intimate pictures/content passed on to others	37.5	11.1
Cyber-bullying (sexual)	24.3	6.0
<b>In comparison: No victimization</b>	<b>14.0</b>	<b>3.5</b>

**Reading example:** For 38.8% of girls who had experienced completed penetration against their will, the value on a scale of internalization problems was in a higher bracket (> 6 on the "internalization problems" sub-scale from the Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire by Goodman et al. [2000]).

Source: Averdijk, M., K. Müller-Johnson, M. Eisner (2012). Sexual Victimization of Children and Adolescents in Switzerland, Table 7.3

Illustration 14: Proportion of male and female victims who show an increased level of externalization problems (becoming angry, lying, stealing)

Victimization with physical contact	Girls (%)	Boys (%)
<b>Victimization with physical contact</b>	<b>24.0</b>	<b>40.9</b>
Attempted or completed penetration	29.9	50.0
Attempted penetration	30.2	38.1
Completed penetration	36.3	58.8
<b>Victimization without physical contact</b>	<b>17.6</b>	<b>34.8</b>
Indecent exposure	24.3	48.3
Verbal/written sexual harassment	20.2	30.8
Forced to witness sexual acts	24.5	41.3
Intimate pictures/content passed on to others	31.1	32.7
Cyber-bullying (sexual)	17.5	37.3
<b>In comparison: No victimization</b>	<b>9.0</b>	<b>17.4</b>

**Reading example:** For 36.3% of the girls who had experienced completed penetration against their will, the value on a scale of externalization problems was in a higher bracket (> 4 on the "externalization problems" sub-scale of the Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire by Goodman et al. [2000]).

Source: Averdijk, M., K. Müller-Johnson, M. Eisner (2012). Sexual Victimization of Children and Adolescents in Switzerland, Table 7.6

about the typical symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder. If we link up these results, then it appears that victims of sexual abuse suffer from post-traumatic stress disorders comparatively more often. Adolescents who admitted to having experienced the trauma of sexual abuse by an adult showed the highest values here. This applies regardless of whether the abuse was the only trauma experienced thus far or whether it was one of several (also see nearby chart on this point). However the values given for victims of other forms of violence such as physical abuse of others in the home were only marginally lower. This means that experiences of violence, be it with or without a sexual element, are particularly damaging. Furthermore, also worth noting is the fact that only very few adolescents show stress to an extent that would correspond to a clinical diagnosis. This applied specifically to 4% of the 57 adolescents who had selected sexual abuse by an adult as their most severe trauma. □

Illustration 15: **Proportion of adolescents reporting the following potentially traumatic experiences (in %)**

No potential trauma recorded	43.2
Hearing about the violent death or serious injury of a loved one	21.8
Seeing someone being beaten up, shot at or killed	19.0
Being in another kind of disaster, like a fire, tornado, flood or hurricane	14.5
Being in a bad accident, like a very serious car accident	13.2
Seeing a dead body (do not include funerals)	10.9
Seeing a family member being hit, punched or kicked very hard at home (do not include ordinary fights between brothers and sisters)	8.7
Having painful or scary medical treatment in a hospital when you were very sick or badly injured	8.3
Being hit, punched or kicked very hard at home (do not include ordinary fights between brothers and sisters)	6.7
Being beaten up, shot at or threatened with being hurt badly	5.9
Being in a place where a war was going on around you	5.2
Having an adult or someone much older than you touch your private sexual body parts when you did not want them to	3.0
Being in a big earthquake that badly damaged the building you were in	1.7

Source: Averdijk, M., K. Müller-Johnson, M. Eisner (2012). Sexual Victimization of Children and Adolescents in Switzerland, Table 7.9

Illustration 16: **Scale values of post-traumatic stress disorders for various traumatic experiences**

Named as the worst experience...	One of several experiences <sup>1</sup>	Only traumatic experience <sup>1</sup>
Having an adult or someone much older touch your private sexual body parts when you did not want them to	23.3	18.7
Being hit, punched, or kicked very hard at home (do not include ordinary fights between brothers and sisters)	22.6	17.4
Seeing a family member being hit, punched or kicked very hard at home (do not include ordinary fights between brothers and sisters)	19.6	15.3
Being beaten up, shot at or threatened with being hurt badly	18.9	13.9
Being in a bad accident, like a very serious car accident	17.9	12.5
Hearing about the violent death or serious injury of a loved one	17.0	13.5
Having painful and scary medical treatment in a hospital when you were very sick or badly injured	16.3	12.9
Seeing a dead body (do not include funerals)	16.3	11.9
Being in a place where a war was going on around you	15.6	10.1
Being in another kind of disaster, like a fire, tornado, flood or hurricane	15.0	11.3
Seeing someone being beaten up, shot at or killed	14.9	11.4
Being in a big earthquake that badly damaged the building you were in	11.8	11.0

<sup>1</sup> The scale values are presented separately for adolescents who have experienced only one traumatic event and those who have admitted to experiencing several traumatic episodes, but selected the relevant experience as the most serious.

Source: Averdijk, M., K. Müller-Johnson, M. Eisner (2012). Sexual Victimization of Children and Adolescents in Switzerland, Table 7.10





# “The consequences depend on the circumstances”

**Expert discussion 6 > The results of the Optimus Study on the psychological consequences of sexual abuse are no surprise to the experts. Christian Wüthrich, head of the child protection group at Berne's Inselspital hospital, stresses however that every child deals with abuse differently and that the specific circumstances of the incident also play a central role.**

At first glance, the room looks like a cozy kindergarten. A circle of chairs has been arranged in the middle, whilst in a corner there is a big doll's house and cuddly toys and children's books lying around. Yet as soon as Christian Wüthrich, head of the child protection group at Berne's Inselspital hospital draws back the curtain along the wall slightly, it becomes clear what this is all about: We are in an interrogation room. Behind the curtain there is a mirror-effect glass wall and behind that sits one of the observers from the child protection group whilst another specialist talks to the child who is being questioned in front of it.

The stories Wüthrich and his colleagues hear in this room are often horrifying. “Suspicions of sexual abuse are by far the most common reason why children are sent to us,” he says. Even if the suspicions are not always confirmed, here in the Inselspital the staff have seen just what damage sexual violence can do. It makes people ill. The results of the Optimus Study, according to which abuse victims are more likely to suffer from internalization problems or post-traumatic stress disorders, do not surprise the experts. The finding that more serious forms of sexual violence are harder to

deal with is also obvious, they claim. “Assaults involving physical contact are more damaging because this touches the child more profoundly, forcing him or her to feel their own powerlessness particularly strongly.”

## **Individual preconditions shape the way victims process abuse**

However the whole issue must be viewed in a differentiated way, says Wüthrich. Abuse is not all the same and indeed not all assaults involving physical contact are equally bad. Whether and how a child processes such experiences depends on many factors. “For example there is a big difference between a child being abused repeatedly for many years and a one-off assault,” explains Wüthrich. It is with sexual abuse within families that the abused child is often rewarded for his or her “services”: They are given more praise than the others or special gifts. “Thus the sexual abuse also becomes a huge abuse of trust.”

What are essential for dealing with such experiences, according to Wüthrich, are the individual's preconditions. There are children who, due to their personalities, are simply better able to deal with such experiences than others. The experts talk



**Christian Wüthrich**

is chief consultant of child and adolescent psychiatry at Berne's Insel hospital and is also head of the hospital's child protection group. The child protection group is an investigation office combining representatives of various disciplines, which deals with babies, children and adolescents who are confirmed or suspected as having been victims of abuse or are at risk from it.

- > [www.kinderkliniken.insel.ch](http://www.kinderkliniken.insel.ch)
- > Children's hospital > Pediatrics
- > Child protection

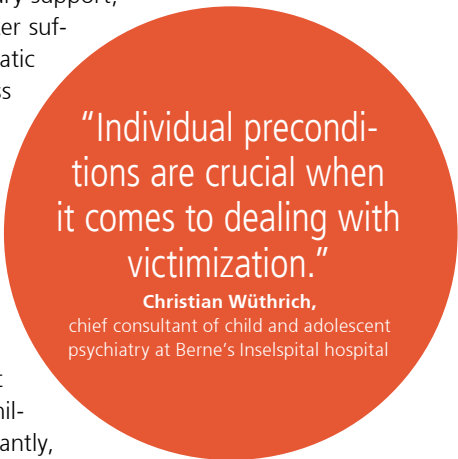
about resilience or resistance. Reaction to sexual abuse, however, is dependent on the child's age. "You sometimes hear about babies who have been abused. This is truly tragic and virtually unimaginable, but the risk that these children will later develop psychological problems as a result of the abuse is lower." At the age of five or six, children already have a much greater sense that the perpetrator is doing something to them that is not normal. "However they are often unable to fathom why, for example, their father is so kind to them and then suddenly hurts them so much again. They divide this up so that in their heads there are two fathers, a good one and a bad one," explains Wüthrich.

### **Reactions of those around the victim are important when it comes to dealing with the abuse**

What is important when it comes to dealing with sexual abuse, though, is the reaction of those around the child. "I'll give you an example: A child explains to his mother that her new friend Peter touched him. Now the mother can react in two ways. She either tells the child to stop telling stories, or she packs Peter's bag and shows him the door." For the child, the mother's reaction is crucial: "If

something really has gone on and the mother does not believe the child, he or she learns not to expect any help in an emergency," explains Wüthrich. However, if the mother believes the child, then this proves there is a reliable mother-child relationship: The mother can see when the child is serious. "If somebody then takes care of the affected child and gives him or her the necessary support, then the risk of the child later suffering from post-traumatic stress disorders is much less than in a child whom nobody believes."

As diverse as the forms and circumstances of sexual abuse are in their detail, so is the range of symptoms. Particular behavioral patterns can point to experiences of abuse. Children who masturbate constantly, for example, put their hands up the blouses of others, invade the personal space of strangers or even shower them with kisses and who are seen by other children as unpleasant could be victims of abuse. "What's important here is that they could be, but aren't necessarily," Wüthrich emphasizes. "One thing is



"Individual preconditions are crucial when it comes to dealing with victimization."

**Christian Wüthrich,**  
chief consultant of child and adolescent  
psychiatry at Berne's Inselspital hospital

clear: Such behavior is unusual, but there can be quite different reasons for it." Christian Wüthrich and his team face an almost daily challenge of clarifying whether a child has actually been abused or whether false accusations have been made, as happens frequently in disputes over visiting rights between parents living separately. There is never absolute certainty. Questioning children can give us a very good insight into how credible a story is, however. "If a child can recount what has happened to them with details and free from outside influences then we can assume that the story is based on a real experience," he explains.

### **"We need to invest in prevention"**

Among the abuse cases that Christian Wüthrich and his team deal with at the Inselspital, it is often abuse within the family that is involved. The victims who come to the child protection groups are mostly younger children, since girls aged 14 and over are sent directly to the women's clinic, and there are also other advice and support services for adolescents. The affected children show particular characteristics: "These children are often not able to distance themselves well and are lacking clear rules in everyday life. They don't learn to

say 'this is me, my body is my body'," explains Wüthrich. This is also reflected in an awareness of wrongdoing: "Ask a child if you are allowed to steal some chewing gum. Any child would immediately shake their head and tell you stealing is wrong. Ask a child if you are allowed to touch someone else under their T-shirt. They will shrug their shoulders and respond with an inquiring look."

In this sense, Wüthrich believes the Optimus Study emphasizes one thing above all: "We need more investment in prevention. Children must learn that the guilt always lies with the perpetrator and that they are allowed to say no." ■

## Result 7



# In whom do victims confide?

**Result 7 >** An astonishing number of children and adolescents who have been victims of sexual abuse speak to other people about it, although it is mostly friends or classmates, or sometimes a child's mother or father, whom they trust with their secret. They will rarely contact a specialized center or organization, so a correspondingly small proportion gets professional support.

Many victims of sexual abuse require external help to deal with their experiences. The prerequisite for this, though, is that they tell other people about what has happened to them. The Optimus Study therefore also looked into whether respondents who had experienced sexual abuse had ever told anybody about it and if so, whom they told.

Depending on the type of victimization, in total between 40 and 60% of adolescents said they had told somebody about at least one of their experiences. This figure is several times that of victims who had reported their abuse to the police or who had contacted a victim support organization. At any rate, this result means that around half of adolescents affected have never told anybody about their experiences.

## **Confidantes within the group of friends**

If affected adolescents tell somebody about their experiences, in most cases they will confide in people from their circle of friends or classmates, and less frequently family members. For example, if a victim of sexual abuse with physical contact tells someone about it, in 86% of cases that person will be a friend or class-

mate, and in 36% of cases a family member. Results of the schools survey were similar with regard to abuse without physical contact. 83% of those affected who had told someone about it turned to friends or classmates and around 35% told a family member about it.

If victims go to an official body following incidents of abuse it is most likely to be a school representative, a doctor or the police that they turn to. In contrast, only a very small minority of less than 1% of victims admitted to having contacted other support organizations such as victim assistance centers, women's refuges, emergency services hotlines or youth welfare authorities.

## **Only a few victims get therapeutic support**

In contrast, only a very small minority of less than 1% of victims admitted to having contacted other support organizations such as victim assistance centers, women's refuges, emergency services hotlines or youth welfare authorities. In most cases the victims only received psychological support if they went to a child protection institution or other official body. This emerged from the comparison of the school survey and the agency

survey. According to the child protection organizations surveyed, in 90% of cases some kind of step was taken to support the victim, and in 25% of cases psychological or psychiatric help was offered. The schools survey showed, though, that only very few victims were treated professionally as a consequence of the abuse. This also applied to particularly severe forms of abuse and also where the victim had told somebody about it. Of those who had experienced an assault with physical contact and penetration and told somebody about it, only a meager 16% of girls and no boys at all were given therapy.

**Boys are less likely to disclose victimization**

In general, though, there are huge differences between the sexes in terms of their behavior in reporting incidents: Boys are much less likely to tell someone about their experiences of sexual abuse than girls. This applies particularly to abuse with physical contact involving

Around half of all young people affected have never spoken to anybody about their experiences.



**The most important data in brief**

- > 42% of all adolescents who have been victims of sexual assault involving attempted or full penetration have told somebody about it.
- > 57% of all adolescents who have been victims of sexual assault without physical contact have told somebody about it.
- > Girls are far more likely to confide in someone than boys.
- > Friends and family members are the figures adolescent victims are most likely to confide in. Of all those who told somebody about their experiences, 86% (assaults with physical contact) and 83% (assaults without physical contact) confided in friends or acquaintances. 36 and 35% respectively (also) told family members.
- > Adolescent victims of sexual abuse only rarely contact official reporting or assistance centers; just 4% of those who had experienced sexual assault with physical contact and had told somebody about it confided in a doctor or psychologist, for example, and 5% contacted the police.
- > Just 16% of girls and 0% of boys who had been victims of sexual assault with penetration and had told somebody about it received therapeutic assistance.
- > In 90% of cases, victims who had gone to a specialist organization received further help and support in dealing with their experiences.

penetration. Around 46% of girls but barely 6% of boys told somebody what had happened to them. This gender difference could be seen where all forms of sexual victimization were concerned, albeit less significantly. The difference could be explained by the fact that boys see their experiences as less damaging. However, it is also possible that the feelings of

shame and guilt that are so typically linked to sexual victimization are even greater in boys than in girls. They contradict the roles expected of boys and young men. Ultimately, though, the results may reflect the fact that girls are generally more likely to talk about their intimate experiences with others. □

#### Illustration 17: Proportion of victims who have told a third person about at least one incident of victimization

Of 100 victims each admitting to having told someone...

Type of victimization	Males (%)	Female (%)	Total (%)
<i>Victimization with physical contact</i>	42	72.3	63.3
Attempted or completed penetration	15.4	47.1	42.1
Attempted penetration	21.7	48.3	44.7
Completed penetration	5.6	45.8	38.6
<i>Victimization without physical contact</i>	45.2	64.3	57.5
Indecent exposure	44.7	62.9	56.4
Verbal/written harassment	41.7	58.1	53.2
Forced to witness sexual acts	24	42.2	33.3
Intimate pictures/content passed on to others	35.5	46.4	43.1
Cyber-bullying (sexual)	36.4	51.5	47.4

**Reading example:** 42% of male adolescents who had experienced victimization with physical contact disclosed at least one incident to someone.





Illustration 18: To whom did the adolescents disclose the victimization?

	Victimization <i>with</i> physical contact (%)	Victimization <i>without</i> physical contact (%)
Family member	23.2	20.3
Friend or colleague	54.8	47.6
Teacher	2.7	3.3
Adult confidant	2.5	2.3
Voluntary services	0.4	0.1
Medical professional	2.7	1.0
Police	3.2	2.1
Any institution	4.8	2.7

**Reading example:** Among the victims of sexual assault with physical contact, 23.2% admitted having told a family member about at least one incident.

Source: Averdijk, Müller-Johnson, Eisner (2012), Table 6.2

# “A fear of change keeps victims quiet”

**Expert discussion 7 > Anybody who has been sexually abused would rather not talk about it at all. Their whole world threatens to crumble. Speaking to friends means this danger is considerably lessened, which is why the results of the Optimus Study surprise neither Regula Schwager from the Castagna victim assistance center in Zurich nor Simone Gaberell, a school social worker in Ostermundigen.**

At Mösli School in Ostermundigen there's a real pre-holiday atmosphere. On a late summer afternoon two days before school ends the site seems to have been emptied of all its occupants. Just two teenage girls are messing around in the playground. They are sitting on a bench with their schoolbags next to them chatting and gossiping. Simone Gaberell is still here too. For the social worker there is actually always work to be done; a teacher has just asked her for advice because one of her pupils is being bullied. “Conflicts among students are the most frequent cases my colleagues and I are consulted about,” says Gaberell. Sexual assaults are something she has to deal with less regularly. Yet the few cases she has handled up to now have covered just about everything imaginable: a group of boys who were harassed by a suspected pedophile, a girl who was abused by a family member, a girl who harassed younger girls, assaults among kindergarten children. And no doubt a great deal occurs that the school social worker never hears about. “It's obvious that the children and adolescents talk about things a lot amongst themselves. Overcoming the hurdle of getting help is difficult,” says Gaberell. She makes particular reference to the

role of the parents: “Being able to tell someone has a lot to do with a child's experiences of trust. As a child, you have to have experiences that prove you are listened to and are given support.” Children from families in difficulty who, statistically speaking, are more likely to be affected by sexual abuse, often fail to learn precisely these things: “If they go to their parents with problems they are shrugged off or even beaten. No wonder, then, that they can no longer trust adults.” To add to this, Gaberell says, children from similar family backgrounds often form friendships with one another. “They keep their stories to themselves and sometimes even believe what's happening to them is right.”

## **Preconceptions of roles influence reporting behaviors**

For Simone Gaberell, there are several reasons behind the fact that boys, in particular, are less likely to share things with others. “This is no doubt linked to preconceptions of roles. A man doesn't seek help, he solves his problems himself,” is how Gaberell explains the prevailing line of thinking. Boys lack role models, she says. “I rarely see men who ask someone to help them or even just ask for directions.” If the problem is also linked to


**Simone Gaberell**

is a trained primary school teacher and social worker. For the last five years she has been working as a social worker at Mösli School in Ostermundigen. As part of her thesis for her Master's in Social Work she studied professional conduct of social workers in risk situations concerning children and adolescents according to civil law.

> [www.moesli.ch](http://www.moesli.ch)

> Information > School social work





**Regula Schwager**  
is a psychotherapist for  
sexually exploited children,  
female adolescents and women  
who were abused in childhood  
at the Castagna advice center  
in Zurich.

> [www.castagna-zh.ch](http://www.castagna-zh.ch)

sexuality, then the hurdles are even greater: Men are not victims – that devalues their sexual identity. However it is also possible that boys are less damaged by sexual victimization than girls, since sexual assaults on boys tend to be less violent.

#### **“Fear of change and stigmatization”**

However, abuse victims who do not confide in anybody have the following in common above all: fear of stigmatization, fear of change and fear of what will happen if they let their secret out. This is confirmed by Regula Schwager. The psychotherapist works at the Castagna victim assistance center in Zurich, which deals exclusively with victims of sexual abuse in childhood and adolescence. Regula Schwager knows: “The 1100 cases we handle each year are just the tip of the iceberg. Victims generally don’t talk about what is happening to them.” The fear is mainly due to wanting to protect themselves, their families or even the offenders. Since most are not abused by simply anybody, but by a person in their closest social circles, by a father, a mother, a family friend or another person close to the family. Often the cases do not concern one-off assaults, but abuse over many years, says Regula Schwager. “Per-

petrators build up a stable relationship with the victim; often there is a close connection between them. If victims tell somebody about the abuse then their whole world breaks down,” explains the specialist. Unlike most other problems in life, with sexual abuse, talking about it is usually not liberating. On the contrary: “All feelings come to the surface again and you have to relive the situation every time you tell it. It’s extremely stressful.”

Given this background it is not surprising, she says, that assistance centers or official authorities are rarely contacted. “Many victims are scared they will have to tell their stories in detail, that the perpetrator will no longer be protected and that their families will be destroyed. They find themselves in a catch-22 situation: They can no longer tolerate their circumstances but at the same time do not want their world to break apart,” explains Regula Schwager. Many do not know that assistance centers, child protection organizations, psychotherapists or psychologists, doctors and other points of refuge have a duty of confidentiality. “And with us, at least, nobody has to describe their experiences in detail,” emphasizes Schwager, “it’s not our job to find out precisely what happened.”

#### **“People who have disclosed victimization can feel a sense of powerlessness.”**

The fact that friends are the preferred option when a victim decides to tell somebody about their experiences has a great deal to do with the nature of the friend relationship: Friends are outside of the family circle and yet are also trusted figures. “Victims therefore don’t have to feel that they are publicly branding their family as they do if they go to an external point of refuge.” Schwager observes that younger children in particular tend to put their trust in people they only see rarely. “Kindergarten children often choose the very assistant who is there only once a week or who is helping out for a short period of time.” Thus they intuitively avoid a permanent confrontation with the issue.

The knowledge can be very burdensome for the person who has been confided in, particularly if it is a friend or acquaintance with no official role: They are perhaps the only ones who know about the abuse and perhaps even know the perpetrator, but they feel powerless. “They are often plagued by feelings of impotence and great helplessness. They are hounded by images and they want to do

"It is very important to convey to the child that something unjust has happened to them."

Simone Gaberell,  
social worker

all they can to stop it happening again. Many can barely believe that it is really going on, since the perpetrators are often people who seem particularly nice, kind and loving," explains Schwager. Around a third of all people who seek help at Castagna are not themselves victims, but reference persons for the victims. "We explain to them what's going on in the victim's head, how they feel, why they feel that way and how they, as a figure of trust, can deal with it." There are no universally applicable prescriptions. In general, though, these reference persons are most certainly dissuaded from acting hastily and without the consent of the victim. Direct confrontation with the perpetrator or his/her partner is also to be avoided. "We also advise telling the victim if you want to seek help yourself. Nobody should promise never to tell anyone about it." The specific advice given strongly depends on the relationship between the victim and the reference person. "Of course it's a whole other story if a child is being abused by his grandfather and we are advising the parents, or if a teen-

age friend of the victim comes to us because he or she is overwhelmed by the situation."

### "Calling things by their names"

School social worker, Simone Gaberell, sometimes hears about incidents through the friends of victims, too. In such cases her task is finding out exactly what is going on and who could still be affected. The victim is always at the forefront: "In an open and sensitive discussion we first analyze the situation. The affected child should feel that he or she can tell me bad things, that I can take it," explains Gaberell. The basic principle is to call things by their names. "Children in particular often have no words to express what is happening to them, or what the place they were touched is called. I always speak very openly, using the names of body parts quite normally, for example, and thus showing the child that it's OK to use these words," she explains. In a further step, the school social worker attempts to find out whether there may be further victims and what the child's relationship with his/her parents is like. She then discusses ways to stop the assaults with the child. "It's very important to convey to the child that what is happening is wrong, that the

child is not guilty and that it is possible to stop the assaults," she explains.

When it comes to incidents between school students, she says, she almost always tries to talk to the perpetrator. Depending on the severity of the case and the circumstances, the social worker might then file a risk report with the custody authority. "I once had a case where there was evidence that the offending child was also being abused." A risk report – depending on the situation even where the affected child does not wish it – does, amongst other things, ensure that professional help is provided.

More often, members of the school social worker team go into classes to introduce themselves and to hear about issues the children and adolescents have. Apparently this can also contribute to making victims more likely to go to an assistance center later in life. "By going to the children ourselves we are giving them a positive experience of a point of refuge," explains Gaberell. At the same time, the school social worker would place a big question mark on whether professional help is really the only right thing for every victim of abuse. Regula Schwager from the Castagna advice cen-

ter also doubts this: "Adult victims, at least, know best themselves whether they are ready to confront what has happened to them and proceed with some kind of therapy. I also respect people who say they don't want any outside help." ■







# Outlook



# A foundation stone is laid

**The Optimus Study proves that sexual victimization among children and adolescents in Switzerland is widespread, and that there are also new forms of abuse which must be addressed for better prevention and treatment.**

“Sexual abuse continues to be a taboo subject.”

Pasqualina Perrig-Chiello,  
development psychologist and professor  
at the University of Berne

“I never thought this project would ever succeed,” admits Pasqualina Perrig-Chiello frankly and freely. The development psychologist and honorary professor at the University of Berne was a member of the scientific advisory committee for the Optimus Study Switzerland and, at the beginning at least, had strong doubts that the plan to gather representative data about the extent of sexual victimization could be implemented at all: “Sexual abuse remains a taboo subject.” The academic expert is all the more delighted, therefore, that there are now valid data. “We did already know that many people were affected. Now we’ve finally got it in black and white.”

And it is urgently needed. Reliable data are crucial when it comes to tackling new campaigns or projects on child protection or expanding existing services and improving strategies. And the new data prove that these are appropriate, she says. Clearly, sexual abuse in Switzerland is not a problem that affects a microscopic group of people and that can be easily ignored. Quite the contrary: The survey of more than 6700 15- to 17-year-old students shows that a shockingly high number of them have been sexually vic-

timized in various ways. Almost 22% of girls and 8% of boys admitted to having experienced sexual assault with physical contact at least once in their lives. Indeed 40% of girls and 20% of boys have been sexually harassed at some point without physical contact being involved.

## **Cyber-victimization particularly widespread**

A particularly high figure was that of so-called cyber-victimization, i.e. harassment or assaults that take place via electronic media. This includes, for example, nude photos of a victim being sent via cell phone or e-mail to other people, making clear sexual innuendos in a chat-room, forcing someone to pose naked in front of a webcam or similar. 28% of girls and 9% of boys who have at some point been victimized without physical contact experienced this form of sexual assault. The idea that cyber-victimization is widespread among adolescents is, in itself, nothing new. And yet these high figures surprise Pasqualina Perrig-Chiello: “I hadn’t reckoned on almost one in three girls actually having experienced such a thing,” she says.

### **Influence of the parental home**

The Optimus Study also sheds light on other, until now rarely discussed aspects of adolescent sexuality. It clearly shows that predominantly adolescents who receive little support from their parents or are even neglected and who move in risky social contexts experience sexual violence particularly frequently when they have their first sexual experiences with people of the same age. Many adolescent victims admit to having experienced assaults by a partner or a date. The school survey also revealed that sexual violence is not usually isolated. Both victims and perpetrators move in a generally violence-oriented environment. It is here that they meet, both of them unnerved and both overwhelmed. In this regard Pasqualina Perrig-Chiello points to the fact that there are also victims who themselves become perpetrators. "Here we're talking about so-called aggressive victims who perhaps pass on what they experience at home."

Younger children are more likely to be victims of authority figures, at least that is the finding of the survey of cases reported to child protection organizations. They are abused by their fathers, mothers, an uncle, a teacher or a club

trainer. Adolescents are probably better able to defend themselves against such assaults and forms of abuse. At the same time they are expanding their sphere of activity, seeking proximity to their peers and distancing themselves from the parental home. The victimization changes, therefore, depending on age.

### **Prevention measures tailored to the age group**

The Optimus Study also shows that victims are often victimized on more than one occasion: Every third one admitted to having already experienced sexual assault five times or more in their lives. Against this background, Pasqualina Perrig-Chiello is also surprised that, according to the school survey, only a few had already been affected as younger children. This may be down to the method used – the survey took place in schools, so the students might be more likely to remember incidents involving classmates in this environment. However it begs the question of whether these very varied victimization experiences depending on a person's stage in life mean better tailored prevention or intervention services are needed. Should the focus move more to adolescents as a target

### **Further information and contact**

Further information about the Optimus Study is available at  
> [www.optimusstudy.org](http://www.optimusstudy.org)

The present publication can be downloaded from the above website in pdf format in German, French, Italian and English. Print versions can be ordered at  
> [order@optimusstudy.org](mailto:order@optimusstudy.org)

The study report "Sexual Victimization of Children and Adolescents in Switzerland (Final Report for the UBS Optimus Foundation)" by M. Averdijk, K. Müller-Johnson & M. Eisner can also be downloaded from the website address above.

Contact:  
> [info@optimusstudy.org](mailto:info@optimusstudy.org)


group and shift away from the family as the scene of the crime? Pasqualina Perig-Chiello says a very definite no to the latter, at least: "The family is and remains the primary socialization environment. Adolescents do not suddenly become victims or perpetrators from nothing." The study shows that sexual violence is closely connected to other forms of violence, to abuse and to a certain style of parenting.

A similar opinion is expressed by Muriel Langenberger. She is head of the child and adolescent department at the Federal Office of Social Insurance (BSV), which was created five years ago within the "Family, Generations and Society" division. The department looks at social and socio-political issues against the background of social, economic and demographic trends. The department itself is responsible for child and youth policy at the federal level. It has a cross-departmental function and takes care of children's rights, child and youth protection and child and youth support. Here, national strategies are developed in the area of child and youth protection together with the cantons and municipalities. Muriel Langenberger warns against taking the study results par for par. "We

must be careful. Adolescents experience abuse not only amongst themselves; many victims are also abused by persons within the family or external authority figures but do not admit it in these surveys," she says. She also emphasizes that, in the area of prevention, there should be no cutting corners when it comes to families. She also points out that, according to a 2009 report by the Federal Commission for Child and Youth Issues, the sexual behavior of adolescents has not changed so much over the last few decades. "But they are certainly growing up in a very strongly sexualized environment. The figures in the Optimus Study show a trend and it makes sense to invest more in the area of youth."

### **Planned prevention measures at national level**

It is in this very direction that intensive work is currently going on at the federal level. At the beginning of 2011, the BSV's child and youth department initiated a five-year program that aims to improve prevention in the area of youth violence. A tripartite committee with representatives from municipalities, cantons and the federal government under the leadership of the BSV developed a strategy to improve prevention. "Sexual violence



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is a development psychologist and  
honorary professor at the University  
of Berne. From 2003 to 2008 she headed  
the national research program NFP 52 on  
childhood and youth in Switzerland. She is  
currently working on a national research  
project about vulnerability resulting from  
separation and divorce.

> [www.entwicklung.psy.unibe.ch](http://www.entwicklung.psy.unibe.ch)  
> team > ppc

among adolescents is one of the issues addressed here,” says Muriel Langenberger. The strategy focuses equally on three areas, namely the family, school and the social sphere. In addition, another BSV program also initiated this year aims at improving youth protection in the media. The aim of this initiative is, on the one hand, to develop the skills of adolescents, teachers and parents in dealing with digital media. On the other hand, the voluntary regulatory measures employed by the media industry are to be reviewed. “We want to know how well the industry’s self-regulation functions and, if necessary, consider together how the implementation of age limits for films, computer games and other media can be guaranteed,” explains Langenberger.

The signs of the times have also been recognized at the federal level. Despite this, or indeed because of it, Muriel Langenberger is also grateful for the Optimus Study. “The data encourages us along the path we have set out on. Unlike the statistics we already had, these figures now show, for the first time, details on cases that are not reported to the police.” Given the high




#### **Muriel Langenberger**

completed a Master’s in International Affairs at the Graduate Institute for International Studies in Geneva in 1995 and now heads the department for child and youth issues at the Federal Office of Social Insurance. This was set up five years ago within the “Family, Generations and Society” division and forms the national coordination office for child and youth policy.

> [www.bsv.admin.ch](http://www.bsv.admin.ch)

> Topics > Children and youth issues



**Hanna-Louise Nahmias**  
is spokesperson for the Federal Office of Justice. The office's duties in the area of victim support consist mainly of drafting new legislation and preparing answers to parliamentary enquiries related to victim support. Where disputes arise, opinions are prepared for the federal court or officially ascertained following complaints.

> [www.bj.admin.ch](http://www.bj.admin.ch)

> Topics > Society > Victim support

estimated number of unreported cases of sexual abuse, the statistics therefore finally give a more complete picture of the extent of the problem. There is similar enthusiasm about the Optimus Study at the Federal Office of Justice (FOJ). Hanna-Louise Nahmias, spokesperson at the FOJ for the victim support department, welcomes the new data basis. "At the moment preparations are underway for a report by the federal council connected with precisely this issue, namely on the reporting behavior of victims," explains Nahmias. The Optimus Study data, according to which victims rarely go to the police or other authorities, tally with her experiences.

### **Reducing the dark figure of unreported cases**

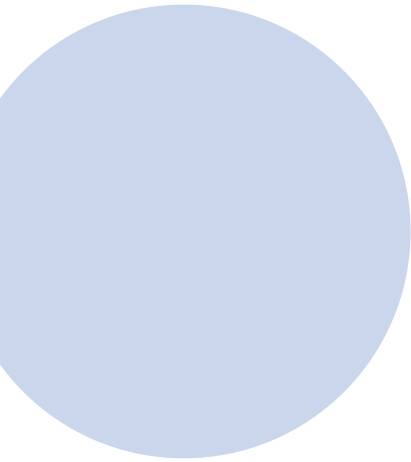
"We are now trying to find out why that is the case and how we can get the number of unreported cases down." This is not simply down to victims often being too afraid to get help, but also the opportunities that are available. Muriel Langenberger points out that the network of assistance centers is not evenly spread everywhere: "In rural regions, access to the appropriate services is often not that straightforward."

As the Optimus Study shows, victims of sexual violence are considerably more likely to suffer from psychological problems. Most only receive support in dealing with their experiences if they go to a competence center or authority. Data collection is not going to help them. Yet the Optimus Study is a first step towards building up a picture of the situation. Now comes the in-depth analysis: Which prevention and intervention strategies exist in the cantons and municipalities? Where might there be gaps? Which of these could and should be closed and how? Are there areas in which Swiss-wide standardization would be appropriate? These and other questions need to be discussed. In the view of Pasqualina Perrig-Chiello it would make sense to create a think tank here that was as widely supported as possible, encompassing professionals from in the field, from academia and from politics, which could somehow address the issue of child and youth protection. Because one thing is clear: "The Optimus Study is a good starting point. Now we need to build on that to better protect children against abuse."





# UBS Optimus Foundation



The UBS Optimus Foundation is a charitable foundation that provides project funding and was founded in 1999 by UBS. It is active throughout the world for the welfare of needy children in terms of education, protection and health.

These three elements are critical factors in a child's life. They give children the opportunity to lead an independent life as adults and to become active members of society who can contribute to positively influencing future generations.

For many years the foundation has been working worldwide for the protection of children. It implements innovative projects along their entire value chain in order to achieve their maximum impact. In doing so it focuses on issues that receive either little or no funding from other areas. The Optimus Study aims to fill in another lamentable gap – because only if scientifically gathered data are available for the area of sexual abuse of children can the influence of prevention and intervention projects be evaluated in the future.

[www.ubs.com/optimus](http://www.ubs.com/optimus)

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