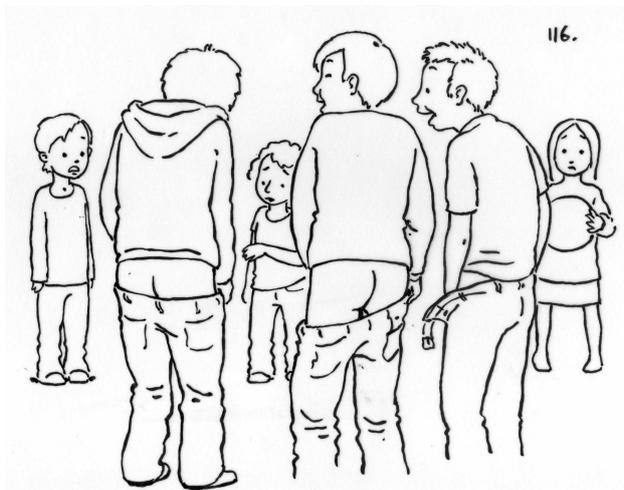


# Addressing sexual (transgressional) behaviour by children and adolescents<sup>1</sup>

*Erika Frans in cooperation with Sanna Maris*

**At the Flemish "Sensoa" competence centre for sexual health, a system has been developed which provides guidance in assessing sexually explicit behaviour by children and adolescents in an educational context.**

One morning at the playground...



Three boys (13 years) show their sexual organs to some children playing (6 years) in an unobserved moment. They thought it would be fun, the kids obviously did not.

**Are your familiar with a similar event?**

All educational experts experience comparable situations and then need to be able to quickly assess whether and to what extent the behaviour of these children is transgressional and which reaction is appropriate in the situation. Some essential considerations play a role in the assessment of sexual behaviour by children and adolescents. In this example, it is clear that the behaviour shown will be judged differently if it frightens the children terribly or if the boys have an erection or have already demonstrated such behaviour more often. The prehistory, personality and behaviour of the boys will also play a role in judging and looking at what is happening: should we judge differently if the boys have a slight mental disability or a form of autism? Or if they have been victims of abuse themselves? Or if they have already committed an abuse once? Do we rate their behaviour differently if they come from Kurdistan or Ghana? One and the same incident can also lead to very different reactions as well. You may think an approach based on agreements and discussion is right, but the children's parents may expect a sanction. So how do we address this?

### **What help can the flag system provide?**

At the heart of the Sensoa Flag System is the aim of adequately classifying, addressing and responding to sexual (transgressional) behaviour by children and adolescents (0 to 18 years). The Sensoa Flag System (Frans/Frank 2010 and 2014) was developed to improve pedagogical action sustainably.

Six criteria, four flags and a development table exist for classifying the behaviour. The development chart provides an overview describing examples of sexual expression and behaviour divided up in age categories (0 to 18 years). Four flags indicate that a continuum of acceptable to mild to very severe transgressional sexual behaviour exists. Based on six criteria, the development table shows examples of acceptable behaviour (green flag), slightly transgressional behaviour (yellow flag), severe transgressional behaviour (red flag) or very serious transgressional behaviour (black flag).

A pedagogical reaction is linked to the flags. The Sensoa flag system was initially developed to give concrete support to professionals in the pedagogical care of children and adolescents. It provides guidelines for the correct assessment of sexual (transgressional) behaviour and pedagogically adequate action. In addition, drawings and case studies help educators to assess and address sexual (transgressional) behaviour amongst and towards children and adolescents. A steering wheel indicates the six criteria with one symbol in each section and can be used as a visual aid when working with the flag system. The idea is to hold the wheel in your own hands and foster self-control in children and adolescents.

A toolbox for the flag system shows how to proceed methodically as a team. A variety of exercises for teams and methods are included here to broach the subject with the target group. The methodology has since been developed in several prevention programmes for children and adolescents, including, "Oké. Spel over seksueel grensoverschrijdend gedrag" [OK. Game about sexually transgressional behaviour] (Jong/Van Zin 2013), "Tussen de Lakens - Modules Seksueel grensoverschrijdend gedrag" [Between the sheets - Module on sexual transgressional behaviour] (Sensoa 2013), "Over de Grens" [Transgressing the boundary] (Sensoa 2012) and the peer education method "Be A Man! relaties en seks: wat is OK?" [Be a man! love, relationships and sex: what's okay?] (Movisie 2013) and on the website [www.WeCanYoung.nl](http://www.WeCanYoung.nl).

## How to evaluate behavior?

In classifying sexual behaviour, the Sensoa flag system is based on some fundamental criteria or social values, including rights, laws, social conventions and similar, and its starting point is that sexual self-determination is a right, but that sexual behaviour must neither harm either the person themselves or any other person concerned. The view of the person responsible for the behaviour is always taken.

A flag is assigned to the behaviour based on six criteria. The behaviour is only assigned a green flag if all the criteria are okay (and only then). Depending on the number of criteria that are not okay and the severity of the transgression, the behaviour is assigned a yellow, red or black flag.

### **Mutual Consent**

One of the first criterion for characterising sexual transgressional behaviour is mutual consent (consensus). This means that both parties must agree with full awareness. If one party leaves the other in the dark, misguides, deceives or takes them by surprise, one cannot speak of consent.

### **Voluntary Engagement**

Voluntary engagement occurs when a child/adolescent performs or permits sexual acts that he/she wants. If he/she compels another person, persuades or puts pressure on them, there is no voluntary engagement. We are not just talking about coerced sexual intercourse here, but also a coerced French kiss or another sexual act that is not wanted. This also include subtle forms of coercion and pressure, such as persuading someone to have sex, or manipulations that adolescents can only become aware of later. Lack of voluntary engagement can range from seduction and promises, to threats, extortion and violence.

### **Equality**

Equality is defined as a situation where two parties operate with the same degree of power in a relationship without being controlled or coerced by the other. This means that a certain balance between both parties regarding age, knowledge, intelligence, reputation, power, life experience, maturity and status must exist. In a sexual interaction, both parties must be equal, so that one does not dominate the other. The possibility of the abuse of power and domination – even unconsciously – is always given. The question here is when does the lack of equivalence become problematic.

### **Appropriate for their development or age**

A behaviour appropriate to age or development means that the child or adolescent exhibits a sexual behaviour that can be expected in his or her age or stage of development. This behaviour is illustrated by what is known from research and what is summarised in the development chart. In the case of development, we think of a gradual process in which children and adolescents are better able to demonstrate complex and socially accepted behaviour. This process runs through several phases that build on each other.

### **Appropriate for the context**

Rules can change depending on the context. For example, the school context will generally allow less sexual behaviour than the domestic context. Behaviour is offensive when it shocks, offends or offends other people. Therefore, the context in which sexual behaviour takes place is significant. In a public space, where other people are present, rules prohibit the exposure of genitalia and breasts and explicit sexual behaviour (gestures, words, movements, drawings). If

this behaviour occurs in an intimate group or in a private setting, it disturbs nobody and no educational reaction is required.

### Self-respect

With self-respect, we mean that it is important that the child or adolescent does not harm himself/herself. Sexual behaviour can be harmful for a child or adolescent, even at a physical, psychological or social level. The child or the adolescent can humiliate himself, inflict pain and enter into risky situations without knowing his own wishes and limits well. The adolescent can have unprotected sex and expose him/herself to danger and abuse.

Young people can harm themselves by transgressing others' boundaries: They could be arrested or harm their relationships and reputation.

Table 1

Tab. 1

#### Overview of characteristics per flag

Basic Criterion	green	yellow	red	black
<b>Mutual consent</b>	Agreement was communicated	No significant rejection	Clear rejection	Clear rejection
<b>Voluntary engagement</b>	No form of coercion, pressure or blackmail takes place	Little compulsion or persuasion	Significant coercion, violence or blackmail; lack of opportunity to escape the situation	Repeated compulsion, violence or blackmail
<b>Equality</b>	Violated persons are equivalent in terms of development, age, power or number	Imbalance is not significant	Serious imbalance	Large imbalance (adult or group), dependency or superiority
<b>Appropriate for development or age</b>	The behaviour matches the development phase	Small deviation in terms of development	Large deviation in terms of development	Large deviation in terms of development
<b>Appropriate for context</b>	The behaviour matches the context	Behaviour does not quite match the context	Behaviour does not match; violation of private sphere	Repeatedly inappropriate in the context
<b>Self-respect</b>	The behaviour has no harmful consequences for the person	Risk of negative consequences for the person	Real negative consequences for the person	Great danger for the person; serious consequences

	themselves			
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### Additional aggravating or mitigating factors

<b>Level of intimacy of the behaviour</b>		Verbal or light touch	Engaging in sexual touching or contact; repeated verbal or light touching	Repeated engagement in sexual touching or contact
<b>Signals given out by the violated child or young person</b>		No fear	Fear	Repeated anxiety
<b>Repetition and duration</b>		One-off or of short duration	Several times or frequently yellow	Several times or frequently red
<b>Awareness</b>		No awareness of the consequences for the other	Limited awareness of the consequences for the other	Knows that the other is being harmed

### Classifying and judging behaviour

The first question when confronted with a situation where possible sexual transgressional behaviour occurs, is: what has happened exactly? The most important thing is to find out as much as possible about what has happened.

#### Describe and name the behaviour

Describing behaviour that has been observed objectively is difficult. We are quick to interpret the behaviour of children. We associate the behaviour with a possible cause, without checking whether it really does form the core of the problem. It is also difficult to describe the behaviour without expressing a value judgement. We find a behaviour pleasant or unpleasant. Such statements are subjective and make it difficult to get to the heart of the behaviour. The world of experience that educational professionals have plays a major role here.

#### Stay with the facts

In the case of children or adolescents who cannot speak for themselves owing to their young age or low levels of development, it is important to get as much information as possible about what has happened. Try to get as clear a picture as possible without researching. Try to stay as close to the facts as possible.

### **Take a good look and ask questions**

Further specification of the criteria also helps to be able to assess a situation better. The guide contains lists of assessment criteria and questions that can be used to provide more clarity, such as, "Do you feel good about this? What would happen if you had said 'no'?"

### **Manage the criteria**

You always judge the behaviour, not the person themselves. You base your judgement on the behaviour of the person who was the initiator and/or was primarily responsible. If you also assess the behaviour of other children and adolescents concerned, you may experience different assessments. You go through all the criteria for all the persons involved: Does mutual consent, voluntary engagement etc. exist.

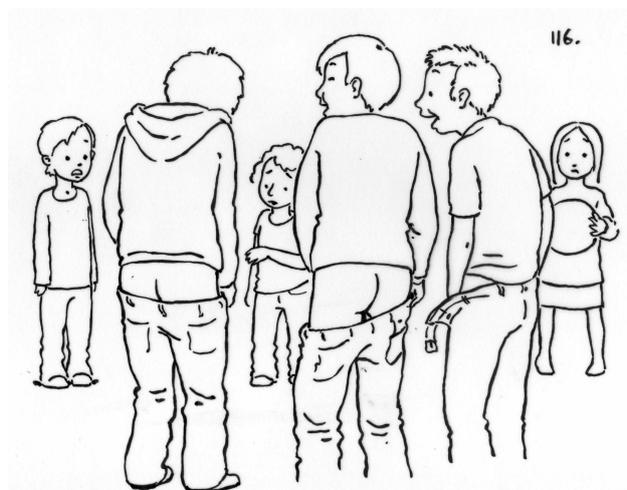
### **Assign the flag**

The green flag is only assigned when all the criteria are okay. The degree of boundary transgression determines the colour of the flag: yellow, red or black. Above all, the consequences that the behaviour entails must be taken into account here.

There are other factors that can be considered as mitigating or aggravating, such as repetition, duration, frequency and the degree of intimacy of the sexual behaviour. The question of the extent to which the person initiating the behaviour should know what consequences it may have for the other is included in the assessment. If the initiator is not capable of making this assessment, the judgement is milder.

### **Application to our example**

In reference to the situation presented at the beginning, the behaviour of the 13-year-old boys can be assessed as follows:



Approval: + – okay (yellow):  
The boys want it, but the kids do not.

Voluntary: + – okay (yellow): Some form of peer pressure may exist. The children have little choice, but there is also little visible compulsion.

Equivalence: – okay (red):  
The development age is too far apart.

Matching the development: + – okay (yellow):  
It does not quite match their age.

Context: – okay (red):  
The place in question is a public place.

Self-esteem: + – okay (yellow):  
The boys are at risk of adverse consequences, above all if they get caught.

Based on these criteria, either the red or the yellow flag could be chosen. It is the first time, however, there have been no touching (hands off), the children were not afraid and the boys' consciousness is (perhaps) limited. We would therefore choose the yellow flag in this situation.

### How should you react pedagogically to sexual behaviour?

As a teacher, you want to reduce the type of form of problem behaviour and stimulate healthy and social behaviour. We begin with an instant and immediate reaction resulting from the flag assigned. It is also important to think long-term in parallel. What general basic pedagogical strategies are needed for conveying "healthy" sexual behaviour and resilience and for acting in a preventative or reactive manner in the case of transgressional sexual behaviour?

Based on our example, the following overview shows the different steps that can be taken when immediately reacting. The overview is designed as a guide which you can follow step-by-step:

- Name: You showed your penis to small children.
- Reflection: How do you see it yourself? Did you see how the children reacted?
- Was that okay? Making jokes is okay. Looking at your penises together is okay.
- Not okay: Not in front of small children, because it may scare them or they do not want you to. Not in public, do it somewhere private.
- Agreements: Can we reach agreements about this?

Tab. 2

#### Summary guideline for action

Reaction to/Aim	Green	Yellow	Red	Black
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<b>Put a stop or do not put a stop to behaviour</b>	Do not stop	Stop or reverse behaviour	Stop behaviour	Stop behaviour
<b>Find words/ adopt a clear position/ address subject</b>	Name, question	Name, question	Name, question	Name, question
<b>Think empathetically</b>	Discuss the feelings of all concerned	Discuss the feelings of all concerned	Discuss the feelings of all concerned	Discuss the feelings of all concerned
<b>Know which behaviour is okay and understand reasons why</b>	Confirm, explain reasons	Confirm positive behaviour, explain reasons	Confirm positive behaviour, explain reasons	Confirm positive behaviour, explain reasons
<b>Know which behaviour is not okay and understand reasons why</b>		Define what is not okay and explain reasons	Define what is not okay and explain reasons	Define what is not okay and explain reasons
<b>Arrive at agreements and determine how further critical support should be given</b>		Arrive at agreements, what is in okay and how to proceed	Arrive at agreements, increase supervision; focus on follow-up and redress	Arrive at agreements, increase supervision and limit freedom of movement; focus on follow-up and redress
<b>Clearly apply ban and demonstrate consequences</b>			Describe and explain confrontation, bans and consequences	Describe and explain confrontation, bans and consequences
<b>Know boundaries and stay safe</b>				Take measures
<b>Reporting</b>			Write report	Write a report and forward it

## **Evaluations and experiences**

Some evaluations of various aspects of the deployment and implementation of the flag system have already taken place in the Netherlands and Belgium. In 2012, an evaluation was undertaken by the University of Ghent (Van Hevele 2012) and Moncarey/Vandevelde (2014). In the Netherlands as well, an evaluation of the implementation in child and youth residential facilities was undertaken in 2015 and 2016 (Lijster-Van Kampen et al. 2017).

The results show that the method and theory of the flag system are widely used when a team has received training on the methodology. Professionals claim to have more knowledge about sexual development, the consequences of sexualised violence and the causes of border-transgressing sexual behaviour. Professionals feel better equipped to assess behaviours and address them with teens and within their team. In order to talk to adolescents about sexual and transgressional behaviour, they claim to experience greater personal effectiveness and a change to a more professional attitude. More professionals say they know how to respond to a given situation; uncertainties become fewer with regard to the educational response.

Changes were observed in the rules and concepts at institutions, in the relationships between adolescents and educators and amongst professionals. In most institutions, attention to the needs of children and adolescents has increased.

The young people themselves rate the drawings and explanations of the criteria and flags as positive and helpful and would like to know more about them.

Factors that support implementation comprise a sense of ownership, the adaptability of the tool, its practicality, the high degree of independence and its integration into the general pedagogical concept.

## **Good practices in the Netherlands and Belgium**

The Netherlands and Belgium (Flanders) have been working on the dissemination and implementation of the flag system since 2010, and there have also been some sector-specific developments. A first book on the fundamentals was published in 2010 (with revisions in 2014 and 2016).

A first derived methodology was developed together with youth welfare services in Flanders (Neyens/Frans 2011) and a second one shortly afterwards with sports facilities in Flanders (Van de Vivere/Frans 2013). In each case, the working method consisted of selecting a number of real-life situations with a working group of representatives from institutions, i.e. professional and public officials, to judge them collectively according to the criteria and then have them drawn. A version for the education sector followed later (2016).<sup>3</sup> The fact that customised versions exist based on recognisable case studies provides a great sense of identification ("our flag system"). The institutions were also responsible for the production, dissemination and implementation of training courses and training days that allowed a lot of educational professionals to be reached in a short period of time.

An enhancement and enlargement for children with special needs was published in 2016 in collaboration with Movisie<sup>4</sup> and Rutgers<sup>5</sup> "Buiten de Lijnen" (Transgressing Boundaries, Frans, E. et al., 2016), Aspects, such as gender and culture and disability and trauma, are consolidated there. Overall, the material now includes around 150 situational drawings.

The flag system has since been included in training curricula for prospective educational professionals and is a popular subject for undergraduate and graduate theses.

Sensoa collaborates with Movisie and Rutgers in the Netherlands. Movisie is responsible for the national, Rutgers for the international implementation of the flag system. Movisie works with a licensing system as an implementation strategy in the Netherlands and, in this context, trains specialists in youth welfare, education and youth protection etc. An important element of this implementation strategy is naming the flag system as a system of "protected intervention". This means that Movisie continuously controls the quality of the intervention and the application of the system. Here, a basic training course developed by Sensoa for the application of the flag system is offered along with a "Training-of-Trainers" (ToT) course and an e-learning module. Professionals who have gone through the six-day ToT programme can share the contents of the flag system with other professionals at their institutions. This should enable the system to be anchored sustainably in institutions.

Rutgers has published an English translation and a website with supplementary materials and networking opportunities ([www.flagsystem.org](http://www.flagsystem.org)) to promote the international exchange of the flag system. A group of international experts meets annually to exchange experiences.

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