Omgaan met ongewenst seksueel gedrag op school
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Summary

This thesis focuses on the responses of young people to unwanted sexual behaviour they experience during secondary education. Currently, little is known about this subject. First, the various responses of young people to unwanted sexual behaviour are described. Second, insight is gained into the factors which influence one of the possible responses: seeking social support.

More than 2,800 fourth year pupils from the provinces of Groningen and Utrecht at schools for general secondary education participated in this study. The final research group consisted of 512 young people, each of whom had experienced unwanted sexual behaviour during the year prior to the study (18%). The data were collected by means of a questionnaire which was filled out during class.

The primary research question is descriptive:

Which coping strategies do young people use as a response to unwanted sexual behaviour in secondary education?

Theoretical framework
The coping theory of Lazarus & Folkman (1984) is used as a theoretical framework to answer this question. This theory is about how people handle stressful situations. An important principle of this theory is the processional nature of coping – the strategies used can change over time. Another principle of the coping theory is the distinction between emotion-oriented and problem-oriented coping.

Results
The immediate coping strategies of young people usually consist of ignoring the situation. This comprises one third of the responses. The next most frequently used strategy is a smart reply or a joke. The strategy least used is physical resistance. Young people use an equal number of emotion-oriented and problem-oriented coping strategies. Fifty-two percent of the responses are problem-oriented and 48% emotion-oriented. In general there are few differences between the coping strategies of girls and boys. An exception to this is that girls more often admit that they did not know how to respond than boys.

By far the most widely used delayed coping strategy is seeking social support from others (56%). The next most common responses are thinking about how to respond the next time and trying to forget what happened, to stop thinking about it. Wishful thinking ('I kept thinking and hoping it hadn't really happened') is used least often. The school staff were informed only in very few cases. With regard to the difference between emotion-oriented and problem-oriented coping, it turns out that 55% of young people use emotion-oriented coping strategies and 45%
problem-oriented coping strategies. Again there are few differences between girls and boys – only two of the fourteen coping strategies show gender differences. The first strategy is accepting the situation because it cannot be changed anyway, which is used by boys more often than girls. The second strategy is seeking social support, which is used more often by girls than boys. Nevertheless, seeking social support is also one of the most common coping strategies for boys.

'Searching social support' receives particular attention in this thesis since it has a positive effect on the well-being of young people after a stressful experience. In addition, talking about the undesirable experience makes the problem transparent within the school, and measures to combat and prevent harassment may be initiated. The results show that young people clearly prefer seeking social support from their friends (almost 90%). A far smaller group talks to their parents. By far the least popular form of social support is school staff, in particular the school counsellor (3%). Seeking social support has had a positive effect for almost all the young people because they have been listened to, they know how others feel about it and they have received support. Young people who indicated that talking (also) has drawbacks point out that no preventive measures were taken and that many people know about it now.

Discussion
When the results are reviewed, it can be concluded that the coping theory is useful for describing the separate responses of young people to unwanted sexual behaviour. However, it is questionable whether the distinction between emotion-oriented and problem-oriented coping offers any significant added value. This study suggests that the classification yields no distinguishing capability – young people use both emotion-oriented and problem-oriented coping in 50% of the cases, both at the time of occurrence and afterwards. A related problem is that responses often cannot be classified clearly as emotion-oriented or problem-oriented. Physical resistance to unwanted sexual behaviour would initially appear to be problem-oriented (the harasser is made to understand that the harassment is out of line and must stop), but it may also be emotion-oriented (venting one’s emotion at the moment of the occurrence).

In the interpretative second part of this study the focus is on achieving insight into factors related to seeking social support.

The second research question is:

Which individual and environmental factors influence the coping strategy 'seeking social support'?

Theoretical framework
This research question was first analyzed using the Health Belief Model (HBM; Becker, 1974), a sociopsychological theoretical framework. This model is frequently used in research into similar problems. The HBM comprises modules
such as perceived severity (the subject's opinion of the seriousness of the harassment), perceived positive and negative effects of preventive action (the subject's opinion of the advantages and disadvantages of seeking social support) and the cue to action (a direct cause which increases the willingness to initiate action). The HBM mainly consists of individual factors. This model has been criticized for the lack of environmental factors. On the basis of this criticism and the results from earlier research into factors influencing coping behaviour in related areas, the Family-School-Peers Model (FSP Model) was developed. In this model environmental factors are central. Among the factors that play a role in this model are family factors (care and control of parents, sexual education given by parents), school factors (rules and atmosphere in the school, sexual education at school) and peer factors (sense of solidarity in the group of friends and peer pressure).

Results

Factors related to seeking social support in general
A logistic regression analysis with factors from both models has yielded a significant relation with seeking social support in general for 5 out of a total of 18 factors. The most important influencing factor is the family factor 'sexual education given by parents' – young people who have received sexual education from their parents seek social support much more often than those who have not. The other predictors are the cue to action 'knowing others who have experienced unwanted sexual behaviour', gender (girls tend to seek social support more often than boys), the perceived severity of unwanted sexual behaviour, and the peer factors 'being able to rely on friends for problems and worries'. The predictive factors stem from the HBM and FSP models. The separate models have an explained variance of 17%. The combined HBM-FSP Model increases the explained variance from 17% to 27%.

Factors related to seeking social support from school staff
The perceived severity of unwanted sexual behaviour is by far the most important influencing factor for seeking social support from school staff – the more seriously young people judge the harassment, the more often they will talk to school staff. Young people also seek social support from school staff more often if they know others who have experienced unwanted sexual behaviour (cue to action). Finally, the perceived benefits of talking to school staff are an influence – if young people expect to be taken seriously when they talk to staff, that they will receive support and the school will take countermeasures, they will seek social support from school staff more often.

The family factors of the FSP Model are most closely related to talking about unwanted sexual behaviour. Young people seek social support more often from school staff when their parents value each other, provide an extensive sexual education, care more for their children, and monitor their children's behaviour. Sexual education at school is the most important school factor. Young people seek social support more often from school staff than from other young people when
they feel that sexual education is taught in an interesting way, they can easily talk to their supervisor about sexuality, they have had a useful sexual education, they have received new information, and they enjoy discussing this information with classmates. Finally, the type of harassment has an influence on the context factors of unwanted sexual behaviour – young people who have experienced physically unwanted sexual behaviour, and more particularly several types of harassment, talk to school staff more often.

Discussion

The HBM has made a useful, though limited, contribution to the explanation of why social support is sought or avoided. Earlier HBM research among adolescents has also shown that HBM factors can explain part of the variance in the behaviour of young people, albeit a limited part. This limited influence has prompted various HBM researchers (Carmel et al., 1994; Petosa & Jackson, 1991) to propose an extension of the HBM with social environmental factors, such as the social norms of peers, but these researchers have not tested this empirically. In this thesis an empirical test of such a model has been carried out for the first time. On the basis of the results it may be concluded that the FSP Model, too, can make a useful contribution to explaining why social support is sought, albeit limited, and that a combination of the models yields a higher explained variance. Therefore the development of a model with environment factors does have an added value.

Recommendations for research and school practice

Sexual education at school is important for seeking social support from school staff. Sexual education should be enjoyable and relate to young people. The ease with which young people can talk about sexuality to their class mentor and to classmates stimulates seeking social support from school staff after unwanted sexual behaviour.

On the basis of these results the following recommendations may be formulated. For research it is important to gain insight into young people's definitions of useful, enjoyable sexual education at school. This research can provide criteria for a good quality sexual education which can be used in curriculum development. It is also advisable for schools to take sexual education seriously. The current approach varies per school. Many schools limit sexual education to technical details. For instance, in biology class the teacher discusses reproduction and contraceptives. Few schools discuss the emotional and social aspects of sexuality, such as being in love, flirting or saying no. Since young people tend to contact school counsellors sooner if they have had useful and enjoyable sexual education, it is advisable for schools to invest in a good sexual education.

Another result of the current study is that an atmosphere of warmth and trust in the family is conducive to seeking social support from school staff. An atmosphere of trust is also important for the school factors, but then specifically focussed on unwanted sexual behaviour. If young people are confident that if they talk to
school staff they will be taken seriously, that they will be supported and that measures will be taken, they will contact school staff for social support sooner. Research into teasing and aggression at school has shown the importance of a social bond with the school (Mooij, 1994; 1998). Among the important factors are the atmosphere at school and the clarity of the rules. However, this study has not revealed that young people who indicate that the atmosphere at school is good and that the rules are enforced are more likely to contact school staff for social support, although this was expected. It would seem that a good atmosphere alone is not sufficient to lower the threshold for talking about this subject. Specific trust in the area of sexuality and unwanted sexual behaviour is needed in this case.

On the basis of this result, it is recommended that schools focus more on the school's policy towards sexual harassment, since if the young people don’t know about it, they won’t use it. It is important that schools make it quite clear that they will deal seriously and confidentially with reports of unwanted sexual behaviour. Current research shows that 50% of the young people are not familiar with their school’s policy, even though all the schools had a policy. There is still a great deal of room for improvement in propagating knowledge about policy, especially among young people.

Finally, it appears that the school counsellor who is named as the first point of contact in policy statements is contacted relatively infrequently. Therefore, it would seem that the counsellor is not the first point of contact for young people, contrary to policy principles. In order to lower this threshold it is advisable to extend policy to include pupil counsellors, since young people tend to primarily talk to their peers about unwanted sexual behaviour. In this way an extra layer of counselling is created. A pupil counsellor can be the first point of contact and a school counsellor can take care of further support. The school counsellor can also function as a coach for the pupil counsellors. The basic conditions are that the pupil counsellors are a good cross-section of the pupils and that they are sufficiently trained and supported. A few schools in the Netherlands work in this way and the first results are generally positive. Appointing pupil counsellors for unwanted sexual behaviour can lower the threshold for young people and make them talk about unwanted sexual behaviour.