



The prevention of child abuse

Dutch policies and practice

Nederlands
Jeugd
instituut



1. Introduction

In the Netherlands, every year more than 100.000 children and young people between the ages of 0 and 18 are abused in one or more ways. It is estimated that between 40 and 80 children die of the consequences.

The Dutch Government finds it unacceptable that so many young people experience violence in their home situation. Therefore, legal measures to counteract child abuse have been broadened, professionals have a legal obligation to report child abuse, regional collaboration and a heightened awareness of child abuse are promoted.

Regional collaboration

Because of the serious effects of child abuse, the Dutch government focuses on the prevention and early recognition and halting of child abuse. An important goal of the Ministry for Youth and Families is the realization of a fit approach of child abuse based on prevention and treatment methods that have proved to be effective. As of 2003 similar methods have been developed and tested at the initiative of RAAK, a workgroup aiming at intensive collaborations between relevant institutes. In 2008 the Netherlands Youth Institute was commissioned to nationally implement the RAAK method over the course of three years (see chapter 7).

Heightening awareness

To heighten awareness and decisiveness of professionals around child abuse, the Ministry for Youth and Families is preparing the implementation of a legal obligation to report child abuse. Before, professionals in the Netherlands were not legally obliged to report child abuse, but this is about to change. In addition, the ministry launched an extensive public campaign in 2009.



2. Figures on child abuse

The most recent figures on child abuse in the Netherlands are taken from two different studies that are very different in their set-up:

- the facts and figures from 2005 of professionals and the *Advies- en Meldpunten Kindermishandeling* (Dutch Advice and Reporting Centres on Child Abuse, AMK) which state that 107.200 children

and young people (3 percent of all 0- to 17-year olds) experienced child abuse in that year, 37.201 of which with apparent damage;

- the 2007 self report of students of the ages 12 to 17 show that over 37 percent of the pupils have experienced some form of child abuse, 20 percent of which during the past year.

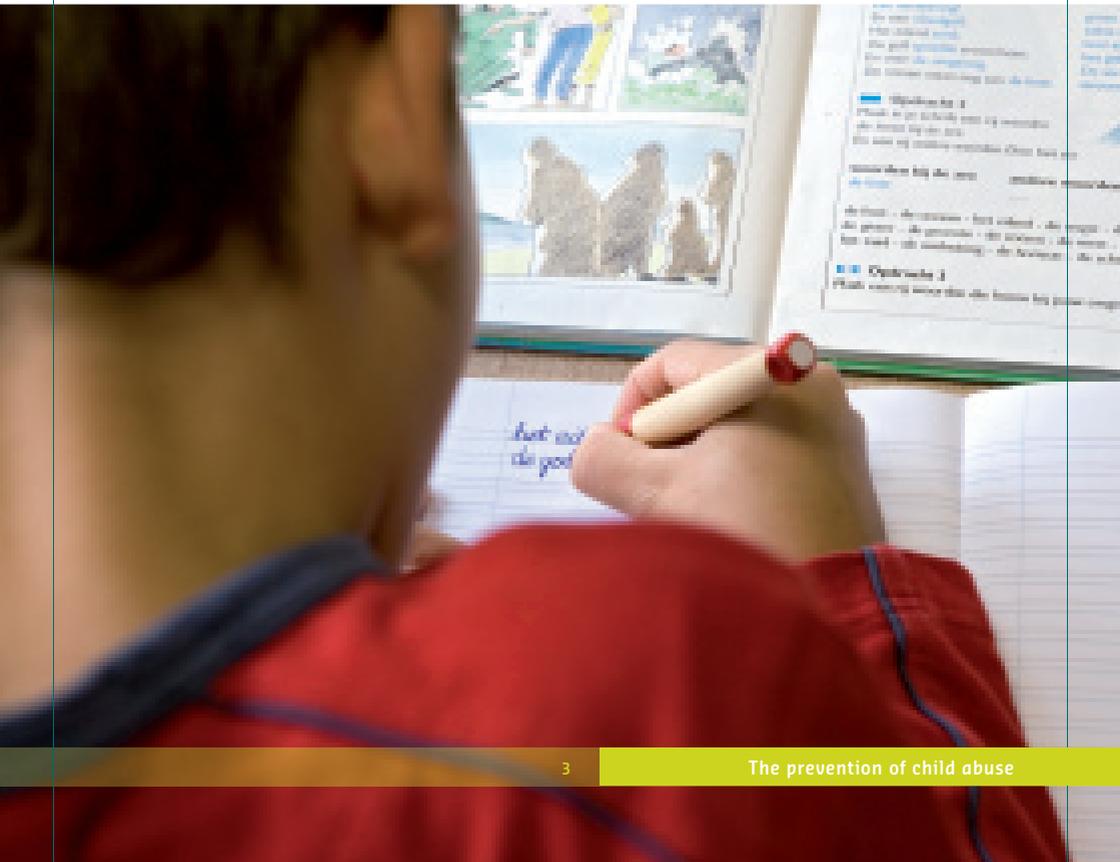


Figure 1: Summary of the most recent researches on abuse of children and youth

National Prevalence Study Maltreatment of Youth (Van IJzendoorn et al., 2007)				
Informant	Population	Definition	Prevalence	Remarks
Professionals and AMKs	0 to 17 years	Cases of child abuse in 2005 with apparent damage as well as probable damage.	107.200 3% of all 0- to 17-year olds	Results are a reflection of the cases of child abuse in 2005. Children who experienced child abuse before 2005 were excluded from this study.
		Cases of child abuse in 2005 with apparent damage.	37.201 new cases (excl. AMK-numbers)	
			50.000 (incl. AMK numbers)	

Students on abuse – study (Lamers-Winkelmann et al., 2007)				
Informant	Population	Definition	Prevalence	Remarks
Students from years 1 to 4 in secondary education	12 to 17 years	Victim of serious child abuse (once or more often)	37%	Due to underrepresentation in the sample survey, generalisation of the results to migrants is tricky.
		Victim of any form of abuse during the past 12 months	20% 160.700 students	

2. Kinds of child abuse

In the Netherlands the following kinds of child abuse are distinguished, which occur in different combinations:

- *Physical abuse*: beating, kicking, biting, pinching, scratching, dropping, inflicting burns, shaking (shaken baby syndrome) and Münchhausen Syndrom by Proxy.
- *Physical and psychological neglect*: withholding care and attention and therefore ignoring basic needs of love, warmth, security and support.
- *Mental or emotional abuse*: behaviour that reflects rejection and hostility.

- *Sexual abuse*: forcing sexual acts by using the dominant power position.
- *Being a witness to domestic violence*: growing up in a family in which abuse occurs is an unsafe situation, which may seriously affect the developmental process of children.

The following figures about the occurrence of the different forms of child abuse in the Netherlands are taken from Dutch research:

Figure 2: Cases of different forms of child abuse

Form of abuse	Number of cases	Percentage of the total number of cases
Sexual abuse	4.733	4,4%
Physical abuse	19.057	17,7%
Emotional abuse	12.685	11,8%
Physical neglect	31.558	29,4%
Education/emotional neglect	28.638	26,7%
Other	10.529	9,8%

Explanation: the total number and percentage dissent from those in Figure 1 because in 53 percent of the cases a single form of child abuse was involved, whereas 47 percent involved two or more forms.

(Source: National Prevalence Study Maltreatment of Youth, Van IJzendoorn et al., 2007)

Witnessing domestic violence

It is estimated that 30 to 70 percent of children with mothers who are being abused, are being abused themselves. In the past years the Netherlands has

come to the clear conclusion that, even for children who are ‘merely’ witness to violence, growing up in an unsafe situation has far reaching consequences.

3. Legal measures to address child abuse

Dutch law offers several possibilities to institute legal proceedings against child abuse:

- *The Dutch Criminal law* allows for measures against acts of indecency, abandoning a needy person, acts against life and abuse.
- *The Dutch Civil law* states that parents are first and foremost responsible for the mental and physical wellbeing of their children and explicitly compels them to raise children without using mental or physical violence or any other humiliating practices.
- *Specific laws* for youth care, health care and the educational system describe obligatory procedures following abuse or abuse of a minor who is dependent of the perpetrator for attention, protection and care or following abuse by dominant family members/partners.

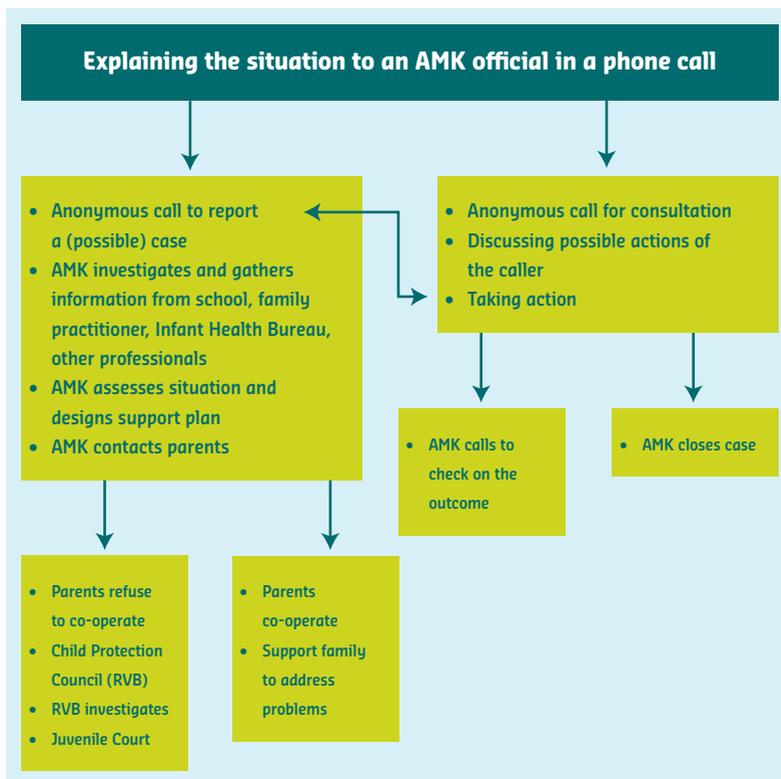
- The *law on temporary restraining orders* from the administrative law allows mayors to impose a ten-day restraining and ‘no contact’ order for the perpetrator if domestic violence or child abuse are imminent.
- As of 1995 the Netherlands abides by the *UN Convention on the Rights of the Child*, which lays down government responsibility to address and strive to prevent child abuse.

4. Reporting (suspicions of) child abuse

From the 1990s the Netherlands has known the *Advies- en Meldpunten Kindermishandeling/AMKs* (Advice and Reporting Centres on Child Abuse). At these centres all over the country where people can report suspicions of child abuse and receive advice on their possible (active) role and options.

Currently, the AMKs are part of the *Bureaus Jeugdzorg* (provincial youth care agency), which are responsible for the assessment and referral to the necessary care as well as support for children and youth as is stated under the Youth Care Act.

Figure 3: Outline of possible steps after reporting to an AMK



The AMK consults those who report a case, investigates suspicions of child abuse and, if necessary, informs the Child Protection Council to investigate whether legal measures are required. The Council may request the juvenile court to protect children

who experience abuse, by placing them under guardianship. If necessary, parents can – temporarily – be deprived of their parental rights or children can be moved to a safe place. Meanwhile Youth Care can mobilize the necessary support and care.

Figure 3: Total of first time contact with the AMK

Type of contact	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008
Advice	18.125	20.475	21.282	25.866	27.634
Consultations	6.116	6.237	6.647	7.777	9.156
Reports	9.820	11.340	13.815	16.932	16.156
Total	34.061	38.052	41.744	50.575	52.946
Increase compared to the previous year		12%	10%	21%	5%

(Source: Registration data AMKs 2008, MOgroep Jeugdzorg)



The annual registration data of the AMKs offer an overview of the quantity and nature of suspicions reported by care workers and bystanders. In 2008 the amount of requests for advice or consultation has increased, while there was a slight decrease in the number of reports. The increase may be explained by the growing attention for child abuse in the Netherlands triggering people to turn to the AMKs for advice and consultation sooner and easier. The decrease of reports may be a result of the fact that most new calls that were made, reported a concern of neglect instead of abuse. Another possible explanation is that the callers are more often inclined and willing to actively address the problem themselves.



Figure 4: Situation at the closure of AMK-files in 2008

	Abs.	%
Passed on to another organization	15.025	53,05
To Child Protection Council	4.860	17,16
Abuse not confirmed	3.548	12,53
No abuse	1.857	6,56
Delegated otherwise	466	1,65
Abuse ended	2.092	7,39
Left with unknown destination	222	0,78
Deceased after abuse	2	0,01
No entry	253	0,89
Total	28.325	100,00

(Source: Registration data AMKs 2008, MOgroep Jeugdzorg)

5. Risk factors for child abuse

As comparative research is not available, it is hard to say whether risk factors for child abuse in the Netherlands are different from those in other countries. Dutch research on child abuse, as well as international research, shows that a direct cause for child abuse can seldom be identified. Even though different forms of child abuse occur in particular circumstances in the Netherlands, there is not enough evidence to explain why child abuse occurs in one family but not in the other while their living conditions appear to be similar. It is assumed that the risk of child abuse increases considerably if and when four or more risk factors and stressors accumulate.

Physical and emotional abuse

In the Netherlands, the following risk factors for physical and emotional abuse have been identified: personal issues of parents (like depression or drug use) relational problems, pregnancy at an early age, unhappy childhood experiences and a lack of parenting dedication and skills. In addition, children with personal traits (such as innate and physical limitations) young age, behaviour and developmental

problems, appear to be extra vulnerable. In addition, there are various factors in the living conditions of families that can add to the risk of child abuse. These are, for example, a negative family climate with many conflicts and violence between the partners, poor social-economic circumstances (such as unemployment) poverty and crime, stress of being a single parent or having a large family and the social-cultural context of the family.

Sexual abuse

Dutch experts suspect that risk factors for sexual abuse mostly arise from disturbed family relations, a tolerant attitude towards sex with children, child porn and deviant behaviour after using alcohol, and the failure to persecute perpetrators of abuse.

Also, young children and children with a handicap, a chronic condition or developmental problems are particularly vulnerable. Girls are more likely to experience sexual abuse than boys. Boys as well as girls run a higher risk of abuse when they grow up with only one biological parent.

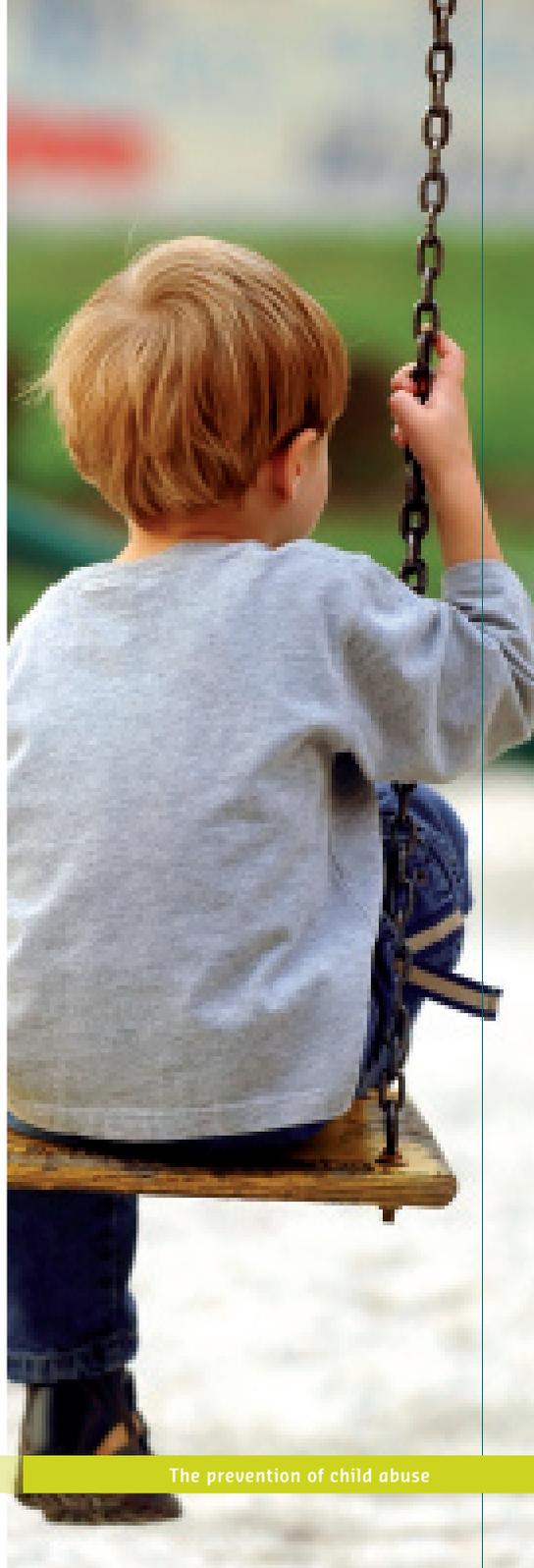
Sexual abuse appears to occur more often in families where the mother

is literally or figuratively absent and where the non-abusing parent does not offer sufficient support.

Perpetrators of sexual abuse in the Netherlands have often experienced unhappy childhoods themselves involving emotional neglect or abuse. Moreover, they are often persons who are unable to empathize with the child or are unaware of the child's hardship.

Protective factors

Next to the risk factors for the different forms of child abuse there are also factors that protect children against abuse. Dutch research has identified several protective factors: a harmonious parental relationship, parents who are aware of the influence of their childhood on their (parenting) practices, instrumental and social support from the social network and self appreciation, resilience, intelligence and social competence of the child. In case of sexual abuse the problem-solving skills of the family and the support of the non-abusing parent may promote recovery. It is evident that these protective factors are mostly unable to counteract or match the dominant power of an abusive adult.



6. Towards an effective approach

Despite the growing familiarity of the AMKs, the past years have shown that interventions and action following suspicions of child abuse as well as relief for victims often take too long to arrive. Next to the fact that care workers and bystanders are not always aware

of the signs of child abuse or do not – dare to – report them, professionals at times appear to refrain from exchanging information sufficiently, due to confidentiality. As a result there is no deliberation or collaboration. In order for this to change, much work has been done in the past years to improve recognition, reporting and collaboration.

Recognition

The Netherlands Youth Institute (NJI) runs the Instruments, Guidelines and Quality standards databank which contains various international and national scientifically sound instruments for the recognition of risks of child abuse, like the *Child Abuse Risk Evaluation* and the *Nijmeegse Ouderlijke Stress Index* (a Dutch parental stress index).

For the early recognition of child abuse by First Aid practitioners in Dutch hospitals the so-called SPUTOVAMO-form was developed.

Also, lists of (early) signs of child abuse have been composed for different age groups.



Reporting Codes and guidelines

The Dutch Government is preparing legislation, obliging all institutes and professional groups to have a child abuse reporting code. The Ministry for Youth and Families provides a basic model for the reporting code and encourages sectors to provide training programmes on the use of the code.

Some fields (like child day care and education) have developed their own protocols. In youth health care a guideline has been developed for practical actions following signs and suspicions of child abuse. The medical field has a general reporting code, which specifically mentions the breach of the oath to secrecy. Furthermore Dutch regulation requires that the causes of death of minors should be determined systematically. If evidence shows that a death was caused by child abuse, the other children in the family may receive support and protection.



7. RAAK: regional collaboration and action

After a number of incidents involving child abuse that lead to the gruesome death of several children, a well-known Dutch psychiatrist founded the working group RAAK at the beginning of this century. RAAK is an action group against child abuse. In Dutch, the word 'raak' means 'right on target', 'effective'.

RAAK

RAAK aims to develop a fit and joint approach of collaborating professionals in the same region in order to generate a more alert and more effective reaction to suspicions of child abuse and to work on different forms of prevention more specifically. Between 2003 and 2006 the approach was tested in four regions. The results were such that the government ordered to apply the approach nationally. The Netherlands Youth Institute supports municipalities throughout the implementation of the RAAK approach.

The core

The core of the RAAK approach is that caregivers, neighbours, friends and acquaintances, professionals in education, shelters, health care, welfare and the police recognize the signs of

child abuse at an earlier stage and work together more effectively to prevent or end child abuse. Consequently the RAAK approach promotes agreements between local and regional partners as well as training and education of professionals.

Municipalities that take up a leading role in this process will receive a governmental grant of 250.000 euro to appoint a regional coordinator for the period 2008-2010.

The added value

The added value of the regional approach according to RAAK is that the need and urgency of actions against child abuse and parenting support will appear on the agenda of governments, politics and organizations. The focus on child abuse will also reveal the limitations of the existing institutes and add to their readiness to collaborate more effectively.

The RAAK lessons

The evaluation of the four test regions of RAAK shows that actions against child abuse are more likely to succeed if:

- an approach is linked with existing developments and structures in *the*

initial phase, if a broad steering committee designs a joint plan and if the municipality assumes a leading role and appoints a capable coordinator;

- the RAAK framework is used as a mirror and a compass during *the planning phase*, a baseline study is executed and the entire scope of care is covered with particular emphasis on parenting support;



- the appointed coordinator has authority and a helicopter view, knows how to connect parties, create a platform and confront institutes on made agreements;
- the development of *actions and interventions*, as well as the implementation and the evaluation based on set quality criteria, are based on the RAAK framework.

Toward a care continuum

To support the RAAK approach a framework for a fit approach of child abuse is determined beforehand. The framework has to contain a “care continuum” with activities on the following levels:

- *Universal prevention* in the shape of awareness campaigns, information on parenting and child abuse and media attention: aimed at all parents, professional carers and children.
- *Selective prevention* in the shape of individual or group meetings and training programmes: aimed at defined risk groups with a higher occurrence of child abuse, for example teen mothers.
- *Indicated intervention* in the shape of individual coaching:

aimed at individuals with personal characteristics which are known to add to the risk of child abuse.

- *Early intervention* in the shape of individual support and coaching; aimed at individuals who are displaying early signs of child abuse, such as mental problems, insufficient monitoring and feelings of powerlessness.
- *Diagnostics and intervention* in the shape of formal care and criminal or civil legal measures; aimed at ending the abuse as soon as ultimately possible.

Effective actions against child abuse call for *evidence based* methods for all of these perspectives. With regard to RAAK, a description has been made of the existing interventions that can be used to tackle all aspects of the approach.



8. Action plan Children Safe at Home

In the Netherlands, the programme Ministry for Youth and Families is responsible for the coherence of the youth and family policy. In 2007 the ministry designed an action plan for actions against child abuse as well as appointed a national steering committee. In the plan of action the following was agreed upon with regard to the roles of the different members of the committee:

- The Ministry for Youth and Families supports the national implementation of the RAAK approach through the Netherlands Youth Institute, initiates a public campaign, supervises the implementation of a legally obliged reporting code and promotes the use of protocols for tracing and persecution. The ministry also informs and deliberates with other departments active in the field of

domestic violence and particular forms of child abuse.

- The 35 centre municipalities who are working on the realisation of regional centres for Youth and Families are formally agreeing on regional collaborations around child abuse and the appointment of regional coordinators.
- The provinces as well as the four most important urban regions are responsible for the youth care bureaus – including the AMKs – and aiming for a coherent approach with regard to child abuse.

More information on the Action plan Children Safe at Home is available on the website of the Ministry for Youth and Families (in Dutch): www.jeugdengезin.nl, PO box 16166, 2500 BD Den Haag, Netherlands, or call: +31 70 340 50 30.



9. The role of the Netherlands Youth Institute

The Netherlands Youth Institute supports the regional implementation of the RAAK approach by:

- supporting the development of a regional implementation plan;
- supporting the organization of formal training on early recognition, stopping and containing negative effects of child abuse;
- supporting the development of a regional action protocol which describes the different roles of the partners once a case of child abuse is reported, firstly by providing a sample protocol;
- providing a complete offer of available training programmes for professionals dealing with children as well as safeguarding that the training programmes are meeting the quality standards;
- contributing to the development of digital training programmes for the early recognition of child abuse;
- deliberating with project leaders of other national projects to share best practices in order to optimize actions against child abuse;
- monitoring and evaluating the implementation of regional work plans and informing the ministry;

- evaluating the effects of the RAAK approach.

The Netherlands Youth Institute is also running the Effective Youth Interventions databank offering independently certified preventive and curative interventions.

Visit our website for more information on the Netherlands Youth Institute: www.nji.nl, or write: PO box 19221, 3501 DE Utrecht, Netherlands, or call: +31 30 230 63 44.



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The Netherlands Youth Institute

The Netherlands Youth Institute is the Dutch national institute for child and youth matters. Its main aim is an optional development of children and young people by improving the quality and effectiveness of youth and parent services. As an expert centre, the Netherlands Youth Institute links scientific research to the practitioners' need for knowledge. It supports professionals in the field of children and youth through advice on policy, programmes and implementation, and by training professionals in evidence based methods.

Contact us

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