

Summary from Procesevaluatie Pilot Halt-interventie sexting

This research concerns a new intervention for youngsters who are guilty of light forms of unwanted online sexual behaviour. Since such an intervention did not yet exist, Halt Foundation and Rutgers developed the Halt-intervention sexting: Respect online (now called: Halt-intervention sexting) in 2017. On 1 September 2017 the implementation of the intervention started in all Halt-regions, on 1 November 2017 the pilot actually started.

Social media and the internet play an increasingly important role amongst youngsters. More and more information is being collected and shared online. This offers opportunities for the development of youngsters. From the perspective that some "experiments" are part of the development, sexting can be understood as exploratory behaviour of youngsters. By sexting we mean: creating and distributing sexual pictures of those involved or other forms of sexual communication. Sexting is a common phenomenon amongst youngsters and occurs with both boys and girls in different capacities.

When sexting takes place without the permission of the person depicted, we speak of unwanted online sexual behaviour. This type of behaviour can be classified as criminal behaviour.

This concerns two types of unwanted online sexual behaviour:

1. Sexting between youngsters where the visual material is undesirably manufactured and/or distributed.
2. Profile abuse and sexual harassment or insults.

The consequences of unwanted sexting can be huge for both the perpetrator and the victim. With a referral to the new Halt-intervention, the young person is offered an alternative at an early stage and becomes aware of the causes and consequences of his behaviour.

The purpose of this research is to determine whether the newly developed Halt-intervention sexting is carried out as intended and whether the right target group is being reached.

This process evaluation answers the following questions:

1. How does the referral of youngsters to the Halt-intervention sexting take place?
2. How does the implementation of the intervention take place?
3. How do youngsters, parents/carers and relevant authorities experience the intervention?

In terms of the effect ladder of the Netherlands Youth Institute (www.nji.nl), the conditions for effectiveness are shown: the intended target group is **reached**, the intervention is **carried out as intended**, there is little dropout and clients are **satisfied**.

A Halt-settlement is a punishment for youngsters aged 12 to 18 who have committed a minor offense according to the public prosecution service. Every Halt-settlement consists of fixed components and the same principles apply to every Halt-settlement. These fixed components are described in Halt's general work process description. In addition, two manuals have been written for the Halt-intervention sexting: the Halt-Respect online guidance manual and the program manual.

The aim of the intervention is to give youngsters who have shown light forms of unwanted online sexual behaviour insight into (the negative consequences of) their digital behaviour and to ensure that there is no recurrence of this behaviour. Because of the intervention, youngsters should become more aware of the negative consequences for themselves and for the victim. Parents are also involved in the intervention.

The Halt-intervention consists of the following fixed components: Intake, three learning assignment, follow-up interview, parent interview, apologize and final interview.

These components have been developed based on research into determinants of unwanted online sexual behaviour of youngsters. These determinants are: knowledge of rules, awareness of consequences, recognition of risky situations and resilience, and parenting skills with regard to safe online behaviour.

In principle, the Halt-employee must perform all these components according to the program manual. We have investigated to what extent these parts have been carried out in accordance to general work process description. Attitude, language and conversational skills were also examined during the conversations.

In addition to these fixed components, the Halt-employee can estimate himself whether an additional interview should take place, if school should be contacted or if a recovery interview with the victim should take place.

The research started with a preliminary phase in which exploratory talks were conducted and a document analysis was carried out, in order to map the intervention and the context of the implementation. In the main phase, the following research methods were used to answer the research questions:

- Registration analysis (Aurah, Halt's registration system)
- File investigation (checklist, evaluation lists of Halt)
- Observations of the Halt-employee and the youngsters/parents who participate in the intervention.
- Interviews with Halt-employees who carry out the Halt-intervention
- Questionnaires for youngsters and parents
- Interviews with youngsters and parents
- Interviews with professionals from relevant authorities

Recruitment and response

In total, 100 youngsters were registered for the Halt-intervention sexting during the research period (Jan-Oct 2018). For the group of 100 youngsters, some characteristics have been described (gender, region and level of education). For 80 youngsters, other information was also obtained from the registration system in addition to these variables. A complete dataset based on a checklist, evaluation list and information in the registration system was collected in 47 cases. Most analyses are based on these 47 youngsters.

Fifteen observations were made (one intake, four follow-up interviews, four parent interviews and six final interviews) and six Halt-employees were interviewed. In addition to that, two youngsters were interviewed and four parents. Finally, 12 professionals from the authorities involved (school, social services, police, OM) were interviewed.

Reference

The reference procedure is described in the guidance manual. The unwanted online sexual behaviour that is eligible for the Halt-intervention sexting does not have a specific legal framework, but is classified under various types of criminal behaviour, such as libel or slander. The choice that the police and the prosecution have for a suitable settlement is described in the Sexting Guideline. The guideline leaves room for a personal assessment by the police and the prosecution. How the police handles a case after arrival depends on various circumstances and factors:

- the degree of voluntary with which the visual material was created;
- the nature of the image material;
- method and extent of distribution;
- relationship between the persons involved;
- age and background of those involved;
- possible motives.

The report is categorized based on these circumstances and factors. The guideline has three types of categories. The complete settlement repertoire is available for all three categories, but it is indicated for each category which settlement should be chosen. The information about possible settlements in cases in category 1 does not comply with the indication and contra-indication criteria for the Halt-intervention sexting.

Part of the sexting reports is identified via crime reports. Not every report turns into an official report. When the police decides to do so, the matter is discussed with chain partners. In this consultation it can be decided to refer the case to Halt. The number of crime reports and official reports varies considerably between the various police regions, as does the number of cases dealt with at Halt. According to the interviewed professionals (Halt-employees, employees of the public prosecution service and the police), the willingness of victims to report cases of sexting is low. The number of reports of sexting cases known to the coordinator is much larger than the number of applications for the Halt-intervention sexting. According to the coordinator, not all sexting cases are referred to Halt. This may have to do with the severity of the type of offense, but also with the relative unfamiliarity of the Halt-intervention sexting with a number of chain partners.

Intended target group

The intended target group consists of boys and girls between the ages of 12 and 17 who have shown mild forms of unwanted online sexual behaviour. The behaviour is described as characteristic age-related offense behaviour that either has to do with sexting between youngsters in which the visual material is undesirably manufactured and/or spread or profile abuse and sexual harassment or insults. Other indication criteria are that the youngster confesses, agrees with the intervention, meets the Halt recidivism regulation and a parent agrees with the intervention. In addition, a number of contra-indications are included in the program manual:

- unwanted realization, possession or distribution **and** blackmail (sextortion), coercion, deception; **or** the victim is over 5 years younger than the youngster;

- Planned behaviour;
- Suspicions of physical sexual cross-border behaviour;
- the offender has a history of sexual offence;
- the suspect denies;
- there are serious, emotional, physical and/or behavioural problems for which adequate help has not yet been deployed;
- The suspect has previously completed a Halt-intervention sexting.

The reached target group meets the age criterion. Whether there always is a slight form of unwanted online sexual behaviour is difficult to figure out due to the different ways of registering in the checklist and Aurah. In eight cases, despite the fact that the indication criteria were not met, the case was taken into consideration. These cases had special circumstances and the matter was consulted with the public prosecutor. In a small number of cases exceptions have been made to the contraindications, again based on specific circumstances and in consultation with the public prosecutor.

Characteristics

Seventy percent of the youngsters are boys, and most youngsters have a low level of education.

The crime was committed by oneself in 68.1% of the cases. According to the youngsters, anger/frustration and peer pressure are mainly reasons for committing the crime.

Most youngsters can empathize somewhat with the victim and take responsibility for what they have done, but there is still some degree of trivialization or the blame is partly placed on the victim by the youngsters and their parents. Nevertheless, parents do agree with the punishment. Overall, it seems to be that the majority of participants are youngsters without major problems, who do not experience psychosocial problems, domestic violence and/or child abuse. In most cases (82.5%) there is only one victim. The victim is usually a girl and has the same age as the perpetrator. The victim is often an acquaintance of the perpetrator.

Intended implementation

We have used the registrations in Aurah (n = 47) and 15 conversations were observed. This number is lower than anticipated because the demand to be present during the observations raised quite a few questions with the Halt-employees. Due to the small number of observations, we can only give a limited representation of the actual execution.

The core components have been used most of the time. Start, the follow-up and final interview took place in all 47 registered interventions. In one observed interview, the follow-up, parent and final interviews were combined in one interview. The parent interview took place in 28 of the 47 cases. In the other cases, parents were not open to an interview. In 40 cases, all learning assignments are made. A reason for not giving the youngster all three learning assignments is that the Halt-employee thinks that the assignment is too difficult for the youngster. The excuse assignment was executed in various ways. Usually the youngster wrote a letter to the victim.

Although the program manual prescribes that part of the intake interview should only be conducted with the youngster, this was not done in 17 of the 47 registered cases. Halt-employees state that parents resisted in the beginning. During the observation of one intake, we saw that the interview

was partially conducted as described. Four follow-up interviews were observed. Not all parts were usually carried out as described in the program manual. Learning assignments were reviewed quickly and there was little room for reflection. The impression is that the follow-up interview program is too full and therefore choices are made by the Halt-employee.

In the parent interviews that were carried out, not all the components that should be discussed were always discussed. The six cases that were observed, showed that not all assignments were fully completed in the final interview.

Elements that can be used at one's own discretion were occasionally used. In four of the 47 cases school has been contacted. In eleven cases an extra interview has been initiated, usually to offer extra support.

In general, the Halt-employees did not devote the intended attention to meta-communication during the interviews (explaining the objectives and working methods of components, explaining the right to complaint, explaining the next steps, etc.). They were mainly focussed on the content of the youngster and/or the parent. The Halt-employees connected to the youngsters and their parents through their attitude and language. Conversation skills that lead to more in-depth conversations, such as asking questions in-depth, checking whether information is understood, giving feedback, naming non-verbal behaviour and emotions were seen less.

In about a quarter of the cases, contacts were sought with the emergency services. The records showed that the Halt-employee was not always referred to for help requests. The majority of all interventions were closed positively - in only seven percent of the registered cases, youngsters dropped out or the process was ended negatively for other reasons.

Promoting and obstructing factors for the effectiveness of the intervention were evaluated based on literature and interviews with those involved. The results of international studies on prevention and criminal behaviour argue in favour of always having conversations with parents (and possibly offering help). The parent interview is appreciated by both Halt-employees and parents (and that is promoting), but Halt-employees are uncertain about the content and find it difficult to fulfil one whole hour. The fact that the parents' interview is voluntary also has an obstructive effect. The type of learning assignments in the Halt-intervention is in line with the results of studies that show that interventions must focus on the development of competences (promoting factor). However, the specific learning assignments are not always considered suitable and/or instructive by Halt-employees and youngsters (obstructive).

According to Halt-employees and parents, initiating the intervention a long time after the date of the crime is obstructing. This appears to occur in some cases.

Experiences

For the experiences of the youngsters, parents and professionals, we used the results from the evaluation lists (n = 47) and the interviews with two youngsters and four parents.

The evaluations show that both youngsters and parents are satisfied with the Halt-intervention. The duration of the assignments was found to be good, and more than half of the youngsters thought the assignments were clear. Furthermore, it was stated that the intervention helped to think before acting, and that it made them more aware of the consequences of unwanted sexting. It is unclear to what extent youngsters have filled in socially desirable answers about the learning effect. The

parent evaluation also shows that they are satisfied with the Halt-intervention and that they thought that the contact with the Halt-employee was good. In addition, they think that the intervention will not be sufficient if the youngster does not experience guilt, and some think that executing community service could also be effective.

In the interviews, youngsters and parents also indicated that they were satisfied with the Halt-intervention. Youngsters and parents sometimes had different expectations at the beginning of the intervention; they thought the intervention would be stricter. The contact with the Halt-employee was experienced positively. The youngsters were also content with the learning assignments. According to a youngster, the intervention has increased empathy. Parents were satisfied with the learning efficiency of their child. Parents thought it was good that the intervention aimed at learning and becoming aware of behaviour, although they expected that a community service order would also be a part of it. Most parents found that the learning effect is primarily achieved through the combination of learning assignments in the intervention and think that this will reduce the risk of recidivism.

It is noteworthy that parents indicated that they pay more attention to the use of social media, while the youngsters indicated that they had not made additional agreements with their parents. As a result, the intervention possibly only partly achieves an important goal that contributes to the effectiveness (more supervision and agreements with educators). This result underlines the importance of investing more in parent interviews. In general, the majority of parents agreed with the punishment their child received.

The interviews with representatives of the authorities involved show that the Halt-intervention is still relatively unknown. They advise to provide more information about what the intervention entails and when it can be applied. Furthermore, all parties indicate that there must be some flexibility and customization in the intervention: looking at the level of the youngster and checking what fits or does not fit. They should also look into whether assistance is already involved and to what extent the intervention fits in with the treatment that the youngster already receives. Finally, it is pointed out that Halt is in a good position to act more preventively by offering more information in the region.

Conclusions:

Reached target group

To reach the intended target group for the Halt-intervention Sexting, Halt depends on references. The implementation phases "dissemination" and "adoption" have not yet gone well. As a result, some of the youngsters that do qualify for the intervention may not be reached. The youngsters that are reached belong to the intended target group: youngsters who commit light crimes and have no additional problems.

Execution as intended

In many cases the intervention is not carried out as prescribed in the program manual. This means that not all core components are executed, or not executed as intended. Most deviations have to do with the conversations that have to be conducted with parents (conversation is not conducted), and with the follow-up conversation, in which the assignments must be discussed (assignment is

not discussed or is adjusted). Most youngsters complete the learning assignments. In the observed conversations, Halt-employees connect with youngsters and their parents in their attitudes and language as intended, but are less successful in conducting in-depth conversations. The intended meta-communication (explanation of goals, procedures, intentions, complaint possibilities) is often not included.

The other elements: extra conversation, contact with school, and excuse are filled in as intended.

Satisfaction

Both the questionnaires and the interviews show that the youngsters and parents are satisfied with the intervention. Contact with the Halt-employee and the learning assignments are considered positive. Youngsters say they have learned from the intervention and parents indicate that they have noticed some behavioural change. Parents consider the parent interview important to stay informed. Professionals who know the Halt-intervention are satisfied with the cooperation and contact with the Halt-employee. They do not know the content of the Halt-intervention, this too should become more known.

Recommendations

The process evaluation has shown that with the implementation of the new Halt-intervention Sexting, an intervention has been developed that is positively received by all involved. However, improvement is still needed on numeral points. These are listed below.

- With regard to the guidelines: indicate more clearly which sexting cases are eligible for the Halt-intervention sexting. Use the same words and criteria as in the guidance manual.
- With regard to the guidance manual and the guideline: describe the contraindications more clearly.
- Improve the connection between the checklist and Aurah with regard to the description: light form of sexual cross-border behaviour.
- Stronger focus on embedding the intervention in the local network of organizations (inter alia by: involving managers in the implementation process and point out the necessity and value of the intervention.
- Fine-tune the program-content to distinctive characteristics of the target group, such as the learning ability and dealing with emotions. In addition to peer pressure, anger and frustration is also a common motive. No attention is being paid to this in the intervention.
- Better support for implementers in making choices in the components during the discussions. A selection scheme could possibly be added in the program manual.
- Address other elements such as attitude and in-depth conversational skills in the program manual. These elements should also receive more attention in training/intervision.
- Parents and youngsters should be better informed about the intervention before the intake, so they can develop a more realistic picture.
- Critically evaluate the films for the film assignments: are all films suitable for all ages? More attention in the training and program manual is desirable.
- More firmly embed making agreements between parents and youngsters in the entire intervention and better monitoring.

This process evaluation has a number of limitations that may influence the expressiveness of some of the results. The small numbers of observations and interviews are a limitation in particular, since they may give an incomplete and less reliable representation. In addition, halt employees, parents and youngsters selected themselves to participate in the observations. This may have caused selection bias. The registration of the application in Aurah is limited because it only indicates whether all conversations have been conducted, and if not, why it did not happen. This registration may not always have been complete and does not provide much substantive information. The measurement of the satisfaction of youngsters and their parents can be influenced by socially desirable answers, since this evaluation was linked to the evaluation from Halt.

Nevertheless, this research has provided many leads for further improvement of the implementation. However, it does not provide information about the extent to which the prevention objectives are achieved. After the intervention has been further improved and sufficient experience has been gained with it, it is useful to conduct a research into the achievement of the objectives.

