

## Session 4: Building a Positive Self-Image

**NOTE:** This Help Wanted session may be useful to people of any age. However, it was originally designed with adolescents and young people in mind. When we refer to sexual interest in "younger children" we mean younger than you if you are under the age of 18. If you are 18 or older, please interpret "younger children" as referring to anyone under the age of 18.

### Introduction

In this session, we'll talk about what self-image is and why it's important to build a positive self-image. You'll also hear from people who are sexually attracted to children *and* living happy, healthy, non-offending lives.

In addition, we'll discuss:

- Tools to construct a positive personal identity
- Positive messages about people with an attraction to children
- Stories of positive role models

### Self-Image

Self-image is the way we each think about ourselves: who we are, what we do, and how we interact with the world. We each have many characteristics that make up who we are as a whole person.

For example, self-image might include:

- Personal characteristics
- Relationships
- Sexual attractions
- Interests
- Occupations

It's normal for our self-image to change over time as we grow and have different experiences. We might act differently in different situations. We might even feel different from one day to the next. It's also normal for us to be proud of some characteristics and wish others were different.

None of us is defined by only one part of ourselves. You might be sexually attracted to children, but that attraction doesn't define your total self.

In the next activity, you'll list some qualities that are part of your self-image.

### Qualities That Describe You

List four to six qualities that describe you. If you need help thinking of qualities, answer these questions:

- What do you like to do?

- What are you good at?
- How would your friends describe you?
- What is really important to you?

Take a look at your list of qualities. Are they mostly positive or mostly negative? We all have qualities we like and dislike about ourselves, but it's important to focus on the positive ones to build a healthy self-image.

We believe everyone has positive qualities! If you can't think of any right now, talk to someone who knows you well and ask them to list some of your positive qualities.

Write at least two positive qualities on a piece of paper and keep it with you to remind you of your strengths.

### **Media Messages**

A lot of media coverage about people attracted to children is negative and focused on incidents of child sexual abuse or fears of child sexual abuse. The media messages might hurt your feelings, scare you, or make you angry, especially if you feel you can't speak up and defend yourself. Remember that media messages don't define who you are—you do.

We've spoken with many young people who have a sexual attraction to children and have never acted on that attraction. They've told us what they would like others to know about them. Here are a few of the things they said:

- "I'm a normal person, and I have other interests. I enjoy computer games, hiking, and playing poker. I have a lot of other things that make up my life, and this is one small part of it."
- "We are genuinely committed to living a life where we don't hurt people. The fact that we are pedophiles doesn't make us psychopaths, deranged sex monsters, or anything like that."
- "I didn't choose to be like this. I would rather not, but it's just one of those things. I'm not a bad person, or I try not to be."

You might have had thoughts like these yourself. Is there something *you* would want people to know about you?

### **What Would You Say?**

If there's something you want to tell people about having a sexual interest in children, write it down.

You might not feel you can share your opinions publicly right now, but over time and through educating people, we hope to have more open conversations in society, both about preventing child sexual abuse and also about supporting people who are attracted to children and making safe and healthy choices.

### **Maintaining a Positive Self-Image**

A big part of successfully living a non-offending life is paying attention to those parts of your life that build your positive self-image.

It's not unusual for people who are sexually attracted to children to have negative thoughts about themselves because of their attraction. Focusing on your talents, accomplishments, and close relationships can give you strength when you're facing all kinds of challenges in life.

Here are a few other strategies you can use to support a positive self-image:

**Be Kind to Yourself**

Have compassion for yourself, the same way you do for others when they are struggling in some way.

**Accept Being Human**

We all have strengths and weaknesses. The important thing is to accept yourself and try to do your best.

**Use Positive Self-Talk**

Saying positive "I" statements such as "I am confident," or "I make good choices" can help you avoid negative thinking.

In the following activity, you can practice positive self-talk.

**Practice Positive Self-Talk**

Write a few positive "I" statements to practice positive self-talk. For example, "I'm doing my best," "I'm creating a good life for myself," "I believe in myself," or "I can handle this."

Positive self-talk might feel awkward at first, but it's a really helpful way to break a habit of negative thoughts and support a positive self-image. Try putting positive self-talk statements where you can see them often.

**It's Okay to Ask for Help**

Sometimes it isn't enough to "look on the bright side" or try to be more positive. If you suffer from depression or anxiety, you might need counseling or treatment to help you manage negative feelings.

If you think you might be depressed or anxious, use an online screener or talk to a doctor or counselor to find out if you could benefit from talking to someone about depression, anxiety, or both—people often experience them together. We all need help sometimes. By getting support for your emotional and mental well-being, you'll feel better overall, and it will be easier for you to build and maintain a positive self-image.

Online screeners and additional resources can be found on our [Resources page](#).

If you are in crisis, please seek help immediately.

- Call 1-800-273-TALK (8255) to reach a 24-hour crisis center,
- Text MHA to 741741, or
- Go to the nearest emergency room

### **Living a Happy, Healthy, and Fulfilling Life**

You probably won't hear much about them, but every day there are people with an attraction to children who are leading happy, healthy, non-offending lives. Next, you'll hear from a few of them.

#### **Success Story One**

"I think I'm on a good track now. I just finished an undergrad degree a few months ago. What I do a lot for fun is, I'm an improv actor. That's become a very big thing for me, and I'd say it's helped me manage everything else because it's really given me something to focus on. It's given me a big support group. They don't know about that side of me, but they know pretty much everything else. And I've made a lot of friends online over the years. Some of them I'm still very close to.

When I met others online who shared similar attractions, that made me immediately feel less alone. There were others—50 or 60 year olds—who just lived normal lives, and it was just part of them. And to see that that was something people could do...It hadn't even occurred to me before that, oh someone could live a normal life like this.

The truth is—and not wanting to sound melodramatic or anything—I don't think I'm the happiest person, but I'm incredibly better than I was a few years ago. I was very isolated and didn't really have many friends, but just gaining a support network over the years, that's really helped a lot because I know there are people I can talk to and people who will come to my rescue if I need to be rescued. The biggest thing to remember is that the attraction is only one part of who anyone is. There's so many other things that define any person."

#### **Success Story Two**

"I am a man in my early 40s, married to an adult woman, with children. I have a successful career as an engineer in the IT industry. I have many friends and hobbies, including watching movies and TV shows, reading books, playing sports, and photography.

When I was about 14 I started to realize that the boys I was attracted to weren't quite growing up with me. I struggled with this idea, mostly being terrified that anyone would find out and also that I would never find someone that I could love and share my life with.

I chugged along in my life, went to college, and met a woman that eventually became my wife. I never told her about my feelings for young boys until many years later. While she was shocked and hurt that I kept such a big secret from her, she understood why I had been so afraid. She also forgave me and accepted me.

To adolescents who are going through this process, you should know you are not alone in this. There are support communities out there where you can talk about your situation with people like you that won't judge or vilify you, where you can learn from others' experiences in order to develop coping mechanisms to deal with your sexuality. You are not monsters or bad people simply for having feelings that you didn't choose.

If you ever feel like you need professional help, there are professionals out there who are compassionate and nonjudgmental that can help you cope and fully accept yourself and your situation. You deserve to be loved and treated with dignity, to live a happy and fulfilling life as much as anyone else, and it is possible to live such a life while being a pedophile."

### **Conclusion**

Each of us is made up of many qualities. Your self-image is how you feel about all the qualities that make you uniquely you.

Maintaining a positive self-image is an important part of supporting your emotional and mental health and can give you strength in managing your attraction to children and your feelings about how society judges you.

At times you might feel alone because of your attraction, but you aren't alone. There are people who are sexually attracted to children who are living happy, healthy, non-offending lives. You deserve that too.

Please visit the [Resources](#) section of the site for more information.

**END**