

# Banning Childlike Sex Dolls /Sex Dolls that Appear as Children

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## Abstract

This article examines legislative and political developments in Denmark and Norway from 2016 until 2022 on the topic of banning 'child sex dolls', i.e. 'dolls that appear as/look like children'.

In Norway, court cases are the focal point for the criminalisation/banning of child sex dolls and are therefore central to this article. A series of cases resulted in the Norwegian Supreme Court (finally) rendering a verdict in September 2019, where it decided that child sex dolls are to be considered forbidden as they imply a 'sexualisation of children', which is prohibited by Section 311 of the Norwegian Criminal Code.

In Denmark, the focus lies in the political debate. One Danish political party suggested banning such dolls in 2016, but this was rejected by the Parliament. Since then, the debate has gone back and forth, primarily relying on advice from relevant organisations, i.a. Save the Children Denmark, until a bill banning the dolls was presented in November 2021.

The article concludes that the scientific research is too scarce, i.e. that we have insufficient knowledge on the effect on the users of child sex dolls. We do not know whether continuously allowing the purchase and possession of child sex dolls leads to an increased number of sexual assaults against children – or a decline in that number. Experts argue that as long as we lack any solid evidence that the use of these dolls has a harmful effect it is heedless, and may even be risky, to ban them. The majority political opinion has changed over time, going from 'we need more knowledge on the matter' to 'we need to protect the interests of the children, and the doubt of the harmful effect of the use of the dolls should be in the children's benefit'. This change, however, has occurred in the absence of any scientific research to support it.

## Abstract

Denne artikel redegør for udviklingen i Danmark og Norge fra 2016 til i dag (2022) på området for forbud mod 'børnesexdukker', eller 'sexdukker der ser ud som/ligner børn'.



For Norge er retssagerne fokuspunkt for kriminalisering af børnesexdukker, og således står de centralt i denne artikel. Retssagerne har ført til den første – og hidtil eneste – Højesteretsdom, der i september 2019 besluttede at børnesexdukker er forbudte, fordi de udgør en 'seksualisering af børn', der er omfattet af § 311 i den norske straffelov.

For Danmark er fokus på den politiske debat. Et politisk parti foreslog i 2016 at dukkerne skulle forbydes, men dette blev nedstemt i Folketinget. Siden har debatten bølget frem og tilbage, primært baseret på organisationers vejledning på området, bl.a. Red Barnet, indtil et lovforslag, der forbyder dukkerne, blev præsenteret i november 2021.

Det primære problem er, at der ikke er tilstrækkelig med videnskabelige undersøgelser, dvs. ikke nok viden, om effekten på de personer, der anvender børnesexdukker. Vi ved ikke om fortsat tilladelse til køb og besiddelse af børnesexdukker fører til et øget antal af seksuelle overgreb mod børn – eller et fald i det tal. Eksperternes mening er, at så længe vi ikke ved, om der er en skadelig effekt af brugen af disse dukker, er det unødvendigt, og måske endda risikabelt, at forbyde dem. Hovedparten af politikernes mening er skiftet over tiden fra 'vi bliver nødt til at opnå mere viden på området' til 'vi må beskytte børnenes interesser, og tvivlen angående den skadelige effekt af brugen af dukkerne skal veje til børnenes fordel' – uden, dog, at basere dette på videnskabelige undersøgelser.

**Keywords:**

Child pornography, sex dolls, political debate, moral legislation.  
Børnepornografi, sexdukker, politisk debat, moralsk lovgivning.

## 1. Introduction

This article is written in extension of research conducted for the Dutch Scientific Research and Documentation Centre, which regarded the need and feasibility of a legislative ban in the Netherlands of handling<sup>1</sup> of 'sex dolls that appear as children', or 'childlike sex dolls'. As part of this research, six other jurisdictions' laws and practices on the area were examined, including Denmark and Norway, which the author of this article was responsible for.

This article elaborates on the developments in Denmark and Norway, primarily based on media- and political discussions, legislative amendments, and judgments. Subsequently, the article discusses experts' opinions on the topic.

The applicable definition of a childlike sex doll ('CSD') is:

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1. 'Handling' is applied as an umbrella term in this article for import, purchase, possession, sale, transfer, etc.



*'A three-dimensional object that:*

- represents (parts of) a (realistic) child (<18 years);*
- that can be used for the purpose of sexual stimulation and/or sexual release; and*
- that – in the case of a sex robot – thanks to a computer programme can show or imitate acting in a particular manner' (Loibl, Van der Aa, Lundh, Niemark & Well, 2022).*

### 1.1. Norway

CSDs have been manufactured and sold globally for over a decade, originating from (primarily) oriental companies, and are starting to appear in the Western world (Chatterjee, 2019). While studies show that society is accepting sex dolls *in general*, there is a tendency that specifically CSDs are rejected on ethical grounds (Eichenberg, Khamis & Hübner, 2019).

On 3 March 2017, the news media NRK reports that Norwegian customs confiscated around 20 CSDs from October 2016 to Spring 2017. Customs reported the findings to Kripos because they suspect the import is criminalised (Jørstad, 2017).

The dolls are described as *'approximately one meter long'*, some of them are *'wrapped in children's blankets and are wearing children's clothing'*. Ann Kristin Grosberghaugen, leader of Kripos' rape section, believes the situation to be *'very serious'*. Kripos considers the order of sex dolls as an indication that the buyers are sexually attracted to children, and it is possible that sexual relations with the dolls can break down barriers for abusing children. The dolls have been ordered exclusively by men, from all social classes, aged 18-60, residing on various locations in Norway. Some are convicted sex offenders, and several have access to children through their work or family relations (Jørstad, 2017).

Police attorney Erik Rand informs that four cases are being persecuted (March 2017) but expects more cases to come. Of the four suspects, one is remanded in custody for two weeks: The police conducted a search at this person's place of residence upon a suspicion that he imported a CSD. During the search, the police found child pornography materials. *'The further investigation will show whether the suspect has ordered the doll'* that was confiscated by Gardermoen customs, and *'whether he knew what he ordered'*, says Rand. Department director of the Customs Services' Intelligence Centre Jørn Ferner Bergersen says *'there is no doubt that you know what you order, when you purchase such a doll on the internet'* (Jørstad, 2017).

### 1.2. Denmark

The debate around CSDs in Denmark arose in 2016-2017 based on discoveries of the dolls by customs in Norway and Sweden (Barkman, 2016; Jørstad, 2017; Zondag 2017a).

On 13 December 2016, the Danish Parliament's Judicial Committee asked Minister of Justice Søren Pape Poulsen to clarify whether the police have the necessary legal tools to monitor Danish buyers of CSDs (Retsudvalget, 2017).

In January 2017, the Minister replies that the dolls do not cause a need for additional investigative tools (Retsudvalget, 2017). Nonetheless, the Minister



asks i.a. the Danish National Council for Children for a statement on CSDs and fictional child pornography. This statement is rendered in April 2017, indicating that the central issue is whether CSDs and fictional child pornography have a preventive or escalating influence on sexual assaults against children. The Council finds it *'a difficult issue'* with *'strong moral aspects'* and emphasises the importance of further research on the field, noting that it has not been evidently proven through scientific research that there is a correlation between the use of fictional child pornography and CSDs and the amount of (online) sexual assaults against children (Børnerådet, 2017).

The Council refers to research attempting to define a difference between child pornography users and users of fictional child pornography. 11 specialists find that *'caution should be shown regarding criminalising users of fictional child pornography'*, partly because of the very individual characteristics of this group of people, partly because there is a risk of harmful side effects. Reference is made to research that shows a connection between the decriminalisation of pornography in the 1960s and a rapid decrease in sexual assaults. The Council thus fears that criminalisation of CSDs and fictional child pornography can lead to more (online) sexual assaults against children (Børnerådet, 2017). As also pointed out by Brown and Shelling (2019) and Chatterjee (2019), there are almost no studies that empirically examine the implications of use of CSDs; Maras and Shapiro (2017) find that it would be unethical to use empirical research to determine whether a causal connection between (virtual) child pornography and child sexual abuse exist.

In October 2017, *Dansk Folkeparti* files a Motion for a Parliament's Solution on banning CSDs, arguing that the lack of a ban appears supporting of *'the reprehensible paedophile tendency'* (Folketinget, 2017). Although *Dansk Folkeparti* does not base the motion on scientific evidence, the argument is in line with Danaher (2017), who argues pro criminalisation of CSDs because they show the user's *intent* to commit a crime (sexual abuse of a child). Thus, use of a CSD is either expressive of a *'deficient moral character'*, which should be punished; or it demonstrates the user's socially problematic moral (in-)sensitivity. Chatterjee (2019) agrees that *'permitting a trade in even abstract child sex dolls and robots could be seen as sanctioning and facilitating a public atmosphere that encourages the portrayal of children as sexual objects, and the acceptance and normalisation of child abuse'*.

The Danish Parliament debates the Motion, and the Sexological Clinic is consulted (Pape Poulsen, 2017). The Clinic provides a statement based on contact with the world's leading scientists and a comprehensive literature review. It appears that there is no scientific research that directly enlightens whether (use of) CSDs increase the risk of sexual assaults against children.<sup>2</sup> It

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2. This was true until September 2022, where Harper and Lievesley published the first empirical study exploring psychological and risk-related constructs associated with ownership of CSDs. Harper and Lievesley found evidence for a functional use of the dolls (Harper & Lievesley, 2022).



has also not been documented that these dolls lead to assaults on children. Part of the conclusion is as follows:

*'If presupposed that there are similarities with findings in research regarding use of pornography, films, and computer games with violent content, and photographs of violence, it can be presumed that there is a group, which is sexually attracted to children, where fictional child pornography and sex dolls have a prophylactic effect on activities directly involving children. However, supposedly, there is also a group, of which several are previously convicted, where such fictional material can contribute to retaining the deviating interest in children.'* (Sexologisk Klink, 2022).

The Motion was rejected.

## 2. Jurisprudence

### 2.1. Norway

Central for the jurisprudence is the *purpose* of the CSDs. This relates to the general requirement for applying the Norwegian provisions criminalising sexual interaction with children that the perpetrator must have had *intent* to commit a sexual act. The element of sexuality is, thus, of significant importance (Matningsdal, 2017).

The first verdict in Norway was rendered on 3 November 2017, where *Fredrikstad tingrett* found a man guilty under the Norwegian Criminal Code Section 311 (which criminalises sexualisation of children) for having ordered and imported a CSD (17-082194MED-FRED, 2017). The Court has no doubt that the doll falls under Section 311: It *'depicts a minor child in a very offensive way. It has been constructed to depict a real child, which is supported by the product description and use of images on the seller's website. It has been constructed with oral, vaginal, and anal openings, and has an electronic heating element to achieve body temperature in these openings'*. The accused was under the impression that the doll depicted a girl aged 12-13 years (17-082194MED-FRED, 2017). The Court, however, doubts whether the act of 'ordering' the doll fulfils Section 311's condition of 'acquire, import, or possess' – since the doll was confiscated by customs, the accused never actually *acquired* it. However, if physical accessibility is necessary to fulfil the acquisition condition, it would overlap with Section 311's possession condition and thus become redundant (17-082194MED-FRED, 2017).

On the penalty, the Court notes that acquiring the doll does not include any physical assault or abuse of children, which influences the criminality of the offence. The Court recognises that the doll to some extent can function as a substitute for sexual assaults, but nonetheless sees no interests worthy of protection as CSDs contribute to a normalisation of sexualisation of children. General preventive considerations require a significant reaction. The



Court finds that the adequate punishment is a relatively high monetary fine (17-082194MED-FRED, 2017).<sup>3</sup>

On 23 April 2018, *Øst-Finmark tingrett* delivers a second judgment, sentencing a man to 60 days of conditional imprisonment and a monetary fine of 10,000 NKR for, i.a., having ordered and imported a CSD (HR-2018-2306-U, 2018). Regarding whether CSDs are ‘productions’ within the meaning of Section 311(1)(c), the Court does not find reason to discuss this further, because the preparatory works state that productions include ‘any representation regardless of the medium’ (HR-2018-2306-U, 2018).

The case is appealed to *Hålogaland lagmannsrett*, which rejects the appeal referring to Section 321(2) of the Code of Criminal Procedure (HR-2018-2306-U, 2018): An ‘Appeal [ ... ] may otherwise be refused when the Court considers it obvious that the appeal will not succeed’. This decision is appealed to *Høgsteretts ankeutval*, which notes that whether Section 311 prohibits ‘dealing with sex dolls that look like children’ has not been tried by the Norwegian Supreme Court, and ‘in the only Appeal Court decision that *Høgsteretts ankeutval* is familiar with, the Appeal Court annuls a District Court’s guilty verdict for a similar act – and several other acts – and pronounces that the indictment »on several points invite for a further explanation of the application of the law and the criminality criteria«<sup>4</sup> (HR-2018-2306-U, 2018). According to Holmboe (2020), this is a consequence of the Supreme Court’s increased focus on the principle of legality, including the importance of the legal basis of criminal penalties. Thus, it is ‘unjustifiable that *Hålogaland lagmannsrett* did not comment on the interpretation of the law’, and, consequently, *lagsmannsretten*’s decision is annulled (Holmboe, 2019), and the case is sent back to *lagmannsretten* for revision (HR-2018-2306-U, 2018). On 16 May 2019, *Hålogaland lagmannsrett* decides to uphold the judgment of *Øst-Finmark tingrett* in its entirety (HR-2019-1715-A, 2019), which leads to an appeal to the Norwegian Supreme Court on interpretation of the legislation.

On 17 June 2019 *Hålogaland lagmannsrett* renders another judgment, this time in an appeal case from *Senja tingrett*. The Appeal Court does not occupy itself with interpretation of Section 311, as it assumes that ‘dealing with sex dolls that depicts minors is covered’ by the provision. Regarding the penalty, the Court finds the appropriate penalty for acquiring a CSD ‘isolated seen’ a monetary fine (similar to *Frederikstad tingrett*) – but together with other indictments, it will be considered as an aggravating factor (LH-2019-23057, 2019).

On 10 September 2019, *Norges Høyesterett* renders the final decision in the case originating from *Øst-Finmark*. It is the only Norwegian Supreme Court judgment on whether CSDs fall under Section 311.

3. The accused was also convicted for other child-pornography related offences, and therefore the collective penalty was 6 months imprisonment.

4. The cases that *Høgsteretts ankeutval* refers to are those of *Fosen tingrett* and *Frostatting lagmannsret* of 30 April and 17 July 2018, respectively (LF-2018-104614, 2018).



The accused asserts that the doll is not supposed to depict a child (the anatomy and size is not similar to that of a child); it does not constitute a punishable depiction of a child within the wording and meaning of Section 311; and, the content of Section 311 is not sufficiently clear to fulfil the clarity requirement of Section 96 of the Norwegian Constitution and Article 7 of the European Convention on Human Rights (HR-2019-1715-A, 2019; Straffelovrådet, 2022).

Regarding whether the doll constitutes a *'sexualisation of a child'*, the Supreme Court, upon inspection, is sure that it is supposed to depict a child. This is based on *'how the doll in question appears. It is less significant how it is described by the supplier, despite this description illustrating the regular use'*. Neither is the doll's height, nor the flat chest decisive in the assessment, but they contribute to the overall impression: The doll is depicting a child far below the age of 18. It has *'anatomy and proportions of a child and has a face with childish features'*. The doll also has a flexible structure, which enables accessing the body openings with associated cavities. This underlines that it is intended for sexual purposes. As such, the doll *'has such characteristics that it constitutes a sexualisation of a child'* (HR-2019-1715-A, 2019).

Next, the Court considers whether the doll is *'a depiction'* within the meaning of Section 311:

*'The term »depiction« embraces a common language widely used. It undoubtedly includes creative efforts in the form of texts, pictures, and films. Additionally, it is clear that a depiction can be multidimensional, e.g. in the form of a hologram or an object, such as a sculpture. A performance may also fall within the concept. In various dictionaries, it is assumed that the word »depiction« corresponds to terms like presentations, productions, and illustrations. This shows that a depiction can be expressed in very different ways.'* (HR-2019-1715-A, 2019).

A *'depiction'* can be multi-dimensional, and it is a broad term (Holmboe, 2020). Consequently, in a common linguistic understanding, *'depiction'* includes (sex-)dolls. The Supreme Court's interpretation of the term is repeated by the Norwegian Criminal Law Council in its report from December 2022 on reforming Chapter 26 of the Norwegian Criminal Code (Straffelovrådet, 2022).

Until 2005, the ban against sexual depictions of children was limited to pictures and films, including fictional photographs and cartoons (HR-2019-1715-A, 2019). When the existing Section 311 was added to the Criminal Code, it was to *'contribute to protecting children against sexual assaults'*. The legislator noted that it, *'further wants to specify that [Section 311] is not only including depictions that document sexual assaults, but also where children are being depicted as sexual objects [ ... ]'*. According to the Supreme Court, this shows that:

*'[ ... ] the legislator intended to design a provision with a broad applicational scope. There are no reasons to assume that the expression »depiction« is limited to the*



*examples explicitly mentioned in the preparatory works. The fact that these preparatory works do not mention sex dolls is not decisive. It is close to impossible for the legislator to concretely identify all current or future depictions that would fall under the provision. The legislator's intention was to criminalise any dealing with depictions that sexualise children [ ... ].' (HR-2019-1715-A, 2019).*

The Court does not find it necessary to discuss whether a doll like the one in question can hinder assaults, or whether '*dealing with the doll*' can have an instigating effect on potential perpetrators or contribute to a normalisation of abuse of children (HR-2019-1715-A, 2019).

Section 311 is sufficiently clearly formulated, and the act (of acquiring the doll) falls within a normal linguistic understanding of the provision. Therefore, the requirements of Section 96 of the Norwegian Constitution and Article 7 of the ECHR are fulfilled (HR-2019-1715-A, 2019).

On this basis, the Supreme Court finds that '*dealing with*' CSDs is covered by Section 311 of the Norwegian Criminal Code. There is no reason to interpret the provision restrictively. Therefore, the appeal is rejected (HR-2019-1715-A, 2019), and *Hålogaland lagmannsrett's* decision of 16 May 2019 is upheld in its entirety.

However, in its discussion on amending Section 311, it appears that the Norwegian Criminal Law Council does not agree with the Supreme Court's interpretation of Section 311. The Council does not want to amend Section 311 substantially with relevance for this article, but notices that it should be considered whether and to which degree, based on the principle of consequential damages, it '*is sufficiently substantiated to criminalise occupation with depictions that do not show assaults against children nor sexualise real children.*' Thus, it seems that the Council is sceptical about the interpretation of Section 311 to include CSDs. With reference to the Supreme Court's conclusion that the legislator intended to criminalise '*any dealing with depictions that sexualise children*', the Council encourages the Norwegian Ministry of Justice and Public Security to consider, on the basis of available research, if the criminalisation of CSDs is justified – the Council finds that '*if the dolls do not increase the risk of assaults against children, and in addition can prevent real assaults, it is, in the Council's opinion, doubtful whether the moral condemnation of the occupation with such depictions alone can justify a criminalisation*' (Straffelovrådet, 2022).

Consequently, it can be concluded that Section 311 does cover CSDs, and as such they are banned as '*depictions that sexualise children*' – and as a consequence of the jurisprudence, it will require a legislative amendment to exclude CSDs from Section 311's scope.

## 2.2. Denmark

In Denmark, no judgments have (yet) been rendered on handling CSDs.





### 3. Parliamentary debates

#### 3.1. Norway

On 4 April 2017, the Norwegian Justice Committee rendered a recommendation to *Stortinget* regarding i.a. security of justice in cases of violence and sexual assaults (Justiskomiteen, 2017). The Committee refers to that customs since October 2016 have encountered 21 cases where Norwegian citizens have ordered and imported 'so-called sex dolls resembling very lifelike children' (Justiskomiteen, 2017).

The majority of the Committee states that:

*'[ ... ] it is a strongly disturbing development, and like Kripos, the Committee worries that access to these dolls can break down barriers against committing assaults on children. [ ... ] [T]here is reason to believe that several of those who order the dolls also commit other crimes related to children.'*

*The majority refers to that questions have been raised on whether Section 311 of the Criminal Code prohibiting sexualisation of children is sufficiently clear on whether it is criminal to import sexualised child dolls, and it might be appropriate to clarify that also this type of act is covered by the ban.*

[ ... ]

*On this basis, the majority promotes the following proposal:*

*»The Parliament requires the government to investigate the need to clarify Section 311 of the Criminal Code so import of sex dolls that appear as children is criminalised.« [ ... ].' (Justiskomiteen, 2017).*

On 25 April 2017, the matter is discussed in *Stortinget*. It decides to adopt the proposal as 'Decision No 621' (*Stortinget*, 2017).

On 8 October 2018, the Ministry of Justice and Public Security publishes a Proposal for the Budget Year 2019, in which it also follows up on i.a. Decision No 621 (Det Kongelige Justis- og Beredskapsdepartement, 2018):

*'The Ministry of Justice and Public Security has noticed that Fredrikstad tingrett in a legally enforceable judgment of 3 November 2017 decided that purchase of sexualised dolls falls under Section 311 of the Criminal Code. The Ministry is thus of the opinion that it currently is not necessary to amend the legislation [ ... ].' (Det Kongelige Justis- og Beredskapsdepartement, 2018).*

Consequently, the Ministry considers the matter closed (Det Kongelige Justis- og Beredskapsdepartement, 2018). There have been no subsequent parliamentary discussions on amending Section 311.



### 3.2. Denmark

In May 2021 the Ministry of Justice in collaboration with Save the Children Denmark presents several actions to combat sexual offences against children in the plan '*Protection against adults that offend children*', informing i.a. that in Autumn 2021, a bill will be proposed that criminalises possession and transfer of CSDs. The government '*is of the opinion that we, as a society, must send a clear signal that we distance ourselves from all sorts of sexual assaults against children. That includes that we should not accept that children are sexualised in the shape of true-to-life dolls that appear as children and are created for sexual purposes*' (Justitsministeriet, 2021a).

On 10 November 2021, the Ministry of Justice proposes a bill, i.a. introducing a new provision in the Danish Criminal Code (Justitsministeriet, 2021b):

#### *'Section 235 a.*

*Sub-section 1: He, who produces, sells, or in any other way transfers a doll that appears as a child and is constructed with a sexual purpose in mind, is punished with a monetary fine, or criminal imprisonment of a maximum of 2 years.*

*Sub-section 2: He, who possesses a doll as mentioned in sub-section 1, is punished with a monetary fine, or criminal imprisonment of a maximum of 1 year.'*

In the remarks, the Ministry notes that use of Section 235 a presupposes that the doll is constructed '*for a sexual purpose*'. When assessing the purpose of the doll it must therefore be taken into consideration i.a. whether the doll is equipped with functions for sexual use, e.g. body openings and/or human bodily temperatures. However, these qualities are not exclusively decisive for whether the doll can be said to have been constructed for a sexual purpose. Also the marketing of the doll can be considered, but this alone will not be sufficient to confirm or deny its sexualisation (Justitsministeriet, 2021b).

The doll must look like a child. This is based on a concrete assessment of the doll's appearance. The following can be considered: Does the doll have anatomy and proportions of a child? Does it appear to depict a person pre-puberty? Does it have a face with clearly childish features? Neither the height nor a flat chest will be decisive in this assessment, but it can be taken into consideration in the overall impression. It can also be considered whether the doll is produced with children's clothes or childish props, e.g. toys intended for children, and whether it carries sound effects that in expression or words signal that it is constructed to imitate a child (Justitsministeriet, 2021b).

It is not in itself decisive whether the doll has full resemblance with or approximately appears as a real person (Justitsministeriet, 2021b). This is interesting in comparison with the existing criminalisation of child pornography (Section 235 of the Danish Criminal Code), which includes a ban on '*other pornographic visual depictions*' of persons under the age of 18, by which is to be understood as '*computer generated photos not depicting a real person,*



*but apart from the fictional has full resemblance<sup>5</sup> with a photography*'. To be covered by Section 235, the *'fictional depiction must, thus, appear approximately as a photography'*. Paintings, drawings, and written child pornography are typically excluded from application of the provision and are, consequently, not criminalised (Elholm, Lund Madsen, Rahbæk & Røn, 2022). Thus, it seems that Section 235 a has a broader application than Section 235: A doll is, in essence, a fictional depiction of a person, but it is irrelevant how far from a human this depiction is, to be covered by Section 235 a – whereas a drawing, which also in essence is a fictional depiction, is not considered to be child pornography under Section 235. The Ministry of Justice does not provide a justification or rationalisation of this distinction between the two provisions.

Specifically for Section 235 a(1), for a person to be punishable, it presumes that s/he has *produced, sold, or in any other way transferred* a CSD.

By 'producing' is to be understood the process where the doll comes into existence. It is irrelevant whether the purpose of the production is to sell the doll, or if the doll is intended for personal use (Justitsministeriet, 2021b) (but the 'personal use' would also fall under the second sub-section as 'possession').

'Selling' or 'in any other way transferring' includes both a sale in a physical store or, e.g., via the internet. It is not decisive whether the sale is made from a corporation or as a transaction between private parties, e.g. through the use of websites (e.g. *Den Blå Avis*), nor whether the transfer takes place in return of reimbursement. When deciding on the applicable penalty, it will be seen as an aggravating factor if the sale or production has been *systematic*. Whether that is the case will i.a. depend on the scope of the production and sale and on the intensity of the marketing (Justitsministeriet, 2021b).

Under sub-section 2 of Section 235 a, s/he who *possesses* a doll as mentioned in the provision is criminally liable. Possession for own use is included as well as transporting or storing a doll for another (Justitsministeriet, 2021b).

The bill was sent in consultation with various instances, of which the National Council for Children is the only organisation directly opposing Section 235 a. In the same vein as in 2017 (Børnerådet, 2017) the Council *'cannot, on the current basis of knowledge, recommend a criminalisation'* of CSDs. It *'fails to understand'* why the latest research on the area has not been obtained. The Council justifies its opinion with reference to statements by the Sexological Clinic of March 2017 and February 2020. In both statements, the Clinic concludes that there is no scientific research directly enlightening the question of *'whether possession of [CSDs] can lead persons to commit sexual assaults against children, or if such possession can deter persons with sexual thoughts about children from abusing children'*. The Council criticises that the Ministry of Justice has not obtained an updated statement from the Sexological Clinic, and that the Ministry is justifying the ban with the need of sending a clear

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5. Author's emphasis.



signal that sexual assaults against children are non-acceptable (Børnerådet, 2021) – the latter not being based on a scientifically documented need.

The Council refers to Article 34 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child, and the recommendation by the Committee on the Rights of the Child that the Member States *'first undertake studies to determine the nature, scope, and causes of sexual exploitation and sexual abuse, and only thereafter let this knowledge form the basis of politics and legislation'* (Børnerådet, 2021). In response, the Ministry says that it forthcoming will *'follow the research on the area but has no plans on launching concrete initiatives to ensure more research'* (Justitsministeriet, 2022).

Contrary to prior (Pape Poulsen, 2017), Save the Children Denmark is now supporting the ban on CSDs: *'As long as it has not been documented beyond any doubt whether the dolls lead to abuse'* they should be banned *'in the interest of the child'*. The dolls have become *'scaringly true-to-life'* and are thereby contributing to an increased sexualisation of children (*'The modern dolls are not only extremely human-looking creatures that have hyper-realistic anatomically correct bodies, but they also have an AI platform built into a robotic head'* (Mazur, 2021)). However, Save the Children Denmark recommend including an exemption, which allows use of the dolls in surveyed, scientifically documented research, e.g. as part of a scientific, controlled process, with the purpose of examining and developing treatment of adults with sexual interests in children (Red Barnet, 2021). In its response, the Ministry of Justice states that it is not familiar with such current use, and it will be *'difficult to ensure an efficient enforcement of the ban if it does not apply without exceptions'*. Therefore, this proposal is rejected (Justitsministeriet, 2021d).

Following parliamentary debates, the bill is adopted. Section 235 a entered into force on 1 March 2022 in the format as cited above.

#### 4. Arguments pro and con criminalisation

In February 2020, Munk argues that politicians are acting blindly with a ban on CSDs and are exposing harmless citizens to penalties: *'They should move from disgust to actual knowledge and acknowledgement of the fact that paedophilia and lost men exist in the world'*. Munk emphasises that the changed opinions of primarily the politicians, but also Save the Children Denmark, are not based on scientific evidence that CSDs lead to an increased number of sexual assaults against children: *'As a matter of fact, the conclusion from i.a. the Sexological Clinic is that we do not know anything about the consequences of the use of sex dolls'* (Munk, 2020).

With a ban, citizens will most likely be exposed to penalties for harmless acts: There is no legal or moral victim of *'the crime'*, because the CSD cannot experience harm (Brown & Shelling, 2019). This is contrary to the harm principle, which, traditionally seen, must be fulfilled before criminalisation is



justified: *'Conduct that merely harm oneself, or which is thought to be immoral but otherwise harmless, is on this account ineligible for prohibition'* (Simester & Von Hirsch, 2011). The politicians want to create *'a law on unintended consequences'* ('the unintended consequence' being the invention of CSDs because of the criminalisation of sexual assaults against children) – *'a classic'* in philosophy and sociology, which means that interventions in complex systems can have unwanted consequences despite good intentions (Munk, 2020).

Viskum emphasises that a ban will be based on a purely moral distancing; but that it is not immoral to have sex with dolls. The basis of a ban is the politicians' immediate repulsion by the thought of paedophilia, but this does not legitimise criminalisation, because criminals would not understand why they are being punished. Viskum finds it *'comical'* that the politicians want to criminalise CSDs based on a *'principle of carefulness'* or to *'take the side of the children'*, because it is unknown how we best take care of the children. Perhaps the dolls can prevent some people from committing child sexual abuse (Viskum, 2020).

The Dutch research draws similar conclusions as per why handling CSDs is not (yet)<sup>6</sup> criminalised in the Netherlands: It does not cause *direct* harm to clearly identifiable, individual victims – it is a victimless crime. Neither is there an empirical proof of a possible causal connection between the use of CSDs and an increased risk of sexual abuse of 'real' children. A Dutch professor makes the distinction between 'harm' and 'disgrace'. Something that is only disgraceful should not be penalised. However, if there is a risk of harm, e.g. allowing the dolls will lead to 'justification' or 'normalisation' of sexual interaction with children, it can be argued that there is a reason for criminalisation. Interestingly, the Dutch research finds that while the question of 'harm' earlier was central when forming new legislation, criminalisation now happens when there is not (yet) a clear image of the potential harm, or even when the *ratio legis* primarily is based on moral grounds (Loibl, Van der Aa, Lundh, Niemark & Well, 2022). Chatterjee, though, finds that the harm principle can be validly interpreted to justify the criminalisation of 'purely fantasy child pornography' because *'it promotes a damaging culture of sexualisation of children'* (Chatterjee, 2019).

In Norway, the considerations have been alike: Marthinussen finds it *'peculiar to criminalise to a large extent something that does not harm anyone, and on which basis? [ ... ] [T]here is no scientific research on this topic'*. The paedophilia provisions in the Norwegian Criminal Code have a wide scope, *'partly because paedophilia is something that the society has little understanding for, and, consequently, we do not have the usual barriers to criminalisation'* (Røset, 2017).

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6. Although the Dutch research is not unambiguous on the need for a criminalisation of CSDs, (Loibl, Van der Aa, Lundh, Niemark & Well, 2022) the Dutch Ministry of Justice have proposed a legislative ban on CSDs. The bill was sent in consultation on 8 November 2022 (Ministerie van Justitie en Veiligheid, 2022).



Psychologist Pål Grøndahl calls for more empirical studies before a connection between those who order CSDs and those who commit sexual assaults against children is established. The dolls may even be an important tool to prevent assaults: *'Maybe we should allow some persons to get the dolls on prescription. It can be an alternative for paedophiles who think it is okay to use a rubber doll as a substitute for an actual sexual assault'* (Moland, 2017). Therapists are not very positive towards the existence of sex dolls (in general, not specifically CSDs), but whenever sexuality becomes dangerous, the use of sex dolls is worth considering if it can protect a real human life. But it should be considered individually which (paedophile) patients would benefit from the use of a sex doll (Eichenberg, Khamis & Hübner, 2019). Some researchers are comparing use of CSDs in therapeutic settings to the use of methadone for drug addicts, arguing that the dolls could be used to satisfy deviant and almost sick urges (Behrendt, 2018). Contradictorily, researchers argue that it is *'irrelevant to discuss the function of the dolls as »relieving« a sexual urge, because sexual abuse is about domination and control, more than it is about sexual satisfaction'* (Brown & Shelling, 2019).

Psychologist Svein Øverland believes that *'for many persons, getting such a doll will make it easier for them to abuse children'*. He strongly advises against handing out CSDs on prescription. However, he also admits that there is a small chance that the dolls can help paedophiles that still have not committed assaults, but this is not based on research: *'We cannot reject that for a very small group, it can have an effect. But I think that if you open that door, you will enter a very ugly room, where we justify the use of such dolls, which can be very harmful'* (Zondag, 2017b).

Psychologist Peder Kjøs agrees. A consequence of living in a civilised society is to deny yourself doing something that hurt others: *'Not all impulses or needs should flourish. Some things should be suppressed'*. While Kjøs also points to the lack of scientific research, he does not think that the dolls should be legalised or available on prescription (Hoffengh, 2018).

Maras and Shapiro (2017) argue strongly against CSDs, also in therapeutic processes. They refer to the Coolidge effect: Paedophiles who watch child pornography need more severe material with each viewing, thus, the (ab)use of the CSD will, over time, no longer be (sufficiently) satisfying. New material, e.g. a new doll, is necessary, but it is expensive. Consequently, the 'easy' solution is to escalate and use a real child. Brown and Shelling (2019) fear that the CSD can function as a bridge between fantasy and reality. The 'step' between watching online child abuse materials and actual child abuse is larger than the 'step' between using a CSD and actual child abuse. Behrendt (2018) disagrees, arguing that if the CSDs were to be legalised for use in purely therapeutic processes, this would not deviate significantly from 'classical and conventional therapy patterns': *'it boils down to adding a new feature to the current therapeutic arsenal, as an additional measure that would or would not work in helping society prevent recidivism and protect children'*.



The Dutch research also mentions the possibility of the protectional effect the dolls might have if they can satisfy or help to decrease an interest in children. In an interview with a Dutch therapist of paedophiles and paedosexuals it is explained that some clients have indicated that CSDs have a 'protecting' effect for them – this cannot, though, be considered as representative (Loibl, Van der Aa, Lundh, Niemark & Well, 2022). While primarily arguing against CSDs, Danaher (2017) agrees that if use of CSDs *significantly decreases* the likelihood of sexual abuse of children, 'we would have an extrinsic reason for dropping the case for criminalisation.'

In September 2022, Harper and Lievesly published an empirical study on use of CSDs. The study is motivated by the researchers' criticism towards the one-sided approach that dominates the CSD debate ('it is repulsive to use/own CSDs'); this viewpoint fails to acknowledge the potential for dolls playing a role in *prevention* of child sexual abuse (Harper & Lievesley, 2022). The study found that some of the concerns about CSD users being at a greater risk of engaging in sexual abuse of actual children might be misplaced: Behavioural proclivity and arousal to hypothetically engaging in child sexual abuse is lower among CSD owners than among minor-attracted people (MAP) non-owners. In support of this finding can be argued that several studies show that possession of child pornography is a minimal risk factor for future incidents of child sexual abuse (Danaher, 2017). Additionally, CSDs 'offer MAPs the opportunity to mimic raising children in the kinds of ways that teleiophilic individuals do in surrogate parental relationships, where sexual motivations for ownership may be secondary. Dolls need not be positively or negatively related to sexual risk but may be seen as a functional part of the lives of individuals who, through their sexual attraction patterns, are unable to live such full lives with real partners or children' (Harper & Lievesley, 2022).

However, despite Harper and Lievesley's findings, the primary argument remains the same: CSDs are contributing to the objectification of human beings, in particular children, as willing, always-available, silent sex toys (Behrendt, 2020; Brown & Shelling, 2019). 'The doll is voluntarily available for sensory and bodily interaction, which necessarily affects the interacting user. You play or cultivate the doll to life, so that its substitute body can step into the human's place. The dolls have an enormous ability to absorb and submits, apparently voluntarily, to our projections and appropriations' (Jørgensen, Leth-Espensen & Skinnebach, 2022). Scholars believe that enabling paedophiles to engage in complex sex acts will in and of itself have a reinforcing effect – despite it 'only' being with dolls (Maras & Shapiro, 2017), and there is a risk of 'desensitisation' due to the dolls' lack of protest (Brown & Shelling, 2019). As such, instead of functioning as an 'outlet', the dolls have an escalating effect on the users.



## 5. Remarks

Conclusively, the following points are made repeatedly in relation to CSDs:

The knowledge about the effect of CSDs is not sufficient, particularly regarding whether the CSDs can have an increasing or decreasing effect on sexual interests in children. It is unknown whether the dolls can be used as a substitute, a 'satisfier'. More scientific research should be conducted; but exactly how a research model would look is unclear, primarily because of ethical and moral considerations (although, it has now been attempted by Harper and Lievesley).

The legislative and judicial developments seem to be based more on moral considerations and political populism than e.g. the harm principle. The politicians, most experts, and relevant organisations agree that no humans are harmed in the handling of CSDs (the discussion of 'robots as sentient beings' excluded).

According to psychologists there is a risk that persons being persecuted for handling CSDs will not understand why they are punished.

It has been suggested to provide the dolls on prescription or in controlled therapeutic processes. This has been (strongly) rejected, either on moral grounds or on the grounds that the legislation will be 'difficult to enforce' if it is subject to exemptions.

Legislation and jurisprudence banning CSDs are based on moral grounds with the following main arguments; 'We do not want paedophilia', 'paedophilia is gross'. While paedophilia is not accepted in society, there is a risk that criminalising on moral grounds will isolate paedophiles even further from the rest of society. In an interview with a Danish psychologist, this was pointed out: Paedophiles are already unwilling to seek help because they feel stigmatised and scolded, even when they have not acted on their desires. Paedophilia cannot be treated; it is a sexuality, like being hetero- or homosexual.

While most scholars call for more empirical research – although not being able to 'imagine' how such a research model would look, and some pointing to the unethicity of such studies – they seem to agree on a 'better safe than sorry'-approach, which causes them to argue for criminalisation of CSDs. Not because of what is *known*, but because of what is *unknown*; primarily whether the dolls have an escalating effect, bridging the 'gap' between use of (fictional) child pornography and abuse of children.

Although the dolls do not cause (direct) harm, they have been used as grounds for house searches, and there is an indication that purchasers of the dolls often also possess child pornography. As such, the CSDs can be used to track users of child pornography, which undoubtedly *does* cause harm to children. Consequently, criminalisation of the dolls as a means to an end – to prevent remote harm – would be a valid argument, but it has not been granted much attention in the debate, also not from the political side.





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