

Child Protection for International Schools

Module 4 – Reporting Abuse

In this module we will cover:

- how to respond if a child confides in you
- how to respond if you have concerns about a child's welfare
- how you should report abuse.

Recognising abuse

Children are best protected when people are clear about what is required of them individually, and how they need to work together in partnership with others to promote the best interests of children and families. No single person can have a full picture of a child's needs and circumstances and, if children and families are to receive the right help at the right time, everyone who comes into contact with them has a role to play in identifying concerns, sharing information and taking prompt action.

If you have concerns about a child's wellbeing, the greatest danger is that you do nothing; you should not assume that a colleague will act. Countless inquiries into child deaths have shown that people suspected abuse was taking place, but they were not quite sure or were worried about getting it wrong.

Be vigilant

Whilst many people may think it is easy to spot a child who is being abused and report it immediately, to others it is more difficult and there can be a number of reasons for missing the crucial signs. People may confuse the signs of abuse or put them down to something else. They may focus on one aspect of a child's health, learning or development and not see the bigger picture, or it may come down to plain 'just not noticing'. When considering the possibility of abuse, it is important to evaluate what you know about the child or young person and then consider both the physical and behavioural signs that are giving you cause for concern.

Think about the following scenarios:

- You notice cuts or burns on a young person's arm and the young person asks for first aid. Asking for first aid could be a cry for help because the young person needs to talk to someone.
- A young person doesn't eat regularly; they have low self-esteem and appear isolated. This may indicate an eating disorder, self-harm or neglect.
- You overhear conversations about drinking alcohol in the park, arranging to meet older friends, gifts, talk of two SIM cards or phones and you notice the young person using other people's phones. This may indicate a child is being groomed.

Everyone has a responsibility for keeping children and young people safe.

All schools should have policies and procedures, as well as one or more people whose responsibility it is to receive safeguarding concerns, and it is them to whom you should turn.

People often express doubt, particularly if they know and like the alleged abuser. They may also fear the consequences, both if they are right to be concerned, and also if they are wrong.

Remember abuse and neglect can happen anywhere; at home, in the park, at school or college, in a youth club, at swimming baths. So being vigilant in the surroundings in which you work is important when supporting children and young people's welfare.

Disclosure

How to respond if a child confides abuse to you

If a child or young person tells you that they are being abused, it is important that you know how to respond. Here are the universal principles regardless of the age of the child.

It is important you

- Stay calm and be patient.
- Find a quiet place where your conversation will not be interrupted. Keep in mind your school's guidelines about being alone with a child or young person.
- Be welcoming, even if the time isn't convenient for you. It may have taken a great deal of courage for them to approach you and they may not do so again.
- Try to make the child or young person feel safe and secure. Reassure them that they have done nothing wrong in telling you.
- Listen carefully and take it seriously.
- Ask questions for clarification only.
- Explain what you will do with the information and what will happen next.
- Write down what you have been told as soon as possible. It should be dated, timed and signed. It should then be given to the designated safeguarding lead immediately.

It is important you do not:

- promise confidentiality
- ask leading questions
- look panicked, shocked or angry
- make the child or young person repeat their story
- interrupt
- give an opinion
- inform parents until you have had a discussion with your safeguarding lead
- view any images
- suggest the child may be to blame.

If emergency help is required, do not delay getting it. If a child asks for confidentiality and they are told this cannot be guaranteed, and as a result they refuse to say anything further, make an immediate report to the designated safeguarding lead.

Starting difficult conversations

Recognise that children and young people who are being abused or neglected may find it difficult to tell someone for the first time because:

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- They may have feelings of confusion, shame, guilt or worry about being stigmatised.
- They may not recognise their experience as abusive or neglectful. For example, a girl thinks her boyfriend's treatment of her is not abusive behaviour.
- They may be being coerced by (or may be attached to) the person or people abusing or neglecting them.
- They may fear the consequences of telling someone. They may worry that no one will believe them, the abuse or neglect might get worse, their family will be split up or excluded by their community, or they will go into care.

Communicate with the child in a way that is appropriate to their age and ability, preferred communication method (for example, Makaton or sign language) and ability to understand. If you have safeguarding concerns, then you must not get a relative or family friend to translate.

You may find the following phrases helpful to start a conversation or encourage the young person to talk honestly with you.

"I'm concerned about you. Is everything OK?"

"May I have a word with you? You seem to be... Is there anything I can do to help?"

Open questions

Sometimes it may not be clear a child is making a disclosure; it is therefore okay to ask open questions. Using open questions with the words 'what', 'when', 'who', 'how', 'where' may help to clarify your understanding and what you need to do. Always remember you are not to investigate and questions are only used for clarification.

Question you may ask:

That's a nasty bruise, when did you do that?

How did that happen?

Where were you when you did it? Who were you with? What did the person do?

Have you told anybody else about this? What did the person say?

You seem to be upset and that's not like you. Is there anything worrying you?

Making notes

The more specific your notes, the more useful they will be in forming a well-rounded picture for child protection professionals to act on. They have busy workloads and it is their role to determine next actions. When they receive a report containing ambiguous, vague information, it makes their role extremely difficult.

For example

Instead of "Nicola was wearing inappropriate clothes for the weather."

Say exactly what you see, hear or know:

"It was minus five degrees outside with a hard frost and Nicola was wearing a summer dress and open-toed sandals without socks or tights."

For example

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Instead of “Omar is looking quite thin and he sometimes steals from other children’s lunchboxes.”

Say exactly what you see, hear or know:

“Omar looks very underweight for his age and stage of development. In the last two weeks, he has taken food from other children’s lunchboxes on seven occasions.”

For example

Instead of “The mother gave an implausible account of how John had come to have so many bruises.”

Say exactly what you see, hear or know:

“John’s mother said she wasn’t aware of the multi-coloured bruises on John’s arms and legs and that she thought he must have fallen over.”

All reports of suspected or disclosed abuse and any actions taken by the school must be securely archived, regardless of the conclusions reached.

After your discussion you may find that:

- the young person is just going through a difficult time temporarily, or
- there is a problem (other than abuse) which you can offer your support for or guide them towards other appropriate sources of help.

If, however, your concerns are correct and they do disclose abuse to you, listen and respond in the manner we have already covered.

It is important your approach should always be child-centred. Caring, considerate adults who take the time to really listen to children and understand the subtleties of what is being said can provide an opportunity for children to ‘open up’ and get help.

Sharing information

Most countries across the world have their own systems for safeguarding children. The designated safeguarding person will have the oversight of child protection policies and procedures within your school. The school should build partnerships with external agencies as well as other schools to help build an effective child protection system.

Wherever you work, you should familiarise yourself with your school’s policies and procedures and those of your local area. You should also know who your designated safeguarding lead and deputy is and how to contact them. Their details should be contained in your school’s child protection policy.

What is important is that you act; doing nothing is not an option.

Fears about sharing information must not be allowed to stand in the way of the need to promote the welfare and protect the safety of children, which must always be the paramount concern.

All schools and colleges should have arrangements in place that clearly set out the processes and principles for sharing information between each other and with other professionals.

If you have not received a direct disclosure, you should still write down your concerns and the reasons for them, and sign, date and time your notes. Pass the information to the designated safeguarding lead in your school.

What happens next

Once a report has been made the designated safeguarding lead will decide on what action needs to be taken next. They will have a clear understanding of the reporting procedures in the host country and any agencies that should be contacted for future preventative care. No concern will ever be the same, and as such each should be dealt with on a case-by-case basis in accordance with the school's policies and procedures.

The designated safeguarding lead should consider any cultural sensitivities of the school community as this may affect how an allegation might be perceived, but these should not be used as an excuse for the appropriate action not being taken.

An allegation should be guided by the duty to:

1. keep the child safe.
2. the alleged perpetrator- to ensure that their rights are upheld.
3. the law and mandatory reporting obligations- to ensure local law is followed.

Your safeguarding lead will usually keep you informed so that you can continue to support the child, although this is on a need-to-know basis.

Allegations against staff

How to deal with an allegation made against a member of staff should be clearly written into the child protection policy. In most circumstances concerns about a member of staff should be reported immediately to the headteacher or principal.

Where there are concerns about the headteacher or principal, this should be referred to the chair of governors, chair of the management committee or proprietor of an independent school as appropriate.

This should be done without having any discussion with any other member of staff. You should not alert the person you are concerned about as this could compromise any further investigation.

Allegations against a teacher who is no longer teaching should be referred to the police.

Examples

- A parent may contact you about concerns they have about how a teacher talks to and acts around children.
- A child may tell you that a teacher has hit them or is displaying bullying behaviour towards them.

With sexual abuse, it is a fact that those who wish to harm children target organisations where they can come into regular contact with them. Once employed, they begin a 'grooming' process to gain the child's (and the parents' or carers') trust in preparation for abuse. This may involve giving them extra attention, praising them and/or giving them gifts. Once trust is established, the abuser typically moves on to introduce touching and a sexual relationship develops.

It happens so slowly and subtly that the child may find it very difficult to tell anyone else because they may believe they are in some way responsible for it; they may have been threatened, they may not knowingly dislike it, or they may be concerned that the person will be angry or disappointed with them.

We learnt in an earlier module that children very rarely lie about abuse, but occasionally a child may accuse someone as a cry for help or to draw attention to other problems they may be having. It is, of course, very upsetting if an unfounded allegation concerns you, but without exception, every single allegation must be reported.

Sexual abuse in organisations does not 'just happen' – it is deliberate, planned and targeted, so much so that an abuser also 'grooms' their colleagues (by appearing to be a responsible, generous person who gets on exceptionally well with children) to minimise the likelihood of them suspecting anything is wrong.

Employing safer recruitment practices helps prevent this, but it is not a guarantee. If an allegation is made, regardless of the type of alleged abuse or whom it may concern, it must be reported.

Summary

This module has covered how to report abuse and what happens once you have reported your concerns. No system can fully eliminate risk, but if everyone plays their part in being aware of the possibility of abuse and acts when they suspect it, children can be protected from harm.

You are now ready to complete the corresponding questionnaire.