

**Office of the Children's Commissioner**

**Good practice in safeguarding and  
child protection in secondary  
schools**

**Guidelines for good practice based on *Feeling  
safe, keeping safe***

## Foreword

The Office of the Children's Commissioner (OCC) is a national organisation led by the Children's Commissioner for England, Dr Maggie Atkinson. The post of Children's Commissioner for England was established by the Children Act 2004. The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) underpins and frames all of our work.

The Office of the Children's Commissioner asked Sussex University to find out what makes secondary school age children feel safe. The resulting study has now been published and the evidence gathered through the study forms the basis of these guidelines for good practice.<sup>1</sup>

We selected six secondary schools in England considered by OFSTED to be putting young people at the centre of the safeguarding process. We found that all of these schools put emphasis on addressing the overall welfare of the young people in their care. Of the six secondary schools that took part, four were academies, one was a selective maintained grammar and one a maintained comprehensive. One of the schools was single-sex. The expansion of the academies programme in recent years means that now more than ever head teachers decide for themselves which methods they will adopt to ensure the safety and emotional wellbeing of their student population.

Our findings reflect this structural shift and show that the attitude of the head teacher is a crucial factor in determining how more vulnerable members of the school population are supported, and how child protection and or safeguarding concerns are addressed.

From our study schools, a strong message emerged that support for student welfare was important to academic success. Put simply, they said that children who feel happy and safe learn better. We found too an acceptance that vulnerable young people respond best to a combination of strong structural support from professionals, alongside peer centred intervention as appropriate for the school context.

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<sup>1</sup> Lefevre, Burr, Boddy and Rosenthal (2013) Good Practice in Safeguarding and Child Protection in Secondary Schools, London: Office of the Children's Commissioner. Available at: <http://www.childrenscommissioner.gov.uk/content/publications>

The following guidelines are based on seven principles for good practice, drawn from the research.

1. Child protection in schools is given strategic priority by leaders in schools and local authorities. At a time of change and financial pressure for education and other children's services this both protects existing good practice and drives forward improvements in this key area of practice. This will include schools examining their approaches to child protection as part of internal self-assessment processes.
2. Safeguarding is a shared responsibility for all those working in the school and all staff understand how their role contributes to the overall work of the school in supporting and protecting its students.
3. Strong communication networks between schools and local authorities assist with recognising risk and determining thresholds, and enable empathic consideration of possible underlying meanings of problematic behaviour by young people. Cross-area and cross-school approaches to child protection, such as a centralised advisory service and dedicated safeguarding roles, support the effective use of resources in a time of economic constraint.
4. Schools and local authorities have established systems for regular on-going training and professional development of all staff who have contact with young people, as well as systems that ensure accessible consultation and support for any staff in schools who may be in a position to identify child protection concerns.
5. Schools systems enable staff to get to know their students well, through regular formal and informal contact within the school, and assist staff in identifying child protection needs.
6. Attending to students' welfare in the broadest sense goes alongside explicit attention to specific child protection needs. As a result, students are aware of potential risks, and have the language to voice concerns, at a stage in life when they are likely to encounter new potential risks, but are also developing increasing agency and responsibility.
7. A student-centred and participatory ethos is key to ensuring student welfare and wellbeing. The benefits of genuinely participatory approaches, as reported by both adults and young people, depend on the strategic prioritisation of child-centred working, and dedicated investment of time, training and resources.

These guidelines have been prepared to help schools interpret the main report for practical application within the individual establishment. They are drawn from the key messages from the report. We hope that they will help school leaders to reflect with their colleagues on their own practice, and may assist them to improve child protection in their school.

## 1. Why does safeguarding matter at secondary school level?

During secondary schooling, students are maturing, acting more independently and taking on increased responsibilities. This may mean they encounter more risky situations, in addition to those which arise from neglect or abuse within their family.

Research suggests that underlying reasons for young people's poor behaviour are more likely to go unrecognised than is the case for younger children. So maltreatment can be masked by 'difficult' behaviour and the young person treated as a problem rather than vulnerable. Risk and neglect may also not be addressed because there is an assumption that young people can cope more easily than younger children. These findings indicate the importance of understanding young people's own perspectives on their difficulties and what may make it hard to seek help.

When young people feel secure and safe in school they flourish both academically and emotionally, in some cases despite having a lack of support outside the school environment. This point was emphasised by the majority of secondary heads who took part in the study.

### Key points from the study

- Safeguarding issues which arise in secondary schools are often different in nature to those experienced in primary schools, as a result of the increasing maturity of the young people involved.
- Difficulties can often manifest in behavioural issues. It is important that schools recognise when poor behaviour may be the result of underlying risk or need.
- Many schools make an explicit link between creating an environment where students feel safe and academic achievement.
- The schools which recognised this need also thought about the ways in which that need could be addressed. Student and professional stakeholders, across case study areas, consistently emphasised the need to think broadly about safeguarding and address child protection issues as part of the promotion of well-being in the school and community.

#### What people told our researchers

*When something difficult happens in someone's life, how they present at school will change [...] well who's showing behaviour problems or problems of conflict with somebody else – and that's when we can start going "now, what are we going to do about it"?*

**Deputy Head**

*Obviously, if you've got issues or certain qualities that are going on at home then obviously you're more than likely going to bring them into the school environment as it can affect your learning in class or just your general behaviour around school.*

**Student**

*We can't make up for families that are not parenting in ways that we would hope that our children would be parented, but we can try and put in place as many opportunities that enable students to build their confidence.*

**Head Teacher**

## 2. Is your senior leadership team taking a lead on safeguarding and creating a culture within which good practice can thrive and develop throughout the school?

A consistent theme in the research was that effectiveness in child protection and safeguarding has to be led from the top. Protection of young people from physical and emotional harm was a central area of concern. Senior leadership teams set the agenda, and impressed upon all staff the importance of taking concerns seriously. In the most effective schools, leaders explicitly set out the link between good safeguarding practice and good academic attainment. Organisational structures were in place for a strong pastoral care system, and a common language was used within the school for concerns regarding safeguarding issues.

### Key points from the study

- The importance of a clear strategic vision from senior managers in schools and local authorities was emphasised in all the case study areas.
- The differing demographic contexts and forms of governance within which schools operated highlighted the importance of flexible approaches, responsive to local need within a wider policy framework and social environment.

One of the students interviewed from a school council described the *'kind environment that the head has created'* in the school.

#### **Case study: Being visible and accessible**

Despite the heavy workload of running a school with over 1000 students, one head teacher taught a course in Critical Thinking and invited students to come to his office for lessons.

The Head also met once a term with a student on the autistic spectrum to check his wellbeing. The student had reported being concerned about the punctuality of some of the bus drivers who took students to and from school. With the head's encouragement the student recorded times and presented them on a spread sheet.

In this school, staff are encouraged to spend more time with students at lunchtime: teachers can have a free school meal if they also sit at tables with students and talk to the students in their vicinity rather than each other.

### 3. Are child protection policies and procedures soundly based in statutory guidance with which all staff are familiar?

The research highlighted the importance of schools and authorities developing flexible approaches which were responsive to local need – at a school and local authority level – situated within a wider policy framework and social environment. However, all locally-planned approaches drew on statutory guidance and were consistent with this guidance.

#### Key points from the study

- All staff had basic knowledge of formal guidance, in a level of detail which was appropriate for their job. This would include child protection processes, safe recruitment and safe practice for staff with young people.
- Statutory guidance was seen as a sound basis on which local practice can develop, rather than a “tick box” process which would insure the school against criticism.
- Statutory guidance, and the locally agreed procedures which arose from it, would be the basis for training and also be drawn upon for staff discussions when concerns arise.
- Heads ran child protection training workshops once a year and also provided stopgap training for new members of staff. These training programmes were compulsory. In most cases the SENCO and head took the lead on the training.
- Schools had a full and active involvement in local inter-agency arrangements for the protection of young people at risk of harm.

#### What people told our researchers

*...all the policy stuff has to be in place – everything the school needs to have covered to get a good inspection report, including: the central single register, recruitment systems, systems for dealing with allegations, dedicated staff with responsibility for safeguarding.*

#### **Chair, Local safeguarding Children Board**

*You have to disseminate your successes so that others can see that it is worth doing this. Schools staff and young people see what others are doing and think, ‘I want a bit of that’ ... From one little seed things grow... Everything spirals.*

#### **Principal Social Worker**

## 4. Is safeguarding a shared responsibility in your school so that there is a whole school approach to understanding child protection concerns?

Schools in the study saw keeping young people safe as the shared responsibility of every adult working there, rather than simply those with a 'safeguarding' element to their formal job description. Levels of involvement in processes varied substantially, but all adults understood how to escalate any concerns they might have, and how to respond to a young person approaching them with a worry or problem. In other words, all students and staff benefit from organisational structures which enable both staff members and young people to raise concerns and know how to seek support both inside the school and in the wider community. As a result, schools provided regular training for all members of staff, at a level appropriate to their role in the school.

### Key points from the study

- A significant number of young people may be so isolated that they will depend on a higher level of adult intervention and structural measures. Vulnerable young people were seen to benefit from a combination of strong structural support from professionals alongside peer-centred intervention as appropriate for the school context.
- Whole staff group training was seen as key to the embedding of understanding of child protection throughout the school.
- Schools and local authorities had established systems:
  - for regular training and professional development of all staff who have contact with young people
  - to ensure accessible consultation and support for any staff in schools who may be in a position to identify child protection concerns.
- Within schools, staff had ready access to informal advice and support as well as strong formal communication networks within and beyond schools for onward referral.
- Good practice included the awareness by everyone of:
  - statutory responsibilities
  - the importance of really listening to children and young people.

### What people told our researchers

*Every member of staff knows in this school if they are worried about something, they pass it on. If there's any concern, you let someone know. And we will do something with it. And you never, ever ignore anything.* **Deputy Head**

*[I am] a child protection coordinator, and I see safeguarding as everyone's responsibility, and in that sense I class myself as the person who is overseeing the safeguarding role.* **SENCO**

*I also tell the staff that they should thank the child for talking to them, that they should always believe the child and that they should not ask too many questions because this will protect any statement that a child might later make. So I tell them to not ask too many questions and pass on the information to myself. I use real case study examples too so that staff understand how serious this is.* **SENCO**

## 5. Do you work in collaboration with your local authority, with other schools within your area and with the inter-agency networks so that knowledge and experience can be effectively shared?

Schools occupy a key role in identifying child protection concerns and in ensuring an appropriate response. However, they rely on expertise from other agencies in making referrals and accessing support for young people at risk. An effective response relies on good collaboration between different agencies including schools, local authorities, police, health professionals and others.

### Key points from the study

- School staff may feel ill-equipped to assess child protection concerns, and so well-known contacts in the local authority (as well as in-school expertise) were seen as crucial in supporting difficult decisions about referral to children's services.
- Most heads wanted opportunities for consultation – they were conscious that they are not experts in child protection, and wanted reassurance and support in dealing with vulnerable children.
- At local authority level, Local Safeguarding Children Boards (LSCBs) were seen as key to facilitating a culture of interagency working, acting as a hub for cross-professional liaison, training and the sharing of good practice.
- Schools with an outward-facing culture, in contact with key professionals in local agencies, were seen to help facilitate good practice by enabling trust and the early sharing of concerns.

*'There are scattered post-holders who work across the piece, such as domestic violence and anti-bullying co-ordinators. The primary ICT co-ordinator is working across the borough on e-safety. We're also doing a lot in primaries and secondaries within PSHE on sexual health and safeguarding.'*

### Case study: Collaborative working

In one local authority the Head of Targeted Services in Education spoke of the Authority *'developing a community of schools'* – a community which spanned different types of school, including academies and independent sector schools. In the same area, the Chair of the LSCB remarked that her role is *'hugely around the old basic things – getting people to communicate, to talk and to listen'*.

This local authority had created dedicated linked roles – including 'champions' for safeguarding or integrated working. It was felt that this offered a way of extending awareness, support and advice across local authority area, and that this model could be replicated easily elsewhere. A School Inclusion Officer told researchers: *'[I have] an excellent relationship with children's services. Eighteen months ago the services were broken up into locality teams and this has made it so much easier. In a locality, team members pop in to school now, and so we are good at liaising with the social workers.'*

## 6. Are risk and protection issues and ways to address these embedded in the school structure and curriculum?

Safeguarding themes need to be embedded in the school wide curriculum rather than treated as separate matters. Protection of young people was seen to be enhanced when attention to student welfare is addressed in its broadest sense. Given the opportunity, schools reported that young people respond well to open discussions addressing their wellbeing and that of others. In the study, schools reported that they could be more effective at safeguarding students where issues relating to safeguarding and wellbeing (including sensitive topics such as domestic violence and abuse) were embedded in the curriculum and when structures were in place that enabled staff and students to feel safe to raise concerns and seek support. PSHE lessons, including sex and relationships education, are of particular importance in helping students to understand such issues as domestic violence, abuse in peer relationships, sexual exploitation, and drug and alcohol abuse.

Schools can play an important role in helping young people to recognise abusive situations and relationships and find routes to getting help.

### Key points from the study

- It was thought that the term ‘safeguarding’ did not have a meaning for young people – it was a term used by adults. They needed to be equipped with a conceptual understanding of what danger, risk and harm might mean, in relation to both themselves and their peers, so that they would be able to recognise when they should be concerned and find the words to express their concerns.
- The approaches taken varied. Examples included discussion as part of the curriculum (in particular within PSHE lessons) and cross-school and within-school events, such as commissioned drama productions.
- Staff in one school had gone through the curriculum together and listed areas of particular concern to the school community. They then incorporated these themes into a broad range of disciplines.

### What people told our researchers

*We have discussion lessons where we can just sit and talk about our opinions on things and it can be like personal problems. And it's like a good lesson to feel that I would like, in my PAL [Preparation for Adult Life] lessons I would feel that I can like talk openly about problems that I have, because it's like an environment where you can trust the people in your classroom, because like my PAL class is quite small as well, so it's good.*

**Student**

*What we do is, all of these aspects about being safe and being in control of your life are taught explicitly in lessons, in a very supportive way.*

**Deputy Headteacher**

## 7. Do young people in your school know who they can talk to about their worries and concerns? Is there a range of ways they can get help?

Adults and young people emphasised the importance of a school environment where young people feel comfortable to reveal their worries and problems– to adult staff or to fellow students.

The internal support system for young people needs to be properly established. In the study schools, pastoral care could be organised in a number of different ways. In some cases students had a tutor group system in which the students stayed with the same year group. In others, tutor groups had a range of children of different year groups represented. There were benefits reported for both approaches, depending on school culture and the skills of the individuals involved, but consistency and continuity in student-tutor relationships were seen as crucial.

### Key points from the study

- The class tutor often plays a key role in identifying and following up any concerns. These are usually then referred through a house or year group support system, either through a head or year or head of house who attends the safeguarding support sessions.
- Some schools provided additional counselling on site for students who were experiencing particular emotional or social difficulties. Examples of issues where young people were referred for counselling included issues such as self-harm, bereavement and anorexia.
- Accessible staff, open door policies, familiarity with, and trust in, those who could offer support all contributed to making sources of help more available.
- In the majority of schools a pastoral lead role was allocated to a deputy head and/or SENCO. A number of other roles had been created for staff who were highly visible to students and were in a strong position to pick up on changes in students' appearance or behaviour: one school had an attendance officer while another had a pastoral support worker. Both were aware of children who were potentially at risk and actively monitored their wellbeing.
- Extra-curricular activities were provided in some schools to develop a sense of community safety and inclusion, in recognition of the difficulties the more vulnerable students might have in finding sources of social support

#### What people told our researchers

*The tutor group for newly transitioned pupils receives visits from sixth form mentors each morning before registration to get to know the students.*

**Head Teacher**

*Other schools around the country should have students go into the local primary schools in their area to let primary age children know about what their school does....Schools should make a storyline based film to pass out to the primary age children to talk about how the school will help them settle, about peer mentors and worries such as bullying and cyber-bullying.*

**Student**

*Pastoral support relies on a high level of attentiveness. If we know our students, we can also respond to our gut feeling if something is wrong.*

**SENCO**

## 8. Do your staff get to know the students well?

The size of secondary schools, as well as the academic and financial pressures on them, can create barriers for staff in identifying child protection needs. These barriers can be minimised. Systems in schools should enable staff to get to know their students well, through regular formal and informal contact within the school.

### Key points from the study

- Time spent with students was seen as important in identifying needs, in line with an emphasis on a participatory and child-centred ethos in schools. As well as the importance to young people of feeling comfortable to reveal their concerns about abuse or other safety concerns, there is a need for students to be well enough known for problems they find it hard to talk about or understand to be picked up by others.
- Schools in this study held either weekly or fortnightly safeguarding meetings either with the school head or the deputy head in charge of safeguarding. These considered the needs of the more vulnerable students, including those who were the subjects of formal child protection procedures.
- Evidence gathering about the needs of young people in one school had led to plans for work with families through a school-based link worker.
- A number of the schools in this study had a very diverse student population, with high rates of children who spoke English as an additional language. Each school had some staff members who spoke the same languages, thus increasing the likelihood that children who did not speak English as their first language might be in contact with someone who could communicate more readily with them. One school had formalised bilingual support officers to support students and also provide a vital link between home and school. From a child protection perspective such a role is key where parents do not speak English as a first language, because effective communication about a student's needs is then more likely to be established.

*Pastoral support relies on a high level of attentiveness. If we know our students, we can also respond to our gut feeling if something is wrong.*

**SENCO**

### Case studies

#### **Promoting academic success through counselling support**

One school provided a specialist counselling service so that the 'whole child' was supported: by dealing with personal and emotional distress and difficulties, students' academic abilities were supported. Whilst in other contexts counselling generally operates as a private and confidential activity, the school counsellor found it was necessary for her to be highly visible and therefore a regular and unremarkable presence in the school. She went into classrooms and taught all students on subjects such as good health and emotional wellbeing in addition to her one-to-one counselling role. She also persuaded the principal that an open door approach would create an environment in which young people would feel comfortable about walking through her door. One student simply came to her room to weep because his mother was terminally ill. The counsellor provided a safe, respectful, accepting and compassionate space, only speaking directly to him if invited.

## 9. Do students have a voice and participate in the school's child protection and support processes?

Many young people of secondary school age turn to their peers and talk among themselves about concerns that they have, in preference to sharing them with adults. This can make safeguarding and protection for this age group more of a challenge.

Most of the schools we visited recognised this and had responded by introducing child-centred responses, for example through the introduction of buddying or mentor schemes.

Some local authorities had involved young people in designing its approaches to safeguarding, involving schools in participation forums and sharing good practice.

### Key points from the study

- Peer-to-peer mentoring schemes were viewed as an effective way of encouraging young people to share concerns, to create an atmosphere of trust and make it more likely that problems will be picked up. It was also recognised that alternatives needed to be available for those who did not want to disclose their problems to a peer.
- Peer mentoring schemes were not limited to issues of risk or safety. They typically had a very broad remit – anything to do with an individual's welfare or, in some cases, academic issues.
- Local Children's Safeguarding Boards and local authorities had developed young people's consultation groups which contributed to 'feeling safe' and 'staying safe' initiatives.
- Supporting transition from primary – in one academy school, each incoming pupil is allocated an older pupil 'buddy' mentor who visits the primary school to provide reassurance that their welfare is central.

### What people told our researchers

*Some of the younger pupils especially may find it quite difficult to speak to an adult, whether it be a teacher or one of the pastoral leaders, but they would find it much easier to speak to one of the peer mentors or maybe even one of the prefects.*

**Student**

*So you have peer mentors to like help you, if you don't want to talk to an adult you can talk to someone you feel comfortable talking to and things like that.*

**Student Councillor**

*I think it's good to feel that maybe if you meet someone in an older year is maybe going through the same thing as you and so you could like talk to them about it and it's important to feel that it's not just you maybe, if there's someone else to talk to. It's like a support mechanism type thing.*

**Student**

## 10. Are student-led approaches well supported in your school?

Over recent years, there has been a significant move in education and social work towards seeing and working with children and young people in a way embraces their rights and capabilities as well as their needs and vulnerability. This approach aims to involve young people as subjects in decision-making and planning about all issues which concern them, rather than just seeing them primarily as 'objects of concern' who need protection and guidance. A range of examples were given by study schools which highlighted an enthusiasm for working together with young people as 'experts by experience'.

### Key points from study

- Young people who took part in the study were aware of issues that might constitute child protection risks, alongside wider issues relating to safeguarding and well-being more generally. During the study, school students openly discussed such issues as bullying in school, parental discord and marital breakdown, domestic abuse and the physical and psychological abuse that can take place within the home, young people being placed in care, self-harm, knife crimes, gang and sexual violence.
- Many young people who took part in the study commented that a person who is experiencing abuse or neglect might find it difficult to seek support. Several also raised concerns about the risk of adults misinterpreting young people's behaviour, and responding in a punitive manner rather than first seeking to explore why a person might be angry or withdrawn or missing school.
- School staff recognised the value of this insight, and incorporated it into their planning and practice. However, they also appreciated the limits of peer mentoring, and cautioned that it may not be appropriate in all circumstances. In one school peer mentoring was not used, because the head teacher judged that the approach would not work well in the context of local needs, cultures and expectations.
- Peer mentoring and other student-led approaches worked best when schools were aware of the potential burden placed on those young people who acted as mentors and provided extensive training and support for these young people. Where students had told of abuse or neglect, mentors knew how to respond appropriately. Staff then provided emotional support for mentors as well as those making the disclosure.

#### **What people told our researchers**

*We shouldn't underestimate the skills sets young people can bring to the table around policy and practice issues. We must listen to the voice of the child.* **Principal Social Worker**

*Good schools involve children and young people in planning. [...] The first premise of good child protection in schools is that it's got to involve the children. [...] One of the best resources are our young people. [...] Young people are their own successes.*

**Local Authority Behaviour and Attendance Advisory Officer**

*Mentoring doesn't always work. Me and my mentor did not get on so I go to him instead [pointing to another student].* **Student**

*You've got to remember the peer mentors, they're humans too, they're humans too they're not 'super', although most of the time they are. They're not 'super', unfortunately, so they can have problems too and sometimes it, your own welfare can be more important.* **Student**