Female Genital Mutilation (FGM) briefing for schools

Schools can play a key role in helping to prevent Female Genital Mutilation (FGM).

Staff training and a whole school awareness of the issue means action can be taken to intervene and support pupils at risk.

Schools in England and Wales have a legal duty under section 74 of the Serious Crime Act 2015 to report cases of FGM if they discover that a girl under the age of 18 has been a victim or if they receive a disclosure. The school must notify the police verbally or in writing within 1 month of discovering that the FGM has taken place.

School ethos, policy and training
Schools should create an ethos that encourages children to feel safe and confident to share any concerns or worries they have with a member of staff.

Any discovery or disclosure about FGM should be treated as a child protection concern and be reported to the police. The school’s child protection policy and procedures should outline this legal duty. The policy should be read and signed by all members of staff and reviewed and updated annually.

Schools should also have a robust attendance policy where patterns of absence are picked up on and investigated, as frequent absences due to health issues can be a sign that FGM may have taken place.

Some local authorities and specialist organisations such as FORWARD can provide training and awareness sessions on the subject of FGM for school staff. This can enable staff to recognise possible signs and indicators that a girl is either at risk or may have already undergone FGM.

Schools should display posters, leaflets and helpline numbers such as ChildLine (0800 1111) and the FGM helpline (0800 028 3550) around the school.

School assemblies are a good way of raising awareness for both pupils and staff. Guest speakers can be invited in from external agencies, theatre groups can be used or films shown to engage young people.
Signs of possible FGM in an education setting

- Prolonged or repeated absences from school.
- May have difficulty walking, standing, or sitting.
- May appear withdrawn, anxious or depressed.
- Academic performance may suffer.
- May spend a prolonged amount of time in the toilets.

If families are planning a prolonged trip during term time and this would lead to an unauthorised absence for the child, it is within the schools’ rights to ask for further information about where they are going and for what purpose. A meeting with the parents can be called and this can be used as an opportunity to risk assess if the child may be in danger of FGM.

Preventative education
The best opportunity to teach children and young people about FGM is as part of the PHSE, Citizenship and Sex and Relationships Education curriculum.

Primary
Government guidance highlights that FGM often takes place between the ages of 5 and 8 years old so primary school aged children need to be made aware of their rights in a sensitive and age appropriate way. Older primary schools girls can be taught about their right to be safe and in control of their own bodies, what their bodies should look like and what is legal. They should also be made clear of where to go to get help if they are worried about anything i.e. if they are told they are being taken away for a ‘special procedure’, or they are ‘about to become a woman’. Circle time is also a good way for pupils to express any worries they might have.

Secondary
International Women’s Day can be used as an opportunity to talk about FGM in PHSE or Citizenship lessons and to hold special events and assemblies. Lessons and messages about FGM should be taught in a non-judgemental way. It should be described as ‘harmful’ and teachers should be mindful that some pupils may not realise or agree that FGM is a bad thing, and may see it as part of their cultural heritage.

Specific cultural groups or girls should not be targeted and PSHE and Citizenship lessons around the subject of FGM should be taught to whole year groups, including boys, as a global human rights issue.
Learning outcomes should include:

- What FGM is
- Why FGM is harmful
- UK law
- Where to go for help and support

Films such as Forward’s Think Again can be used to engage the class as well as quizzes, interactive activities and discussions. Ground rules during discussions should be set to keep learning safe and teachers should be clear about group discussions remaining confidential. There should be an agreed model for appropriate language and distancing techniques should be used to make discussion and exploration safe for young people.

A box could also be placed in the room for confidential questions of worries at the end of the lesson.

**What schools should do if they are worried about a child**

If a member of staff suspects a child is at risk of, has already undergone, or receives a disclosure about FGM, they must be careful to respond in an appropriate and sensitive manner. Efforts should be made to establish the full facts from the child before any action is taken. The member of staff should discuss it with the school’s designated safeguarding lead, following the procedures set out in the child protection policy. School staff should not attempt to investigate the case themselves or attempt to speak to the child’s parents as this may place the child at an increased risk of harm.

FGM should be treated as a child protection concern and referred to the relevant authorities as outlined in the school’s child protection policy. Schools could also check for any guidance about FGM issued by their LSCB.

**Working with parents**

Opportunities should be used to engage with parents from communities where FGM is known to occur. Coffee mornings and information sessions can be held to explain the legal and long-term health ramifications of FGM.
Useful links

FORWARD- http://www.forwarduk.org.uk/

Think Again: the film - http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kzBNTtR7toE

Daughters of Eve - http://www.dofeve.org/

Womankind - https://www.womankind.org.uk/

FGM helpline - 0800 028 3550

HM Government (2011) Multi-agency practice guidelines: Female Genital Mutilation

Keeping Children Safe in Education (2016, DfE)