Education: learning from case reviews

Summary of risk factors and learning for improved practice around the education sector

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Schools have a duty to protect children from harm within the educational setting (both from members of staff and from other pupils). They are also very well-placed to notice the signs that a child may be being abused at home. Both staff and pupils need to be able to recognise the signs of abuse and be clear about what action they should take if they are worried.

Reasons case reviews were commissioned

This briefing is based on learning from case reviews published since 2008 which have highlighted lessons for the education sector to improve safeguarding practice.

In these case reviews, children and young people died or were harmed due to the following:

- suicide
- sexual exploitation
- becoming involved in an abusive relationship with a teacher
- death or serious injury due to neglect or physical abuse.

Key issues for the education sector in case reviews

Inappropriate teacher-pupil relationships

In a number of cases teachers had inappropriate relationships with their pupils. Pupils and staff were not always clear about what constituted unacceptable behaviour or did not know how to report their concerns.

Pupils’ behaviour masking underlying issues

Challenging behaviour or poor attendance can be a sign that a young person is experiencing deeper, underlying problems at home or at school. Teachers are often in a good position to notice warning signs and take appropriate action to prevent things getting worse or provide help and support.
Bullying in school

Many children experienced bullying at school. Bullying can be very distressing to children. It can impact on children’s learning, and can lead to truancy, refusing to go to school or mental health problems.

Online behaviour

Text messaging and social networking sites have blurred the line between professional and private and home and school life. Both pupils and teachers were involved in inappropriate online behaviour, including cyberbullying and online grooming.

Learning for improved practice

Recognising and responding to abuse

- All staff should be able to identify the signs of sexual, emotional, physical abuse, neglect, including sexual exploitation and sexual bullying. Teachers should also understand the impact of abuse, neglect and poor parenting on children’s welfare and have knowledge of children’s attachment behaviour and developmental milestones.
- All cases of underage sex should be treated as a potential child protection issue.
- All staff must be familiar with and comply with the school’s safeguarding policies and procedures.

Listening to and supporting pupils

- Young people need to know how they can raise safeguarding concerns (such as having a named safe person who children can speak).
- Schools must consider providing mentors / advocates to help young people present their views effectively.
- Schools should provide a follow-up support service for children and families who have made an allegation of abuse against staff which includes counselling, social work and in-school support.
- Staff should not evaluate situations based on their assumptions about how children and young people behave, how teachers behave, or teachers’ vulnerability to false allegations.

Be alert to inappropriate pupil / teacher relationships
• School staff need to be able to identify the signs of grooming and be alert to warning signs of potentially inappropriate relationships between colleagues and pupils.

• Children involved in inappropriate relationships with members of staff are unlikely to speak out themselves. Concerns raised by other pupils must be investigated with an open mind.

• Relationships between pupils and staff should never be seen as based on mutual consent. They must be viewed as child sexual abuse / exploitation.

• Cases where a pupil seems to be trying to establish an inappropriate relationship with a member of staff should not be simply dismissed as a ‘crush’ or adolescent behaviour. Staff members should talk to the pupil about what is appropriate behaviour and provide a listening ear to any issues they raise. Staff should also consider involving the child’s parents / carers.

• Where practical, classrooms should not have covered internal windows.

• Senior teachers should make unplanned visits to classrooms on a regular basis including at break times.

• Schools should consider tightening recruitment processes to include value-based interviewing.

Recognising poor behaviour and school attendance may be a sign of abuse, neglect, special needs or vulnerability

• Bad behaviour and poor attendance are potential signs of vulnerability. They may be an indicator of abuse or neglect; or of unmet special educational needs; or that a child is taking part in risky or criminal behaviour.

• Schools should work with the local authority to keep track children who are missing from education.

• Permanently excluded children and their parents need support from the local authority to find appropriate alternative arrangements promptly.

Enforce robust bullying policies and procedures

• Schools need robust policies and procedures for tackling bullying and must embed awareness-raising activities in the curriculum.

• Schools, police and local authorities should work together strategically to tackle bullying incidents in schools which are also linked to anti-social behaviour away from school premises.

Have a comprehensive e-safety policy

• Schools need to enforce a comprehensive e-safety policy. E-safety needs to be embedded in the school curriculum.
Every school should have policies for the safe and appropriate use of ICT by both pupils and staff and consider ways of monitoring individual use of ICT on school premises.

Keep accurate records of incidents and concerns

- Schools must keep accurate records of all incidents and concerns relating to children and / or members of staff. This allows the relevant professionals to recognise emerging patterns, understand the significance of previous concerns and prevent incidents from being dealt with in isolation.

Train staff to work with challenging parents and other agencies

- Staff need training in working with difficult families who refuse to co-operate with professionals. This will support timely decisions and give them the confidence to challenge parents’ behaviour.
- Schools should receive training in how and when to challenge social workers’ decisions.
- School governing bodies need to act as a critical friend, scrutinising safeguarding practice and asking questions as necessary.