

Case Study 1 - Joanna**Importance of recognising signs and symptoms of child abuse and effective recording of information to safeguard children.**

As an early year's practitioner, safeguarding and promoting the well-being of all children is a prime concern. It is important that training is regularly updated to reflect new policies, procedures, and understandings about child protection (The Safeguarding Company, no date). According to the National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children (NSPCC, 2016a), signs of abuse are not always obvious. Therefore, practitioners need continual training to recognise subtle and varied indicators of abuse. According to NSPCC Learning (2021c), practitioners must be familiar with the setting's safeguarding policies and procedures. These policies are in place to protect children.

Abuse can be in forms such as physical, emotional, sexual and neglect. The National Institute for Health and Care Excellence (NICE, 2017) and NSPCC (2016b) suggest that those experiencing abuse can present with changes in behaviour, such as becoming withdrawn, anxious, or aggressive. Additionally, unexplained injuries, such as bruises, inappropriate sexual behaviour, bedwetting, poor hygiene, unwashed clothes, inappropriate clothing and being hungry can be signs and symptoms of abuse. In Joanna's case, physical abuse is suspected.

As an early years practitioner, Healey (2024), states that building good relationships with children is important, so they feel comfortable in sharing their worries. This includes having a 'knowing' of the children so that changes in behaviour are spotted. This relationship is evident between the practitioner and Joanna. The practitioner has established a relationship and can identify that Joanna is usually a happy, outgoing girl. It has been noted that in recent weeks, Joanna has been quiet, clingy and reluctant to leave the practitioner's side. This is possibly due to her feeling safe in the care of the practitioner and has formed a secure attachment. According to Pacey (2016), Bowlby suggests that having a secure attachment within their setting can support children in feeling safe, calm and secure. The change of behaviour that Joanna demonstrates should not be dismissed, and assumptions must not be made, only clear, factual information should be observed and recorded. (Warwickshire Safeguarding, 2019).

Gov. Wales (2021), The Education People (2018) and Rimmer (2021) agree that observations must be detailed and recorded, including the date, time and any behaviour changes that were noticed and reported to the Designated Safeguarding Lead (DSL) whilst following the safeguarding policies and procedures within the setting.

In addition to the change of behaviour in Joanna, she has become reluctant to take off her jumper or cardigan. More recently, bruising has been noticed on her body, near her ribs. Joanna has become upset when asked about this. Again, the practitioner must not add any personal interpretations or make assumptions about how Joanna has these bruises in her record keeping. Moreover, it is important to use appropriate interactions with Joanna in questioning.

By using open-ended and non-leading questions to allow children to express themselves freely. According to Do Right by Kids (2019) an example of an open-ended question would be 'Could you tell me more about what happened?' Avoid suggesting answers or prompting specific responses like 'Did someone hurt you?' Instead, use language like 'Can you tell me how you got your bruise?' This also clarifies what the child has already disclosed. Importantly, do not rush the child to answer, allow them to answer in their own time (NSPCC Learning, 2023).

The practitioner must record and specify the location of the bruises on Joanna's body and record anything that Joanna discloses. Rose (2023) highlights the importance of strong, continuous record-keeping in safeguarding children as this can prompt action by professionals to keep children safe. Rose (2023) adds that many schools use an electronic concern reporting system which allows all staff to share concerns and to be aware of trending patterns which builds a clear picture of a child's experiences. Additionally, the National Council of Voluntary Organisations (NCVO, 2018) supports that statement by adding that recording safeguarding concerns can provide evidence to support actions taken by the setting or external agencies.

A critical analysis of the reporting and referral processes and procedures when abuse is suspected.

The foundation of the reporting and referral procedure in cases of suspected abuse is statutory requirements. Section 47 of the Children Act (1989) prioritises cases where children are at the highest risk of 'Significant harm' This ensures that resources are allocated to the most serious cases and preventing severe abuse or neglect. However, one criticism of Section 47 is the lack of a precise definition of 'significant harm' which can lead to inconsistent application of the law (NSPCC,2021a).

These laws require professionals who encounter possible abuse situations to follow certain procedures and actions. For example, The Children Act (2004) states there is a clear legal duty for various agencies to ensure the safety and well-being of children. The statutory requirements also promote collaboration amongst multi-agency staff.

However, this can lead to challenges in communication and different interpretations of responsibilities causing inconsistency in safeguarding children. In an article, Jahans-Baynton and Grealish (2021) state that this could be caused by technology skills and a lack of face-to-face contact with other agencies. Additionally, Dixon *et al.* (2022) state, that although agencies share the same goal to safeguard, each role has their own, set guidelines and processes that they must follow.

Section 128 of the Social Services and Well-being (Wales) Act (2014) and Wales Safeguarding Procedures (no date) emphasise the well-being of children and the powers that authorities have such as police and social services. However, due to reporting requirements, the system may become overloaded with reports. This could put a strain on available resources and potentially delay the processing of legitimate cases. Healthcare Inspectorate Wales (2023) and Walsh (2024) have reported a shortage of staff and resources in both social services and policing to respond to the increasing number of child protection concerns. Furthermore, this would have an impact on multi-agency working and safeguarding of children. Moreover, this can lead to inconsistencies in practice. The Care Inspectorate for Wales (cited in a report by Pollock,2023) states that inconsistencies have been recorded in the safeguarding of children in Wales.

Policy and procedure guidelines within a setting give instructions for carrying out statutory requirements. For example, *Working Together to Safeguard Children* (2023) outlines the procedures for multi-agency collaboration, assessment, and intervention in cases of abuse. Effective policies and guidelines can promote consistency in safeguarding children (NSPCC Learning, 2023a).

However, the effectiveness of these guidelines can be impacted by how accessible they are, how clear they are written and the level of training the practitioner or professionals have. Davies (2020) states that school staff should be trained accordingly. This includes office staff and cleaners with a minimum of level one, teachers and teaching assistants trained to a level two with headteachers and DSL a level three. Additionally, while it is important to update policies often to reflect legislation, this can make it difficult for some practitioners or professionals to stay up to date and adjust to changes. The Wales Safeguarding application for Android and iPhone can support practitioners and professionals with up to date with the latest legislation and what to do in the event of a child protection concern (Social Care Wales, no date).

Professionals and practitioners involved in the reporting and referral process rely on ethical frameworks to guide their actions and decisions. These frameworks place a strong emphasis on protecting children and respecting their rights to make decisions about their lives whilst promoting their well-being. Article 12 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNICEF, 2022) states that children have the right to express themselves in all matters that affect them in their day-to-day lives. Despite the frameworks in place, the reporting and referral process for suspected abuse cases still faces challenges, such as the underreporting of abuse due to fear of repercussions, lack of awareness, or doubts about evidence (NSPCC Learning, 2024).

Setting responsibilities to ensure a holistic, open and effective approach to safeguarding.

Safeguarding in early years settings is an integral part of ensuring the well-being and development of children. Practitioners and settings must take on the responsibility of protecting children from harm, abuse, and neglect while promoting their overall growth. As highlighted by NSPCC Learning (2023b), this involves creating a safe and nurturing environment where children can thrive.

A holistic, open, and effective approach to safeguarding is essential in achieving these goals, as emphasised by Withersworldwide (2022). This approach considers not only the physical safety of children but also their emotional, social, and psychological well-being. Schools are tasked with implementing policies and practices that address various aspects of children's lives, as outlined by the Department for Education (2024).

For example, Child Protection Policies outline the procedures for identifying, reporting, and responding to concerns about children's safety and well-being. It serves as a guideline for staff on how to deal with potential cases of harm or abuse. Additionally, a behaviour policy includes measures to address bullying and discriminatory bullying, the policy is aligned with Section 149 of The Equality Act 2010 (Children's Rights Alliance for England, 2023) and Article 2 of the UNCRC (UNICEF, 2022). It ensures that all students are treated equally and with respect, creating an inclusive environment where diversity is valued. Furthermore, anti-bullying policies also play an important role in making children feel safe and promoting a positive school culture (Family Lives, 2024). A code of conduct for staff would also be included in these policies.

In addition to these policies, emotional support can be put in place by the setting to support children with safeguarding concerns this is following article 39 of the UNCRC (UNICEF, 2022). According to the British Association of Play Therapists [BAPT] (2023), therapy can provide a safe and confidential space for children to express their feelings and experiences, allowing emotional release and healing. Furthermore, children can develop coping mechanisms and resilience, enabling them to handle challenges and setbacks more effectively.

In Joanna's case, a holistic approach to the situation would be to ensure her immediate safety and well-being within the setting. Vain (2023) suggests that this will provide emotional security and stability, ensuring that the child's emotional well-being is prioritised. According to Ann Craft Trust (2023), if physical abuse is suspected, this should be documented with factual information saying what you see, not what you feel. At this current stage, practitioners are not aware there have been previous concerns at home or concerning Joanna. This recent situation should be documented and reported in line with the settings policies and procedures and reported to the Designated Safeguarding Lead (DSL) (NSPCC Learning,2023a). The practitioner or DSL may gently question Joanna using open-ended or non-leading questions to allow Joanna to express herself freely, and to try to gauge an understanding of what has happened and if the injury is caused by physical abuse. Again, the practitioner must not make assumptions, for example, it could be that Joanna has been climbing and has fallen and injured herself and has not told anyone for fear of being told off. The clingy behaviour could be completely unrelated. However, another example is that Joanna discloses that someone has been hurting her. Article 19 of the UNCRC states that children should be free from violence, abuse and neglect (UNICEF,2022). The DSL is responsible for referrals to the appropriate agencies such as police or social services within 24 hours (Citizens UK, no date and NSPCC,2017).

Safeguarding procedures are important in ensuring the protection and well-being of children like Joanna. Adhering to established policies and guidelines and following legislation such as the Children Act (2004) Social Services and Wellbeing Act (2014) Wales Safeguarding Procedures (no date) and United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNICEF,2022) is integral for effective implementation. A holistic approach integrates immediate safety measures, emotional and psychological support, family involvement, and multi-agency collaboration. It is through continuous monitoring, accurate documentation, and regular training ensure that all practitioners are equipped to recognize and respond to signs of abuse appropriately. Additionally, having positive relationships with children can allow for them to feel safe (NSPCC,2021b) in turn, enabling them to feel more comfortable disclosing concerns or worries to those they trust.

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