



SAFEGUARDING UPDATE

WITH DR SANDRA WISEMAN

TUESDAY 13TH OCTOBER 2026 • ISSUE 190

Learning from serious child safeguarding incidents – what schools need to know

The Child Safeguarding Practice Review Panel's latest quarterly analysis, published on 29th September 2026, provides important learning from 60 rapid reviews relating to serious safeguarding incidents occurring between January and March 2026. Half involved a child death and **48%** involved serious harm. Although much of the data relates to very young children, the findings contain important messages for schools about professional curiosity, understanding the whole family and avoiding unseen risk.

What does the data tell us?

Almost half of the children involved were babies under one, and **18%** of children were recorded as having a disability, with a further **5%** having a possible but unconfirmed disability. The most common causes of death were unexplained SUDI/SUDC (**40%**), suicide (**13%**) and intrafamilial fatal assault (**13%**). For serious harm, the most common causes were intrafamilial assault (**38%**), neglect (**17%**) and extrafamilial child sexual abuse (**14%**).

Two emerging themes are particularly important for safeguarding practice: **hidden males within families and young parents.**

Hidden males – who else is in the child's life?

A striking **30%** of reviews identified a hidden male as a theme. The Panel describes these as men within the family or wider network who are involved in a child's life but are unknown to, overlooked or unseen by services. They may be biological fathers, stepfathers, mother's partners or other male relatives.

Professionals were frequently unaware of these men's involvement in children's lives. In some cases, previous violence or offending by male caregivers had not been sufficiently considered when assessing risk. The Panel also identified missed opportunities to engage fathers and understand how their own experiences might affect their parenting.

For schools, professional curiosity matters. Don't assume that the adults named on school records provide the complete picture.

Consider:

Who lives in the home? | Who regularly stays there? | Who cares for or collects the child? | Who is a significant adult in their life? | Has this changed? | What do we know about them?

A new partner, previously unknown adult or change in household circumstances may be significant safeguarding information.

Young parents – understand vulnerability, don't make assumptions

Young parents were another emerging theme. 11 of the 60 reviews (**18%**) involved children cared for by young parents: one involved parents under 18 and ten involved parents aged 18–24. The Panel notes that young parents were overrepresented compared with national birth-registration data.

Common vulnerabilities included mental health difficulties, alcohol or substance use, housing problems, neglect, adverse childhood experiences and intergenerational abuse.

Being a young parent is not itself a safeguarding concern. The learning is about recognising when a parent's own experiences, vulnerabilities or unmet needs may affect their ability to provide safe and consistent care.

For schools, this means asking not simply **"What is this parent doing?"** but also **"What might be happening for this parent, what support do they need and what impact is this having on the child?"**

Don't overlook cumulative concerns

The findings reinforce a familiar message from safeguarding reviews: individual pieces of information can appear insignificant until they are brought together.

Changes in attendance, presentation or behaviour; hunger or tiredness; parental mental health; substance misuse; housing difficulties; changing adults within the household; domestic abuse; neglect; or difficulties engaging with the family may form a much more concerning picture when considered together.

Schools should ensure that safeguarding records help the DSL to identify patterns, connect information and understand the child's lived experience, rather than simply recording a series of separate incidents.

What should schools do?

The findings provide a useful opportunity for DSLs to reflect on practice:

- **Know the whole family:** establish who is important in the child's life, not simply who holds parental responsibility or appears on the contact form.
- **Remain professionally curious:** explore changes in household composition, relationships and caring arrangements.
- **Engage fathers and male caregivers:** avoid automatically directing communication and safeguarding work only towards mothers.
- **Consider historical information:** previous violence, offending, domestic abuse or other known risks may be relevant to current assessments.
- **Understand parental vulnerability:** consider mental health, substance/alcohol use, housing difficulties and parents' own experiences of trauma or abuse.
- **Bring information together:** attendance, pastoral, SEND, behaviour and safeguarding information should contribute to the whole picture.
- **Keep the child at the centre:** always ask what family circumstances mean for the child's daily lived experience, safety and wellbeing.

Questions for DSLs and safeguarding teams

- **Do we really know who is living in, staying at or regularly visiting the homes of our vulnerable children?**

- **Do we actively engage fathers and male caregivers, or can they become invisible in our safeguarding practice?**
- **Would staff recognise a change in family composition as potentially significant safeguarding information?**
- **Are we sufficiently curious about parental mental health, substance/alcohol use, housing difficulties and previous experiences of abuse?**
- **Do our records enable us to see cumulative harm and patterns over time?**
- **Are we sharing information effectively enough to build the whole picture around a child?**

Key message

Don't just ask, "What do we know about this child?"

Ask, "Who is in this child's life, what do we know about them, and what might we be missing?"

Be professionally curious. Build the whole picture. Keep the child's lived experience at the centre.

Read:

<https://childsafeguarding.independent-panel.uk/publication/q4-rapid-review-analysis-january-to-march-2026/>

Nowhere to Turn 2026 – What schools need to know

Women's Aid's Nowhere to Turn 2026 report highlights the significant barriers some survivors of domestic abuse face when trying to access refuge and safe accommodation. These include having no recourse to public funds, mental health or substance use needs, disabilities, multiple children or older male children.

What does the report tell us?

The findings are concerning:

- **92.5%** of women supported reported experiencing controlling and coercive behaviour
- **4 in 10** experienced further abuse while waiting for a refuge space
- **Women with disabled children faced particular difficulties** accessing suitable refuge accommodation.

Women's Aid recorded over 100 instances where services failed to provide support or provided incorrect or inappropriate support.

What does this mean for schools?

Children experiencing domestic abuse may remain at risk even when a parent is actively trying to leave an abusive relationship. A lack of suitable accommodation, financial difficulties or other barriers may mean a family remains with, or returns to, an alleged perpetrator.

Schools should therefore:

- **Listen and remain professionally curious,** don't assume that a parent can simply leave.
- **Consider the child's lived experience** and the impact of domestic abuse, coercive control, instability and housing difficulties.
- **Recognise additional barriers** including disability, immigration status, mental health and substance use needs.
- **Notice changes** in attendance, behaviour, presentation, emotional wellbeing or family circumstances.
- **Share concerns promptly with the DSL** and work with children's social care and specialist domestic abuse services where appropriate.
- **Continue to assess risk,** separation or an attempt to leave should never automatically be viewed as meaning the risk has ended.

Key message

Don't ask, "Why doesn't the parent just leave?"

Ask: "What barriers are preventing this family from reaching safety, and what does this mean for the child?"

See the whole picture. Remain professionally curious. Keep the child's safety and lived experience at the centre.

Read:

<https://womensaid.org.uk/what-we-do/research/research-and-reports/nowhere-to-turn-2026/>

Safeguarding Network Meeting – Thursday 22nd October, 3:45pm – 5pm Free

This free Safeguarding Network Meeting will provide an opportunity for Designated Safeguarding Leads, Deputy DSLs and senior leaders to reflect on how the changes are working in practice, discuss emerging issues and ask any questions that have arisen. The session will be practical, interactive and discussion-based, and will include:

- ☒ **KCSIE 2026 – Frequently asked questions**
- ☒ **Interactive safeguarding scenarios based on real-life situations schools are facing**
- ☒ **Discussion around professional curiosity, online safety and AI, Family Help, child-on-child abuse, information sharing, record keeping and decision making**
- ☒ **Sharing safeguarding challenges, ideas and good practice with colleagues from across our schools**

Forthcoming free safeguarding webinars for Autumn term 1 2026

Anti-bullying – Tuesday 13th October

Domestic abuse – Tuesday 20th October

Autumn term 2

Radicalisation – Tuesday 10th November

Child-on-child sexual abuse – Tuesday 17th November

Sexism and sexual harassment – Tuesday 24th November

Child sexual exploitation (CSE) – Tuesday 1st December

County lines – Tuesday 8th December

Trauma – Tuesday 15th December

Dr Sandra Wiseman

S4S Safeguarding Lead/Specialist

Email: Sandra.Wiseman@services4schools.org.uk

Mobile: 07786 582266