SAFEGUARDING UPDATE

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Safeguarding lessons from serious incidents: What schools need to know

The Child Safeguarding Practice Review Panel has identified 10 persistent themes that continue to emerge in safeguarding reviews where children have died or suffered serious harm as a result of abuse or neglect.

Although these issues are not new, their repeated appearance highlights the importance of schools regularly reflecting on their safeguarding practice, challenging assumptions and ensuring that concerns lead to timely and effective action.

What are the 10 persistent themes?

1. **The child's lived experience:** Understanding what everyday life is really like for the child, rather than relying solely on records, professional accounts or assumptions.
2. **Understanding the whole family:** Considering family relationships, circumstances and wider influences that may affect a child's safety and wellbeing.
3. **Naming and understanding harm:** Recognising and clearly identifying abuse, neglect and other forms of harm, including their impact on the child.
4. **Understanding and responding to risk:** Recognising that risk can change and ensuring concerns are continually assessed rather than considered in isolation.
5. **Information sharing and triangulation:** Bringing together information from different professionals and agencies to build a fuller picture of the child's circumstances.
6. **Positive and skilled engagement with families:** Building relationships with families while maintaining professional curiosity and a clear focus on the child's welfare.
7. **Consent and responding when it is absent:** Understanding that a lack of parental consent must not prevent necessary safeguarding action or lawful information sharing.
8. **When cases become 'stuck':** Recognising when concerns continue without meaningful progress and ensuring cases are reviewed, challenged and escalated where necessary.
9. **Stepping back safely:** Ensuring decisions to reduce or end support are based on evidence of sustained improvement and reduced risk, rather than short-term changes or reassurance alone.
10. **Culture, leadership and practice conditions:** Creating a safeguarding culture where staff feel confident to raise concerns, challenge decisions, reflect on practice and learn from mistakes.

What should schools be doing?

The learning reinforces several important expectations within Keeping Children Safe in Education (KCSIE) 2026.

- **Maintain professional curiosity:** Look beyond individual incidents and consider patterns of behaviour, attendance, presentation and family circumstances.
- **Strengthen safeguarding records:** Ensure concerns, decisions, actions, professional discussions and the rationale for decisions are clearly recorded.
- **Review repeated concerns:** Where concerns continue, DSLs should consider whether existing interventions are making a meaningful difference to the child's lived experience.
- **Challenge and escalate:** If a referral does not result in the expected response and concerns remain, follow local escalation procedures rather than allowing the case to drift.
- **Share information appropriately:** Ensure relevant safeguarding information is shared promptly, lawfully and with the appropriate professionals.
- **Listen to children:** Ensure their wishes, feelings and experiences inform safeguarding decisions, including when children find it difficult to disclose harm.
- **Provide effective DSL oversight:** Build opportunities for case discussion, supervision, reflective practice and review of safeguarding decisions.

A question for DSLs and school leaders

Are we confident that our safeguarding processes are making a difference to children's lived experiences, or are we simply recording concerns and actions?

This is an important distinction. Effective safeguarding is not just about identifying and reporting concerns; it is about understanding whether the action taken has actually improved a child's safety and wellbeing.

Recommended action

Schools should consider using the Panel's 10 themes as a discussion point during DSL meetings, safeguarding governor visits, staff training and safeguarding audits. Reviewing a small sample of ongoing safeguarding cases against these themes can help identify opportunities to strengthen practice.

Key message: Safeguarding is not simply about following procedures. It requires professional curiosity, effective information sharing, constructive challenge and, above all, a clear understanding of the child's lived experience.

Further reading and free resources:
https://childsafeguarding.independent-panel.uk/persistent-themes/

*Child Safeguarding Practice Review Panel – Persistent Themes
The Panel also provides a downloadable one-page overview and a strategic leadership reflection resource to support professional discussion.

Online sextortion: Record numbers of children targeted – What schools need to know

New figures from the Internet Watch Foundation (IWF) reveal a significant increase in children experiencing online sexual extortion, commonly known as 'sextortion', with boys particularly at risk.

In its latest report, published on 9th October 2026, the IWF confirmed that during the first six months of 2026:

- **462** reports involving sextortion and confirmed child sexual abuse imagery were recorded through Report Remove.
- This represents a **17%** increase compared with the whole of 2025, when **394** reports were confirmed.
- **95%** of these reports involved boys exclusively.

These figures relate to confirmed reports through Report Remove, rather than all incidents of sextortion, meaning the true scale is likely to be considerably greater.

What is sextortion?

Sextortion is a form of online blackmail where offenders threaten to share nude or sexual images of a child unless they pay money, provide further images or comply with other demands.

Offenders may pretend to be another young person, develop an online relationship and manipulate children into sharing images. Threats can escalate quickly, leaving children frightened, ashamed and reluctant to seek help.

Although older teenagers are most frequently identified, primary-aged children are not immune. The IWF has previously reported cases involving children as young as 11, and even younger.

What do schools need to do?

In line with Keeping Children Safe in Education (KCSIE) 2026, schools should ensure that:

- **Staff recognise the warning signs:** Sudden changes in behaviour, anxiety, withdrawal, distress following online activity or unexplained requests for money may indicate exploitation.
- **Online safety education is age-appropriate:** Teach pupils about online manipulation, unwanted contact, pressure to share images and where to seek help.
- **Boys are recognised as potential victims:** Avoid assumptions that online sexual exploitation predominantly affects girls.
- **Disclosures are handled sensitively:** Reassure children, avoid blame and report concerns immediately to the DSL. Do not ask children to forward, download or share sexual imagery.
- **DSLs respond promptly:** Consider immediate safety, emotional wellbeing, risk of self-harm, police involvement and appropriate safeguarding referrals.
- **Parents are informed:** Share practical advice about online risks, reporting routes, device safety settings and supportive responses when children disclose concerns.

The Report Remove service, operated by the IWF and Childline, allows children under 18 in the UK to report nude or sexual images of themselves that have been shared online or that someone is threatening to share.

The service can help prevent imagery from being circulated, even before it appears online. Schools should ensure pupils, parents and staff know this free, confidential service is available.

Report Remove - Childline:
https://www.childline.org.uk/info-advice/bullying-abuse-safety/online-mobile-safety/report-remove/

A key reminder for DSLs

A child experiencing sextortion may be frightened of the consequences of disclosure. Threats can escalate rapidly, and the emotional impact can be severe. Schools must respond without judgement, assess immediate risks and ensure the child receives appropriate safeguarding support.

Key message: Online sexual extortion is a safeguarding concern, not simply an online safety issue. Early recognition, trusted relationships and prompt action can prevent further harm.

Read:
https://www.iwf.org.uk/news-media/news/record-number-of-uk-under-18s-facing-sextortion-online-as-experts-say-no-time-to-lose-on-nudity-blockers-for-teens-phones/

Updated guidance: Advocacy for children and young people – What schools need to know

The Department for Education has published updated statutory guidance (13th October 2026) on independent advocacy for looked-after children, children in need and care leavers, replacing guidance from 2004.

The key change is that advocacy should not be limited to children making a formal complaint. Eligible children should be able to access independent support whenever they need help expressing their views, wishes and feelings or participating in decisions affecting their lives.

What should schools know?

- **Children's voices matter:** Ensure pupils are listened to and involved in decisions affecting their education, care and wellbeing.
- **Know when advocacy may help:** Particularly during placement changes, school transitions, exclusions or risk of exclusion, EHCP reviews and safeguarding concerns.
- **Support vulnerable pupils:** Recognise that younger children and those with SEND or communication difficulties may require additional support to ensure their views are represented.
- **Work with professionals:** DSLs and designated teachers should understand local advocacy arrangements and help eligible children access support.

Key message: Although the statutory duties primarily apply to local authorities, schools play an important role in ensuring vulnerable children know their rights, have their voices heard and can access independent advocacy when needed.

Read:
https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/advocacy-services-for-children-and-young-people

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

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