

Safeguarding scenario: What would you do? 🧑🧒🗣️

As a former Headteacher and now Safeguarding Consultant, one of the questions I often ask during safeguarding training and audits is:

? What would you do if a child told you they were regularly physically chastised at home?

Imagine a pupil tells you:

- ◆ "If I'm naughty, my mum smacks me with a belt."
- ◆ "My dad says it's the only way I'll learn."
- ◆ "I try not to make mistakes because I'm scared of being hit."

Children may describe physical punishment as "normal" or believe they deserve it. They may not recognise that what is happening could place them at risk of harm.

⚠️ Not all physical punishment is abuse, but all disclosures should be taken seriously.

While the law in England allows parents to use "reasonable punishment" in limited circumstances, any punishment that causes injury, leaves marks, involves implements such as belts or objects, is excessive, or causes a child to fear for their safety may constitute physical abuse and requires a safeguarding response.

✅ So what should schools do?

🗣️ Take all disclosures seriously

Listen carefully, remain calm and avoid expressing shock or judgement. Never promise confidentiality. Explain that you will need to share the information with the Designated Safeguarding Lead (DSL) so they can help keep the child safe.

📝 Record exactly what was said

Record the child's own words as soon as possible, including any description of injuries, frequency, objects used or comments about how the child feels. Accurate records help build a clear picture over time.

🔍 Assess the level of risk

The DSL should consider the child's age, the nature of the punishment, whether injuries are present, whether there is a pattern of behaviour and whether other forms of abuse or neglect may also be occurring.

👮 Follow your safeguarding procedures

The DSL should decide whether advice, Family Help, or a referral to children's social care is required. If a child is at immediate risk of significant harm, appropriate safeguarding procedures should be followed without delay.

♥ **Support the child**

Children who experience physical chastisement may feel frightened, ashamed or believe the punishment is their fault. Offer reassurance, ensure they know they have been listened to and continue to monitor their wellbeing.

👤 **Work with parents where it is safe to do so**

Parents should not automatically be confronted before the DSL has assessed the risk. Any discussions with parents should always be led by safeguarding considerations and follow local procedures.

♥ **Remember...**

Every child has the right to feel safe.

One disclosure may be the first opportunity a child has had to tell someone what is happening.

Safeguarding is not about deciding whether a parent intended harm.

It is about considering:

- 🔍 The child's lived experience
- 📄 Accurate recording
- 👤 Professional curiosity
- 🛡️ Acting in the child's best interests

Sometimes a comment that sounds matter-of-fact can reveal a much wider safeguarding concern. Taking the time to listen, record and respond appropriately could make a significant difference to a child's safety.

💬 How does your school help staff understand the difference between lawful parental discipline, inappropriate physical punishment and physical abuse? Are staff confident about when a disclosure should be passed immediately to the DSL?