

# A Contextual Safeguarding Approach for International Schools



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*Written by*

**Anastasia Soola Georgiou**

**Accredited Safeguarding Consultant**

Veema Education

@VeemaEdu

We are used to the visual focus of ‘safeguarding children in education’ being linked to possible risks within the child’s family. But this does not take into account ‘contextual safeguarding’, because considering risks within a child’s family is only part of the safeguarding picture, especially for older children.

The concept of contextual safeguarding takes into account influences from outside the family, the public environment in which children and young people spend their time, which are key to assessing risks for example, public settings such as parks, shopping centres, through to children and young people increasingly using the internet which can impact on their physical, emotional and mental well-being<sup>1</sup>. There is concern about the amount of phone usage and how phones and the internet monopolise the time of children and young people. As a generation growing up with the internet, it has always been present in their lives but the impact of less face to face social time, traditional family time, conversations and eye contact is the result of the time spent and lost staring at an app or a phone.

In particular, high level risks such as child sexual exploitation, should be robustly addressed while complementing any family intervention. In effect contextual safeguarding does not replace the assessment of family risks, but it provides a more holistic safeguarding assessment, which includes looking at children’s social or public environment (peer group, school, neighbourhood) which they frequent, as well as their family environment, leading to a more vigorous and all-inclusive response.

Schools may provide a protective factor, but research<sup>2</sup> shows that pupils have experienced sexual harassment and peer-on-peer abuse in educational settings as well as organisational abuse.

In essence, contextual safeguarding provides a framework to address extra-familial risk, by recognising that:

- children are more likely to be influenced by their peers than by their families
- children encounter significant harm in a range of settings beyond their families
- there is a need for referrals to be made for contextual interventions that can complement work with families.

A contextual safeguarding assessment will consider risks from peer-on-peer abuse, a key topic in the latest Department of Education statutory guidance Keeping Children Safe in Education, 2018. International schools overseas should use UK statutory guidance as a benchmark of best practice. A new section on sexual violence and sexual harassment between children and young people explains the complexity and difficulty of addressing such behaviour. It is important to remember that children displaying harmful, sexual behaviours have often experienced their own abuse and trauma. Nevertheless, bullying, physical abuse, sexual violence/harassment and cyberbullying are serious forms of peer on peer aggression, are unacceptable and must be taken seriously. Both victims, perpetrators and others affected by peer on peer abuse must be supported with clear processes and policies. Within the diverse cultures of international schools

overseas, contextual safeguarding may be more prevalent. Peer-on-peer abuse or exploitation can undermine the capacity of parents to keep children safe and can fracture family relationships (Firmin, 2016). It can include physical abuse, sexting (or youth produced sexual imagery) and initiation/hazing type violence and rituals which can involve victims undergoing painful, humiliating or dangerous activities and can include sexual assaults and tortuous initiation practises. Peer-on-peer abuse in schools may also be an indicator where children go missing, or disengaging, from education.

Grooming is a significantly harmful activity where trust is built up over a period of time, trust that is carefully nurtured by perpetrators who use a variety of methods to befriend not just other children, but also parents and friends. This is the common the pre-cursor to child sexual exploitation, sexual abuse and harassment, but what can be done to prevent it?

## What can you do?

Schools can work towards a contextual safeguarding approach<sup>3</sup> through:

### (a) Providing a safe environment:

Raising awareness of the issues of peer on peer abuse through Personal Social Health Education classes, the use of school assemblies and circle time to raise issues with children. In essence, affording children opportunities to consider potentially harmful views on sex, consent, gender and relationships with their peers which are the basis of some forms of peer-on-peer abuse; offering the services of a trained counsellor on the school site to encourage children to seek support regarding their worries and any mental health needs.

### (b) Recognising incidents of peer on peer abuse and taking action:

In many cases staff may either not recognise peer-on-peer abuse or will not recognise the severity of what is reported to them. Better training to address signs and indicators is necessary for both; specifically, for the latter it is critical that action is taken when initial information sharing occurs, otherwise it will lower confidence in services and discourage future information sharing from both staff and children.

### (c) Sharing information appropriately - supporting proactive rather than reactive responses to escalation risk.

This can be broken down into the following areas:

- Emails regarding peer-on-peer abuse directed to senior safeguarding officers, but also shared with all members of staff, so that the whole school is aware

- Information from parents and children to be recorded on a Safeguarding Awareness Map. This peer group mapping exercise can help staff see links between isolated incidents which in turn will help to identify children that might be vulnerable or at risk of offending or being victimised.
- Every term, children are asked to complete an anti-bullying survey, followed up with a robust analysis and response to the survey
- The designated safeguarding lead to collate safeguarding concerns on a cause for concern template, stored in a locked and secure cabinet
- Ensure there is a central confidential logging system, to include behaviour incident logs

### (d) The school's responses to abuse and discouraging a victim culture - what are the options for children to identify and disclose harm?

- Staff responses to reports of abuse can be counterproductive and can encourage a victim-blaming culture. Saying things like 'she teases them', 'she's a huge flirt' or commenting on appearance, can transfer culpability onto victims and unintentionally normalise harmful attitudes and behaviours.
- How easy it is for children to disclose sexually harmful behaviours to school staff? Is there a named person (without a teaching timetable) who can be available for managing disclosures?
- It is essential that reassurance is given that disclosures are being taken seriously. Children who disclose must feel supported and kept safe.

### (e) Effectively assessing and addressing incidents

- In some cases, it may be necessary to create an individual timetable for children who are involved in peer-on-peer abuse. While this may not address the cause of the behaviour, it allows some time where victims can safely come and go and provide respite while the abusive behaviour can be addressed by staff.
- Identifying and addressing the issues that are driving abusive behaviours with groups of children who engage in peer-on-peer abuse
- Using joined up working with experienced partner agencies, to support and challenge children exhibiting unsafe and unhealthy behaviours.

## (f) Effective and good quality staff training

- Training should be regular (at least annually) and include issues relating to harmful sexual behaviour which should be informed by national and local evidence. Training should include specifically how to identify and respond to harmful, sexual behaviour. Face to face training is essential and conducive to effective learning, as opposed to just online training. The benefits of face to face training include the opportunity to network and learn from others, it provides engagement and focus for a more effective learning experience, it is adaptable to the learner's needs (rather than set options), it provides human interaction, discussion and debate and an instructor on hand to answer your questions and queries.
- Both staff and children should receive training – see (a) above.

A 'calm, considered and appropriate response'<sup>4</sup> is advised. This type of response is not possible without proper planning, procedures and effective training. A robust policy on sexual violence, sexual harassment and effective staff training are key to pre-planning. Schools should not underestimate the importance too of staff being trained in managing disclosures, taking into account the child's age, developmental stage, whether they are disabled or not and whether there is a power imbalance. It is likely that staff will be dealing with the beginnings of what could turn out to be a criminal investigation and therefore knowing what questions to ask, how to ask questions and ensuring the child's wishes and feelings are constantly considered, are key to ensuring proper procedures are followed and to determining what action to take. No amount of pre-planning can forewarn staff of what the disclosure might be and so each case should be decided individually, i.e. on a case-by-case basis.

The practise of engaging children and listening to their views can lead to greater awareness of and the prevention of harm<sup>5</sup>. For example, a group of year 6 girls in Derby were able to provide evidence to the police after watching 'Alright Charlie', a film depicting child grooming and sexual exploitation, which later led to the arrest and conviction of a perpetrator. Similarly, in North Lincolnshire, the safeguarding children board involved children producing a 'positive steps' leaflet promoting positive emotional well-being and mental health.

To demonstrate the importance they place on safeguarding, international schools overseas should ensure they follow UK statutory guidance which states

that the designated safeguarding lead (and all deputies) must have a 'complete safeguarding picture'<sup>6</sup> with their job descriptions amended to reflect this update. Given the weight attributed to their role, it is the designated safeguarding lead (or a deputy) who should take a leading role and, working with other agencies, is positioned as the person with the most information and who can help clarify what is happening in a child's life and use their professional judgement to make decisions on a case-by-case basis. Although this does not seem any different to previous guidance, it has been afforded more clarity, emphasis and importance with this update.

Poor information sharing can directly impact on the safety of children, especially around all aspects of a child's well-being, health and sexual health, particularly where staff may be reticent in sharing relevant information. A significant aspect of sharing information is to keep our focus on the child, rather than on what adults might think if the information was shared. The paramountcy principle<sup>7</sup> advocated by the Children Act, remains critical in forming professional opinions about whether to share information or not and the newly published General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR), human rights law and Data Protection Act 2018 are clear that the barriers to information sharing where there are safeguarding concerns have not been raised. What it does do is advise that they provide a framework to ensure personal information is shared appropriately. The recently published 'Information Sharing - advice for practitioners providing safeguarding services to children, parents and carers' advises that 'relevant personal information can be shared lawfully if it is to keep a child or individual at risk safe from neglect or physical, emotional or mental harm, or if it is protecting their physical, mental, or emotional well-being.'<sup>8</sup> The advice should be considered by overseas staff as a benchmark of good practice and followed wherever possible.

Contextual safeguarding is essentially linked to significant harm beyond the boundaries of the home, where children spend increasing amounts of time away from their families in public places and/or in schools and are exposed to violence and abuse. There is a need for more meaningful staff training and guidance on how to identify and respond to peer-on-peer abuse. Robust recording and sharing information systems are essential to support designated safeguarding leads to have a complete safeguarding picture and to correlate and share information. The whole school community must be mindful about the role they play, to ensure the root causes of the abuse are addressed through supporting both victims and perpetrators.

## References:

<sup>1</sup> Firmin 2017; Contextual Safeguarding: an overview of the operational, strategic and contextual framework.

<sup>2</sup> Barter et al 2009; Ringrose et al 2011; EAW 2010; GirlGuiding 2013, 2015.

<sup>3</sup> Fritz, Firmin 2016: Learning Project 1, Evidencing peer-on-peer abuse in educational settings.

<sup>4</sup> Keeping Children Safe in Education, 2018 P62, para 237.

<sup>5</sup> Yvette Stanley, Ofsted 'Social Care commentary: multi-agency safeguarding arrangements' 10 July 2018.

<sup>6</sup> Keeping Children Safe in Education, 2018 P6, para 11.

<sup>7</sup> Children Act 1989, Section 1.

<sup>8</sup> DfE Information Sharing for practitioners providing safeguarding services to children, young people, parents and carers, Page 5.

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### **Anastasia Soola Georgiou's bio in brief:**

*Soola Georgiou is a safeguarding consultant and trainer. She has over 23 years' experience working with children, families and professionals in education. She provides general service development and consultancy at both at strategic and at case level. A qualified barrister, she has the legal experience needed to investigate serious case and multi-agency reviews. Her strategic work includes the development of safeguarding and child protection policies and procedures, as well as providing advice to head teachers, governors and designated safeguarding leads. Soola has over ten years' experience as an accredited Safer Recruitment trainer making safeguarding and promoting the welfare of children an integral and essential part of creating safe environments. Soola offers safeguarding audits to schools and other education settings on all aspects of safeguarding and child protection, including statutory guidance and best practice, Inspection requirements and the review of safer recruitment procedures. Her work on safeguarding and promoting the welfare of children has seen her collaborating with various schools as a school governor, the Chartered College of Teaching, Islington Council and Cambridge Education.*

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To discuss anything covered in this paper or for any other queries, please call us on **+44 (0)20 3637 4232** or email [info@veema.co.uk](mailto:info@veema.co.uk).