

Hidden DANGERS

In the third and final part of her series, **Melanie Pilcher**, policy and standards manager for the Pre-school Learning Alliance, examines some of the less obvious aspects of creating a safe environment in early years settings...



As previously discussed in this series, there are elements of health and safety that are clearly defined and readily achieved by meeting prescribed expectations enforced by legislation. However, there are other, less tangible but equally important, aspects that contribute to making young children, staff and parents feel both emotionally and physically secure when they access early years services.

Recent negative events and subsequent reports into what went wrong emphatically highlight the devastating consequences that can result when unsafe practice is allowed to develop in an early years setting. It may begin with the odd breach of safeguarding and welfare requirements, when ratios are not fully met now and again, or the behaviour of a colleague makes others uncomfortable but is explained away as being harmless. When such actions go unchallenged, the expectations of what is acceptable behaviour can be dangerously lowered, allowing an unsafe environment to develop.





Security GUARDS

The child who has been settled, has developed a strong attachment with his key person, and has been given time to comprehend his new environment will usually feel emotionally safe. The four themes of the EYFS further underline this as they work together, beginning with the unique child who can be “resilient, capable, confident and self-assured”. The unique child is supported through positive relationships with his carers within enabling environments – safe places in which he can thrive. With these things securely in place, the best possible conditions are created in which learning and development can take place.

been settled in fully will be overwhelmed by the new situation in which she finds herself, and if the attachment with the key person hasn't formed before she starts attending full sessions on her own, then she will feel insecure and confused. Furthermore, in settings where the importance of settling-in is not fully understood, the resulting behaviours that can arise will not be identified and supported effectively.

any other person working with children”. The manager or leader who conducts supervision will have to be clear about how they will structure a reflective element into the process, where, within a safe environment, practitioners feel free to consider their concerns. Setting such specific criteria into the statutory framework places clear responsibilities on providers and practitioners to be accountable for their own actions, and those of colleagues.

Supporting staff

Practitioners cannot possibly maintain a safe environment for children when the conditions under which they themselves are expected to work are flawed. Because safe practice begins with a corporate responsibility and a professional duty for early years practitioners, their role is at the very heart of the process. Practitioners must be willing to think the unthinkable and to challenge their own practice and that of others; especially when a person whom they trust or who has authority over them is taking unacceptable risks or attempts to justify behaviour that clearly breaches policies and procedures. Staff must be supported to express any concerns they might have, and it is well-structured and regular supervision that will enable this to happen.

The new EYFS strengthens the safeguarding and welfare requirements to include supervision of staff as a ‘must do’ with clear criteria for what should be covered, stating that:

Supervision should provide opportunities for staff to:

- discuss any issues - particularly concerning children's development or wellbeing
- identify solutions to address issues as they arise
- receive coaching to improve their personal effectiveness.

Added to this is a requirement that staff must have access to training that enables them to identify “inappropriate behaviour displayed by other members of staff, or

Enabling children

For children, a safe environment is one where all of their learning and development needs are met, where they are listened to and have a sense of control over their environment and their experiences – it all sounds quite straightforward, and is clearly defined within the themes of the EYFS. Even so, staff must take time to reflect on just how this is achieved. The role of the key person has also been strengthened within the new framework, with an increased emphasis on parental engagement that gives staff an insight into the child's life outside of the setting, making them more able to identify reasons to suspect neglect or abuse that may be happening within the home environment.

There is, as we have already seen, legislation in place that will keep a child safe, but for them to feel safe is another matter. A young child won't necessarily care whether there are safety mats below the climbing frame, or feel safer if there are. What will have the biggest impact will be his attachment to the staff caring for him, who act as a secure base in the absence of his main carer.

During the vital settling-in period a child must be allowed the opportunity to become familiar with new faces, routines and environments in her own time. Settling-in is sometimes rushed to fit in with a parent's return to work or with ‘single intakes’ where several children are starting together. The child who has not

Engaging parents

Choosing to use childcare in the first place is a big leap of faith for some parents. A decision about which type of childcare to adopt will have been carefully made based upon a number of factors, including how the setting looks, the atmosphere, and the disposition of the staff and management. Practitioners and parents need to quickly develop a relationship of trust and mutual respect where expectations and boundaries are clearly defined. It is only right that parents should be made to feel that the early years setting is a ‘safe’ environment for them too. For this to happen, they must have the utmost confidence in the practitioners to whom they have entrusted their child. It is therefore understandable that settling-in is as important for the adult as it is for a child. Relationships need time to build so that the key person has as good an understanding of the parent's needs as they do of the child's. When this exists, they can respond to both with empathy and the parent is incorporated as part of the early years team.

As parents begin to understand the role of the practitioner, and vice versa, then a safe relationship exists. Practitioners have to give due consideration to what parental engagement really is in their setting. It can be easy to state in policies and procedures that ‘parents are equal partners’ but if that partnership is defined and dictated by the setting, then an atmosphere of inequality will exist and the relationships are unlikely to be positive in the true sense of the EYFS.

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Further information and resources can be found in the Pre-school Learning Alliance publications *Developing Reflective Practice* (2012), and *Effective Teamwork* (2011) To order, visit: pre-school.org.uk/shop or call 0300 330 0966.