Playing it safe

How can early years organisations, managers and practitioners best protect the children in their care? The Pre-School Learning Alliance's **Stephanie Mathivet** identifies some safeguarding solutions…

Last year, the events at Little Ted's Nursery in Plymouth brought the importance of safeguarding children's welfare in early years settings into sharp focus. The recent review into the failings at that setting identifies lessons that must be learnt (see below), but it's useful to look first at the issue in more fundamental terms.

The Early Years Foundation Stage Welfare Requirements state the measures providers must undertake to ensure children are safeguarded from harm. Other elements of the Statutory Framework outline the criteria that providers, managers and staff must meet in order to be suitable to work with young children. This provides the basic structure for keeping children safe, but in large organisations there needs to be a systematic approach to ensure every element of the organisation is able to respond appropriately.

Organisations need to develop a way of working that ensures everyone knows what their role and responsibilities are in relation to safeguarding children, and that various elements of the organisation are able to work as a whole, following the same procedures. This is known as a 'corporate approach', whereby key players across the organisation set operational standards and goals to ensure all staff are fully involved, whatever their level.

There are different strands of a corporate approach that need to be covered:

BEING PRO-ACTIVE that means having robust procedures in place to ensure anyone coming into the organisation is suitable to work with children, understands their role in relation to child protection and is able to work within an organisational culture of safe working practice. Pro-active organisations think about what procedures they're going to need, how these will be disseminated and how staff will become familiar with them. They also need to consider how the management tiers structure will ensure supervision and accountability with each layer of management being clear about its role and responsibility. Organisations also need to ensure an organisational culture that values relationships and strives to attain these at all levels. It's within a network of safe relationships that children thrive.

BEING REACTIVE that means being able to recognise when there's cause for concern about a child and knowing what procedures to follow if abuse is suspected. Organisations need to ensure that their procedures are being followed so that reactiveness is both timely and appropriate. They also need to have procedures for acting if an allegation is made against a member of staff. Being reactive also involves knowing how and when to work with other organisations during investigative processes. Organisations need to have a culture in which children's needs and rights are respected, and they are listened to.

BEING EDUCATIVE this recognises that an organisation must be able to provide training for staff in child protection to ensure that there's a base line of understanding and a shared culture of principles and values that guide behaviour in relation to safeguarding children. It also means that the organisation needs to be able to learn from its own mistakes and from receiving feedback on its procedures and systems, so that it can review and develop its safeguarding activity. It may also seek to ensure that children themselves have opportunity to learn about staying safe and that the organisation's curriculum promotes children's wellbeing by developing their confidence and self-esteem.

This can be a huge task, depending on the size of the organisation. Those at senior level, responsible for the overall corporate

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A *safeguarding* audit

One of the things the SCR review recommended was that an audit for settings be carried out by local authorities to establish that a safe organisational culture exists in childcare settings. But settings themselves can and should work towards a self-audit of the culture within their settings and wider organisation. In the case of Little Ted's, the use by staff of their mobile phones while in the workplace was not checked and stopped. Sometimes employers feel they should rely on staff's sensible judgement and don't want to create an organisation in which staff work in a constricting 'dos and don'ts' environment. It's a difficult balance and establishing trusting culture depends on staff feeling able to discuss things openly if they feel something is not right.

approach, need to look at how the organisation's structure supports two-way communication so that information flows from the hub to the spokes regarding roles and responsibilities as well as policies and procedures, developing systems for communication and accountability. It also needs to ensure there are mechanisms for feedback through the spokes to the hub at the centre, so that those on the ground – practitioners and users of the service – can be part of a review to ensure procedures remain fit for purpose and adaptable at local levels.

Creating a safe organisational culture

Plymouth's Local Safeguarding Children Board's Serious Case Review (SCR) concerning the sexual abuse of children at Little Ted's Nursery by staff member Vanessa George published its executive summary recently. For this article it's not necessary to recap the findings of the whole review as that is available elsewhere, but the concept of a 'safe organisation' is worthy of consideration. Barry Raynes, Jim Wild and Caroline Thompson carried out a literature review for the team carrying out the SCR and they identified what they describe as characteristics of a safe organisation; these include:

- Staff are respectful to all employees as well as children
- Staff are open about discussing good and poor practice
- Blame only occurs in extreme circumstances
- Leaders model the appropriate behaviour
- Staff are knowledgeable about the vulnerability of the children whom they look after and aware that abusers may already be in the employ of the organisation

- Children are listened to
- Staff are empowered to challenge poor practice
- Parents are encouraged to be involved in their child's plan and welcomed to the setting
- Whistle-blowing procedures are in place and staff know how to use them.

What's interesting here is that safeguarding procedures are not mentioned. Not that the review is saying these aren't necessary as in fact it makes many references to these. However, policies and procedures being in place, understood and enacted by staff is only one part of the whole picture. What's being presented in the above list describes elements of an organisation's culture that's based on respectful relationships, open and honest communication and a 360 degree sharing of information and views, as well as levels of knowledge and awareness that ensures provision is safe for children. It also describes an organisational culture where staff are safe from bullying or intimidation in the workplace.

Senior managers have a crucial role to play in setting the standard across the board for a safe organisational culture. Where staff work in a culture of fear or blame, where they're under pressure to 'put up and shut up', or where there are poor management practices and relationships that are based on power and control, the culture of the organisation will skew towards it being unsafe. Children are cared for with a network of adult relationships; where this forms a safe and protective network they will be safe, but where there the characteristics of a safe organisation do not exist it will become dysfunctional, and children will slip through the holes in the network.

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Issues for reflection

LET'S LOOK AT SOME COMMON DILEMMAS THAT CAN CROP UP IN EARLY YEARS SETTINGS, WHICH YOU CAN DISCUSS WITH YOUR COLLEAGUES IN YOUR WORKPLACE. FOR EACH SCENARIO ASK YOURSELVES:

- Is this safe practice?
- What are the dangers in this practice?
- Should there be/is there a procedure about this?

Case A: The manager of the setting allows staff babysitting for parents, saying it's the staff's business what they do in their own time. Staff openly advertise on the parent notice board.

Case B: At children's parties and other nursery events parents have always photographed their child or made personal videos of the event. The manager says they will be upset if she stops it.

Case C: Staff regularly have sales parties in the staffroom after work for a company selling underwear and sex toys. Parents can come but without their children. They have a few drinks and a bit of a laugh. A donation from the sales goes towards the Christmas fund.

Case D: The manager's three-year-old child attends the nursery; she told the key person that as she's the manager she doesn't have to attend the meetings to discuss her child's progress.

Case E: The owner of the nursery does not involve the manager in staff selection and offered a job to her unemployed boyfriend saying she didn't need to take references or a CRB check as she could vouch for him.

over to you!

What potential dangers do you think might arise from the scenarios above? Email info@teachnursery and let us know your thoughts. Next issue we'll be comparing different views against the possible outcomes.