

Practice issues from Serious Case Reviews

8. Incomplete information-sharing by schools in child protection conferences

What is the issue?

School staff may be reluctant to share information in child protection conferences

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Child protection conferences are an important opportunity for agencies to share concerns about a child. Our analysis of SCR reports found that some agencies may face particular barriers to sharing information in this forum, with school staff highlighted as one example.

For example, in one case education staff did not mention that a child had exhibited sexual behaviour at school during a child protection conference. This meant that other members of the multi-agency group did not fully understand the young person's needs. Education staff omitted this information in their report to the conference because they did not wish to damage their working relationship with the parents. In this case the school had been concerned about the child's behaviour for some time, and believed that children's social care (CSC) were aware of this issue, but this was not the case.

This document is one of a set of 14 briefings intended to support managers, senior managers and practitioners by:

- identifying difficult issues in multi-agency safeguarding work, focusing on interprofessional communication and decision-making
- exploring why these issues arise, and therefore how they might be addressed.

The briefings are based on analysis of 38 Serious Case Reviews (SCRs) published between May 2014 and April 2015, augmented by information gathered from multi-agency summits in London, Leeds and Birmingham. The summits were held in September 2015 and were attended by 194 practitioners and managers from across children's social care, health, education, police, probation and Local Safeguarding Children Boards (LSCBs).

The briefings are the result of a pilot process that developed and tested new ways that SCR findings can be shared and used to support improvement.

Why does this occur?

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The SCR report highlights the following reasons for this issue:

- school staff did not want to upset the child's parents
- a possible perception that once a referral to CSC is made, further concerns do not need to be raised.

Participants at the three summits also identified a number of underlying reasons for this issue including the following:

Fears about damaging relationships with parents

Several participants mentioned not wanting to 'upset' families as a reason not to share all information at child protection conferences:

'There is always a fear about maintaining a relationship with the parents so people are worried about how much to present, particularly with negative information.'
(Manager, children's charity)

The situation is particularly tense if parents are aggressive or hostile. Some teachers may also fear that if they raise concerns, parents will remove their children from the school entirely, which would be worse for their safety. However, some comments described education professionals who were confident in safeguarding issues:

'We get some professionals that are very good at telling parents the way it is.'
(Independent Reviewing Officer)

Safeguarding knowledge in schools

A common theme in discussions around this topic was knowledge of safeguarding practice among teachers. There was a perception that education staff will report more minor incidents because their thresholds are lower, and then experience frustration when concerns are not investigated by social care:

'Sometimes schools feel they put a referral in, but then it gets sent back. They might feel there isn't any point.'
(Safeguarding Board Chair)

Boundaries of the teacher's role

Some participants thought that school staff may feel that their role is to side with the parent and act as an advocate. This may then be at odds with their role in providing information to the conference.

Impact of relationship between CSC and schools

Participants thought that relationships between CSC and schools had an impact on referrals: if working relationships are good, workers are more likely to make referrals and contribute at conferences:

'My experience as a social worker, I had five comprehensive schools ... the headteachers I dealt with were really good, it is about the relationship you have.' (LSCB Manager)

Reluctance to discuss sexualised behaviour shown by children

Summit attendees discussed the taboo nature of sexualised behaviour among children, and a possible unwillingness within schools to engage with this issue. Participants gave examples of sex education programmes from other countries, and wondered if schools could do more to develop a shared language and narrative regarding sexuality.

Protecting the reputation of the school

Some participants thought that schools may not want to raise particular problems for fear of damaging their school's reputation. One participant said:

'I have had direct experience of staff saying, "That doesn't happen in my school – we don't have parents like that or children from those families".'
(Voluntary Sector Representative)

Solutions suggested by summit participants

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Participants at the summits suggested the following possible solutions:

- consistency of understanding the function of a child protection conference and clarity around roles, including ensuring that all agencies know that the conference should focus on a holistic assessment of the child, not just focusing on the reason that the conference has been called.

Questions for you to consider

Unpicking the issue

1. Is this issue familiar to you?
2. Locally, is the issue exactly the same as described above? If not, what does this issue 'look like' for you?
3. What good practice is there in relation to this issue? Are there weaknesses you are aware of and how would you describe them?

Why do you think this happens in your local area?

1. Do some or all of the reasons described above apply in your area?
2. Is it an issue that has been identified in local SCRs, audits or inspection feedback? What light have these activities shed on the issue?
3. What knowledge do you have from your own experience about why this happens?
4. What organisational factors are involved locally?
5. How does local culture, custom and practice, within and between agencies, contribute to this?

Thinking through the solutions

1. Have there been previous efforts locally to address this issue? What was the result?
2. Given your understanding of the reasons for this issue, what further actions do you think would be helpful in addressing it?
3. What strengths can you build on, and what are the areas of difficulty?
4. What action would need to be taken at a strategic or leadership level?
5. Who would need to be involved to achieve improvement?
6. Are there any unintended consequences you anticipate for the different agencies and professions involved?
7. How will you know whether any actions have had an impact?

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