4.3 How to deal with disclosure of domestic violence

CEA@Islington, London Borough of Islington's education partner, has issued the following guidelines for schools as part of its new domestic violence prevention and support project, entitled Home Safe. (See Resources, Section 6.2, p 44, for details of CEA@Islington’s website, which contains this and other information relating to domestic violence.)

When a parent discloses:

• Don't feel that you have to take responsibility to solve everything – at a minimum it is very important that you can simply listen to the parent, give them space to talk and give them correct information on where to get help.
• Don't say that you will be able to sort everything out. That is not your job.
• Don't offer total confidentiality, which you can't guarantee because of child protection duties.
• Do listen to what they have to say.
• Do let them know that everybody deserves to feel safe. Nobody deserves to be abused and that domestic violence is wrong and against the law.
• Do tell them they are not alone, that many women and children experience domestic violence.
• Do make it clear that you understand there are many risk factors in living with and fleeing domestic violence for parents and children and that support agencies can help them improve their safety, whatever they decide to do, and draw up emergency plans.
• Do make it clear that the school is there to support them and their children.
• Do explain that because domestic violence puts children at risk you will have to tell your designated child protection manager about the situation, who will contact the parent to explain child protection procedures and discuss how to work together to protect them and their child.
• Do remember that supporting the abused parent is the best form of child protection.
• Do explain that the school can provide information and certain support to enable the parent to make their own decisions about their situation and will not judge them, whether or not they leave the violent relationship.
• Do explain that there is support out there for financial, housing and legal problems. Bear in mind that some parents may not be entitled to claim benefits or legal aid, for example, if they are asylum seekers, and some parents may need specialist agencies offering translators – Women’s Aid can refer you to appropriate local services.
• Do remember that all survivors are individual and have different needs. Black and minority ethnic women may be wary of contacting agencies due to their experience of racism, and may need interpreters. Women may have different levels of support from family and friends. They may have limited finances or be without recourse to public funds.
• Do ask if they are in immediate danger/need of healthcare and/or if they need to use a telephone in the school to contact a relative, friend, the police, hospital or their GP or a helpline number.

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• Do give contact details for domestic violence helplines and agencies (see Resources, Section 6.6, p 49, for details).
• Do ask if they would like to come back to the school for a meeting to discuss what support the school can offer to them and their children.
• Do remember to check contact arrangements – is it safe to contact them at home by letter or phone? Do they feel their child is being affected and how would they like the school to respond? Have they separated from their violent partner and do you need to clarify who can and can’t pick up children from school? Do you need a photo of their ex-partner to look out for them on school grounds if they present a threat? (See Section 4.4, Ensuring a child’s safety, p 26.)

When a child discloses:
• Don’t ignore what the child says. Listen and take them seriously.
• Don’t offer total confidentiality, which you can’t deliver because of child protection issues.
• Don’t give confidential information to the abusing parent, especially home contact details.
• Do say that everybody deserves to feel safe, nobody deserves to be abused and that domestic violence is wrong and against the law.
• Do work with the parent, designated member of staff, social services, and other agencies as appropriate who are working with the family to make sure the child’s progress and welfare is monitored.
• Do tell them they are not alone, that many women and children experience domestic violence.
• Do make it clear that the school is there to support them and their parent to be safe.
• Do explain that there is support out there, and that you can give their parent this information.
• Do tell them they have a right to support for themselves. Explain that they can see a school counsellor if you have one or be referred to another agency that can help them, explain what help is available and ask them what help they would like. Explain exactly what will happen in the referral procedures.
• Do explain that you understand that living with domestic violence can have lots of negative effects, including effects on their school life and work, and stress that the school wants to help them manage their stressful situation, not blame or draw attention to them. For example: they may not be able to get to school on time if they have fled violence to new accommodation further away; they may be absent because they have to attend appointments; they may have difficulty concentrating if they are worrying about their abused parent.
• Do explain that because domestic violence puts children at risk you have to tell the designated child protection manager in your school about their situation; stress that only certain teachers will know about it and that other teachers generally will not be told, and other pupils will not know about it.
• Do report the disclosure to the designated child protection manager in your school, who will report to social services.

"In English lessons we had ‘talk partners’ like buddies, which was good.”

Jordan, 13