Safeguarding new school starters

Are new children at your school, particularly those who arrive mid-year, checked for vulnerabilities?

Debs Ward makes the case for a pro-active approach to ensure those who need protection receive it

On a number of occasions, children have been allocated to my school with no additional information, only for me to later find out they are vulnerable children and, in one particular case, a looked-after child.

Important information and records relating to vulnerable children are sometimes passed on too slowly to receiving schools and in some cases are not passed on at all. There can also be a lack of information from parents, social services and other agencies involved with a family; one example is a vulnerable child who was in my school for over three months before the social worker contacted us. I was both surprised and shocked that this could have happened and that such a vulnerable child had not had adequate support for over three months due to a lack of communication.

Be proactive

Some of the most vulnerable children are those from transient families. These are the children whose paperwork, which contains key safeguarding details and is often incomplete in detail and chronology, can be a challenge to track down. Speaking to parents, the previous educational setting, school nursing team and children's social care can provide you with crucial information which ensures that new starters are on the radar and protected immediately.

Share information

In general, the people who need information about an allocated child will be the class teacher, year group head, possibly a teaching assistant and pastoral support. They will be closest to the child and must be armed with details about the child's background and whether they need to look out for signs such as neglect, abuse or injury.

Safeguarding children new into school can be a challenge, particularly with little or no prior information. However, if you are willing to put time into making telephone calls, meeting with parents and tracking down the paperwork and information it can be done effectively and immediately.

Use the procedure below to ensure good practice. A copy can be downloaded and printed via http://bit.ly/1D310pm

Essential steps for safeguarding children new to the school

A number of steps need to be taken to safeguard new children once the school has been allocated a child or family.

1. As soon as you have received the allocation make contact with the family and arrange a face-to-face meeting.

2. At the meeting record as much information as possible:
   - Is there a CAF in place?
   - Are there any other professionals working with the children or the family?
   - Who are they?
   - Where are they based?
   - If there are other professionals involved with the child/family what is the reason for this?
   - A brief overview of the family dynamics and who the child lives with and other significant adults in their life. (This may seem intrusive, so it should be done in a tactful and open way.)

3. Contact the child/children’s previous school and speak to the designated senior person. (If you have not got this information contact your authority’s admission’s department.)
   - Is there a CAF in place?
   - Who is the lead practitioner?
   - Are there any other professionals involved with the family?
   - Who?
   - For what reason?
   - Contact details?
   - Has there ever been a referral to children’s social care?
   - For what reason?
   - Is the child on the child protection register or a child in need?
   - For what reason?
   - When is the next meeting date?
   - Venue?
   - Who is the allocated social worker and their contact details?
   - Does the child have any special educational needs or disabilities?
   - Are there any concerns around the child’s attendance?
   - If so what are these concerns?

4. Contact your school nursing team and children’s social care (if appropriate) and alert them to the fact that you have been allocated the child/children. This also provides you with an opportunity to find out if they hold any information about the child/children that you need to know.

5. Agree with the previous school about forwarding any records or minutes that they may have (if there are safeguarding or child protection concerns the school should have a set of detailed notes). It is important you obtain these as a matter of urgency.

6. Share relevant information with school staff about the new child/children. This should be done with those who need to know: class teachers, teaching assistants, learning mentor/pastoral support, parental inclusion worker.

7. Open a file on the new child or a separate file for each child if it’s a family.
   - Make a record of the people you have spoken to and the information you have gathered.
   - This then forms the start of your own paper trail and is evidence should you fail to track down notes from any previous settings.
Respecting to prejudice-based bullying: training for senior staff

Bullying of any kind can cause misery and impact on pupils’ learning. Elizabeth Smith looks at ways to combat bullying based on homophobia, race, religion or disabilities.

This training is targeted at any senior leader, especially the headteacher, deputy headteacher(s) and those with a pastoral responsibility in their job description. It may also be beneficial for the link governor with responsibility for bullying to attend this unit. It is aimed at promoting a safe learning environment and encourages adherence to policy and consistency of approach. It will take around 45 minutes.

You will need a photocopy of the handout on page 7 for the first part. For the second part you will need a copy of the school’s anti-bullying policy, along with sheets divided into three columns: area for development, actions and timescales.

The session is adapted from Unit 1 of the ‘Preventing Prejudice-Based Bullying’ course from the Optimus Training and CPD Hub (see below).

Responding to incidents (25 minutes)

Distribute the handout from page 7 to participants. The box at the bottom shows a number of key principles for preventing and tackling bullying which have been identified as effective. Introduce these to participants and explain that bullying is a complex social issue and it is always important to include parents and local community groups in developing an effective school-based strategy.

Divide the participants into small groups and instruct them to consider each of the three bullying incidents detailed in the handout and generate a response to each situation. The responses must take into consideration the key principles and should be recorded on the handout.

Allow 15 minutes for participants to prepare their responses then take feedback from the groups: Was there consensus over how each incident should be dealt with? Why/why not? How can consistency of response be ensured? Did the responses follow the key principles? Each incident will raise its own issues and discussion points. Some of these are as follows:

Incident 1

Many pupils (and some adults) are unaware that the word ‘gay’ should not be used to describe something as worthless or rubbish and therefore do not use it with malicious intent. This does not mean that it should not be challenged just as you would not allow a racist term to be used in this way. Raising awareness at a whole-school level is of paramount importance here. School reporting and recording systems should be used to monitor future incidents and the data can be analysed to assess the effectiveness of any interventions.

Incident 2

This is obviously a serious incident and must be dealt with accordingly. It might be preferable to deal with this as two separate incidents, one of racism and one of violence. Parents must be involved at an early stage but be aware that both sets of parents will be angry. Allow time for a proper investigation of the incident and be seen to be fair. It may be necessary to instigate restorative justice, perhaps through the safer schools officer.

Incident 3

Trying to force Rachel’s peers to be her friend will not be effective. There should be appropriate lunchtime and after-school clubs in place to support all vulnerable pupils and allow them to establish their own friendships. Opportunities should be instigated that allow her to shine. A whole-school ethos that nurtures and promotes tolerance should be developed.

Action planning (20 minutes)

Divide the participants into small groups (or pairs if there are a small number of participants). Each group should be given a copy of the school’s anti-bullying policy and a sheet divided into three columns: areas for development, actions and timescales. Ask the groups to identify what actions need to be taken for each area of the following areas to improve the school’s performance in preventing and responding to prejudice-based bullying and the timescale in which these should be completed:

- policy
- curriculum mapping
- staff training and induction
- recording and reporting systems
- use of data
- educating pupils
- involving parents
- wider community.

Their ideas should be collected at the end of the training so that a collated action plan can be produced.

> PREVENTING PREJUDICE-BASED BULLYING

This article is adapted from the Optimus In-House Training course Preventing Prejudice-Based Bullying. The full course will ensure that:

- all staff understand what prejudice-based bullying is and how it impacts on young people
- staff and pupils are supported by a whole-school approach, with consistent policies and practice
- staff are equipped with strategies for dealing with prejudice-based bullying incidents.

To find out more, go to www.optimus-education.com/training-hub