Safeguarding – everyone’s responsibility and concern

Maureen Lee talks to Karen Lees and Stephanie Robinson about a variety of approaches to training designed to ensure all staff members have the correct knowledge and experience to keep children safe.

As a team of tutors for Early Years Initial Teacher Training we have recently been reviewing our safeguarding training and assessment processes. The process has given us an opportunity to look back to earlier points in our careers and our relative lack of knowledge and understanding (back then) when it came to our own roles in keeping children safe.

Without doubt, there have been huge steps forward in recent years, steps mainly taken in response to children’s risk, danger, abuse, and death. Statutory guidance has incontrovertibly established safeguarding as everyone’s responsibility, where every single member of staff must know and understand that responsibility, be fully trained and retrained, and have the capacity to be able to be vigilant about all the many and complex aspects of protecting children’s safety and wellbeing.

Another major step forward is the understanding and total acceptance that there is never a place for complacency. Settings, schools, local authorities, services, and all other professionals who work with and for children know they must routinely and critically look and look again at their safeguarding procedures.

Everyone must look again at how systems support and challenge professionals working with children. Everyone must scrutinise, monitor and evaluate safeguarding systems so that everyone takes their responsibility seriously and vigilantly, and so that any ambiguities in systems are identified. The implementation of safer recruitment training is an important part of safeguarding, to ensure that leaders – including the manager and governors – are able to effectively implement these practices in their recruitment process and meet safeguarding obligations.

Approaches to training

One of our tutors, Karen Lees, also works as a safeguarding trainer in the East of England. Here, she shares some approaches that she uses with leaders and managers to audit staff knowledge, understanding, and confidence. Karen uses training contexts that bring out misunderstandings that may not previously have been evident, either to the individual or organisation, and enables staff to be open and not embarrassed to admit any gaps in knowledge and understanding. Karen suggests these approaches:

Recognise and address, up front, complexities and potential barriers

Within a collaborative team environment and where parental partnerships are positive, it could be easy to think ‘it couldn’t happen here’, ‘I don’t want to upset anyone’, or ‘it’s not my place to say anything’. For new entrants to the profession, time and serious attention must be spent on how this type of thinking has rendered children far from safe. For more experienced team members, the need is just as great because there can never be too many reminders.

Use NSPCC Serious Case Review summaries

Learn from a sample of cases and recurring themes that have contributed to neglect, risk, injury, and death:

• The vital importance of faultless multi-agency communication.
• Safeguarding planning processes that address the variable pattern of cooperation in non-engaging families.
• Risks of rapid deterioration of home circumstances – neglect can lead to danger within a very short period.
• The impact and potential addictive features of social networking (and its excessive use) on parenting capacity.
• Identifying whether practitioners lack understanding of cultural and family backgrounds.
• The need for recognition of behavioural cues that indicate abuse rather than relying on verbal disclosure.
• Full understanding of whistleblowing and the impact of failing to act.

Make it a team effort

Share out responsibility for generating and disseminating updates on new or complex areas of safeguarding across the staff team. Volunteers or allocated individuals then make posters, prompt sheets, information booklets, and PowerPoint slides, to support their colleagues’ understanding in new areas of safeguarding guidance.

Knowing and understanding the circumstances that impact negatively on children’s wellbeing provides an opportunity to increase protective factors and reduce risk factors – John Carnochan OBE.
Evaluate the value of online training
Is it useful? Is it enough? Does it work well enough when people need to apply theory to practice?

Provide information for parents/families on safeguarding procedures
Think about ways of checking parents’ understanding through booklets or information sheets, or online information. Can you have an online, ‘I have read and understood’ system?

Regularly test knowledge and understanding
For example, use scenarios. Cheshire local authority suggests using one scenario per month. Your own local authority may have similar resources. Do staff members know where the full policy is located, rather than just the summaries?

Test if procedures are understood/being followed
In the absence of a setting-based example, use a scenario written specifically for the purpose.

Highlight and discuss the characteristics of poor practice
These include:
• Failure to act on early signs.
• Poor record keeping.
• Failure to listen to the views of the child.
• Failure to reassess concerns when situations do not improve.
• Sharing information too slowly.
• A lack of challenge to those who appear not to be taking action.

Develop case studies
Karen suggests that settings develop their own case studies of best practice. A start might be to think about the things – structures, policies, people, culture, systems – that are in place to ensure safety and wellbeing and to use them to construct a diagram. The points included could be rated using Ofsted-style gradings from 1 to 4, thinking of evidence that confirms the gradings.

Urgent actions can be planned to address any less than good aspects. Short case studies could also be put together of how concerns have been addressed over the past few years (written carefully to preserve confidentiality) – these can be returned to during staff training in future months and years.

Safeguarding and Protecting Every Child – a national conference
report from Stephanie Robinson, Best Practice Network’s lead EYITT tutor in Yorkshire and the Humber
In January 2016, Laura Henry, early years expert trainer, set up a Facebook group called Early Years Safeguarding and Child Protection, prompted by the number of questions and queries that sector colleagues were posting on social media. There are close to 4,000 members, which made Laura feel that there was a need to come together to explore some of the issues face-to-face.

The first ‘national’ safeguarding conference was held in November 2016 to mark what would have been Victoria Adjo Climbié’s 25th birthday. Victoria, an eight-year-old Ivorian girl, was tortured and murdered by her guardians in the year 2000. Her death led to a public inquiry and produced major changes in child protection policies in the United Kingdom.

The Safeguarding and Protecting Every Child conference was a timely reminder of the stark reality of what happened to Victoria and, throughout the day (and beyond), we were challenged to think about the terrible impact on children of not feeling or being safe. It was a very thought-provoking conference and provided what I felt was a fairly unique opportunity for early childhood professionals and for those who lead and train them.

The day provided reminders, information, and space to reflect on how we must all work together more proactively and collaboratively, and with a totally solution-driven focus to ensure our children are kept safe.

All the keynote speakers and workshops were valuable. For those of you not able to attend, I have reflected on some of them here and offer the challenge questions I took away and hope they will be useful to leaders, managers, trainers, and practitioners.

John Carnochan, OBE, was the first speaker. John had been an active police officer for nearly four decades, including a spell as deputy head of the Criminal Investigation Department within Strathclyde Police. As the co-founder and co-director of the Violence Reduction Unit (with a Scotland-wide remit), John led a variety of successful initiatives in tackling gang violence, knife crime, and domestic violence. His presentation, Early Years – the closest thing to magic without actually being magic, left none of us in any doubt about the seriousness of the issues and responsibilities we are facing in the early years.

‘A child who is the victim of any adverse childhood experience (ACE) will be significantly disadvantaged throughout their life. Knowing and understanding the circumstances that impact negatively on children’s wellbeing provides an opportunity to increase protective factors and reduce risk factors.’

John explained that ACE include: Physical/sexual/emotional abuse; neglect (physical/emotional); domestic substance abuse; domestic violence; parental mental illness; parental criminality. In the UK, compared with children who had had no adverse childhood experiences (ACE), those with four ACEs or more, were among other things:
• 2x more likely to binge drink.
• 5x more likely to have had sex under the age of 16 years.
• 11x more likely to have been incarcerated.

We were left with important and challenging questions for everyone working with, and for, children in the early years:
• What can and must we do to support families so that they are confident and able to sustain safe, stable and nurturing relationships with their children?
• Even if we feel a long way from those who set government policy, we must all think about how we can influence it. So, what can we do more of and better
to ensure that primary prevention of these serious risk factors is a key component of national strategy, so that it is placed at the heart of all our collaborative efforts.

Jane Evans is a renowned parenting and childhood trauma expert, widely known for her TEDxBristol talk on childhood anxiety, *Taming and Tending Your Meerkat Brain*. Hearing just a little of the breadth and depth of Jane's work was enough to remind us that children are always safer when love and care are unconditional, and that, as professionals, we have a unique opportunity to support families in understanding ways they can give their children that unconditional acceptance.

Jane's experience of working with families with complex needs and her knowledge of the latest neuroscience and attachment research was fascinating and, again, ‘mind focusing’. She impressed upon us that safeguarding children also means understanding the impact of early years trauma: ‘A child’s brain and body is created and constructed by daily experiences of nurturing and self-soothing. When this is absent, erratic, aggressive, or detached, it causes stress and fear in the developing child, which increases their vulnerability in daily life. It is important to understand this when we look at protecting children and increasing their physical and emotional safety.’

From Jane's presentation, I took away quite a few challenge questions:

- How can practitioners use their informal interactions with families to model that children need to be able to come to their trusted adults whenever they feel they need to, with whatever they feel they want to. This is what unconditional acceptance means.

- Do we say and model enough among the staff and with families to reinforce that children should be able to repeatedly make mistakes? That is what learning is about and children should not fear their trusted adults' disapproval. They should be able to feel close to them at all times.

- How can we use Jane's key points for staff training on safeguarding and ensure everyone follows her guidance?

- Be a mindful attachment practitioner.

- Offer children our physical and emotional regulation and attachment.

- Support children to tune in to their feelings and develop calmness.

- Seek out a range of resources that help practitioners in this – Jane has produced some excellent books herself.

Professor Dame Donna Kinnair is head of Nursing at the Royal College of Nursing and explored with us the lessons learnt from serious case reviews. Donna advised the prime minister’s Commission on the Future of Nursing and Midwifery in 2010 and served as nurse/child health assessor to the Victoria Climbié Inquiry.

Again, what I took away was the imperative for us all to make sure the sector works more collaboratively with other key professionals to safeguard and protect children.

Points taken from Donna's presentation are also very useful challenges for staff training and safeguarding update sessions, where it would be useful to come up with a list of what they mean in practice.

- Child protection is everyone's business and there are no 'experts'.

- Do the simple things better.

- The child is the client.

Dr Eunice Lumsdon is head of Early Years at the University of Northampton and has extensive experience in social work, specialising in safeguarding and adoption. Eunice has advised on professional standards for early years in England and internationally, and is passionate about the breadth, depth, and quality of training.

Eunice challenged us to think about the rights our youngest children have to a professionalised early years workforce, and to be cared for and educated by professionals who know their own role in all areas of early childhood trauma. Eunice stressed that the workforce must proactively create safe, nurturing environments that promote aspiration and life chances for all children and challenged us to recognise and shun any hint of complacency: 'There is some excellent practice in early years settings but the time is right for us to do more.'

To achieve more, a few key questions taken from Eunice's keynote could be of great benefit to all practitioners:

- Do you really understand safeguarding?

- What training have you had – theory and practice?

- Do you really know how it impacts on outcomes?

- Do you really know what you can do to mediate against the impact of abuse?

- What do you really think about families you work with?

- Do you know what your colleagues think?

- How does your setting address the challenges of child maltreatment? *eye*