

Excerpted from: IICSA Report Safeguarding Children from Sexual Abuse in Residential Schools

Nine key findings from the research

1. Within the education sector, residential schools face distinct and complex challenges to prevent and respond to incidents of child sexual abuse effectively.

The overarching theme across all aspects of the research was the specific challenges that residential schools face in relation to safeguarding children, some of whom have very high levels of need due to their SEND. This includes the need to balance independence and privacy with keeping children safe in a place which acts as their home as well as their school.

The distance some parents lived from school and the diverse range of cultures which children were from could act as barriers to successfully engaging parents in training and education on safeguarding children from sexual abuse. Some parents and schools had different views on children's use of and access to devices, such as removing mobile phones and other devices from students at night. Another example was the difficulty for parents living far away or overseas of attending safeguarding workshops at the school.

Staff in residential schools spent a significant amount of time with children in their care, and it was acknowledged that they might therefore play a greater role in identifying and responding to incidents of sexual abuse than staff in non-residential settings. The importance of tailored and comprehensive training was viewed as vital in this context. It was acknowledged, for example, that training should address the potential for lines of professional boundaries to become blurred due to the 'in loco parentis' role played by staff in residential settings.

2. All participants could identify 'clear cut' types of child sexual abuse such as sexual violence and rape but were less confident about identifying and dealing with peer-on-peer concerns and other 'grey areas'.

Staff participants acknowledged that identifying the point at which an incident becomes abusive could be difficult. Issues between children (students in romantic relationships, for example) and youth-produced sexual imagery (for example, sharing pictures of girls in bikinis) were described as 'grey areas'. These were also noted as grey areas by children who largely thought of peer-on-peer abuse as relationships where there was a significant age gap.

Navigating these 'grey areas' required a sensitive assessment of the nature of the relationship between the people involved and consideration of any cognitive impairment or communication needs and other contextual factors such as peer pressure.

3. Prevention work was multi-faceted and included awareness-raising, and education and training of staff, students and parents. This was both supported and underpinned by a strong 'safeguarding culture' within schools.

Promoting open and trusting relationships was seen as key to creating a culture that helped prevent child sexual abuse and supported early identification of issues. This involved ensuring that approaches to preventing child sexual abuse (such as safer recruitment) were in place, and that situational risks (such as shared dormitories and bedrooms) were managed.

In some mainstream schools, areas such as bedrooms and bathrooms were identified as potentially riskier and were checked more regularly to ensure children were safe. In some special schools, there was more active management of all spaces, which included, for example, restricting access to bedrooms and staff logging entry and exit times in communal spaces to provide a full audit of all events.

Of key importance was building open and trusting relationships across and within the staff group; between children and staff; in children's relationships with each other and in the schools' relationship with parents. Interactions at school were expected to be respectful, and a zero-tolerance approach to the use of sexualised, sexist or discriminatory language was advocated.

4. Parents and children wanted education and awareness-raising work within the school to start as early as possible. However, some parents were more 'hands-off', trusting the school to take the lead.

Children and parents wanted schools to deliver appropriate messages as early as possible, adapting approaches for age and developmental phase. Some parents described themselves as more 'hands-off' in their engagement with education and awareness-raising because they trusted the school to educate children on this (and related) issues.

Education and awareness-raising work could be challenging in the SEND context due to the range of complex needs that some children had – for example, cognitive impairment making it difficult for the concept of child sexual abuse to be understood.

Parents thought that children should be supported to learn how to use the internet safely so that these skills could be applied both inside and outside of school.

Children thought that education was effective when it included repeated messaging, informal discussions and bringing in external speakers to talk to children. Children valued approaches which addressed and dealt with issues related to child sexual abuse directly.

5. Disclosures were often initiated by children, suggesting that some children felt able and comfortable to talk about their concerns. Overall, staff reported the highest number of concerns.

Children weighed up factors such as privacy and control when making decisions about disclosure. Having staff who children trusted to go to when they were ready to speak was important. Challenges to children disclosing concerns could relate to communication needs (especially in special schools) or emotional factors such as shame.

Staff in special schools where children had high levels of need were more actively involved in identifying signs of abuse than staff in mainstream settings. This could include physical monitoring, such as using body maps to record any bruises or unexplained injuries, or enabling non-verbal communication through a range of approaches.

6. Reporting practice varied between residential schools in the study, despite working from the same statutory guidance.

School staff emphasised the importance of logging all concerns of a sexual nature, including 'niggling doubts'. This enabled schools to build a rounded view of a child or young person from different staff and help identify concerns at an early stage if a worrying picture was emerging.

There were differences between concerns that schools discussed in interviews and recorded in the proforma. For example, two schools did not record any concerns in their safeguarding records over one academic year, despite all schools visited talking about dealing with issues in this area. This could be because some schools logged concerns elsewhere – in behaviour logs, for example.

7. Residential special schools recorded nearly ten times the number of concerns per student than other residential schools.

This could suggest that special schools are identifying and reporting a higher proportion of incidents taking place, or that more concerns of a sexual nature occur in these settings due to the level and type of needs that some children with SEND have (for example, concerns like children getting undressed in inappropriate places).

8. Staff reported that they understood the guidance and knew what to do when incidents were reported. The use of discretion by safeguarding leads following up on concerns was important.

Staff were clear that concerns needed to be logged and reported to the designated safeguarding lead, reflecting the emphasis placed on awareness of safeguarding procedures. It was clear that designated safeguarding leads used their professional judgement to ensure a proportionate response to incidents, especially those described as 'grey areas'. In exceptional circumstances, this sometimes meant that incidents that constituted a crime were not reported to the police.

Following an incident, schools offered support to those affected, carried out education and awareness-raising with students, undertook risk assessments and worked with local authorities to share learning and expertise.

9. Schools reported difficulties escalating referrals to local authorities.

Schools reported variation across different local authorities in their thresholds for accepting referrals. This was particularly problematic in some special schools where it was felt that the specific needs of children and/or parents with SEND – including, for example, cognitive impairment and intellectual disabilities – were sometimes not fully understood by local authorities.

In contrast, local authority participants reported working hard to ensure that threshold information was well disseminated and understood, referring to the published guidelines and awareness-raising that schools said they wanted.

The timeliness of referrals and follow-up investigations by local authorities was also an issue of concern for some schools. This included the speed of local authority response to referrals, which was sometimes beyond the required one-day window; reduced weekend cover within local authorities; and the length of investigations, which sometimes had negative impacts on those involved.

More details on the key research findings detailed above are outlined in the following sections across four themes: understanding, prevention, identification, and response to child sexual abuse.

Understanding what child sexual abuse is

School and local authority staff generally had a clear theoretical understanding of what constitutes child sexual abuse, which included specific forms of abuse such as physical or 'contact' abuse, online abuse (including image sharing and grooming), being shown inappropriate images (both online or offline), peer-on-peer abuse, intra-familial abuse and harmful sexual behaviour. There were, however, 'grey areas' where issues were considered less 'clear-cut'. These included image sharing and understanding what constitutes abusive behaviour in the context of relationships between peers. In these 'grey areas', professionals felt it was important to consider the ages of those involved and their relationship to each other, cognitive impairment, clarity of consent, power differentials and contextual influences such as peer pressure.

While generally able to define child sexual abuse in relatively broad terms, children were less clear about peer-on-peer abuse and child sexual exploitation, as well as whether and how image sharing related to child sexual abuse. In special schools, there were a range of additional complexities, such as cognitive impairment and learning disabilities that could make it more difficult for some students to fully understand the definition of child sexual abuse and/or communicate their needs with family, friends and school staff.

Parents' understanding tended to be focused more on physical acts and some were surprised by the breadth of the definition of child sexual abuse provided in interviews, especially the inclusion of online-facilitated abuse.

Prevention of child sexual abuse

The residential context requires schools to work in a wider and more complex range of situations than is needed in day schools. Responsibility for 'round-the-clock' care, leisure time on and off-site, as well as peer relationships outside the classroom are key distinctive features of safeguarding in these settings. This is further complicated in residential special schools where there are additional requirements to meet higher levels of health and care needs alongside children's education and learning, increasing the amount of contact and time staff spend with children.

Structural approaches

Schools' governance structures had checking and balancing responsibility for safeguarding. While schools felt that these structures generally worked well, challenges could arise, for example where governors lacked experience in education and working with children.

Local authorities that commissioned residential education provision monitored schools through visits and contract management meetings on safeguarding practice. Some also discussed carrying out broader auditing processes of all schools in their area, which focused on reviewing school policies and processes. For example, one Local Safeguarding Children Board (LSCB) asked all schools in the area to complete a safeguarding self-assessment.

Schools used a range of approaches to ensure they recruited staff who were capable of safeguarding children and posed no risk of harm. These included screening, checking employment history, obtaining satisfactory references, enhanced DBS clearance, and trial working periods.

Despite meeting minimum standards for recruitment and vetting, staff acknowledged that this was not a failsafe against appointing someone seeking to abuse children. The length of time involved in pre-employment checks and vetting also posed the risk of losing potentially good staff.

Education and training

Safeguarding training in schools was delivered to all school staff via the local authority as well as internally. Feedback on the quality and nature of training was mixed. For example, the core training offered by the local authority was often thought to be important for new recruits, but those who had attended several times felt it could be improved by further tailoring and using more engaging techniques (for example, discussion of case study scenarios). Training of external support staff, such as local authority transport employees, was less consistent.

Local authority participants discussed the importance of tailoring training to ensure it met schools' needs, and described providing learning gathered from other schools, including from serious case reviews.

A key challenge in supporting children to build their understanding of issues around child sexual abuse was determining the right developmental phase for material to be introduced.

"We try and tailor it to fit the needs and the understanding of the young people within those environments."

Staff, special school

Across both mainstream and special schools, work that dealt specifically with relationships, sex and sexual abuse built on a foundation of more basic information about school rules and appropriate behaviour, which was a focus during children's earlier education and would be tailored to the specific needs of children in different settings.

"There's [...] general guidance given, before we hone in to the specifics, just about the attitudes and values and expectations of just being a pupil here [...] In many ways, that forms the bedrock of the preventative measures, and then you come [on] to some of the specifics that you might have [...] like] behaving inappropriately in a sexual nature [...] through the [...] PSHE programme."

Staff, mainstream school

However, examples were given where education content had not been well targeted to developmental phases. Children and parents suggested that more detailed awareness-raising about online behaviours should be undertaken with younger children. Education in special schools was highly tailored, though some staff held the view that some children would struggle to have a basic understanding of risk even when different approaches to engaging them were utilised (for example, using alternative communication approaches such as story boards with those who have learning disabilities).

Effective education and awareness-raising included repeated messaging, informal discussions, bringing external speakers in to speak to children, and innovative story-telling approaches. Regardless of the mechanism, children valued approaches which tackled child sexual abuse issues directly and transparently. Children made two key suggestions for improvements. First, that it was important for children to be supported to understand the risks of child sexual abuse at the earliest age appropriate. Second, that the content of safeguarding education should be diversified, to cover a wider range of risks and models of abuse.

Situational approaches

Staff acknowledged the need to balance effective monitoring of the school environment with allowing children privacy and supporting the development of their independence within and beyond the school setting.

Schools described a range of approaches to help ensure appropriate and safe use of the internet, including: limited access to devices (removing them at night, for example) and sites deemed inappropriate for prolonged use; IT monitoring systems which filtered content and flagged attempts to access inappropriate content; and physical monitoring of access (i.e. staff watching children using devices in the same room). Despite such policies and approaches, it was felt to be challenging to effectively manage prevention activities in this rapidly-changing area, especially where children had access to the internet via 4G and where students' computer literacy was greater than that of the school staff.

School staff also described forms of physical management of children by gender and age to keep them safe, ensure healthy boundaries between them and offer privacy when needed. This was felt to be a challenging and unique aspect of the residential context. School staff also discussed the need to manage physical space to prevent same-sex peer-on-peer abuse, such as sexual bullying among boys, for example.

Finally, schools identified ways in which they kept track of students' whereabouts. In mainstream schools, this involved staff being aware of children's locations during their free time, especially when there were known romantic relationships between students. In special schools where children had high levels of need, there was a much greater emphasis on continuous and active supervision of students, aiming to both reduce risk and identify signs of abuse quickly.

Promoting trusting relationships

Establishing and maintaining relationships between staff and children that were built on trust and transparency was described as fundamental. This meant that children were more receptive to messages communicated by staff and had the confidence to seek advice or support when needed. However, it was also acknowledged that there was a potential risk of professional boundary lines becoming blurred.

"The boundary between a professional relationship in a residential setting, and [an] overfamiliar [one ...] is where a lot of the risks lie."

Staff, mainstream school

The importance of involving parents within a culture of communication and openness was highlighted by schools and parents alike. To this end, schools aimed to provide clear, accessible information on safeguarding and wellbeing issues to ensure prevention work was as joined-up as possible.

"I think [communication between schools and parents] it's very important because you need to know what's going on. At the end of the day, I'm ultimately responsible for him, he's my son and I very much feel it's my responsibility to keep him safe. So, it is very, very important. It's important both ways [...] if I were to have any concerns, [it's important] that they [the school] would be open and accept them, and I know that they are."

Parent, special school

Although some parents appreciated the efforts schools made to engage them, others took a more 'hands-off' approach. However, parents who admitted to engaging less described having greater trust and confidence in the school to educate their children in such matters.

Identifying and disclosing child sexual abuse

In the proforma, the number of concerns with a sexual element recorded in the last completed academic year ranged from zero to 21, with a mean of 5.8.² No clear relationship between the numbers of recorded concerns and the school type was evident. Special schools recorded nearly ten times the number of concerns per student as mainstream schools, suggesting a difference in volumes of concerns (which could be related to the type of need that some of these children had) or different approaches to identification and reporting.

The proforma data showed that, across both mainstream and special schools, girls were more likely to have raised concerns than boys, though boys also logged online and peer-on-peer concerns as the most frequent issues.

² The proforma securely gathered information on the types of queries, concerns and incidents of a sexual nature or with a sexual element that are logged in residential schools' safeguarding records.

Identification by staff

Changes in children's behaviour and physical presentation were considered potential indicators of child sexual abuse. The behavioural signs highlighted by staff included changes in engagement, deteriorating mental health, increased anti-social behaviour, and behaviours that challenge staff. Physical signs ranged from direct physical harm to changes in appearance, substance misuse and unexplained access to resources (such as money or new clothing).

Approaches to identifying changes in children's behaviour and presentation included individual welfare plans, information-sharing between staff and parents, and risk assessing individual children. The proforma indicated that care and boarding staff were most likely to identify concerns in special schools, perhaps reflecting the more proactive identification processes in place in these settings. Approaches to identifying child sexual abuse included 'body mapping' and completion of daily diaries which captured details of behaviour. Despite these approaches, identifying potential signs of child sexual abuse was described as challenging in relation to some children with complex needs.

Across the schools, staff discussed having a low threshold for reporting and recording safeguarding concerns. Staff across schools were encouraged to share information quickly with the designated safeguarding lead(s) about anything they noticed that seemed 'off' or about which they were uncertain.

The proforma data, however, provided insight into the range of concerns being logged in safeguarding records, and it seemed there were some disparities between schools about concerns that were and were not logged. For example, staff at all schools talked in the qualitative interviews and focus groups about dealing with safeguarding concerns relating to issues between children; however, these were only detailed in the proforma by some, and two schools did not report any concerns at all. Staff suggested that these differences could be explained by some concerns being recorded in behaviour rather than safeguarding logs; variations in levels of incident across different types of school; and changes in practice over time.

Disclosures initiated by children

The proforma highlighted high proportions of disclosures initiated by children, which were similar across mainstream and special schools. School staff, children and parents discussed a range of ways in which children might disclose and/or access support about sexual abuse, whether about them or other children in the school. They included raising concerns with a range of staff members; using tools to report remotely (online forms, paper forms and display boards, for example); speaking to wider support services (including statutory services like the police and social workers, voluntary services like Childline, and services commissioned by schools like advocates and 'independent listeners'); and receiving informal support from family, friends and peers.

Children expressed a range of ideas about how and to whom they might disclose. Some said they would weigh up a number of factors in determining how to proceed, taking into account issues of trust, privacy, accessibility or convenience. Adults and children described how children might progress from discussing concerns informally, to disclosure to school staff directly.

When thinking about disclosing to school staff, children were clear that they would speak to the person they trusted and liked most, irrespective of job role. As such, having open and trusting relationships across staff roles within schools was a key facilitator for identification and disclosure.

“There’s that link between you and the house parent [...] they do care [and ...] they are someone there that you could go to.”

Child, mainstream school

In special schools, children and staff often developed close relationships through more frequent contact to support and understand their needs. However, some participants raised concerns that settling and bonding can be longer-term processes for children with certain forms of SEND (for example, developmental delays or neuro-developmental conditions) in residential settings and that this could pose a risk for disclosure if children did not feel able to discuss issues with staff. Furthermore, this ‘close’ relationship might also pose a barrier to children disclosing if, for example, an adult abusing a child would always be present during opportunities when a child might speak to somebody else. Signposting children to relevant support and giving them a choice of accessible routes to communicate their concerns both played a role in supporting children to disclose concerns or abuse. Some schools were able to offer access to the telephone whenever needed and had 24/7 support from house staff or medical services, meaning children could discuss their worries at any time.

Appropriate physical environments for private conversations of this nature were also an important consideration, as concerns about being seen or overheard could discourage children. However, school staff raised the importance of staff being able to balance the child’s desire for privacy with minimising the risk of false allegations and of the child feeling unsafe.

Children had concerns about the potential negative consequences of identifying and disclosing child sexual abuse: they feared implicating the perpetrator(s) and the impact this would have on how that person, or their wider peer group, viewed them. Other barriers to children raising a concern or disclosing sexual abuse included repressing or ignoring experiences due to feelings of anxiety, embarrassment or shame about the abuse.

Response, support and aftercare

Raising and escalating concerns

Staff were clear on the steps that should be taken if a concern was raised and talked about safeguarding being a ‘24/7 responsibility’ for everybody at the school. Similarly, if allegations were made about a member of staff, a standard process was followed, regardless of their role within the school. While there was less awareness of the process after referral to the designated safeguarding lead, there was confidence that they would take the necessary steps to manage and resolve incidents appropriately.

The immediate question for the designated safeguarding leads was whether a concern should be referred to an external agency or not. Some situations were seen to be clear-cut concerns for referral, such as if a member of staff had behaved in a sexually inappropriate way with a student. Differences in power dynamics were important considerations in the decision-making process too, including, for example, the age gap or difference in cognitive ability between students (especially for those with SEND). Staff talked about the challenge of establishing and making a judgement as to when incidents crossed a line from being acceptable to abusive, including in relation to concerns involving peers. If in doubt, designated safeguarding leads would consult with local authorities or the police. Both staff and local authority participants emphasised the importance of being able to have these discussions.

Differences in thresholds across English local authorities were widely reported by safeguarding staff in schools. Both mainstream and special schools reported that concerns referred to local authorities sometimes did not reach their thresholds. This was sometimes felt to be due to variability in response across local authorities (despite working from the same statutory guidance), which was a source of frustration for participants.

“We’ve had an ongoing battle about the threshold. We report [and] they say, ‘Oh, we don’t want to know about that.’ Then you have an inspector who says, ‘You need to report it.’ That discrepancy is just painful [...] They may also differ between local authority and they disagree with what the inspector says. [...] and obviously these are low-level things that we do feel are important for our young people to get sorted. So we do report it.”

Staff, special school

Staff from special schools also felt that the additional complexity of their students’ experiences was not always sufficiently understood by the local authority, meaning that some felt that children were left at risk when action had not been taken. In contrast, local authority participants spoke of working hard to ensure that threshold information was well disseminated and understood, referring to the published guidelines that schools said they wanted.

The proforma data indicated that most safeguarding concerns were not referred to external agencies but instead were dealt with by schools themselves, implying that schools perceived many concerns to be lower-level. Immediate measures by schools to ensure children’s safety could involve keeping students apart (though this could be challenging in practice); removing the alleged perpetrator(s) from the school; and confiscating or wiping devices.

Follow-up and outcomes

Support could be within the school in the form of pastoral support, school counsellors, specialist therapists and school nurses or external, including child and adolescent mental health services (CAMHS), sexual health clinics or specialist support organisations. Schools acknowledged that some children may not feel able or ready to access support directly after a disclosure is made, highlighting the importance of offering children a range of options and ensuring support is accessible and non-threatening.

A range of punitive measures and remedial actions that aimed to bolster safeguarding practice were reported. Following the conclusion of an investigation, schools reported that if a staff member was found to have breached their contract due to sexually inappropriate behaviour, they would be dismissed. In mainstream schools, students could be asked to leave if their behaviour warranted it. Being excluded was not discussed in special schools. This probably reflects the fact that a core part of their work with students is to teach safe and appropriate behaviours.

Key remedial actions included awareness-raising activities with students, which typically took the form of revisiting topics that had already been addressed (such as e-safety or healthy relationships and consent) and reiterating messages about what is and is not appropriate. Staff also discussed reviewing processes and practice following incidents. However, finding the time to reflect on practice was thought to be challenging within the school environment.

Background

The Independent Inquiry into Child Sexual Abuse ('the Inquiry') was set up in March 2015 and aims to consider the extent to which some state and non-state institutions in England and Wales have failed in their duty of care to protect children from sexual abuse and exploitation, and to make meaningful recommendations for change.

The Inquiry's investigations look at how different institutions have responded to child sexual abuse. The residential schools investigation's remit is to investigate the institutional response to allegations of child sexual abuse in residential schools. There are two broad types of residential schools:

- mainstream residential schools, which include independent or private schools (typically fee-paying) and state boarding schools (where the educational element is funded by the state and the boarding element is paid for privately); and
- schools that provide for students with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND).¹

Throughout the report the term 'mainstream' school is used to refer to the independent and state boarding schools and 'special' schools to refer to schools that are exclusively attended by children with SEND.

Residential schools vary in size and nature. At the time of writing there were:

- 502 mainstream residential schools in England, of which 40 were state boarding schools (GOV.UK, 2019);
- 269 residential special schools in England (GOV.UK, 2019); and
- 22 residential schools overall in Wales (StatsWales, 2019).

Most are not exclusively residential but have a mix of day and residential students. Many students 'flexi board', staying some time at school but also at home. Twelve mainstream boarding schools have boarding only and no day students (Stevens et al., 2019).

Research aims

The Inquiry commissioned the National Centre for Social Research (NatCen) and ResearchAbility to carry out mixed methods research to support its residential schools investigation. The overarching aims were to:

- explore how child sexual abuse in residential schools in England and Wales is understood from the perspective of school staff, children, parents and local authority staff;
- explore residential schools' safeguarding practice in relation to the prevention, identification, reporting of and response to child sexual abuse in residential schools from the perspective of staff, children and parents; and

¹ Most of these students will have an education, health and care (EHC) plan from their local authority in which the school is named. This means that it has been determined that their learning needs would be best met in a specialist setting, where their wider health and/or social care needs can also be met.

- collate views from staff, children and parents on good practice in residential schools in the prevention, identification, reporting of and response to child sexual abuse.

Methodology

The research comprised of two main data collection strands:

- qualitative interviews and focus groups with residential school staff, children, parents and local authority representatives; and
- an online proforma which schools completed to capture information about concerns with a sexual element that had been recorded in safeguarding logs.

Across England and Wales, 15 case study schools were purposively sampled for range and diversity across key characteristics including school type, sex, age and region. Schools included in the Inquiry's investigations were not eligible to take part.

	Qualitative interviews and focus groups	Proforma
Schools	Carried out at 13 of the 15 schools	Completed by 15 schools
Data collection	Data were collected from: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 100 members of staff • 43 children • 17 parents • 7 local authorities. 	Data were collected from schools' safeguarding logs about the number of concerns with a sexual element recorded in one academic year (up to 10 concerns per school).
Aim	To explore understanding of safeguarding issues and schools' safeguarding practice in relation to different types of child sexual abuse and for different groups of children, and to collect views on improvements that could be made.	To explore the types of concerns that schools recorded and how these were responded to.

The study had some limitations. The research findings are unlikely to cover the full spectrum of all schools' practice. Schools included in the Inquiry's investigations (previous or ongoing) were not eligible to participate, which may bias data collection towards schools with a stronger safeguarding culture. The qualitative data also suggest that schools participating in this research were those that felt more confident in their safeguarding practice. The proforma data do not provide a comprehensive view of all incidents that happened in school but offer a starting point for better understanding and context, providing insight into schools' record-keeping and response processes.

The research was approved by the Inquiry's and NatCen's Research Ethics Committees, and a detailed disclosure protocol was designed to ensure that any disclosure of harm was responded to appropriately.

Safeguarding children from sexual abuse in residential schools

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