

Chapter Twenty-Two

Children Living Away from Home

This chapter will be subject of further review during 2007, in the light of Working Together 2006

22.1 Revelations of the widespread abuse and neglect of children living away from home have done much to raise awareness of the particular vulnerability of children in a residential setting. Many of these have focused on sexual abuse, but physical and emotional abuse and neglect - including peer abuse, bullying and substance misuse - are equally a threat in institutional settings. Every setting in which children live away from home should provide the same basic safeguards against abuse, founded on an approach which promotes their general welfare and protects them from harm of all kinds, and treats them with dignity and respect.

Basic Safeguards

22.2 There are a number of essential safeguards which should be observed in all settings in which children live away from home, including foster care, residential care, private fostering, health settings, residential schools, prisons, young offenders institutions and secure units. (These safeguards will be explicitly addressed in contracts with external providers)

22.3 These basic safeguards include that :

- children feel valued and respected and their self-esteem is promoted
- there is an openness on the part of the institution to the external world and external scrutiny, including openness with families and the wider community
- staff and foster carers are trained in all aspects of safeguarding children; alert to children's vulnerabilities and risks of harm; and knowledgeable about how to implement child protection procedures
- children will have ready access to a trusted adult outside the institution, e.g. a family member, the child's social worker, independent visitor, children's advocate
- children will be made aware of the help available from independent advocacy services, external mentors, and ChildLine
- complaints procedures will address informal as well as formal complaints in a way which is clear, effective, user friendly and readily accessible to the child, (including those with disabilities and those for whom English is not a first language). There should be a complaints register in every children's home which records all representations or complaints, the action to address them, and the outcomes
- recruitment and selection procedures are rigorous and create a high threshold of entry to deter abusers
- clear procedures and support systems will be in place for dealing with expressions of concern by staff and carers about other staff or carers. Organisations should have code of conduct instructing staff on their duty to their employer and their professional obligation to raise legitimate concerns about the conduct of colleagues or managers. There will be a guarantee that procedures can be invoked in ways which do not prejudice the 'whistle-blower's' own position and prospects

- there is respect for diversity and sensitivity to race, culture, religion, gender, sexuality and disability
- there is effective supervision and support, which extends to temporary staff and volunteers
- staff and carers are alert to the risks to children in the external environment from people prepared to exploit the additional vulnerability of children living away from home
- peer abuse will always be taken as seriously as abuse perpetrated by an adult
- children and families from black and minority ethnic groups are likely to have experienced harassment, racial discrimination and institutional racism. Failure to consider the effects of racism will undermine efforts to protect children from other forms of significant harm
- all settings in which children are living away from home will have in place rigorously enforced anti-bullying strategies

Foster Care

22.4 Foster care is undertaken in the private domain of carers' own homes. This may make it more difficult to identify abusive situations and for children to find a voice outside the family. Social workers will see children in foster care on their own for a proportion of visits, and this will be explicitly recorded.

- foster carers will monitor the whereabouts of their foster children, their patterns of absence and contacts
- foster carers will notify the placing authority of any unauthorised absence by a child
- children's social care duty to conduct Section 47 enquiries, when there are concerns about significant harm to a child, applies on the same basis to children in foster care as it does to children in their own families. Enquiries with foster carers will consider the safety of any other children living in the household, including the foster carers' own children
- where foster carers care for children who have been abused, who may have been abused or who may have abused others, they have a right to be given full information, both in the interests of the child and of the foster family