



Child Protection Guidelines For Post-Primary Schools

"Children First", the national child protection guidelines, published in September 1999, noted that school staff are particularly well placed to observe and monitor children for signs of abuse. It called on schools to put in place clear procedures which school staff must follow where they suspect, or are alerted to, possible child abuse.

The "Child Protection Guidelines for Post-Primary Schools", was produced to meet this need. The Guidelines reflect the particular circumstances of the post-primary school setting and provide management authorities and school staff with guidance in relation to recognising the signs and symptoms of child abuse and with procedures for dealing immediately with such concerns. The Guidelines should be taken in conjunction with Children First and not as a stand-alone document.

A central facet of the Guidelines is the requirement for each Board of Management to designate a senior member of staff as the Designated Liaison Person (DLP) for the school. The DLP will act as a liaison with outside agencies such as health boards and as a resource person to any staff member who has child protection concerns.

Recognising child abuse.

Child abuse can take different forms, but usually consists of one or more of the following:

Neglect: Where a child's needs for food, warmth, shelter, nurturance and safety are not provided to the extent that the child suffers significant harm.

Emotional Abuse: Where a child's need for affection, approval, consistency and security is not being met.

Physical Abuse: Where a child is assaulted or injured in some way that is deliberate.

Sexual Abuse: Where a child is used for the sexual gratification of another.

The Guidelines provide advice on the signs and behaviours that may be indicative of child abuse.

What responsibilities have school personnel:

Schools have an obligation to provide students with the highest possible standard of care in order to promote their well being and protect them from harm. School personnel are especially well placed to observe changes in behaviour, failure to develop or outward signs of abuse in children. In situations where school personnel suspect that a child may have been abused, or is being abused, or is at risk of abuse, they should ensure that such concerns are reported in accordance with the procedures outlined in the Guidelines.

Reporting concerns to the Health Board:

If a member of staff receives an allegation or has a suspicion that a child may have been abused, or is being abused, or is at risk of abuse he/she should, without delay, report the matter to the school DLP.

If the DLP is satisfied that there are reasonable grounds for the suspicion or allegation he/she should report the matter to the relevant health board immediately.

If the DLP is not sure whether to report the matter to the health board, the DLP should seek advice from the Duty Social Worker in the health board.

If the DLP decides that the concerns of a member of staff should not be reported to the health board, the member of staff should be given a clear statement, in writing, as to the reasons why. The member of staff should be advised that, if he/she remains concerned about the situation, he/she is free to consult with or report to the health board.

What will the Health Board do with a report?

Once a report of suspected child abuse has been made to a health board, it is then a matter for that health board to decide upon the action, if any, which is necessitated by that report. The social worker handling the case may need to seek further clarification from the person who first raised the concerns. In some cases, the response of the health board will be to call a child protection conference.

Allegations or suspicions of child abuse concerning school employees:

In a school context, the most important consideration to be taken into account is the protection of children, and their safety and well-being must be the priority. However, the school also has duties and responsibilities, as an Employer, in respect of its employees.

School employees may be subject to erroneous or malicious allegations. Therefore any allegation of abuse should be dealt with sensitively and support provided for staff including counselling where necessary. The employee should be treated fairly which includes the right not to be judged in advance of a full and fair enquiry.

It is important to note that there are two procedures to be followed:

- i) the reporting procedure in respect of the allegation;
- ii) the procedure for dealing with the employee.

In the case of post-primary schools, the DLP is responsible for reporting the matter to the appropriate health board while the Employer is responsible for addressing the employment issues.

Protocol authorising immediate action.

The Guidelines provide a written protocol by which the Employer may authorise the school Principal to absent an employee from the school where circumstances warrant it as a precautionary measure in order to protect children in the school.

Where the Protocol authorizing immediate action is invoked to absent an employee from the school an emergency meeting of the Employer body should be convened.

Action to be taken by the employer.

The Guidelines provide advice to the Employer on the immediate actions to be taken where a report has been made to a health board concerning a school employee.

It is essential that at all times the matter be treated in the strictest confidence and that the identity of the employee should not be disclosed until such time as the employee has been offered the opportunity to address and/or be represented to the employer.

Further follow-up required.

The Guidelines advise that the employer should maintain strict confidentiality and that any further follow-up action should accord with the established grievance and disciplinary procedures for the sector.

Feedback from Health Boards.

The Children First guidelines place an onus on health boards to ensure that arrangements are put in place to provide feedback to employers in regard to the progress of a child abuse investigation regarding an employee. It is clearly stated in those guidelines that efforts should be made to investigate complaints against employees promptly bearing in mind the serious implications for an innocent employee.

Peer abuse and bullying.

The Guidelines provide advice on the recognition and reporting of abuse perpetrated by a child's peers. It is important that potentially abusive behaviour between children is not ignored and, as appropriate, certain cases should be referred to the health board.

School management is responsible, in the first instance, for dealing with bullying in school. The more extreme forms of bullying behaviour, when perpetrated by adults rather than children, would be regarded as physical or emotional abuse. Only such serious incidences of bullying should be referred to the health board.

Forms and contact details.

The Guidelines provide a Standard Reporting Form and contact details for the relevant Health Board as well as Guidance Notes on Child Protection Conferences.

The Guidelines are available on the Department of Education & Science web-site at www.education.ie