

# School safety meetings

This case study shows how 'school safety meetings' helped to create safety and build trust between young people, the school, and the wider safeguarding partnership. Two students (aged 14) began coming to school with designer handbags that teachers thought they couldn't afford. The girls were friends, and teachers were concerned that they were at risk of exploitation. During conversations with teachers and pastoral staff, the girls told workers that they were being bought gifts by an adult male. The school was already worried about the girls because they hadn't been able to develop good relationships their parents.

## What was the response?

At first, the school safeguarding team contacted the police. After the police spoke with the two young girls separately, they thought it possible that they were being exploited. But the police didn't have enough information to confirm this and so couldn't go further with the case.

The school safeguarding team carried on supporting the girls and building their trust. They began with small conversations and through these small conversations more information came out about where the girls were going, what they were doing, and who they were spending time with.

The safeguarding team made sure the girls knew that all the things they were sharing would be noted down by the pastoral workers to better support the girls and find out what might be happening.

This helped the safeguarding team create a visual map of the girls' friends and connections, building a picture of protective as well as potentially harmful relationships. From this, the safeguarding team were able to spot where exploitation may also be happening to a wider group of children.

A 'school safety meeting' was organised – that included the police, the school, and social care – to address these concerns of child exploitation.

This was an early example of a 'Level 2' Contextual Safeguarding response, where the focus of the work was on the 'context' (in this case the friendship group within the school context), rather than on an individuals and their family situations.

By creating a map of the girls' friends and connections, as well as hosting a 'school safety meeting', workers could talk about, better understand, and create a plan to the change the contexts where significant harm was happening.

## What were the challenges?

The children's social care system did not have a process in place for creating safety in contexts (like 'schools' or 'peer groups') when there was significant harm beyond the family home. For example, they did not have a system or process to accept referrals for peer groups and there were no meetings set up to discuss these concerns with partners like police, health, school, and so on.

Instead, the systems in place were set up to recognise and respond to individual young people and their experiences of harm within the home. This made it really hard to do the work set out in this case study; and at the beginning even resulted in the police having to close the case due to the lack of information.

## What difference did this make?

Setting up 'school safety meetings' helped to create safety for the girls as well as the other children who were potentially being exploited. Workers were able to focus in on the contexts - the areas and the adults - who were causing harm, which meant that no further incidents of concern were raised. The school also worked with the girls to manage the emotional impacts of what happened.

Social care, the police and the school continued to have meetings once-a-term to discuss any new issues of harm that young people may be experiencing at the school. Not only did this strengthen the relationship between these different services, but it also helped address issues that were beginning to bubble up before it was too late.

## What did we learn?

By taking a Contextual Safeguarding approach, the school was able to respond to the issues the girls were experiencing. The school felt able to be open about the problems they had because they built trusting relationships with their partners (social care, police, health and so on). Now, regular 'school safety meetings' take place, and the school feels well supported.

Working in this way helped children's social care workers spot where there were gaps in their system (i.e. being able to make a referral for a 'peer group'), and build new processes to enable other 'Level 2' Contextual Safeguarding responses.

Building good relationships between young people and school workers was crucial. This example helps to show how relationship building takes time and involves commitment by workers to support young people at their own pace.

Lastly, the workers were able to pull together the visual map, as well as spot other young people who may be experiencing harm, because of the school staff's commitment to listen to young people.