Safeguarding emergencies: what to do when you need to act quickly

Are you prepared for safeguarding emergencies? Ann Raymond sets out some examples, how to act in an emergency, and some principles of good practice for preparedness

All schools must have a comprehensive safeguarding and child protection policy, which includes detailed procedures to follow in cases of suspected abuse and neglect. For the majority of safeguarding situations those procedures will be sufficient, but have you considered what would happen in an emergency? Safeguarding emergencies are thankfully infrequent in schools, but the DT, DDT, headteacher and all staff should be prepared to take appropriate emergency action should the need arise.

Examples of safeguarding emergencies

Safeguarding concerns typically emerge during the school day, while the child is in your safe hands and there is sufficient time to consult with colleagues, complete the necessary school forms and closely monitor the situation. Some circumstances, however, may warrant emergency action by the DT/DDT. (If the child is away from the school but in the school’s care, the responsible member of staff will need to act.) Examples of safeguarding emergencies necessitating immediate action include:

- severe illness or injury which may be attributable to physical or sexual abuse, or self harm
- a fearful child’s refusal to go home at the end of day
- suspicion or disclosure of serious abuse becoming apparent during a school outing or residential trip
- a risk of trafficking or abduction when the child leaves the school premises
- a risk of the child being abused through sexual exploitation after school
- a child who is incapacitated through substance misuse
- a missing child with known vulnerabilities
- credible immediate risk with regard to FGM or Forced Marriage
- in some instances an allegation made against a member of staff can necessitate immediate action to safeguard pupils.
Key principles when taking action in an emergency

• Try not to panic. Act quickly but rationally.

• Stay child focused. The welfare of the child must come before all other considerations. Explain your actions to the child if they are of sufficient age and maturity to understand.

• Act within accepted guidelines. You should always endeavour to act in accordance with DE and ACPC procedures.

• Exercise professional judgement. Draw on your skills and expertise to decide how to proceed.

• Share information with caution. In a safeguarding emergency (in contrast to health and safety/accidents emergencies) there might be reason to believe that a parent is involved in the abuse or neglect. In these circumstances take action to support and protect the child, then take advice from children’s Gateway service about contacting parents.

• Identify social, educational, physical and cultural vulnerabilities. Concerns involving children with SEND warrant immediate action due to their increased risk of abuse. The vulnerability of other children, such as those who are or have been sexually exploited, live in challenging family circumstances, are looked after, have or have had a child protection plan or where the risk of FGM or forced marriage is suspected, should also tip the balance in favour of emergency action.

• Be clear about what you can do. Being the child’s advocate is firmly within your remit. Removing a child from their home, taking them to your home or confronting a suspect is not.

• Stay with the child. You will remain responsible for the child until you can arrange for him or her to be looked after by another appropriate adult.

• Document all actions. Including telephone and face to face conversations. Date, time and sign all records.

Embedding emergency action

Emergency situations, by their very nature, preclude deeper analysis, lengthy discussions with colleagues or the collection of further information.

It is advisable to include emergency procedures in your statutory safeguarding training for all staff and in your child protection policy.

‘What to do in an emergency’ flowchart

Governors should be consulted about any proposed procedural additions or changes, such as the adoption of the ‘What to do in an emergency’ flowchart. If you identify gaps or failures in your
existing procedures for dealing with a safeguarding emergency, the governing body must rectify the
deficiency as soon as possible.

The flowchart describes a simple step by step process. As always you should adapt it for your own
school. Insert the name and contact number of the DT (and deputy) and contact numbers for your
local children’s Gateway service, out of hours duty team, police child abuse investigation unit, CPSSS
and NSPCC helpline.

The flowchart can be used by the DT/DDT or other members of staff, in school or off the premises.
During residential trips or similar occasions when the DT/DDT is not available it is vital for staff to
know how to contact the DT or their deputy out of school hours.

A number of safeguarding related policies will benefit from the addition of an emergency flowchart
or checklist, including missing children, managing allegations and site security.

Sharing information

Medical concerns

It is important to make paramedics, hospital staff, social workers or police aware that the child’s
illness or injury may be non accidental.

Parental consent

Staff should always try to obtain the child’s and parent’s consent to share information with other
professionals. If consent is refused or not advised it is still acceptable to share information in an
emergency in order to protect a child.

Guidance

Information sharing should follow the school’s normal guidelines and be proportionate to the
circumstances. Area Child Protection Committees’ Regional Policy and Procedures (ACPC)
encourages all professionals to pass on relevant information without delay: fears about sharing
information cannot be allowed to stand in the way of the need to promote the safety and welfare of
children. No professional should assume that someone else will pass on information which they
think may be critical to keeping a child safe.

Emergency action by child protection agencies

When children’s social services or police receive an emergency safeguarding referral they have
authority to take immediate action, if necessary, in the best interests of the child.

If social services or NSPCC decide the child should be removed from their home, an Emergency
Protection Order can be applied for, though this takes time to secure. The police can, in exceptional
circumstances, exercise their powers to remove the child to a place of safety immediately.
In some cases social services may apply for an Exclusion Order, which involves removing the perpetrator in order for the child to return home. Whichever course of action is undertaken the school will be involved in the ensuing strategy discussions and multi-agency plan.

**Policies and planning**

It can be daunting to take a decision in a safeguarding emergency, particularly in the absence of support and advice from more experienced colleagues. Forward planning will, however, prevent many problems becoming emergencies and also support staff to make rational decisions if an emergency does occur. Remember, you can always contact the CPSSS in your ELB for support.

Ensure your policies, documentation and training courses include clear guidelines to make sure staff understand their responsibilities and avoid undue delay, which could result in further harm to the child.

A list of relevant contacts for out of hours teams such as duty social care, emergency GP service, duty CAMHS team, hospitals and NSPCC should be readily available at all times.

With the correct tools in place, an informed emergency decision can be made with confidence.

**Author details**

Ann Raymond

Ann is an independent children’s services consultant with particular expertise in child protection and safeguarding. Formerly the NSPCC Education Adviser for South West England and national lead Education Adviser for safeguarding disabled children