

Keeping safe

The development of effective preventative education in primary schools in Northern Ireland: summary report

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March 2011

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Acknowledgements

In completing this research project, we are very grateful to and thank the following for their contribution:

- the participants: principals, teachers, classroom support staff, allied health professionals, parents, children and key personnel from the statutory and voluntary sector;
- the expert advisory group who provided advice and support throughout this research project;
- NSPCC administrative staff for their support throughout the project; and
- the peer review panel who provided important comment and advice on the drafting of this summary report.

The research was funded by a grant from the Department of Education in Northern Ireland.

1 Introduction

In 2008, the NSPCC was asked to undertake exploratory research on the need for preventative education in primary schools, which equips pupils to recognise and respond appropriately to bullying, child abuse and domestic abuse.

The need for research

Recent studies confirm that many children living in Northern Ireland, Great Britain, the Republic of Ireland and internationally experience physical, sexual, emotional abuse and neglect in their daily lives. Many also experience bullying (including cyberbullying) and domestic abuse. Research literature shows that certain children are particularly vulnerable, notably those perceived by their peers as being “different”, for example in terms of their sexuality or those who have a special educational need or disability. These studies clearly show that children are more likely to be maltreated by parents, carers, relatives and people known to them than by strangers, and that many children experience multiple forms of maltreatment throughout childhood.

Experiences of abuse have been shown to have a negative and detrimental impact on children’s health, wellbeing and development, both in the short and longer term, and a negative impact on children’s educational outcomes. Such negative consequences are often further exacerbated by children’s reticence to tell and to seek support. Many children wait a long time before disclosing such experiences – many never do. Consequently, maltreatment experiences can remain hidden for many years while children continue to suffer in silence and other children continue to be at risk from perpetrators.

It is highly significant that some children do not tell because they do not recognise their experience as being inappropriate or abusive. Many children are not taught the necessary knowledge or skills to protect themselves, either at home or at school. Many parents do not talk to their children about abuse, and when they do, they often convey messages that are inaccurate. Consequently, children are ill-informed. They may know about “stranger danger”, but are unaware that the abuser is more likely to be someone they know and should be able to trust. Most children do not know about protective behaviours, such as what to do or say if someone they knew touched them in a way they did not like. Many are not aware of how to report their concerns.

A growing body of evidence suggests that school-based preventative education is both cost-effective and improves children’s knowledge, awareness and skills. Children who experience this education are better placed to recognise inappropriate and abusive behaviour, to use self-protection strategies and to report the experience, thereby seeking help and stopping the abuse. Despite this evidence, school-based preventative programmes have not been developed in a coordinated and strategic manner within Great Britain and Northern Ireland. Rather, a number of organisations deliver a variety of messages in schools about a wide range of related subjects, such as relationships and sexuality, bullying, child abuse and domestic abuse.

In recent years, there have been significant developments in policy, legislation and guidance on safeguarding and promoting the welfare and wellbeing of children. There has been a shift from a narrow child protection focus on children who have been abused and neglected towards a wider focus on safeguarding and prevention. This broad and inclusive concept of safeguarding includes all preventable harm that affects the lives of children, with a clear focus on children's personal development and wellbeing, and on making children's lives better. This has created a climate conducive to the development of preventative education for children in primary schools. In 2007, Northern Ireland's revised curriculum for schools was introduced, incorporating a statutory personal development element for 4–16-year-olds. This has provided a significant opportunity to embed the teaching of “keeping safe” messages within the personal development and mutual understanding (PD&MU) curriculum and cross-curricular themes in the context of whole-school approaches to safeguarding.

The research undertaken

The research undertaken in this project involved consultation with children, school leaders, teachers, other school staff, parents, and key personnel from the statutory and voluntary sectors about the need for preventative education. Potential barriers and facilitators to the effective development and implementation of preventative education in primary schools were also identified. The study assessed what children need to know and what skills they need to develop to help keep themselves safe. Current practice in primary schools on teaching “keeping safe” messages was examined.

This summary report describes the key findings and recommendations resulting from consultations with key stakeholders during phases 1 and 2 of the study. In phase 1, a case study was conducted in the Ballymena District Council area in the North Eastern Education and Library Board. The chosen area included grant-aided primary schools of all types of management and ethos, serving children and families across a broad range of socio-economic status bands. The case study involved an in-depth exploration of the experiences and views of key stakeholders on the teaching of “keeping safe” messages in primary schools.

Phase 2 extended the study across all five education and library boards, and a range of methods were used to engage schools, school leaders and parents to consider and verify the initial findings from the first phase. Phase 2 included an online audit of current practice in teaching “keeping safe” messages in primary schools.

Chapter 2 of this report describes the methods used to assess and identify gaps in primary schoolchildren's knowledge and understanding of “keeping safe”, and reports on the findings from this part of the study. This is followed by sections that summarise the methods used and findings from the consultation with school staff (chapter 3), parents (chapter 4), and key personnel from the statutory and voluntary sector (chapter 5). Chapter 6 presents the most significant findings from the audit of current practice in schools, while chapter 7 outlines the recommendations for practice and policy development. Details of the five full research reports can be found on the back cover of this document and all reports can be downloaded from www.nspcc.org.uk/inform

2 Consultation with children

The photography project

Between March and June 2009, 236 children (predominantly Primary 5–7 class groups), across 15 mainstream and special schools in the Ballymena District Council area, took part in a photography project. Of those children, 175 were given a disposable camera for seven days to take photographs of what “keeping safe” meant to them. The remaining 61 children were involved in analysing the photographs.

Findings

- Physical safety and accident prevention were core to children’s concept of “keeping safe”, while personal safety comprised a small element of most children’s understanding of it.
- Children’s references to personal safety included bullying, stranger danger, and good and bad people.
- Some children were tuned into “feeling secure”, and a small minority indicated that they had a role to play in keeping themselves safe.

The self-report questionnaire

Between May and June 2009, 532 children (predominantly Primary 4–7 class groups), across 16 mainstream and special schools in the Ballymena District Council area, completed a self-report questionnaire. This was used to assess their knowledge and understanding of “keeping safe”, including bullying, domestic abuse, and appropriate and inappropriate touch. Children were also asked questions about their age and gender, for example, and their sources of “keeping safe” information.

Findings

- Children’s knowledge and understanding of how to keep safe from bullying, domestic abuse, and appropriate and inappropriate touch varied significantly with age, self-reported special educational needs and the number of “keeping safe” information sources accessible to them. Less-significant variations existed with gender and school management type.
- Children with low knowledge and understanding (5 per cent of those surveyed) were likely to be younger, have special educational needs, and have fewer sources of “keeping safe” information. Those with high knowledge and understanding (55 per cent of those surveyed) were likely to be older, have no special educational needs, and have more sources of “keeping safe” information.
- Overall, children had a better understanding of how to keep safe from bullying compared with domestic abuse, or appropriate and inappropriate touch. In relation to domestic abuse, many children thought that “sometimes children are the cause of their parents’ abusive behaviours/fights” and that “children should try to stop their parents fighting”. Significant gaps were evident in children’s understanding of inappropriate sexual touching from someone known to them and their understanding of stranger danger.

Implications of findings

While the current curriculum provides opportunities for children to be taught about keeping safe, it is clear that children receive inaccurate messages and do not have the knowledge, understanding or skills to keep themselves safe from maltreatment. An effective preventative curriculum is therefore required to communicate these messages to children.

The implementation of an effective preventative education programme in primary schools will require that:

- children are given a knowledge and understanding of maltreatment, and provided with the opportunity to practice the skills required to keep themselves safe in abusive situations;
- children are taught about all forms of maltreatment, including bullying and child abuse, and in particular the sensitive issues of domestic abuse and child sexual abuse;
- teaching approaches and materials used are appropriate to the age and ability of all pupils.

3 Consultation with school staff

Focus groups with teachers and other school staff

Between November 2008 and March 2009, a series of nine focus groups were hosted with 50 participants, including teachers, classroom assistants and allied health professionals working in mainstream primary and special schools in the Ballymena District Council area. A short story about hypothetical characters was used to stimulate and aid discussion. The focus group discussions explored the views and experiences of participants, and provided valuable insight into the barriers and facilitative factors to teaching “keeping safe” messages in primary schools in Northern Ireland.

Findings

- Teachers reported varied states of readiness to engage with the development and teaching of “keeping safe” messages through preventative education in primary schools. Significant differences were evident across school sector and management type in teachers’ attitudes, experiences, and their training and support needs.
- Teachers and other school staff reported varied practice in how they currently taught “keeping safe” messages. The special school sector reported teaching more sensitive messages like appropriate and inappropriate touch than the mainstream school sector. Controlled schools, in comparison with integrated and Catholic Maintained schools, reported teaching fewer sensitive messages, focusing instead on accident prevention, internet safety, bullying and stranger danger. External agencies were often used to teach “keeping safe” messages.

- Teachers varied in the attitudes they expressed about the role of the school and of the teacher in safeguarding the welfare of children, both in terms of preventative education and secondary prevention. A minority of participants expressed reluctance for schools and teachers to take on the responsibility for teaching “keeping safe” messages. All teachers, classroom assistants and allied health professionals working in special schools acknowledged that they had a key role to play in teaching “keeping safe” messages to children.
- Teachers and other school staff, working across all school sectors and management types, reported feeling ill at ease and lacking in confidence in relation to teaching sensitive messages. However, teachers within Catholic Maintained schools reported greater confidence, having had the experience of teaching formal relationship and sexuality education (RSE) programmes developed for all Catholic Maintained schools.
- Participants highlighted the opportunity presented by the revised curriculum to embed the teaching of “keeping safe” messages within primary schools. They were clear that any approach to development in this area should include integration across all aspects of the school, and should involve the whole-school community. All participants expressed a need for comprehensive training, development and support to teach “keeping safe” messages.

Focus groups with school principals

Between October and December 2009, six focus groups were hosted with school principals and vice-principals (36 participants in total) working in mainstream primary and special schools across the five education and library board areas. The focus groups explored how representative and transferable the findings from the initial case study were across all schools. They also explored the role of the school, the role of the teacher, and the training, development and support needs of school staff in teaching “keeping safe” messages. Participants were provided with a series of verbatim excerpts from the phase 1 findings to stimulate and focus their discussion.

Findings

- Participants expressed positive attitudes to embracing and embedding preventative education within all aspects of the leadership and teaching practice within their schools. Some reported existing positive practice in this regard. While acknowledging the concerns expressed by some school staff in phase 1, principals did not feel that these views were representative of those working more widely in schools across Northern Ireland.
- Factors that emerged as significant in influencing positive practice with regard to teaching “keeping safe” messages through preventative education included:
 - child-centred leadership and ethos
 - school profile characteristics (size and pupil–teacher ratio)
 - pupil vulnerability (social deprivation and special educational needs)
 - relationship of the school in the community.

These are significant factors that should be considered in developing and implementing preventative education across primary schools in Northern Ireland.

- All participants expressed the view that schools and their wider support services within education and social services require appropriate resourcing if preventative education is to be effectively developed across primary schools. This resourcing is required for teaching “keeping safe” messages to children, as well as secondary prevention to ensure that emerging disclosures are appropriately responded to and managed within a multi-agency context. Participants considered that strategic leadership is required from the Department of Education and the Education and Training Inspectorate, as well as appropriate funding, training and support for personnel, and relevant materials linked to existing curriculum developments.
- All participants were unequivocal in expressing the need for a comprehensive package of training, development and support to facilitate schools’ engagement in a long-term process of building capacity to teach preventative education. They recommended a number of key elements within this package, including adopting:
 - best-practice models for delivering continuing professional development (CPD);
 - a whole-school approach to engaging all school staff, parents and external agencies.

Implications of findings

Many teachers and other school staff had a shared understanding of the role they could play in teaching children how to keep safe from maltreatment and the topic areas that needed to be addressed. However, they were concerned about dealing with the more sensitive issues, such as sexual abuse and domestic abuse. They also lacked confidence in their ability to respond effectively to disclosures.

While school leaders were committed to embedding preventative education within all aspects of the leadership and teaching practice within their schools, they were concerned that resources should be available to ensure that disclosures were appropriately responded to and managed within a multi-agency context.

The implementation of an effective preventative education programme in primary schools will require that:

- the whole-school community, including teachers, support staff and parents share the same understanding of “keeping safe” and work collaboratively to teach children how to keep safe;
- school staff are confident in dealing with all aspects of the preventative curriculum and have the skills to manage sensitive issues;
- school staff have access to a range of teaching materials to assist in delivering “keeping safe” messages that are appropriate to the age and ability of pupils;
- school staff work with parents to equip them to play their part in delivering “keeping safe” messages;
- school staff are confident that, where disclosures are made, appropriate and timely support will be available from external agencies.

4 Consultation with parents

Parental involvement questionnaire

Between May and October 2009, 248 parents (predominantly white, female, aged between 31–50 years, with more than one child) across 16 mainstream primary and special schools in the Ballymena District Council area completed the questionnaire. This questionnaire was developed to identify the significant barriers and facilitators of parental involvement in teaching “keeping safe” messages through preventative education.

Findings

- The vast majority of parents were supportive of their children being taught “keeping safe” messages through preventative education; they thought that preventing their children from receiving these messages would be foolish, irresponsible and harmful.
- The majority of parents reported positive attitudes to being involved, in particular, by allowing their child to access a school-based programme or by supporting their child with directed homework activities in conjunction with a school-based programme. They were less positive about taking on a more proactive role, for example by becoming involved in the co-delivery of materials in the classroom or teaching their children using books or DVDs at home.
- Most parents described their current involvement in preventative education in terms of allowing their children to access “keeping safe” messages in school. The majority reported that they intended to be involved over the coming year by allowing their child to access a school-based programme and by supporting them with directed homework activities.
- The responses showed that there were potential barriers and facilitators to parental involvement in “keeping safe” education. These included parents’ attitudes and beliefs: their belief that they could help their children learn “keeping safe” messages and the attitudes of significant others in their lives. The research showed that those who were older, with a higher income and female reported more positive intentions to be involved.

Focus groups with parents

Between January and April 2010, focus groups were conducted with parents from the five education and library board areas of Northern Ireland. In total, 33 parents (predominantly female, aged between 26 and 47 years, with more than one child) of Primary 5 children took part. The focus groups were used to validate the parental questionnaire data from phase 1, and to explore the facilitative factors and barriers to parental involvement, as well as parental support for the teaching of “keeping safe” messages through preventative education in primary schools.

Findings

- All parents who participated in the focus groups were supportive of their children receiving school-based preventative education. They wanted preventative education to be fully integrated into the school curriculum, and for it to involve age and developmentally appropriate messages as children progressed through primary school. Accurate messages, delivered to all children in a consistent way, and discussions generated in the context of the group situation, could enhance children's knowledge and their ability to protect themselves.
- Parents reported that schools could maximise their commitment to, and support for, preventative education by keeping parents informed about the content and timing of any taught programme. They felt that preventative education delivered by teachers should be reinforced by parents. They wanted training and resource materials in a variety of formats to promote their effective involvement by enhancing their confidence, knowledge and skills to communicate with their children about sensitive issues.
- Parents who were already involved in teaching their children preventative messages tended to focus on the risks presented by strangers, particularly around abduction, or provided messages that were too general to help children take appropriate protective action.

Implications of findings

The vast majority of parents were supportive of their children being taught how to keep safe from maltreatment through preventative education in schools, where accurate messages could be delivered to all children. Some parents were already addressing some of these issues with their children but they tended to focus on the risks presented by strangers rather than people known to their child.

The implementation of an effective preventative education programme in primary schools will require that:

- “keeping safe” messages delivered in school are reinforced by parents and carers;
- parents are actively encouraged to support the preventative curriculum through information about content and teaching approaches;
- parents are equipped to actively assist in the delivery of “keeping safe” messages and to support their children with related homework activities;
- parents are provided with opportunities to enhance their confidence, knowledge and skills to communicate with their children about sensitive issues.

5 Consultation with key personnel from the statutory and voluntary sector

Semi-structured interviews

Between June and December 2009, 22 semi-structured interviews were conducted with key personnel from the statutory and voluntary sector. Those interviewed were individuals responsible for the development of preventative education (including policy, curriculum and programme content), those who would be involved in the training and management of personnel delivering key prevention messages, and those involved in inspecting educational provision. Topics discussed included the meaning of safety and what was already being done in schools, factors that would facilitate the development of preventative education, barriers that might deter the development of preventative education, and next steps – what needed to happen to ensure the development of preventative education in primary schools.

Findings

- There was considerable support among participants for the development of preventative education that addressed bullying, child abuse and domestic abuse, and involved the collaboration of the education sector, health and social services, other statutory agencies and families. Enhanced inter-agency collaboration was required to progress any legislative, policy and practice developments.
- A number of curricular, structural and strategic developments were identified as having the potential to assist the development of preventative education.
- A number of factors were identified that could impede the development of preventative education, including:
 - cultural issues
 - lack of inter-agency collaboration
 - barriers in the school system in relation to developing a comprehensive package of training and support for whole-school staff.
- The need for effective leadership and significant financial resources were identified as essential for the development of teaching resources, the training, development and support of school staff, and for the engagement of parents.
- Resources needed to be developed that:
 - were consistent with the revised curriculum and made links with other programmes, for example, relationship and sexuality education;
 - were appropriate for children across the key stages and with different levels of ability;
 - were user-friendly and well-structured;
 - provided advice for teachers about how to discuss sensitive issues like secrets and touches.

- A supportive environment for any school-based developments could be facilitated by the adoption of public education to maximise parental awareness, and to support preventative education being undertaken in other sectors.

Implications of findings

There was considerable support among key personnel from the statutory and voluntary sector for the development of effective preventative education in schools that addressed bullying, child abuse and domestic abuse.

The implementation of an effective preventative education programme in primary schools will require that:

- children are taught about how to keep safe from all forms of maltreatment through school-based preventative education that is embedded in the curriculum and ethos of the school;
- the statutory and voluntary sectors work collaboratively to respond to children’s need to receive consistent preventative messages, and to promote public education that supports this within the home and community;
- a package of training, development and support be provided for school principals, teachers and other school staff to equip them to deliver effective preventative education;
- resources are provided to facilitate teachers, other school staff and parents to deliver “keeping safe” messages to children.

6 Audit of current practice in primary schools

Online questionnaire

Between April and May 2010, 328 schools completed an online questionnaire sent to all primary schools in Northern Ireland. The questionnaire was designed to gather information about the socio-demographic profile of the school, current practice in teaching “keeping safe” messages (including the approach adopted by schools), who were involved in teaching “keeping safe” messages and how these messages were being taught, staff training and development, and how parents were involved in the life of the school and their potential role in planning and teaching “keeping safe” messages.

Findings

- Schools reported using a variety of approaches to teach children “keeping safe” messages, including:
 - school assemblies (89 per cent of schools)
 - presentations by external individuals and groups (77 per cent of schools)
 - children attending external events (61 per cent of schools)
 - timetabled curriculum slots (29.9 per cent of schools).

Messages were delivered in a fragmented way with few opportunities to integrate them through all aspects of school life.

- A variety of teaching methodologies were being used by schools, including:
 - classroom discussion
 - play-based learning
 - stories, poems and DVDs.

Fewer opportunities were provided for children to practice key skills, such as how to recognise appropriate and abusive behaviour.

- A considerable number of schools reported teaching a variety of “keeping safe” messages to children. The majority of children across all key stages were being taught messages about recognising feelings, safe and unsafe touch, bullying, stranger danger and who to turn to for help.
- Results indicated that many schools were not teaching children how to keep safe from violence in the home, and how to identify appropriate and inappropriate touch. Furthermore, teaching placed disproportionate emphasis on the risks presented by strangers. Younger children and children attending special schools were less likely to be taught “keeping safe” messages.
- A number of individuals were involved in the teaching of “keeping safe” messages. Schools reported the involvement of:
 - teachers (97.9 per cent of schools)
 - classroom and learning support assistants (32 per cent of schools)
 - designated individuals or teams (57.3 per cent of schools)
 - school nurses (28 per cent of schools)
 - parents (17.4 per cent of schools)
 - external agencies (55.2 per cent of schools).
- There were considerable differences in schools’ reports of current practice across school sector (special or mainstream), school management type (controlled, maintained or integrated), education and library board area, and size. These differences related to the approach adopted, who was involved, what messages were taught and the teaching methodologies used.

Implications of findings

Primary schools in Northern Ireland were already teaching children some “keeping safe” messages but many schools were not teaching children about more sensitive issues, such as how to keep safe from violence in the home, and how to identify appropriate and inappropriate touch. Current teaching placed disproportionate emphasis on the risks presented by strangers, and the teaching methods being used by school staff were not providing children with opportunities to practice key skills, such as how to recognise appropriate and abusive behaviour.

The implementation of an effective preventative education programme in primary schools will require that:

- children of all ages and abilities are taught about all forms of maltreatment, including bullying, child abuse and domestic abuse, using an integrated, whole-school approach;
- children are given a knowledge and understanding of maltreatment, and provided with the opportunity to practice the skills required to keep themselves safe in abusive situations;

- school staff are confident to teach children about how to keep safe from violence in the home, and how to identify and respond to inappropriate touches;
- teaching approaches and materials used are appropriate to the age and ability of pupils, and integrate with the revised curriculum.

7 Recommendations for practice and policy development

Each individual research report in the study contains the full recommendations made as a result of the consultation with the relevant group. The recommendations can be found at the start of each report. This section presents a summary of those recommendations.

The key recommendations for practice development are:

- Children in primary schools should be taught “keeping safe” messages using an integrated approach, which imparts knowledge, promotes understanding and fosters skills to enable children to keep themselves safe from all forms of maltreatment, including bullying, child abuse and domestic abuse.
- The Department of Education should develop a comprehensive package of training, development and support for the whole-school community, including school leaders, teachers, support staff and parents to enable them to teach “keeping safe” messages through preventative education, and embed preventative education within the curriculum and ethos of the school.
- The Department of Education should provide a range of evidence-informed resources, using the most effective approaches and methodologies to equip school staff and parents to deliver “keeping safe” messages to children attending primary and special schools. Teachers should be involved in the planning and development of these resource materials.
- Programme implementation should take account of variations that exists across the primary school sector, recognising that a discrete approach to the development and implementation of preventative education may be required to meet the particular needs of the special school sector.
- Systems and processes should be established to monitor the implementation of preventative education, evaluate its effectiveness and disseminate best practice.

The key recommendations for policy development are:

- Relevant government departments and organisations should adopt a shared commitment to developing a programme of preventative education in primary schools within a wider public health approach to “keeping children” safe. This could usefully be reflected in the Children’s Strategy¹ action plan.
- The Department of Education should draw on best practice evidence to lead this strategic development across primary and special school sectors, in conjunction with parents, and other statutory and voluntary partners.
- The Safeguarding Board for Northern Ireland (SBNI) should consider the development and implementation of a public education campaign that promotes the primary and secondary prevention benefits of preventative education.
- Social services departments and other relevant voluntary agencies should be appropriately resourced to respond effectively to children’s disclosures, and to support these children and their families in both the short and longer term.

¹ *Our children and young people – our pledge. A ten year strategy for children and young people in Northern Ireland 2006–2016*. Belfast: Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister (OFMDFM)

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