

Mimbre safeguarding and child protection policy

February 2024

All Mimbre staff should read pages 1 – 7 of this policy. Further information can be found in the appendices.

Statement and aims

Everyone who participates in Mimbre Youth Programme is entitled to do so in an enjoyable and safe environment.

Mimbre have a moral and legal obligation, when given responsibility for young people, to ensure that teachers, staff, volunteers and chaperones provide them with the highest possible standard of care.

All children have a right to protection, and the needs of disabled children and others who may be particularly vulnerable must be taken into account.

Mimbre will ensure the safety and protection of all children involved in our work through adhering to the guidelines below and by promoting good practice.

A child is any person under the age of 18 (The Children Act 1989).

The aim of this policy is to:

- Provide young people with appropriate safety and protection while in the care of Mimbre
- Allow all staff to make informed and confident responses to specific child protection issues.

Mimbre thank NSPCC Child Protection in Sport Unit (CPSU), Sport England, Gorilla Circus and Immediate Theatre for their support in creating this policy.

Promoting good practice

Child abuse, particularly sexual abuse, can arouse strong emotions in those facing such a situation. It is important to understand these feelings and not allow them to interfere with your judgement about the appropriate action to take.

Abuse can occur within many situations including the home, school and extracurricular activities. Some individuals will actively seek employment or voluntary work with young people in order to harm them. A teacher, chaperone, assistant or volunteer will have regular contact with young people and could be an important link in identifying cases where they need protection. All suspicious cases of poor practice should be reported following the guidelines in this document.

When a child enters MYP having been subjected to child abuse elsewhere, our activities can play a crucial role in improving the child's self-esteem. In such instances MYP must work with the appropriate agencies to ensure the child receives the required support.

Good practice guidelines and Code of Conduct

Everyone should be encouraged to demonstrate exemplary behaviour in order to set good examples of healthy relationships and also in order to protect themselves from false allegations. The following are common sense examples of how to create a positive culture and climate.

Good practice means:

- Always working in an open environment avoiding private or unobserved situations and encouraging open communication.
- Treating all young people/disabled adults equally with respect and dignity.
- Always putting the welfare of each young person first.
- Maintaining a safe and appropriate distance with all participants (for example it is not appropriate for staff or volunteers to have an intimate relationship with a participant or to share a room with them – see below regarding physical contact).
- Building balanced relationships based on mutual trust and empowering children to share in decision making.
- Making MYP activities fun and enjoyable for everyone.
- Teach the participants skills suitable to their individual level and ability and acknowledge each participant's individual achievements and gain, without comparing to others
- Ensuring that if any form of manual/physical support is required, it should be provided openly, only when necessary and with the participants consent. The option of opting out of physical contact and proximity if the child is uncomfortable should always be given.
- Involving parents/carers wherever possible. For example, encouraging them to take responsibility for their children in the changing rooms. If groups have to be supervised in changing rooms, always ensure parents, teachers, chaperones or volunteers work in pairs.
- Giving enthusiastic and constructive feedback rather than negative criticism.
- Recognising the developmental needs and capacity of young people and disabled adults – avoiding excessive training and not pushing them against their will.
- Securing parental consent in writing to act in loco parentis, if the need arises, to administer emergency first aid and/or other medical treatment.
- Keeping a written record of any injury that occurs, along with the details of any treatment given.

Child to adult ratios: 8 children to 1 adult in classes, 4 children to 1 adult for trips.

Practices to be avoided

The following should be avoided except in emergencies or special circumstances. If a case arises where these situations are unavoidable (for example the child sustains an injury and needs to go to hospital, or a parent fails to arrive to pick a child up at the end of a session or a theatre outing or performance project where parents need chaperoning of their kids to and from the venue, to enable their participation), it should be with the full knowledge and consent of at least two of Lina Johansson, Silvia Fratelli, the child's parents or if necessary Executive Director Lissy Lovett, or safeguarding trustee Ria Meera Munshi.

Otherwise, avoid:

- Spending excessive amounts of time alone with children away from others.
- Taking or dropping off a child to and from the activity and home without company.
- Inviting or allowing children to stay with you at your home unsupervised.
- Any written or electronic communication with young people.

The strength of Mimbre's programme is being embedded in the community where our programme takes place. However, this means that some teachers and programme directors might encounter young people from the programme outside class times as their children might be friends with the young people, attend the same school, or live in the same neighbourhood. It is therefore important that Mimbre staff always make a clear distinction between occasions where they interact with the children as a teacher and a representative of Mimbre, and occasions where they interact with the children as a parent, a local community member, or a neighbour.

Practices never to be sanctioned:

The following should never be sanctioned. You should never:

- Engage in rough physical or sexually provocative games, including horseplay.
- Allow or engage in any form of inappropriate touching.
- Allow children to use inappropriate language unchallenged.
- Make sexually suggestive comments to a child, even in fun.
- Reduce a child to tears as a form of control.
- Allow allegations made by a child to go unchallenged, unrecorded or not acted upon.
- Do things of a personal nature for children or disabled adults that they can do for themselves.

NB It may sometimes be necessary for staff or volunteers to do things of a personal nature for children, particularly if they are young or are disabled. These tasks should only be carried out with the full understanding and consent of parents and the young people involved. There is a need to be responsive to a person's reactions. If a person is fully dependent on you, talk with him/her about what you are doing and give choices where possible. This is particularly so if you are involved in any dressing or undressing of outer clothing, or where there is physical contact, lifting or assisting a child to carry out particular activities. Avoid taking on the responsibility for tasks for which you are not appropriately trained.

Incidents that must be reported/recorded

If any of the following occur you should report this immediately to another colleague and record the incident on the incident form provided with the register (appendix 4 on this policy). You should also ensure the parents/carers of the child are informed:

- If a young person hurts themselves in class or a teacher accidentally hurts a young person
- If they seem unusually distressed in any manner or their behaviour drastically changes in a short period of time
- If a young person discloses any personal information that raises safeguarding concerns
- If a young person misunderstands or misinterprets something you have done.

Incident forms will be kept securely in the Mimbre office for 7 years. If an injury in class, the teacher or teaching assistant will follow up with parents as appropriate to check-in about recovery.

Photography, Filming and Social Media

Check with Lina, Silvia, Natasha or Emma which young people have given consent to be photographed or filmed and to have their images/videos to be shared. If using a personal camera, delete the photos/videos as soon as you have sent them to the Mimbre office. Mimbre does not use children's names in photograph captions (other than for accreditation).

When the kids are presenting work at informal sharings with parents/carers, if not all kids have photo consent, we ask the audience to not share any photos taken on social media platforms. If performing in public context we inform parents that we can't control what footage the general public takes, but make sure that the young people are not presented in any manner that can be sexualised or misconstrued and that no individual information is available to link the young people with any footage taken by the public.

The majority of our children are too young to have their own social media presence, but for our older group we regularly discuss the importance of not sharing any footage of themselves which feature other participants without seeking their consent first.

The MYP team will agree on a selection of approved images for publicity and presentation about the company's work with young people that only includes appropriate images where participants/parents have consented to public use of the image.

Whenever possible we also seek the participants individual consent if we are to use their pictures in any marketing context for posters or banners reproduced for public marketing.

There are incidents in the sports and performing arts world, where people have used group activities as an opportunity to take inappropriate photographs or film footage of young and disabled people in vulnerable positions. Any concerns of this nature should be reported immediately to Lina Johansson or other appropriate person.

Recruitment and training

Anyone may have the potential to abuse children in some way and all reasonable steps must be taken to ensure unsuitable people are prevented from working with children.

Recruitment

Pre-selection checks must include the following:

- Consent should be obtained from an applicant to seek information from the Disclosure and Barring Service. NB: a criminal record does not immediately preclude someone from working with children, but it needs to be considered.
- Evidence of identity should be provided (for example passport or driving licence with photo).
- References will be checked, and we will ask if there are any safeguarding concerns. We will also talk to others who have worked with the candidate whether or not they have been given as a reference.
- Gaps in employment, frequent changes in employment or vague statements will be checked, but keeping in mind that there are multiple factors that can affect a person's history.
- We will look at public social media handles and google names, especially to check shared values.
- We will also ask explicitly if there is any reason why the candidate shouldn't work with children.

Training

In addition to pre-selection checks, the safeguarding process includes training after recruitment to help staff and volunteers to:

- Analyse their own practice against established good practice, to set good examples of teaching and working with young people and to ensure their practice is likely to protect them from false allegations.
- Recognise their responsibilities and report any concerns about suspected poor practice or possible abuse.
- Respond to concerns expressed by a child or young person.
- Work safely and effectively with children.

In the first instance this training will be carried out by Lina Johansson, Designated Safeguarding Officer, but will be refreshed at intervals with outside training.

MYP requires:

- Anyone connected to MYP to receive information outlining good practice and informing them about what to do if they have concerns about the behaviour of an adult towards a young person.
- Relevant personnel to undergo first aid training (where necessary).

A note on PREVENT training: the majority of the young people MYP works with are 5-10, so PREVENT training is not a priority for the organisation. If there are any concerns in this area, MYP will turn to those in the sector with more experience.

Responding to allegations or suspicions of abuse

It is not the responsibility of anyone working with MYP, in a paid or unpaid capacity, to decide whether or not child abuse has taken place. However, there is a responsibility to act on any concerns through contact with the appropriate authorities. Non-action is not an option in child protection. You must act immediately: DO NOT assume someone else will.

Please pass information to the Designated Safeguarding Officer without delay or an alternative colleague.

Whistleblowing: MYP assures that it will fully support and protect anyone who in good faith reports their concern that a colleague is, or may be, abusing a child.

If a young person says or indicates that they are being abused, you should:

- **stay calm** so as not to frighten the young person
- **reassure** the child that they are not to blame and that it was right to tell
- **listen** to the child, showing that you are taking them seriously
- **keep questions to a minimum** so that there is a clear and accurate understanding of what has been said. The law is very strict and child abuse cases have been dismissed where it is felt that the child has been led or words and ideas have been suggested during questioning. Only ask questions to clarify.
- **inform** the child that you must inform other people about what they have told you. Tell the child this is to help stop the abuse.
- **safety of the child** is paramount. If the child needs urgent medical attention call an ambulance, inform the doctors of the concern and ensure they are made aware that this is a child protection issue
- **record** all information
- **report** the incident to the Designated Safeguarding Officer, Lina

If Lina is not available, or the concern is about Lina then report it to Silvia, Lissy, or Ria on Mimbre's board.

If reporting to Mimbre does not seem possible, then either speak directly to Hackney MASH, the NSPCC Child Protection Helpline or Childline (numbers all below).

Beyond that report, please keep any allegations confidential and shared on a need-to-know basis only.

[Additionally, if a person is caring for a young person under 16 (or under 18 if disabled) for more than 28 days and they are not a near relative and do not have parental responsibility for the child, then they have to inform Social Services. It is up to Social Services to assess whether or not it is safe for the child to reside with the carer. If you have any concerns about a young person who is residing with someone without official parental responsibility, let Lina know.]

Where there is a complaint against a member of staff there may be three types of investigation:

- a criminal investigation
- a child protection investigation
- a disciplinary or misconduct investigation.

The results of the police and child protection investigation may well influence the disciplinary investigation, but not necessarily. The routes each investigation might take are included in the appendices below.

Support to deal with the aftermath of abuse

- Consideration will be given to the kind of support that children, parents and members of staff may need. Use of helplines, support groups and open meetings will maintain an open culture and help the healing process. The British Association for Counselling Directory is available from The British Association for Counselling, 1 Regent Place, Rugby CV21 2PJ, Tel: 01788 550899, Fax: 01788 562189, Email: bac@bacp.co.uk, Internet: www.bacp.co.uk
- Consideration will be given to what kind of support may be appropriate for the alleged perpetrator.

Bullying

If bullying is suspected, the same procedure should be followed as set out in 'Responding to suspicions or allegations' above.

Action to help the victim and prevent bullying:

- Take all signs of bullying very seriously.
- Encourage all children to speak and share their concerns (It is believed that up to 12 children per year die by suicide because of bullying, so if anyone talks about or threatens suicide, seek professional help immediately). Help the victim to speak out and tell the person in charge or someone in authority.
- Investigate all allegations and take action to ensure the victim is safe. Speak with the victim and the bully(ies) separately.
- Reassure the victim that you can be trusted and will help them, although you cannot promise to tell no one else.
- Keep records of what is said (what happened, by whom, when).
- Report any concerns to the Designated Safeguarding Officer.

Action towards the bully(ies):

- Talk with the bully(ies), explain the situation, and try to get the bully(ies) to understand the consequences of their behaviour. Seek an apology to the victim(s).
- Inform the bully(ies)'s parents.
- Insist on the return of 'borrowed' items and that the bully(ies) compensate the victim.
- Provide support for the victim's teacher.
- Impose sanctions as necessary – for example removing the bully from classes
- Encourage and support the bully(ies) to change behaviour.
- Hold meetings with the families to report on progress.
- Inform all organisation members of action taken.
- Keep a written record of action taken.

Contacts

Designated Safeguarding Officer:

Lina Johansson, Joint Artistic Director

lina@mimbre.co.uk

020 7613 1068 (office)

0784 545 0117 (mobile)

Alternative senior management

Silvia Fratelli: silvia@mimbre.co.uk / 07814 650917

Lissy Lovett: lissy@mimbre.co.uk / 07931 353531

Mimbre Safeguarding Trustee

Ria Meera Munshi

safeguarding@mimbre.co.uk

External Advisor

Jo Carter – Immediate Theatre

jo@immediate-theatre.com / 020 7682 3031

Hackney MASH (multi action safeguarding hub)

0208 3565500 / MASH@hackney.gov.uk

0208 3562710 / Outside 9am-5pm contact the Emergency Duty Team

Hackney Local Authority Designated Officer (LADO) Contact & Referral

All contact and referrals to the Hackney LADO need to be made via <https://hackney.gov.uk/lado>

Police: 999

NSPCC Child Protection Helpline: 0808 800 5000

Childline: 0800 1111

If there are concerns that a young person is becoming radicalised or groomed into violent extremism, please contact one of the following:

Lisa Aldridge, Service Manager, **Safeguarding and Reviewing Team:**

Lisa.Aldridge@hackney.gov.uk or 020 8356 6164.

Brendan Finegan, Service Manager, **Youth Justice:**

Brendan.Finegan@hackney.gov.uk or 020 8356 1107.

Hackney Ark

Centre for children and young people with disability and special educational needs

Tel: 020 7014 7000

<https://www.homerton.nhs.uk/hackney-ark/>

See also

- Mimbre's code of conduct
- Mimbre's anti-bullying and harassment policy
- The additional resources below

Appendices

Appendix 1: Possible actions following an allegation or report

1. Concerns about poor practice:

- If, following consideration, the allegation is clearly about poor practice, the Designated Safeguarding Officer, Lina Johansson, will deal with it as a misconduct issue.
- If the allegation is about poor practice by Lina Johansson, or if the matter has been handled inadequately and concerns remain, it should be reported to Silvia Fratelli, Lissy Lovett or safeguarding trustees Ria Meera Munshi and Karen Petersen who will decide how to deal with the allegation and whether or not to initiate disciplinary proceedings.

2. Concerns about suspected abuse:

- Any suspicion that a child has been abused by either a member of staff or a volunteer should be reported to Lina Johansson, who will take such steps as considered necessary to ensure the safety of the child in question and any other child who may be at risk.
- Lina Johansson will refer the allegation to the social services department which may involve the police, or go directly to the police if out-of-hours.
- The parents or carers of the child will be contacted as soon as possible following advice from the social services department.
- As above if the concern is about Lina Johansson, then Lissy Lovett, Silvia Fratelli or Ria Meera Munshi should be contacted.

Confidentiality

Every effort should be made to ensure that confidentiality is maintained for all concerned. Information should be handled and disseminated on a need-to-know basis only.

This includes the following people:

- the Designated Safeguarding Officer
- the parents of the person who is alleged to have been abused
- the person making the allegation
- social services/police
- the alleged abuser (and parents if the alleged abuser is a child).

Seek social services advice on who should approach the alleged abuser.

Internal enquiries and suspension

- Lina Johansson, the Designated Safeguarding Officer, will make an immediate decision about whether any individual accused of abuse should be temporarily suspended pending further police and social services inquiries.
- Irrespective of the findings of the social services or police inquiries MYP along with its board of trustees will assess all individual cases to decide whether a member of staff or volunteer can be reinstated and how this can be sensitively handled. This may be a difficult decision, particularly where there is insufficient evidence to uphold any action by the police. In such cases, MYP must reach a decision based upon the available information, which could suggest that on a balance of probability, it is more likely than not that the allegation is true. The welfare of the child should remain of paramount importance throughout. When in doubt, the suspension will be upheld.

Allegations of previous abuse

Allegations of abuse may be made some time after the event (for example by an adult who was abused as a child or by a member of staff who is still currently working with children).

Where such an allegation is made, MYP will follow the procedures as detailed above and report the matter to the social services or the police. This is because other children, either within or outside circus, dance or theatre, may be at risk from this person. Anyone who has a previous criminal conviction for offences related to abuse is automatically excluded from working with children. This is reinforced by the details of the Protection of Children Act 1999.

3. Concerns outside the MYP environment (eg a parent or carer):

- Report your concerns to the Designated Safeguarding Officer, Lina Johansson, who should contact social services or the police as soon as possible.
- See 4. below for the information social services or the police will need.
- If the DSO is not available, the person being told of or discovering the abuse should contact social services or the police immediately.
- Social services and the Designated Safeguarding Officer will decide how to involve the parents/carers.
- Maintain confidentiality on a need-to-know basis only.
- See 4. below regarding information needed for social services.

4. Information for social services or the police about suspected abuse:

To ensure that this information is as helpful as possible, a detailed record should always be made at the time of the disclosure/concern, which should include the following:

- The child's name, age and date of birth of the child.
- The child's home address and telephone number.
- Whether or not the person making the report is expressing their own concerns or those of someone else.
- The nature of the allegation. Include dates, times, any special factors and other relevant information.
- Make a clear distinction between what is fact, opinion or hearsay.
- A description of any visible bruising or other injuries. Also any indirect signs, such as behavioural changes.
- Details of witnesses to the incidents.
- The child's account, if it can be given, of what has happened and how any bruising or other injuries occurred.
- Have the parents been contacted?
- If so, what has been said?
- Has anyone else been consulted? If so, record details.
- If the child was not the person who reported the incident, has the child been spoken to? If so, what was said?
- Has anyone been alleged to be the abuser? Record details.
- Where possible referral to the police or social services should be confirmed in writing within 24 hours and the name of the contact who took the referral should be recorded.

Information should be stored in a secure place with limited access to designated people, in line with data protection laws.

Media

In the unlikely event that the media/press wish to report on an incident, Lina, Silvia, Lissy and board members will decide together who will respond and how. Professional advice will be taken if necessary and MYP will always comply with the Police and Social Care Services advice.

Appendix 2: monitoring and review

This policy was written in March 2023, drawing on Mimbre's previous safeguarding policy and Sports England's safeguarding policy. It was updated in February 2024 with minor updates.

It will be reviewed annually and fully updated every three years or whenever there is a major change in the organisation or in relevant legislation. Lina Johansson and Lissy Lovett are responsible for updating it.

DBS checks are done every three years and a record is kept. Mimbre encourage everyone to sign up to the DBS update service.

Risk assessments are reviewed at least annually and for each trip/project.

Appendix 3: resources and background

- [City of London & Hackney Safeguarding Children Partnership](#)
- [NSPCC Child Protection in Sport Unit](#)
- [The Children Act 2004](#)
- [Hackney Child Wellbeing Framework](#)
- [Working Together to Safeguard Children 2018](#)
- [Hackney Children and Families](#)
- [London Borough of Hackney Refreshed Children's Action Plan 2022](#)
- [Young Hackney](#)
- <https://hackney.gov.uk/child-protection>
- <https://hackney.gov.uk/children-and-families/#rights>

Appendix 4: MIMBRE YOUTH CHILD PROTECTION & INCIDENT FORM

Name of the child:

Parent or carer's details:

Child's address:

Tel number:

What is said to have happened or what was seen? What was said by those involved?

Is there any actual evidence e.g. bruises, bleeding, change in behaviour?

When did it occur?

Was anyone else involved or concerned?

Who else was present in class when the incident took place?

Action taken (i.e. icing, first aid, advice given):

Who has been told about it?

Follow up?

Your full name, contact number and signature:

Date:

Appendix 5: Defining child abuse

Introduction

Child abuse is any form of physical, emotional, or sexual mistreatment or lack of care that leads to injury or harm, it commonly occurs within a relationship of trust or responsibility and is an abuse of power or a breach of trust. Abuse can happen to a young person regardless of their age, gender, race or ability. The effects can be so damaging that if not treated, it may follow the individual into adulthood.

There are four main types of abuse: **physical abuse, sexual abuse, emotional abuse, and neglect**. The abuser may be a family member, someone the young person encounters in residential care or in the community, including sports and leisure activities. Any individual may abuse or neglect a young person directly, or may be responsible for abuse because they fail to prevent another person harming the young person.

Young people with disabilities

Young people with disabilities may be at increased risk of abuse through various factors such as stereotyping, prejudice, discrimination, isolation and a powerlessness to protect themselves or adequately communicate that abuse had occurred.

The reasons why disabled children are more vulnerable to abuse are:

- Many disabled children are at an increased likelihood of being socially isolated with fewer outside contacts than non-disabled children
- Their dependency on parents and carers for practical assistance in daily living, including intimate personal care, increases their risk of exposure to abusive behaviour
- They have an impaired capacity to resist or avoid abuse
- They may have speech, language and communication needs which may make it difficult to tell others what is happening
- They often do not have access to someone they can trust to disclose that they have been abused
- They are especially vulnerable to bullying and intimidation
- Looked after disabled children are not only vulnerable to the same factors that exist for all children living away from home, but are particularly susceptible to possible abuse because of their additional dependency on residential and hospital staff for day to day physical care needs.

Disabled children have the same human rights as non-disabled children to be protected from harm and abuse. Disabled children and young people should be seen as children first. Having a disability should not and must not mask or deter an appropriate enquiry where there are child protection concerns.

Safeguarding disabled children's welfare is everybody's responsibility, and given that we know that disabled children are more vulnerable to abuse than non-disabled children, awareness about safeguarding disabled children and what constitutes best practice, is essential.

We must be aware that the belief that disabled children are not abused or beliefs that minimise the impact of abuse on disabled children can lead to the denial of, or failure to report abuse or neglect.

Additional resources and time may need to be allocated, if an investigation of potential or alleged abuse is to be meaningful. This is a basic premise and should not be ignored at any stage of the safeguarding process.

Types of abuse

Abuse and neglect are forms of maltreatment of a child or young person. Somebody may abuse or neglect a child by inflicting harm, or by failing to act to prevent harm. Children may be abused in a family or in an institutional or

community setting, by those known to them or, more rarely, by a stranger. They may be abused by an adult or adults, or another child or children.

All staff and volunteers should be aware that the main categories of abuse are:

- **Physical Abuse:** where adults physically hurt, or injure a young person e.g. hitting, shaking, throwing, poisoning, burning, biting, scalding, suffocating, drowning. Giving young people alcohol or inappropriate drugs would also constitute child abuse.

This category of abuse can also include when a parent/carer reports non-existent symptoms or illness deliberately causes ill health in a young person they are looking after. This is called Munchausen's syndrome by proxy.

In a sports situation, physical abuse may occur when the nature and intensity of training disregard the capacity of the child's immature and growing body.

- **Emotional Abuse:** the persistent emotional ill treatment of a young person, likely to cause severe and lasting adverse effects on the child's emotional development. It may involve telling a young person they are useless, worthless, unloved, inadequate or valued in terms of only meeting the needs of another person. It may feature expectations of young people that are not appropriate to their age or development. It may cause a young person to be frightened or in danger by being constantly shouted at, threatened or taunted which may make the young person frightened or withdrawn.

Ill treatment of children, whatever form it takes, will always feature a degree of emotional abuse.

Emotional abuse in sport may occur when the young person is constantly criticised, given negative feedback, expected to perform at levels that are above their capability. Other forms of emotional abuse could take the form of name calling and bullying.

- **Neglect** occurs when an adult fails to meet the young person's basic physical and/or psychological needs, to an extent that is likely to result in serious impairment of the child's health or development. For example, failing to provide adequate food, shelter and clothing, failing to protect from physical harm or danger, or failing to ensure access to appropriate medical care or treatment.

Refusal to give love, affection and attention can also be a form of neglect.

Neglect in sport could occur when a coach does not keep the young person safe, or exposing them to undue cold/heat or unnecessary risk of injury.

- **Sexual Abuse** occurs when adults (male and female) use children to meet their own sexual desires. This could include full sexual intercourse, masturbation, oral sex, anal intercourse and fondling. Showing young people pornography or talking to them in a sexually explicit manner are also forms of sexual abuse.

Indicators of abuse

Even for those experienced in working with child abuse, it is not always easy to recognise a situation where abuse may occur or has already taken place. Most people are not experts in such recognition, but indications that a child is being abused may include one or more of the following:

- Unexplained or suspicious injuries such as bruising, cuts or burns, particularly if situated on a part of the body not normally prone to such injuries
- An injury for which an explanation seems inconsistent
- The young person describes what appears to be an abusive act involving them
- Another young person or adult expresses concern about the welfare of a young person
- Unexplained changes in a young person's behaviour e.g. becoming very upset, quiet, withdrawn or displaying sudden outbursts of temper
- Inappropriate sexual awareness
- Engaging in sexually explicit behaviour

- Distrust of adults, particularly those whom a close relationship would normally be expected
- Difficulty in making friends
- Being prevented from socialising with others
- Displaying variations in eating patterns including over eating or loss of appetite
- Losing weight for no apparent reason
- Becoming increasingly dirty or unkempt

While at times, it is immediately apparent that a non-disabled child has suffered significant harm, it is not always so and lengthy enquiries are often necessary.

Where there are safeguarding concerns about a disabled child, there is a need for greater awareness of the possible indicators of abuse and/or neglect, as the situation is often more complex. However, it is crucial when considering whether a disabled child has been abused and/or neglected that the disability does not mask or deter an appropriate investigation of child protection concerns. Any such concerns for the safety and welfare of a disabled child should be acted upon in the same way as that for a non-disabled child.

When undertaking an assessment (and considering whether significant harm might be indicated) professionals should always take into account the nature of the child's disability.

The following are some indicators of possible abuse or neglect for disabled children:

- A bruise in a site that might not be of concern on an ambulant child, such as the shin, might be of concern on a non-mobile child
- Unwillingness to try to learn a child's means of communication
- Ill-fitting equipment e.g. callipers, sleep boards, inappropriate splinting; misappropriation of a child's finances
- Not getting enough help with feeding leading to malnourishment
- Poor toileting arrangements
- Lack of stimulation
- Unjustified and/or excessive use of restraint
- Rough handling, extreme behaviour modification e.g. deprivation of liquid, medication, food or clothing
- Invasive procedures which are unnecessary or are carried out against the child's will

It must be recognised that the above lists are not exhaustive, but also that the presence of one or more of the indications is not proof that abuse is taking place.