

## Features

# Safeguarding in 2024: Part 1, Identifying new priorities

30 January [Rachel Buckler](#)

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In the first of a four-part series, Rachel Buckler, a trainer and consultant specialising in safeguarding, looks at ways to strengthen safe practices in the early years workforce.



Illustration: Amanda Hutt

Reflecting upon safeguarding and child protection contexts this past year has presented a range of emerging themes. While challenges concerning risks to children prevail, inconsistent or poor engagement between early years leaders and social care remains a key feature. We have also seen an increasing amount of identified risks to children from within the workforce and a growing number of incidents which have resulted in child deaths or serious injury.

Safeguarding conversations and discussions taking place currently seem to be dominated by a number of significant and repetitive themes:

- Weaknesses in safer recruitment processes.
- Poor staff induction and training.
- Deficits in workforce experience, knowledge of safeguarding and safe practices and what it means to keep children safe.
- Staff ratios and poor deployment.
- A failure to fulfil adequate processes that determine ongoing suitability of staff and a lack of understanding about transferable risk when children are unsafe because of adults working with them.
- Weak leadership and oversight of staff performance management.

It is important to recognise the rarity of these areas standing alone or occurring in isolation. This is not just because they are interlinked, rather because they reflect a poor culture that lacks a child-centred perspective.

### **Stories that have recently dominated the sector**

Headlines reported in the press where children have died or been seriously harmed while in the care of early years providers have been startling recently. Processes that establish the facts behind such headlines can take time. Criminal investigations, and reviews, are often a drawn-out process.

As a sector we sense the horror of the likelihood of accidents occurring in our own settings and reflect upon our own safe practices. Proactive leaders revisit systems and procedures that protect children from harm and make sure that everyone works together to respond safely and appropriately for all children in their care.

Some of the settings referenced in the press of late are no longer open. This makes it difficult to ascertain facts and details that have the potential to inform learning to prevent similar tragedies from reoccurring. Regulatory activity in relation to some settings where such tragedies have occurred does, however, give some insight. Ofsted, having served a welfare requirement notice to one nursery, issued a compliance action report. The report called for clarity and actions in relation to the following:

- How leaders and staff will be trained to understand safeguarding policies and procedures, especially how they identify and respond to inappropriate behaviours by staff working with children.
- How they will put systems in place to determine staff suitability to work with children.
- Considerations regarding medication that staff take and how these impact upon their ability to care for children.
- How induction is used to secure an understanding of procedures involving safeguarding, child protection and health and safety matters.
- Training for staff so they can take appropriate action if a child becomes ill.
- Ensuring that risk assessment informs staff practice so that premises are safe and fit for purpose.

### **What has the sector learnt from published case reviews?**

Learning from a range of historic case reviews contextualises physical harms because of serious neglect, malpractice and sexual abuse. I have drawn upon five main themes identified and suggested some reflective aspects of safe practice for the consideration of leaders and managers.

#### **1. A lack of understanding about risks for young children**

- Do all staff explicitly understand risks, given the ages and developmental stages of the children they work with? Are these explored in staff inductions, supervisions and training?
- How do staff implement safe practices and follow procedures for all children?
- How often are risk assessment and health-and-safety-themed topics discussed in team meetings?

#### **2. Poor, or a lack of, supervision of children**

- Do all staff understand the importance of being vigilant, especially when risks are more likely to occur, such as mealtimes?
- Are children always accounted for? How do we apply the 'within sight or hearing' expectation of the EYFS (2024)?
- How is dynamic risk assessed and are staff responsive to ongoing and new or emerging risks?
- How do we apply ratios and how effective is staff deployment to ensure adequate supervision of children?

#### **3. Unsafe environments**

- Is everyone aware of areas in the setting that present high or frequent risks?
- How do you communicate risk assessment processes and procedures both inside and outside of your building?
- How is 'safe sleep' implemented?
- How do you manage risks brought into the setting as and when they occur?

#### **4. Abuse or maltreatment by staff**

- Are safer recruitment procedures adhered to?
- How effective are systems that determine the ongoing suitability of staff?
- How conducive is the setting environment towards preventing incidents of abuse from occurring?
- How do managers use staff supervisions to scrutinise adults' practice and behaviours?
- Are all staff, students and volunteers confident and empowered to know how and when to whistle-blow?

## 5. Unsafe cultures

1. Do all those working in the setting take personal responsibility for assessing and managing risk?
2. Are all policies and procedures that address children's wellbeing and safety effective and adhered to consistently?
3. Do leaders and managers model safe practices?
4. Do teams work together to ensure children are always safe?
5. How do leaders and managers prioritise staff CPD, and how is this used effectively and appropriately?
6. How do leaders and managers support staff's mental health and wellbeing?

### Supporting staff mental wellbeing while ensuring children's safety

The emphasis on staff wellbeing in recent years is a welcome and necessary development. The Mental Health Foundation states on its website that '1 in 6.8 people experience mental health problems in the workplace'.

Also, 'women in full-time employment are nearly twice as likely to have a common mental health problem as full-time employed men'. In a workforce which is predominantly female, this gives the early years sector something to consider.

We know that mental health can affect an individual's ability to perform well, or indeed safely, in their job, and getting the right balance between supporting staff and meeting children's needs can sometimes be difficult.

Both can be achieved, but it is important to remain single-minded, ensuring early years provision delivers child-centred outcomes as its primary objective.

### CASE STUDY: Nicole Politis, owner director, Portico Day Nurseries

'Developing staff wellbeing in all our nurseries has been a key theme for many years. Our open-door policy means we are able to speak with those who may be struggling with any personal difficulties or problems outside of work.

Managers make sure that they speak to team members every day. We actively find ways to find out if staff are struggling with their mental health.

'We have a specific policy stating our commitment to supporting staff wellbeing in the business and what this looks like in practice.

'We send a questionnaire out each term to check in with staff and we offer information and signpost people to places and organisations that specialise in mental health support. This includes counselling services. Staff supervision is utilised to identify and support individuals, and those needing focused support will receive additional chats and supervision.

'We know that there is a fine balance between meeting the needs of staff and ensuring high standards of care for children. We have learned to recognise the fine line and differences relating to someone who is fit to work and someone who isn't. Where younger staff are involved, we have often spoken to family members with their permission for additional support. Where the

ongoing suitability of staff is a concern, we are clear about the things that we believe will compromise their ability to care for children.

‘We use observations of staff and their engagements with children and foster a culture of openness and honesty. Sometimes staff are not always forthcoming with information and often lack understanding about what may affect their working with children. This can be problematic.’

*Rachel Buckler's book Developing Child Centred Practice for Safeguarding and Child Protection. Strategies for Every Early Years Setting (2023) is published by Routledge.*

REFERENCES

- DfE (2024) EYFS statutory framework for group and school-based providers: <https://bit.ly/3TSXjCT>
- Mental Health Foundation: <https://www.mentalhealth.org.uk>

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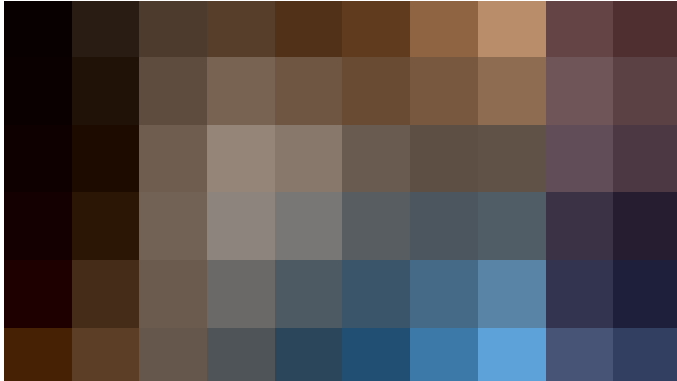
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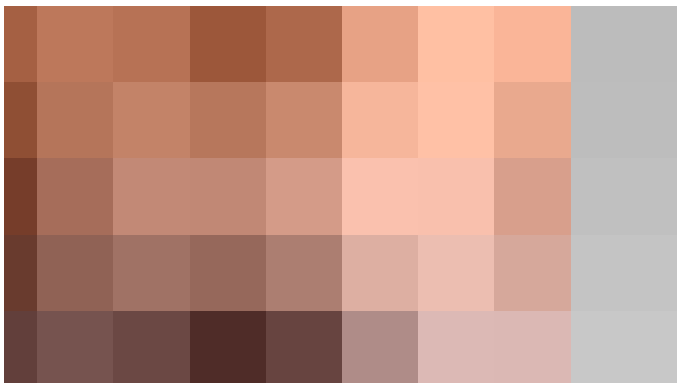
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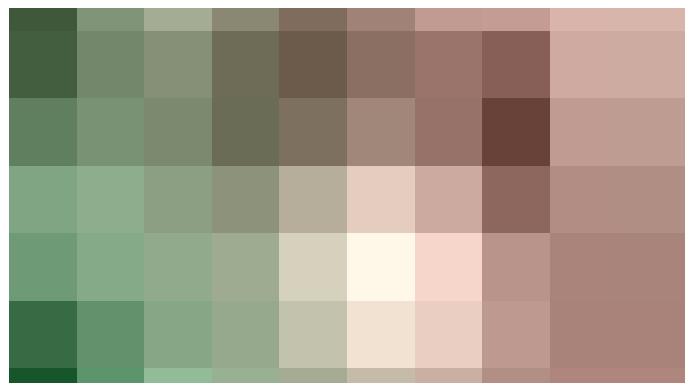
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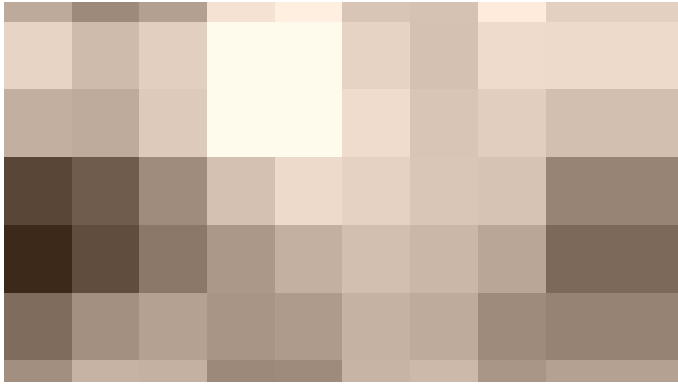
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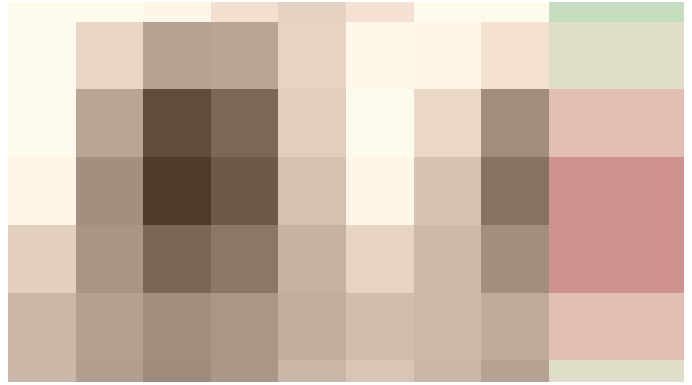
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