

Keeping Children Safe

A standards-based approach to child protection

Child abuse (physical, sexual, emotional/psychological and neglect) is a serious violation of a child's right and often has long-lasting consequences on the emotional and physical development of the child, and at times even results in death.¹ Violence against infants and younger children is a major risk factor for psychiatric disorders and suicide, and can lead to depression, anxiety disorders, smoking, alcohol and drug abuse, aggression and violence towards others, risky sexual behaviours and post-traumatic stress disorders. Preventing violence against children therefore contributes to preventing a broad range of non-communicable diseases (WHO and ICSPAN 2006).

Abuse of children occurs on a staggering scale across the world. A lot more could be done to prevent this. Anyone who comes into contact with children has a responsibility to keep them safe and promote their well-being; however, at home, at school, in the community and within agencies, adults who are supposed to protect and care for children also form a potential risk to children. Working with children can give adults who seek to harm them the power, status and opportunity to abuse their position of trust. And unfortunately this does happen. Agencies have a special responsibility to make their operations safe for the children with whom they are in contact.

Many aid and development agencies that have contact with children have tried to put measures in place to keep the children safe from harm. Yet a lot of organisations struggle with defining adequate policies and systems to prevent child abuse within their organisations and beyond; to equip their staff with the skills to recognise and respond to issues of child abuse; and to make their agencies 'child safe'. Many organisations face additional challenges of addressing child protection in environments where national and/or local protection systems are weak,

where emergencies have made children particularly vulnerable to abuse and exploitation, and where there is little common understanding of child protection issues and standards of practice.

In recognition of these challenges and as a response to them, several international aid and development agencies (mainly based in Europe), together with the UK National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children (NSPCC), have worked together since 2001 to develop a standards-based approach to child protection. They form the Keeping Children Safe Coalition, with the goal to increase the safeguards offered to children through improved child protection policies and practice within agencies and authorities which work with children.

In 2006 the Coalition produced a high-quality child protection training and implementation toolkit. The toolkit is based around agreed standards that require staff and other agency representatives to receive an appropriate level of training, information and support to fulfil their roles and responsibilities to protect children. It is a comprehensive pack of materials for people working in child protection across the world. Comprising a full training pack with DVD and CD-ROM, the toolkit aims to support agencies at international, national and local levels to put these standards into practice (see box 1 and 2). The toolkit has been distributed globally and has been well received and endorsed by the UN Study on Violence Against Children.

Though no law or policy will fully protect children from abuse, these standards, simple policies and procedures, when put in place, will considerably strengthen child protection. In addition, adapting the standards globally will contribute to developing a common understanding of child protection issues, while also increasing the accountability of

organisations working, directly or indirectly, with and for children.

The Keeping Children Safe Coalition is now about to embark on the next phase of its work (2007–2009, funded by the Oak Foundation), with the aim to roll out child protection training globally through the establishment of protection networks with a range of target agencies working principally in developing countries, and to strengthen the global coordinating role of the Coalition. The first region where such a network will be set up is West Africa, and the first round of training in the region (in seven selected countries) has been tentatively scheduled for early February 2008. It will be conducted in English and French. The ultimate goal is that participating agencies will take the lead in adopting (and adapting to their context as they see fit) the Keeping Children

Safe child protection standards, which in turn will create safer organisations for children.

References

WHO (2006). *Global Estimates of Health Consequences due to Violence against Children*. Background paper for the United Nations Study on Violence against Children. Geneva: World Health Organization.

WHO and ICSPAN (2006). *Preventing Child Maltreatment: A Guide to Taking Action and Generating Evidence*. World Health Organization and International Society for Prevention of Child Abuse and Neglect.

Note

1 The World Health Organization (WHO) estimated, through the use of limited country-level data, that almost 53,000 children died worldwide in 2002 as a result of homicide (WHO 2006).

Box 1: The toolkit

'Keeping Children Safe: A Toolkit for Child Protection' helps agencies to:

- recruit staff safely;
- strengthen policies and procedures that prevent abuse within agencies – help them deter, detect and respond to abuse;
- increase staff confidence to deal with child abuse concerns when they arise;
- create child-safe environments;
- keep children safe beyond agency boundaries;
- ensure increased protection for children around the world;
- integrate child protection into all areas of operation.

The toolkit can be downloaded from www.keepingchildrensafe.org.uk or ordered from publications@keepingchildrensafe.org.uk.

Materials are available in English only, but a full French translation will be available in January 2008.

Box 2: The standards

Standard 1

A written policy on keeping children safe

Standard 2

Putting the policy into practice

Standard 3

Preventing harm to children

Standard 4

Written guidelines on behaviour towards children

Standard 5

Meeting the standards in different locations

Standard 6

Equal rights of all children to protection

Standard 7

Communicating the 'keep children safe' message

Standard 8

Education and training for keeping children safe

Standard 9

Access to advice and support

Standard 10

Implementation and monitoring of the standards

Standard 11

Working with partners to meet the standard