

'Someone to talk to': safeguarding in schools through everyday contact

Michelle Lefevre

University of Sussex

The understanding and identification of child protection needs among young people in their secondary school years has been well documented as a matter for concern. Young people are often unable to let others know of the harm or risks they are facing and it is essential that those around them not only create a safe environment which encourages the confiding of concerns but are in a position to identify where young people's demeanour or behaviour is indicative of things awry in their lives. The secondary school environment is uniquely well placed to assist in both respects due to the everyday contact and on-going relationships staff have with their students.

This paper draws on findings from a study funded by the Office for the Children's Commissioner in England which researched systems and policies developed by secondary schools to provide effective support and protection to their students. Six schools within four contrasting local authorities were selected as case studies of well-developed practice. Data collection included documentary analysis, focus groups with students and interviews with local authority managers, school staff, and school governors.

A key finding, emphasised by both staff and students, was the importance of creating a school environment where young people feel comfortable to reveal their safeguarding concerns – either to staff or to fellow students – and where students are known well enough for undisclosed concerns to be recognised by adults. Systems which enable staff to have regular formal and informal contact with students facilitate this. Protection needs can be obscured if staff focus on presenting problems, for example with behaviour or school attendance, without considering the underlying issues which might be provoking this. Schools must build students' awareness of, and language for talking about, child protection risks. Student-centred and participatory approaches are central to success.

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