DEFINITIONS AND INDICATORS OF ABUSE

Abuse

Abuse is a form of maltreatment of a child. 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 strangers.

Abuse can take place wholly online, or technology/AI may be used to facilitate offline abuse. Children may be abused by an adult or adults or by another child or children (Child-on-Child Abuse).

The Four Main Categories of Abuse

1. Neglect

Neglect is the persistent failure to meet a child's basic physical and/or psychological needs, likely to result in the serious impairment of the child's health or development. Neglect may occur during pregnancy (e.g., as a result of maternal substance abuse). Once a child is born, neglect may involve a parent or carer failing to:

- Provide adequate food, clothing and shelter (including exclusion from home or abandonment).
- Protect a child from physical and emotional harm or danger.
- Ensure adequate supervision (including the use of inadequate caregivers).
- Ensure access to appropriate medical care or treatment.
- Respond to or nurture a child's basic emotional needs.

Indicators of Neglect: *(Note: Not a checklist)*

- Constant hunger, stealing, scavenging or hoarding food.
- Frequent tiredness, listlessness or poor concentration.
- Frequently dirty, unkempt or poorly/inappropriately clad for the weather.
- Poor school attendance or persistent lateness.
- Untreated illnesses, dental issues or injuries.
- Failure to achieve developmental milestones (e.g., growth, weight, social/intellectual development).
- Unsuitable responsibilities (e.g., age-inappropriate cooking, ironing or sole care of younger siblings).
- Child is regularly left alone, with inappropriate carers, or not collected from school.

2. Physical Abuse

Physical abuse may involve hitting, shaking, throwing, poisoning, burning or scalding, drowning, suffocating or otherwise causing physical harm to a child. Physical harm may also be caused when a parent or carer fabricates the symptoms of, or deliberately induces, illness in a child (Fabricated or Induced Illness).

Indicators of Physical Abuse: *(Note: Not a checklist)*

- Multiple bruises in clusters, of uniform shape, or carrying an imprint (e.g., hand, belt).
- Bite marks or round/unusual burn marks (e.g., back, shoulders, buttocks).
- Injuries inconsistent with the explanation given or changing accounts of how an injury occurred.
- Bald patches or inexplicable covering of limbs in hot weather.
- Symptoms of drug/alcohol intoxication or poisoning.
- Fear of going home, fear of medical help or reluctance to change for PE.
- Inexplicable fear of adults, extreme compliance or aggression/bullying towards others.

3. Sexual Abuse

Sexual abuse involves forcing or enticing a child or young person to take part in sexual activities, not necessarily involving violence, whether or not the child is aware of what is happening.

- **Physical contact:** Includes rape, assault by penetration (e.g., penetration with an object, vagina or anus), or non-penetrative acts (masturbation, kissing, rubbing, touching outside clothing).
- **Non-contact:** Includes forcing children to look at or produce sexual images, watching sexual activities or grooming a child in preparation for abuse.
- **Online & Digital:** Includes creating, sharing or viewing nudes and semi-nudes, as well as AI-generated sexual imagery, deepfakes or digitally altered images.
- **Perpetrators:** Sexual abuse can be committed by adult males, adult females or other children (Child-on-Child Abuse).

Indicators of Sexual Abuse: *(Note: Not a checklist)*

- Sexually explicit play/behaviour or age-inappropriate sexual knowledge.
- Anal or vaginal discharge, soreness, scratching or genital bruising.
- Reluctance to undress for PE or swimming; reluctance to go home.
- Thrush, persistent stomach disorders, eating disorders or self-harm.
- Aggressive sexual behaviour, sexual harassment or touching others inappropriately.
- Regressive behaviour (enuresis, soiling), open/frequent masturbation or severe withdrawal.

4. Emotional Abuse

Emotional abuse is the emotional maltreatment of a child causing severe and adverse effects on their emotional development. It includes conveying to children that they are worthless, unloved or inadequate or deliberately silencing/mocking them. It involves imposing developmentally inappropriate expectations, overprotection or isolation. It also includes witnessing domestic abuse or hearing the ill-treatment of another person.

Indicators of Emotional Abuse: *(Note: Not a checklist)*

- Consistently negative self-descriptions ("stupid", "naughty", "worthless").
- Over-reaction to minor mistakes; sudden speech or sensory disorders (e.g., traumatic mutism).
- Delayed physical, mental or emotional development.
- Neurotic behaviour (rocking, head-banging, tics, twitches, regression).
- Extreme compliance, fear of parents being contacted, running away or self-harm/substance misuse.

Specific & Emerging Safeguarding Concerns

Child Exploitation (CSE & CCE)

Exploitation occurs when an individual or group takes advantage of an imbalance of power to coerce, manipulate or deceive a child into sexual or criminal activity for financial gain, status or through threat of violence.

- **Child Criminal Exploitation (CCE):** Includes County Lines (drug transportation), working in cannabis factories, shoplifting, vehicle crime or forced violence/carrying weapons (knives).
- **Child Sexual Exploitation (CSE):** A form of sexual abuse where a child is coerced into sexual acts, sometimes under the guise of a "romantic" relationship.
- **Key Indicators:** Controlling relationships with older individuals/gangs; entering/leaving unknown vehicles; possessing unexplained money, expensive items, or multiple phones; frequenting risky areas/hotels; periods of going missing.

Child-on-Child Abuse & Harmful Sexual Behaviour (HSB)

All staff must be aware that children can abuse other children. This is treated along a continuum:

Harmful Sexual Behaviour (HSB), Sexual Harassment, Sexual Violence

- **Online Precursors:** Misogyny, sexism, homophobic language and extreme online narratives (e.g., incel culture) serve as key indicators feeding into child-on-child harm.

Honour or Faith-Based Abuse (HBA)

Abuse perpetrated to defend perceived "honour" or religious/cultural beliefs. Includes Forced Marriage, Female Genital Mutilation (FGM), nd belief in spirit possession/witchcraft.

Modern Slavery & Trafficking

Children being moved or coerced into forced labour, domestic servitude or criminal/sexual exploitation, where they are treated as commodities.

Child-to-Parent or Caregiver Abuse (CPCA)

A form of domestic abuse where a child or young person exercises harmful, violent or controlling behaviour towards a parent or carer.

Severe Mental Health Concerns

Indicators such as self-harm, severe suicidal ideation and extreme social withdrawal must be treated as potential safeguarding indicators requiring DSL intervention, rather than solely pastoral support.

Online Safety & Digital Risks (Content, Contact, Conduct, Commerce)

Staff must be alert to online harms as primary safeguarding triggers:

- **Harmful Content:** Exposure to illegal material, radicalisation, misogynistic/incel content, self-harm/suicide promotion and misinformation, disinformation, conspiracy theories or deepfakes.
- **Generative AI & Chatbots:** Risks of children building unmonitored, abusive or inappropriate emotional/sexual reliance on AI entities or interactive bots.

Parent/Carer Safeguarding Indicators

- Delay in seeking obvious medical treatment for a child.
- Incompatible, changing or unrealistic explanations for injuries.
- Persistently negative attitude, unrealistic expectations or hostility towards the child.
- Substance misuse, domestic violence, or evidence of coercive control in the household.

Safeguarding Disabled Children

Children with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND) face heightened vulnerabilities. Additional indicators include:

- Unexplained bruises on non-mobile children (e.g., shins or torso).
- Malnourishment or poor toileting arrangements due to inadequate assistance.
- Unjustified or excessive use of restraint or rough handling.
- Deprivation of equipment, medication, food or disabling wheelchair batteries.
- Misappropriation of the child's finances or inappropriate invasive care procedures.