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Encompass Safeguarding Newsletter: Addressing Low-Level Concerns

In safeguarding, low-level concerns are often the critical warning signs that, when recognised and acted upon, can prevent harm and ensure a safer environment for everyone. These are behaviours by individuals that may not meet the threshold of harm but are inconsistent with the school's ethos and are likely to negatively impact the wellbeing of students or staff. Fostering a culture where all staff and students feel confident and supported to report such concerns is essential to maintaining a safe and nurturing school environment.

Why Reporting Low-Level Concerns Matters

When low-level concerns go unreported, they can escalate over time, resulting in significant harm to students, staff, and the broader school community. A culture that encourages early reporting allows for intervention before issues develop into serious safeguarding or behavioural concerns. Sometimes it is the relentless repetition, or the belief / threat that it could be repeated at any time which causes significant harm. Other times low level behaviours can be seen as 'gateway' behaviours which if not directly addressed can open the door to more serious concerns.

Examples of Low-Level Concerns and Their Potential Impact

Below are scenarios that illustrate low-level concerns and the consequences if left unaddressed:

1. Persistent Bullying in the Classroom

Concern: A teacher notices a group of students repeatedly making subtle, hurtful comments towards a quieter peer. While the comments may seem minor, the pattern is evident.

Potential Impact: The targeted student's wellbeing deteriorates, leading to school avoidance, poor academic performance, and long-term mental health challenges.

Recommendation: Train staff to spot patterns of behaviour and create open lines of communication where students feel safe reporting bullying. Early intervention with restorative practices can prevent escalation.

2. Overly Friendly Teacher-Student Interaction

Concern: A teacher frequently gives certain students special privileges, spends one-on-one time with them unnecessarily, and shares personal anecdotes that blur professional boundaries.

Potential Impact: If unchecked, such behaviour could evolve into grooming, putting students at significant risk of abuse and damaging trust within the school community.

Recommendation: Reinforce professional boundaries through regular training and provide a non-judgmental process for reporting concerns about colleagues. Emphasise the importance of documenting patterns of behaviour.

3. Sexist or Inappropriate Language Among Peers

Concern: Students make casual sexist jokes or use inappropriate language, which is initially dismissed as “messaging around.”

Potential Impact: Tolerance of such behaviour can normalise sexism, escalate into sexual harassment or assault, and create an unsafe environment for all students.

Recommendation: Address inappropriate language immediately and incorporate ongoing education on respect and boundaries through PSHE lessons or assemblies. Establish clear policies for reporting and addressing such behaviour.

4. Inappropriate Use of Technology by Staff

Concern: A staff member is observed taking photos of students on their personal device during school events.

Potential Impact: Even if the staff member’s intentions are innocent, this behaviour violates safeguarding policies, exposes students to privacy risks, and raises questions about the staff member’s judgment.

Recommendation: Ensure all staff understand and adhere to policies around the use of personal devices. Provide secure systems for capturing and storing images for official purposes.

5. Neglecting Supervision on School Trips

Concern: Staff members meet to have a drink during a residential trip while the students are in their rooms in the evening.

Potential Impact: Teachers are not providing appropriate levels of supervision which can lead to incidents such as injuries, bullying, or students placing themselves in risky situations. Additionally what starts off as one small alcoholic drink can easily become more and teachers’ decision making could be impaired by alcohol putting themselves or students at risk of harm.

Recommendation: Reiterate the importance of supervision during trips and provide clear guidelines for staff roles and responsibilities. Conduct thorough debriefings to identify and address lapses.

6. Dismissive Attitude Towards Concerns

Concern: A senior staff member repeatedly downplays low-level concerns raised by colleagues, creating a reluctance among staff to report issues.

Potential Impact: Critical early warning signs are missed, leading to unresolved safeguarding risks and a breakdown of trust within the school.

Recommendation: Provide leadership training on fostering a culture of trust and accountability. Emphasise that all concerns, no matter how small, should be taken seriously and documented.

Recommendations for Building a Supportive Culture

Clear Policies and Procedures: Ensure all staff are familiar with safeguarding policies, particularly regarding low-level concerns. Make it easy to report concerns through accessible systems and designated leads.

Regular Training: Provide ongoing professional development that reinforces the importance of recognising and addressing low-level concerns.

Open Communication: Encourage staff to discuss concerns without fear of reprisal. Emphasise the shared responsibility of safeguarding.

Record Keeping: Maintain detailed records of concerns, even if no immediate action is required. These records can provide crucial context if patterns emerge.

Leadership Role Modelling: School leaders should model openness, accountability, and responsiveness in addressing concerns, setting the tone for the entire community.

Final Thoughts

Creating a culture where low-level concerns are promptly recognised and reported is essential for the safety and wellbeing of students and staff. By addressing these concerns early, schools can prevent harm, build trust, and ensure a positive learning environment for all.