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Due to the content's nature, some sources are anonymous.

Covid 19 - Safeguarding within Early Years Practice

How young children are kept safe has changed (Edmundson, 2020). To prevent the spread of Covid-19, on March 18th 2020 the Education Secretary for England announced the closure of early years settings to all, except the children of key workers and those the State considers vulnerable (Merrick & Busby, 2020). In a short space of time, parents and carers were left to consider both the implications of this change and of those created by ensuing emergency legislation (Coronavirus Act 2020, 2020), alongside their capability to support their families and see through what is, in every practical sense, a biological humanitarian crisis (Humanitarian Coalition, n.d.). As a recent, on-going emergency, neither the short nor long-term effects of this unprecedented episode are known. However significant concern has been raised about its impact on children (Edmundson, 2020). In particular there is uncertainty regarding how best to protect children from abuse and neglect during what has become one of the world's most restrictive mass quarantines (Headteacher, 2020; Kaplan, Frias & McFall-Johnsen, 2020). It is a unique challenge, one this thought piece, after reviewing statutory policy, early years practice and recent developments will consider early years practitioners to be particularly well-equipped to meet.

Prior to the Covid-19 pandemic, England's most recent safeguarding and child protection policies were set out within 'Working Together to Safeguard Children' (DoE, 2018) created to support the Children and Social Work Act (Children and Social Work Act, 2017). Neither safeguarding nor child protection are fixed concepts, and as an updated version of previous

guidance, this document was created to reflect recent policymaker decisions. Successive governments regularly aim to improve upon and enhance prior child protection structures and policies, although a number are in retrospect to high profile abuse cases and subsequent reports - the enactment of The Vulnerable Groups Act (The Vulnerable Groups Act, 2006) a case in point¹.

With this it is possible to understand the 'why' and 'how' behind the advancement of English child protection policy. It is a logical, linear pathway that underpins the procedures and policies of relevant agencies. Within early years practice, section three of the Statutory Framework for the Early Years Foundation Stage (DoE, 2017) sets out the safeguarding and welfare requirements for early years settings. Legislation underpins the everyday safeguarding processes of individual early years premises; processes that are inspected by the government organisation Ofsted to ensure regulatory compliance.

A consideration here, and with relevance to the Covid-19 crisis, is whether 'good' safeguarding practice is achieved through unwavering compliance to process. Munro (2020) does not believe this to be the case. Although her views focus mainly on social service agencies, Munro argues that professionals make better judgements to support children and families by combining procedures with personal experience and context (Munro, 2020). Yet unwavering compliance to child protection procedure falls in line with an increasingly authoritarian approach to the management of safeguarding and child protection within legislation and inspection

¹ The Vulnerable Groups Act (2006) was created to prevent people unsuitable to work with children and vulnerable adults from gaining access to them through their work (The Vulnerable Groups Act, 2006). It was based on recommendations made by the Bichard inquiry after the Soham murders - an extensive criminal investigation that attracted intense media scrutiny (Morris, 2003).

(Burton & Reid, 2018). The Safeguarding Lead Practitioner (SLP) of an early years setting in rural Cornwall (personal communication, 13 February, 2020) has a pragmatic perspective. Their particular setting is situated within a community ranked amongst the poorest 10% of neighbourhoods in England (Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government, 2020). A neighbourhood where intergenerational poverty has created a close-knit community distrustful of official support networks and general societal interference. This has, the SLP believes, led to a localised way of life that is accepting of child protection standards below those expected within more affluent society.

With this in mind, the SLP sees the role of early years practice as one of 'trusted partner'. A place where families are heard and supported with what means the setting is able to provide. As the SLP explained, unless immediate action is required, the setting's first line of inquiry when child protection concerns arise is 'How can we help?'. Experience and context have taught them that an event, such as an unexpected bill, disproportionately harms a financially stretched family, and in being a trusted partner, a setting may be able to mitigate safeguarding concerns before they truly develop. Before due process is required.

The ability to use professional judgement to determine appropriate safeguarding response is established across early years practice (early years professionals, personal communication, 2019 & 2020). This enables settings to consider child protection as unpredictable and complex, with each case requiring distinctive response. It is an ability set outside those of linear process, and in doing so makes the 'one size fits all' procedural approach feel cumbersome as a response to the complexities of safeguarding young children, while using tacit knowledge (Polanyi, 1973) allows practitioners to recognise child abuse and neglect and take effective

action in whatever that may mean for the unique child. This does not imply that early years practice throws away due process. Rather it is indicative of early years practitioners distinct ability to balance logical and analytical process with intuition and experience, and due to their unique position within communities and relationship to the young children in their care, they arguable do so to greater effect than other safeguarding agencies who are limited in capability by strict compliance to due process.

Therefore, at a time when other agencies share concern that “the coronavirus lockdown has left children and family specialists...without any national rules or advice on how to adapt their approach.” (Brindle, 2020), by modifying current process when gaps appear, tacit early years practitioners have adapted practice to meet the challenges of safeguarding young children during the pandemic (personal experience, 16-20 March 2020).

Presently, young children deemed vulnerable by the State can remain in early years settings. These include children who are not yet “formally recognised as such” (DoE, 2020a, p. 7) but were referred to social services prior to national lockdown. Yet for others potentially ‘at-risk’, there is a continuing obligation for them to be assessed as “being in need, or meeting Section 17 of the Childcare Act 1989.” (DoE, 2020b, p.3). This requires social services to continue to accept and process cases, a service that, in the current climate, is increasingly understaffed (Cornwall Council, 2020). Yet ambiguity within recent government policies (DoE, 2020a; DoE, 2020b) allows “those on the edges of receiving children’s social care support” (DoE, 2020b, p. 4) to be offered a place. This grey area could allow practitioners to support: young children on the edge of social care support; those temporarily at risk; and, those whose family’s stability has drastically changed during the crisis. New ‘at-risk’ categories, not explicitly

embraced by recent policies, align with those highlighted by Prof Rand Conger (Newkirk II, 2020) in his work concerning economic crisis where he states that higher levels of child neglect and abuse “tend to track with greater traumatic events, economic instability and stress.” (Newkirk II, 2020, n.d.). And as the Covid-19 pandemic upsets people’s ability to access food, shelter, transportation and medical care, the foundations of the nation’s hierarchy of needs (Maslow, 1954), its basic physiological and safety requirements, are shaken. By way of example, during both the 2009 H1N1 influenza pandemic in Australia and the 2003 SARS outbreak in Canada, the Alliance for Child Protection in Humanitarian Action (ACPHA) (2019) reported heightened levels of anxiety, frustration, depression and worry amongst caregivers that in turn increased levels of family instability. Currently, the global increase in domestic violence, and uptick in severe physical abuse related injuries in young children are considered to be a stress response to the current infectious disease pandemic (Cook Children's Checkup Newsroom, 2020; Graham-Harrison, Giuffrida, Smith & Ford, 2020).

Therefore, as the nation continues to live behind locked doors, an interesting context to Bronfenbrenner’s ecological theory (Aubrey & Riley, 2019), an increasing number of ‘unknown to the state’ young children become at risk. The only safeguarding professionals with insight to family situations across communities, who are able to assess the uncertainty current circumstances have on individual young children, are early years practitioners. And as tempers fray and situations become desperate, families are more likely to answer a call, have an appropriately distanced doorstep chat, and accept support from someone who is trusted within the community; someone who knows them and understands their lifestyle and their predicaments. In these unprecedented times, early years practitioners are well-equipped to offer such support.

To date, multi-agency safeguarding initiatives have been known to neglect early years professional input (Bradwell, 2020), a scenario Burton & Reid (2018) put down to the ill-held belief that early years practitioners neither have the skills nor qualifications to give educated insight to such matters. Perhaps by demonstrating their ability to meet current safeguarding challenges head-on, such beliefs will change and early years practitioners will be recognised as the professionals they truly are.

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