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Safeguarding in International Schools During COVID-19

International schools overseas face many challenges, not least in safeguarding and promoting the welfare of children. Sometimes without access to child protection services, with different legislations and cultural considerations, our aim is to support and enable international schools to overcome these challenges. During the COVID-19 pandemic, most schools closed and remote education became the norm. This article addresses the challenges faced once children returned to school, presenting pragmatic solutions benchmarked against best practice guidance to support safeguarding and pastoral care systems in international schools.

1. Online Safety Monitoring and Management

Schools have an obligation, as part of their duty of care to children, to consider how they may be taught about safeguarding, including online safety. Best practice dictates that 'appropriate filters and appropriate monitoring systems' are in place to prevent children from accessing harmful or inappropriate material. However, monitoring children accessing school learning technology from home requires careful consideration:

- Avoid over-blocking: Excessive restrictions may limit appropriate online teaching opportunities and children's ability to learn risk assessment and management skills
- Technical monitoring systems: Use systems capable of monitoring technology not owned by the school, with multilingual capabilities to detect illegal content, bullying, child sexual exploitation, discrimination, drugs/substance misuse, extremism, pornography, self-harm, violence, and pro-suicide sites
- Parental engagement: Include in your online safety strategy ways to engage parents and carers in setting up parental controls and monitoring home internet use
- Age-appropriate implementation: Tailor monitoring approaches to developmental stages
- Transparency: Ensure all users are aware their online access is being monitored
- Alert prioritization: Establish procedures for rapid response to reports and alerts

- Clear escalation procedures: Define how alerts are recorded, shared, and escalated (e.g., Professionals Online Safety Helpline: 0344 381 4772;
- helpline@saferinternet.org.uk)
- Regular review: Analyze results to inform policy and practice

2. Professional Conduct and Digital Responsibility

Good safeguarding means safeguarding yourself as well as children. Manage your professional reputation and personal data carefully:
- Device usage: Use school devices where possible; establish rules for personal devices (apps, image-taking policies)
- Professional modeling: Always ask permission before posting images of children online; dress appropriately during remote sessions; remind yourself of the staff code of conduct
- Policy compliance: Review and reinforce acceptable use policies, safeguarding policies, and school online safety guidelines
- Personal digital footprint: Search your name regularly to check for undesirable content; choose profile photographs carefully
- Reputation awareness: Consider how employers and others might perceive your online activity; maintain school reputation at all times
- Security practices: Check privacy settings regularly, use strong passwords with mixed case, symbols, and numbers
- Cultural sensitivity: Address bullying incidents promptly, particularly important in multicultural settings
- Secure logout: Always log out when finished to keep content secure

Cyberbullying response: If victimized, do not respond. Take screenshots or print evidence and report to the site, senior leadership, and the Professionals Online Safety Helpline (0344 381 4772;
helpline@saferinternet.org.uk).

3. Mental Health and Wellbeing on School Return

Consider the impact of COVID-19 on mental health and wellbeing when children return to school. The World Health Organisation advises that education settings should remain "welcoming, respectful, inclusive, and supportive environments for all." Children may have experienced neglect, abuse, anxiety, or bereavement during closures. Poor behaviour often signals adverse experiences or trauma.
Action: Provide access to pastoral and mental health support.

4. Safeguarding Provision for Returning Children

Review and agree what safeguarding provision is needed:
- Manage disclosure spikes: Focus on mental health and wellbeing in lessons; allow dedicated time for children to discuss COVID experiences
- Relationship rebuilding: Increase playtime and peer reconnection opportunities; offer one-to-one support

- Routine reestablishment: Provide quiet spaces; allow time to re-learn routines and school behaviour expectations
- Gender-specific risks: Be aware of increased exploitation risks for girls (e.g., home care responsibilities, out-of-school vulnerability)

5. Staff Support and Training

Ensure risk assessments and emergency procedures are regularly reviewed as pandemic risk changes:
- Pastoral training: Provide dedicated training for pastoral staff to help children manage anxiety
- Bereavement support: Offer training for all staff
- Counselling access: Establish dedicated counselling support for students, staff, and parents
- Staff mentoring: Create a mentoring system for staff needing support
- Policy involvement: Give all staff opportunity to contribute to safeguarding policy updates and COVID-19 addendums
- Vulnerable pupil support: Implement buddy systems and extra pastoral support for children with SEN and disabilities
- Reintegration flexibility: Consider appropriateness of time-out cards for children struggling to return to school life

6. Teaching, Learning, and Family Support

Balance academic priorities with wider pastoral and family support to address behaviour, attendance, and learning attitudes:
- Curriculum alignment: Identify priorities and revise expectations
- Social distancing monitoring: Record, monitor, and evaluate procedures; include weekly actions in your School Improvement Plan
- Policy communication: Upload COVID-19 policies to the school website with contact numbers for parents and children
- Practical adjustments: Adapt practical lessons for social distancing; develop catch-up support programmes
- Flexible attendance: Avoid attendance awards; develop policies encouraging staff and children to stay home when sick
- Regular parent communication: Use calls and surveys to address problems early and foster mutual understanding
- Cultural-policy clarity: Remind staff that cultural practices conflicting with school rules (e.g., corporal punishment) are not acceptable
- Sensitive dialogue: Engage in tactful conversations with parents about school discipline and consider CPD for staff on difficult conversations

7. Supporting Ambitious Learners and Breaking Down Barriers

Children's anxieties about educational gaps are likely prevalent, particularly in international schools where parental academic expectations are high. This is compounded by some cultures being reluctant to discuss or accept mental health support:

- Engagement strategies: Use surveys, quizzes, and case studies with significant parental involvement to promote understanding of school policies and pastoral care systems
- Senior leadership communication: Offer virtual information updates (live or pre-recorded, posted on the website) about school safety measures during the pandemic
- Collaborative partnerships: Work with parents to discuss key policies on behaviour, safeguarding, and pastoral issues in a spirit of genuine collaboration

Essential Reading

- DfE: Initial Planning Framework for Opening Schools to More Children
- Keeping Children Safe in Education (KCSIE) 2019 and DfE COVID-19 Safeguarding in Schools
- UK Safer Internet Centre and Childnet International
- UNICEF: COVID-19 Prevention and Control in Schools
- COVID-19 Addendum to Safer Working Practice (April 2020)