

Towards safer organisations

Adults who pose a risk to children in the workplace and
implications for recruitment and selection

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Executive summary

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This summary addresses the key findings of a review of the literature on child abuse in organisations, with the purpose of informing methods of recruitment in settings where staff or volunteers may come into contact with children. The study also draws on interviews with relevant professionals and a small sample of convicted child sex offenders. Overall this should help organisations to identify adults who are likely to be unsuitable candidates for roles that give access to children.

The methodology and research that underpin the key findings and conclusions presented here are outlined in more detail in the full report, which will also be published on NSPCC inform in mid-2009.

The risk of abuse

The vast majority of paid staff and volunteers who work with children are committed to their wellbeing and care. Nevertheless, between 1967 and 2000 there were 19 public inquiries into abuse in children's homes, to which can be added other well-publicised cases of abuse: Beverley Allitt, a paediatric nurse convicted of the murder of four children and attempted murder of three others in her care on the ward (Clothier, 1994); the case of Jason Dabbs, a student on placement convicted of indecent assaults on 12 nursery children in two schools (Hunt, 1994); and Ian Huntley, a caretaker in a community college, who had been screened and selected as a suitable employee, but was subsequently convicted of the murder of two 11-year-old girls attending a primary school where his partner, Maxine Carr, was a teaching assistant (Kelly, 2004).

These cases are probably only the tip of the iceberg. In the absence of a central mechanism for reporting or recording incidents there still remains a lack of systematic information on the true incidence of abuse (Kendrick, 1997). However, they do give an indication of the range of abuse perpetrated by workers, and provide tangible evidence that despite the best efforts and intentions of well-meaning organisations, professionals and volunteers, children have been abused, and in rare cases murdered, in organisational settings. As recently as in 2004 there was still sufficient concern for the Bichard Inquiry to find "...errors, omissions, failures and shortcomings which are deeply shocking" (Bichard, 2004, p.1). The cases demonstrate

clearly that, without an appropriate organisational culture of safeguarding, the risk that the ethic of care will be breached is present in any setting where adults come into contact with children.

While there is a growing commitment to the empowerment of children – supported by measures in the Children Act 1989 and evidenced by the growth of the children’s rights movement, increased commitment to children’s participation in designing services provided for them, and involvement in staff selection processes – they nevertheless remain vulnerable.

Vetting and barring unsuitable people

Government-led initiatives are undoubtedly essential in preventing unsuitable people from gaining positions of trust with vulnerable people, and can also act as a deterrent. The new Vetting and Barring Scheme, replacing the current List 99, PoCA, PoVA and Disqualification Orders regimes by the end of 2009, will consolidate and improve existing guidance and legislation, and have a major impact on the recruitment and monitoring practices of people working or volunteering with children. Created under the Safeguarding Vulnerable Groups Act 2006, the scheme is administered by the Independent Safeguarding Authority (ISA). The ISA will decide who is unsuitable to work or volunteer with vulnerable groups, based on information held by various agencies, government departments and the Criminal Records Bureau (CRB).

However, these measures can only be effective in barring those who are known to present a risk – those whose behaviour has been picked up as a potential threat, or those who have actually been convicted of sex offences. As the Bichard Inquiry (2004) concluded, however, many high-risk individuals in fact do not have criminal convictions, while patterns of behaviour that might flag an individual as presenting such a potential risk are not necessarily detected by the police or children’s services.

Nevertheless, employers may rely solely on these vetting and barring procedures, without considering the range of other screening methods that are necessary to safeguard children effectively. Checking for previous convictions is an important part of the recruitment process, but not sufficient in itself, as the majority of maltreatment remains unreported and unrecorded.

Safer selection processes

Selection processes for recruiting new staff or volunteers tend to be adapted to the type of role for which they are being recruited. However, the abuse cases that have come to light clearly demonstrate that even those who are not in direct contact with children in their daily working lives can still present as much of a risk as those who have “frontline” responsibilities. When determining the necessary elements of a vetting, screening and selection process for any position, be it for frontline or ancillary staff, a volunteer or student, the widest possible consideration should be given to the potential risks to children.

Choosing with Care, the 1992 Warner report which focused on staff selection, development and management in children's homes, highlighted particular areas of concern related to recruitment, and made a number of recommendations. One of these was that “employers should use preliminary interviews as a standard part of establishing a fuller picture of the character and attitudes of short-listed candidates for all posts in children’s homes.” (p.55) It also recommended the introduction of assessment centres, using role plays, written exercises, group exercises, aptitude tests and possibly even personality questionnaires to better assess a person’s suitability for a particular job. A complete list of the Warner Report recommendations is reproduced in Appendix 2 of the full report.

The key message that emerges from the Warner Report (1992) and other literature on the subject of recruitment is the importance of a multi-layered recruitment process, extending beyond skills-focused interviews and CRB checks.

Screening potential abusers

In 1988 the Department of Health and Social Services expressed the view, noted in the Warner Report (1992), that “there is no acceptable test currently available or likely to become available in the near future which could be used with any degree of accuracy to screen applicants for their potential to abuse children sexually.” (p.52) In relation to both sexual and physical abuse, the situation appears not to have changed significantly since that date, but attempts to develop such tests predate the Warner Report: Milner (1986), for instance, developed the Child Abuse Potential Inventory (CAPI) self-report questionnaire, specifically to assess personality and interactional characteristics relevant for determining physical child abuse potential. However, when Herman (1995) applied this test to volunteers for roles working with children, his results proved that the CAPI alone is insufficient for screening

employees for such potential. Nevertheless, the results may have some correlation to the desirable and undesirable characteristics of potential employees, and therefore could be useful as part of a multimodal assessment.

The reason why it is difficult to identify potential offenders is that, as the evidence gathered for this study suggests, those who have a propensity to abuse share many relevant characteristics with the “general population”. At best, they can be described along the lines of Doran and Brannan (1996), for instance, who divided “typical” institutional abusers into two categories: the “charismatic, articulate, well-networked ‘caring professional’ who is usually a part of the leadership of the institution”; and the “...isolated but dutiful staff member who is perhaps over-helpful to colleagues and children, and frequently does things outside normal duties”. Another study suggests that while some abusers are “authoritarian” or “charismatic”, others are “quiet, unassuming” or “inadequate” (Rowlands, 1995). As highlighted in the inquiry into the case of the student Jason Dabbs, there may be nothing in an offender’s past that gives an indication of a propensity to abuse. Dabbs was in fact noted as having “an ability to relate...to individual children with sympathy and understanding” (Hunt, 1994, para 6.4.5). All this lends support to the argument that there is no “typical” profile. As summed up in the inquiry report of the Beverley Allitt case: “...she did indeed appear to be like everybody else” (Clothier, 1994).

It follows that for organisations striving to prevent unsuitable people from working with children, it will be difficult if not impossible to detect potential abusers. However, it is possible to put in place recruitment procedures that evaluate the risk potential candidates may present to children, by assessing not only their skills and experience, but also their values, motives and behaviours in certain situations. An adequate selection process should also address a candidate’s attitude to the control and punishment of children, issues of power and sexuality (Bowles, 1995), and probe their willingness and ability to protect children from others who might abuse. Understanding what motivates or drives a person to abuse will help recruiters recognise the potentially significant signs.

Sexual Interest in children

Research shows that sex offenders tend to lack empathy only towards their own and other victims of abuse, but not towards people in general. (Hayashino et al, 1995, Marshall et al, 2001; Puglia et al, 2005). Thus, during an organisational selection process, they may demonstrate the ability to empathise with children generally, which is often regarded as a positive attribute in applicants to child-focused posts, and could be taken as an indication that

someone is not a risk to children. However, it is important to critically review other attributes before concluding that the candidate is suitable. In that respect, the challenge is that an inappropriate level of emotional congruence with children, potentially a key risk indicator, may be “almost indistinguishable from the characteristics and behaviours of those who are considered the most effective with children.” (Sullivan et al, in process, p. 24).

Reporting on the results of self-administered questionnaires from a large sample of both male and female public sector childcare workers in a UK local authority, Freel (2003) found a level of sexual interest in children in 15 per cent of the male and 4 per cent of the female respondents. Even more worryingly, 4 per cent of the men and 2 per cent of the women admitted that they might have sex with a child “if it was certain no one would find out and there would be no punishment” – a likely underestimate of the true situation, given the socially unacceptable nature of such sexual interest, particularly in a sample of childcare workers. Freel (2003) nevertheless asserted that a sexual interest in children cannot be used as a screening criterion, as “an expressed sexual interest in children appears to be relatively common in the male population in general, not just in childcare workers” (p. 492), and it is not predictive of who will actually abuse a child.

The findings of Sullivan and Beech (2004) would suggest otherwise: they analysed a sample of 41 professional abusers¹ and found that only a quarter of them had not been influenced by their sexual interest in children in choosing their jobs, with more than half (57 per cent) admitting that it had. In any case, protecting children from those who are sexually attracted to them, even if there is no intention to act on it, would seem to be a reasonable and legitimate goal.

One method of assessing such an interest may be through the use of non-sexually explicit or arousing images, which has proved quite accurate when tested in a research setting. It has not been applied as a screening test in the UK, but has the potential to form part of a careful screening process, although considerable care would need to be taken, both ethically and practically, with developing its use in that context (Glasgow, 2003, 2006).

¹ Residents in a specialist sexual abuse assessment and treatment centre who admitted to having abused children in a professional capacity.

Values drive all behaviour²

Effective safeguarding is founded on an organisational commitment to a set of values that have children's welfare and wellbeing at their core. These values, as well as the appropriate behaviours that reinforce them, must be clearly articulated, put into practice through defined methods, and monitored for their effectiveness.

In situations where this is not the case, organisations are vulnerable to what Wardaugh and Wilding (1993) termed a "corruption of care": without clearly defined behaviours that reinforce organisational values, abuse can arise because those values are misinterpreted or purposely betrayed, or simply because the principles of good practice are neglected: the Pindown regime in Staffordshire, for example, was designed to improve the behaviour of children in care, but in fact amounted to abuse (Levy and Kahan, 1991).

Inappropriate behaviours are often known, or at least suspected, by peers. In that context, the Huston Inquiry (Social Services Inspectorate, 1994) recommended that agencies providing services to children or vulnerable adults should ensure that a culture of openness and trust is fostered within the organisation, encouraging staff to share any concerns about the conduct of colleagues, and children to report anything they are concerned about in their dealings with staff. They should also be assured that any concerns will be acted upon in a sensitive manner.

Research findings also highlight the importance of developing and maintaining policies and procedures that limit the scope for individuals to spend time alone with children, both within and outside the work environment, and of having staff support systems that facilitate the identification and effective management of inappropriate behaviour by staff. (Sullivan et al, in process).

A culture of awareness and vigilance will limit the opportunity for abuse. However, information about any concerns or allegations must be treated confidentially and regarded critically before acting upon it; any recommendation to record such information in HR records should be considered very carefully indeed.

² Sullivan et al, 2001, p. 248.

Value-based recruitment

In response to the Warner report's recommendations, the NSPCC has developed Value-Based Interviewing (VBI) as a method of assessing the values, motives and attitudes of those applying to work with children. VBI has the potential to make a worthwhile contribution to the recruitment process as it focuses on behaviours within the context of organisational values, probing the extent to which potential new recruits are likely to respect and adhere to these.

The first step in the process was the identification of a set of clearly defined and measurable organisational "Values and Behaviours in Action" (VBA) and their characteristics. To that effect, detailed job analysis interviews were conducted with over 150 staff, from which emerged a framework of values and behaviours for use in recruitment, staff development and performance management within the NSPCC.

The NSPCC values are defined as:

- **Courage:** We communicate openly and honestly, challenging the status quo and using our independence and experience to lead change for children in all our activities.
- **Respect:** We respect children and seek to foster respect for them in others.
- **Protect:** Everything the NSPCC does is designed to protect children and young people from harm.
- **Trust:** We strive to be an organisation that children can trust. We work alongside and in cooperation with others, and wherever possible seek to forge new partnerships that can help to end cruelty to children.

NSPCC desired behaviours that express these values are defined as:

- **Working Together:** Working co-operatively within a team, with other teams and functions, and in line with NSPCC values to achieve the NSPCC vision and purpose.
- **Accountability:** Taking responsibility for work and delivering against objectives, being reliable, and acting with integrity.
- **Motivation and Resilience:** Being self-motivated, responding positively and treating challenges as opportunities.

- **Striving for Improvement:** Questioning and challenging oneself and others to bring about continuous improvement.
- **Planning and Prioritisation:** Working effectively to meet short- and long-term objectives and prioritising time and effort.
- **Stakeholder Focus:** Understanding stakeholders' needs and managing the relationships to achieve best outcomes.
- **Commitment to the NSPCC's Vision and Purpose:** Understanding, believing in and demonstrating commitment to the role in achieving the NSPCC's vision and purpose.

The value-based interview itself is a structured criteria-based process, where a candidate describes examples of behaviours from the past in response to an interview question. These examples are then explored in more detail through supplementary questions that explore “how” and “why” an applicant makes particular choices in a work environment, probing into the reasons for their behaviour.

This type of interview differs from the “technical” interview where the focus is on skills, experience and knowledge. It is done separately, by a panel drawn from a pool of staff who are specifically trained in this method. The VBI attempts to provide in-depth information about candidates' attitudes, character and behaviour at work, which can then be used to select candidates who have the attitudes and values that will help promote the culture of safeguarding and who are, therefore, also more likely to be effective in identifying and addressing safeguarding issues at work – all of which create a safer environment for children. It is important to understand, however, that VBI should not be used in isolation from other methods of selection such as technical interviews, role plays or tests and is not a substitute for thorough vetting of candidates.

VBI with convicted child sex offenders

A small sample of convicted child sex offenders agreed to undertake a simulated Value-Based Interview process to see whether their answers would in themselves have produced sufficient evidence to prove their unsuitability for working with children (assuming they had not been convicted of their offences and therefore not identified as abusers).

The level of self-reflection from two interviewees was quite high, which would have been assessed as positive in this type of interview. Two interviewees described themselves, with persuasive examples, as people who were good with children, finding it easy to communicate

at their level. However, all interviewees eventually revealed a blurring of boundaries either in relation to physical contact with children, or in doing something for children they should not, such as keeping quiet when inappropriate behaviour was observed. Although none of the behaviours discussed were particularly offensive or even manifestly inappropriate, in the context of the NSPCC's expectations of practice and adherence to procedures and policies, there were indications that the behaviours and underlying attitudes of these individuals would not have been acceptable, and ultimately none were deemed suitable to work with children.

This exercise demonstrated the feasibility of engaging known offenders both in testing aspects of VBI and in discussing their behaviour. It would be useful to apply the method to a larger, more representative sample, to gain further valuable insights into the personal characteristics of offenders in organisational settings, and their perceptions on the measures designed to deter inappropriate behaviour. This information is currently substantively absent from the literature.

Conclusions and issues for consideration

Much of the study relates to sexual abuse, as this is of the highest concern and the focus of most of the literature on abuse within organisations. However, all forms of potential abuse need to be considered when making selection decisions.

There is no single characteristic or set of characteristics that identify someone as being unsuitable for working with children, but there are a number of behaviours and attitudes that can be meaningfully assessed in the course of a multi-layered selection process. This will help identify relevant traits or signs that indicate someone may be unsuitable to work either directly with children and families, or on their behalf.

The study draws attention to the importance of articulating clear values and behaviours to maximise safeguarding within organisations, and of ensuring individual alignment to these organisational values. Of central importance is that candidates' answers to interview questions are examined more closely to assess whether they are authentic or "pseudo indicators of suitability", masking a potential area of concern. Value-Based Interviewing has a key role to play in this respect.

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