



Learning Paper
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Embedding Safeguarding to Improve Learning

Colin Haikin, ChildHope's Partnerships and Programmes Manager and Education Advisor, reflects on the importance of safeguarding in the creation of effective learning environments, drawing on ChildHope's experience in schools in Ethiopia

Introduction

ChildHope has been working with highly marginalised children since 1989. Many of these children live and work on the streets, in extremely hazardous situations, or are at risk of serious abuse and exploitation, such as forced early marriage or physical violence in the home. Over the years, ChildHope has built a powerful reputation in the field of child protection and safeguarding*. Working alongside in-country partner organisations, ChildHope has developed safeguarding interventions to make children's environments as safe as possible, even in the most demanding situations.

All ChildHope's programmes have strong education and learning components, whether they are delivered through schools or non-formal settings. In some contexts, ChildHope and its partners support children to rehabilitate, access, and enrol in school, and improving their experience of education once they are there through overall improvements to the school environment. For example, through developing teachers' pedagogy and gender responsiveness, or through the introduction of hygiene corners, so the girls have a safe and clean area during menstruation. In others programmes the focus is on vocational and life skills. ChildHope's programmes always aim to frame the child's learning experience within the family, community, and society in which they live; working with the adults in their lives as well as their peers.

Often the children ChildHope supports suffer sexual exploitation, abuse and harm. This does not just happen on the streets, rubbish dumps, or whilst enduring child labour, but it often happens in places where children should be safest - in their homes or at school.

This paper aims to capture ChildHope's learning around the essential relationship between safeguarding and education. We explain why we believe that safety is an essential platform for effective learning, and why we believe that safeguarding must move beyond policy and paperwork, into the culture of all learning environments. We describe our socio-ecological model, which aims to put the child at the centre of policy development and implementation. Finally, we illustrate how ChildHope and CHADET, our partner in Ethiopia, integrated safeguarding into education programming and how this established an environment more conducive to learning.



Safeguarding is an umbrella term that covers all forms of maltreatment against which a person (adult or child) needs to be protected - physical, emotional, sexual abuse or neglect.

Safeguarding includes the prevention of sexual exploitation and abuse (PSEA).

Sexual exploitation and abuse (SEA) usually refers to acts committed against persons of concern.

Sexual exploitation is defined as an actual or attempted abuse of someone to obtain sexual favours.

Sexual abuse means the actual or threatened physical intrusion of a sexual nature, whether by force, or under unequal or coercive conditions. It includes sexual slavery, pornography, child abuse and sexual assault.

Safeguarding is the measures put into place to ensure the prevention of sexual exploitation and abuse (PSEA).

Safeguarding Improves Learning

All organisations that work with, or encounter, children need robust safeguarding policies and procedures to ensure that every child is protected from harm. This includes voluntary and community organisations, as well as public sector institutions. Robust safeguarding policies and procedures protect children, ensuring they are safe from those who might pose a risk.

This is never more important than in schools or any establishment where learning takes place, whether in formal or non-formal settings. However, to be truly effective, policies must go beyond the confines of the physical school or learning setting, addressing children's safety and protection in the home and community, as an integral part of a child's learning environment.

Abusive childhood experiences are known to slow cognitive development resulting in poor school achievement¹. Child abuse can result in harm to a child's mental health, the effects of which can last throughout adulthood², negatively affecting their full and long-term educational development³.

Studies published by the National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children (NSPCC) in 2000⁴ and 2011⁵, looking at the relationship between how children are treated at home and their attainment at school showed that abuse has a "profound effect" on children's performance in all aspects of school life. Children who are abused and neglected at home are more likely than their peers to do badly at school, more likely to have behaviour problems, and more likely to become victims of bullying. The findings showed that abuse in the first five years of life almost triples a child's likelihood of having multiple physiological, behavioural, and academic problems at school. These children are far more likely to drop out of school before completing their education, regardless of other factors such as poverty, class, family status etc, creating an added factor contributing the likelihood of school drop-out.

Safeguarding includes 'child protection' which is part of the safeguarding process. Child protection focuses on protecting individual children identified as suffering or likely to suffer significant harm; this includes procedures which detail how to respond to concerns about a child.

Safeguarding is particularly crucial in schools and non-formal educational settings, not only as an important means of protecting children from sexual exploitation, abuse and harm, but because teachers and other staff who connect with the children are in a position to gain a unique insight into how children are developing, behaving, and interacting with others. This means they are more likely to spot signs of abuse. They can also use their unique position to educate children on the dangers they face inside and outside of school and how they can get help.

Safe Learning Environments

In any environment where there is abuse, learning cannot easily take place.

As mentioned above, research has shown that a child subjected to abuse, will have greater difficulty in learning, including social learning, often resulting in lower academic achievement. As far back as 1943, American psychologist Abraham Maslow demonstrated in his "hierarchy of needs", in the absence of physical safety - due to family violence, childhood abuse etc, or if a child does not feel safe generally - they may struggle to fully develop their learning or cognitive abilities, as their primary motivation will be ensuring their immediate, basic safety needs are met.

Therefore, for a child to reach her full learning potential, it is not only the educational setting that needs to be safe; the notion of a safe learning environment extends beyond the school walls and into the community and home. To ensure the full development of the child, the necessity to safeguard against exploitation and abuse, extends beyond the walls of any learning establishment.

The policy environment in which safeguarding is enacted is easily defined in specific places where there are clear lines of management control and responsibility such as schools, non-formal educational setting, or any setting where children regularly meet. In these cases, any person who works in these establishments will have a responsibility to uphold and implement the safeguarding policy to protect the children. However, any effective safeguarding of children will go beyond any school gates, or limits of a 'project' site; it extends into areas such as in a child's home, or on their walk to school. In these contexts, the intricacies around ensuring all children are safe and protected from harm become more nuanced. Where policy implementation can be simpler in a more controlled environment, it becomes more complex in a community or a home environment; but equally as important.

International policy development provides us with a good template, but safeguarding policy and practice needs to be adapted locally, in partnership with local communities, and in environments where the children themselves can actively influence positive change.

Embedding Safeguarding Policy into Practice

Learning cannot take place if you do not feel safe.

Schools, and organisations, often offer safeguarding as part of a suite of training activities, or as part of a staff development session. The notion is to 'train' people on how to respond to incidents of sexual exploitation, harm and harassment, or any incident where a child's safety may be compromised; the training raises people's awareness of dangers, the reporting mechanisms, and those persons with overall safeguarding responsibility. It becomes an agenda item; something that is 'done to' the participants, rather than explored with them; people are trained on 'doing safeguarding right'. However, it could be argued that this, in itself, does not safeguard a child against sexual exploitation, abuse and harm, rather it informs people how to react once a child's safety has been compromised.

ChildHope embeds safeguarding into its programmes and activities through a 'child rights-based' approach. It is not enough to merely develop staff - teachers, managers etc. - to understand the safeguarding policy, or the proper reporting mechanisms; but to understand and identify potential risks and take precautionary measures to address them before they occur. Besides, it recognises the need to empower children and young people to make informed choices that support their well-being and safety.

Crucially, we can work with the children themselves to improve their understanding of safeguarding and help them recognise dangers and potential risks. This was never better highlighted than in a recent ChildHope project in Ethiopia.

ChildHope's Approach and Ethiopia Case Study

ChildHope aims to introduce safeguarding strategies and policies in full consultation with the communities in which we work, or those in most need of the policy. When working in educational settings, our position is to embed the policy requirements into the day-to-day operations of the school, or non-formal educational programme, by working with a range of stakeholders. We do not separate safeguarding from the educative process, as a policy document that sits in isolation from the learning environment, but we embed all safeguarding policy requirements and practice into the daily operations of the school. This way, we ensure that the safeguarding of children is a proactive measure, rather than being merely reactive when issues arise.

The local community landscape will be different from community to community, and therefore the issues and safeguarding needs may be different. However, local, national, and international laws, policies, social norms, etc. all interact and affect a child's personal development. ChildHope's approach to all its projects, is to adopt the socio-ecological model which seeks to understand the dynamic interrelations among various personal and environmental factors and how they affect a child's development.

Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Framework for Human Development suggests that to fully understand a child's development, the entire ecological context in which a child's growth occurs needs to be considered, and reflects the complex interplay between the individual, personal relationships, community, and societal factors.

As well as providing a useful perspective for understanding the relationships between children, such as friendships, families, community organisations and national policies etc, it allows us to understand the range of factors that might put a child at risk.

Working with in-country partners, and by engaging the children in 'early-stage' dialogue, ChildHope can understand the varying contexts and consider how we can best identify the risks, engage with children, and help to keep them safe. It is only in this way, we can comprehend contextual nuances that will affect a child's safety, and develop culturally appropriate systems whilst ensuring international standards. In this respect, the method by which ChildHope develops its contextual safeguarding policies, evolves with the child at the centre of policy discussions, while allowing us also to draw on essential school, community, local organisation and institutional inputs and expert insights.



Ethiopia Girls' Education Programme

Setting

Between 2013 and 2021, ChildHope jointly delivered, with its in-country partner, CHADET, a large education project, working with over 16,000 girls, across 77 schools. The overall project had a tightly controlled results framework, with key impact indicators focusing on improved learning in mathematics and literacy. A standard approach to any education project, where the outcome is to raise learning standards, is to focus on improving teaching methods (pedagogy), as this has the most direct and immediate impact on students' learning. Our project was no different; we did focus on pedagogic improvement. However, this was not the initial focus of the project.

As mentioned in earlier paragraphs, Maslow's "Hierarchy of Needs" suggests that a child must satisfy their basic needs, such as safety, before progressing on to meet higher level growth needs, which would include cognitive development and learning.

Using the ecological model, ChildHope's initial focus was to work with the range of individuals, communities, organisations, and institutions that interact with, and affect, a child and their development; safeguarding was the starting point.

Actions

Girls' clubs, and boys' clubs (called Good Brothers Clubs), were established in each school. Work with the girls included boosting girls' self-esteem and recognising and understanding potential risks and dangers. Boxes, called Letter Link Boxes, were installed in each school where girls could anonymously report incidents and concerns. Work with the boys' clubs included understanding their role in perpetuating traditional harmful practices and the resulting effects. We worked with the boys on changing negative attitudes and behaviours.


Community groups were established to discuss and challenge traditional harmful practices and negative social-norms, and to recognise dangers that may affect girls. The girls' club members were actively involved in community groups, discussing issues and how they felt. Groups of girls staged community plays and performances to bring attention to their safety needs, and the needs of children with disabilities.

ChildHope and CHADET worked with school leaders and teachers to develop contextually relevant safeguarding protocols including recognising potential risks, reporting, and responding mechanisms. ChildHope and CHADET worked with the project donors, the UK Government's Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO - formerly the Department for International Development), and CHADET worked with Ethiopian government institutions to develop safeguarding frameworks that are proactive and responsive towards issues of safety and wellbeing.

By the time any work was started with the teachers to develop their pedagogic and classroom skills, a safer, more nurturing environment, which was conducive to learning had been established for the girls, meeting their basic safety needs, allowing them to focus on developing their cognitive learning abilities.

Learning

The safeguarding and protection work went far beyond just developing a policy and ensuring that all school staff adhered to the policy. Safeguarding was more than just robust reporting mechanisms. It became embedded in everything that the project delivered. Crucially, this included the girls, as the 'service users'. They were actively influencing the policy through



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the girls' clubs, by bringing a personal and contextual understanding of their lives and how dangers affect them. As a result of this work, the girls were able to identify potential risks and dangers, of which they had previously been unaware or accepted as 'normal'. The entire process was an iterative learning process, with the girls as active agents of change, and at the centre of the policy development and safeguarding process.

This example highlights the breadth and depth of the work needed to ensure that any safeguarding policy development remains an ongoing learning process, rather than something that is produced and 'signed-off'. It highlights that for a truly contextual safeguarding policy to be developed, it must be in partnership with the communities and especially those who are most in need of the policy. In this case, the girls.

Beyond the many educational outcomes, such as improved literacy, numeracy, and raised self-esteem for the girls, and improved pedagogy and gender responsiveness for the teachers, as the project drew to a close, it also left behind a vast network of schoolteachers, school leaders, education officials, and community members, with a deeper understanding of safeguarding and child protection issues, the need for safeguarding, and how to develop, interpret, and implement safeguarding and child protection policies. Moreover, there were more than 16,000 girls who were confident in negotiating their own safeguarding strategies, and able to identify dangers. Each girl had developed a deeper understanding of issues that affect them, which they would take into adulthood, becoming their own agent of change. As the economist and philosopher Amartya Sen notes; "people have to be actively involved, given the opportunity, in shaping their own destiny, and not just as passive recipients of the fruits of cunning development programs" ⁶

Results

The results of this approach were tangible and a great indicator of a combination of the growing confidence of the girls and their ability to recognise and understand safeguarding and their rights, as well as the demonstrable safeguarding leadership within the schools; in which the girls, in turn, had confidence.

This led to the girls reporting, through the Letter Link Boxes, issues and concerns around early marriages; corporal punishment being administered in schools; bullying in and around school; domestic abuse; pressure to migrate; pressure to drop out of school to work; threats of abduction on their way to school and outside of school hours - all of which had previously gone unreported. The schools, in turn, acted swiftly in each case to intervene and protect the girls.

During the monitoring process, it was noted that, in the later stages of the project, the number of incidents reported via the Letter Link Boxes was declining. However, further investigation found that although the number of incidents reported via the LLBs dropped, girls had become confident in approaching the school authorities directly, to report and voice their concerns, confident in the knowledge that the schools would act appropriately.

The Language of Safeguarding

Many languages do not have a direct translation for the word 'safeguarding'. And even in countries that do, such as the UK, people are often unsure of the relationship between 'safeguarding' and 'protection', much less how this translates into policy and practice. This brings a risk of building such a complex web of alien language, frameworks, policies, and approaches around keeping people safe, that we are in danger of losing sight of the very people we are meant to be protecting.

By the involvement of the people (children) we are aiming to protect, and by including community groups, organisations, and institutions in the dialogue - as highlighted in the Ethiopian example - it is possible to demystify the language of safeguarding at the policy development stage. In the Ethiopian example, the network of people developed an understanding of safeguarding requirements and how to keep children safe, and the 'language of safeguarding' did not become a limiting factor. The dialogue with communities, authorities, and families allowed us to demystify the terminology, and present it in a way that made sense to the communities, ensuring that all involved were able to discuss policy requirements.

Key Learnings

The overall and primary aim of any safeguarding policy is to keep children and vulnerable adults safe, protecting them from sexual exploitation, abuse, and harm. In a school or educational setting, where these safety measures do not exist, children will not learn and develop to their full potential.

The development of any safeguarding policy is carried out in partnership with those communities, allowing ChildHope and its in-country partners, to develop a full understanding of the contextual nuances affecting them. The iterative nature of the policy development, with school leaders, parents, teachers, and children, ensures that once ChildHope withdraws from the project site, policy implementation is sustainable, far beyond the lifecycle of that project. Meaningful engagement at the policy design stage, ensures effective safeguarding interventions will have lasting effects. For ChildHope projects safeguarding policy development and practice is led by our partners in local language, embedded in the communities and within understanding of local schools, organisations and institutions. We do this via our [South2South Safeguarding Network](#).

The Girls' Education Challenge programme in Ethiopia, allowed us work with a range of stakeholders in the development of safeguarding policies and practice, and provided us with essential learning. The development of safeguarding policy and practice was carried out in partnership with communities, allowing ChildHope and its in-country partners, to develop a full understanding of the contextual nuances affecting them.

As contexts change those stakeholders who had been involved in discussions and the development of policy, were positioned to adapt policy to meet contextual change, and our local partner was well placed to advocate for change at local and regional level, ensuring sustainability.

ChildHope's key learnings for the development and implementation of any safeguarding policy in an educational setting are:

1. Involve the right people in developing the policy. Policy and practice should be developed in full consultation with those implementing it, and those who are most in need of it, in this case the children. This ensures that policy requirements are contextually appropriate and embedded in the day-to-day practices of those stakeholders who have a responsibility for the protection of children, and that the needs of children are fully understood. Crucially, consultation with girls and boys raised their awareness of their safeguarding needs (particularly of girls) enabling them to be champions for change in their learning settings and communities. The consultation process with children exposed risks of which adults had previously been unaware, and identified issues for which intervention was needed (e.g. child marriage, domestic labour, forced migration).
2. Create a conducive learning environment first. As children need a secure environment in which to learn, it was essential to work with the schools to develop safeguarding practices and a conducive learning environment for the children before any work around developing teachers' pedagogy or school leadership development etc. takes place. The girls on the programme reported they felt safe, and more engaged with learning. Where previously many girls reported that they did not feel safe or acknowledged at school, the work around safeguarding and the girls' clubs had boosted their self-esteem and school "belonginess" and increased their capacity for learning. Students thrive on consistency and structure, and they associate these factors with a feeling of safety, enabling them to focus on learning. In addition, when work was carried out with teachers and school leaders on new and alternative ways of working, they were able to introduce the new working practices, such as new pedagogies, to a student body 'ready for learning'.
3. Reach beyond the school/learning setting to the community. By understanding contextual factors which build on and compliment international policy standards, and by engaging with a broad range of stakeholders, the reach of the safeguarding policy and practice goes beyond the confines of the school walls, and into the communities and homes of the children. By changing key environmental factors, discussing what is harmful, and changing individual attitudes and micro environmental social norms, encourages behaviour change, and with it, social norms focused on protection and nurturing, leading to learning environments which are safer, happier and more conducive to learning.
4. Ensure safeguarding policies are 'embedded and living'. By embedding policy and practice into the day-to-day culture of the educational setting, ensures safeguarding policies serve as more than just a stand-alone document that is produced and signed off - it becomes a 'living' policy that continues to evolve and advance over the passage of time, and as contexts change, and address risks rather than just respond when they happen

ChildHope aims to be a continuous learning organisation. We would be interested to hear your views on this paper, and if you have any similar experiences or insights that you would like to share.

Please email us with your thoughts and experiences to info@childhope.org.uk, we would welcome the feedback and discussion.

If you would like to learn more about our work, please click on the active links below or visit the webpages:

- ChildHope/CHADET [Ethiopia Girl Education Challenge programme](https://www.childhope.org.uk/our-work/projects/gec/), please visit: <https://www.childhope.org.uk/our-work/projects/gec/>
- ChildHope's [South2South Safeguarding Network](https://south2southnetwork.com/) consultancy service, please visit: <https://south2southnetwork.com/>
- ChildHope's [wider areas of work and partners](https://www.childhope.org.uk/our-work/) please visit: <https://www.childhope.org.uk/our-work/>

<https://www.childhope.org.uk/>

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