

Are Teachers trained to protect our children?

This seems like a straight forward question, but simple answer is 'No' - teachers are not trained to protect our children, despite being the most important professional group to work with our children on a day-to-day basis.

I have spent the last 15 years working in child protection, and whilst there have been changes in public policy - most recently with the introduction of the government's Every Child Matters Agenda, this seems at best front-end publicity, with very little happening in our schools to keep our kids safe.

Every Child Matters sets out that everyone in education shares an objective to help keep children and young people safe - by identifying children and young people who are suffering or likely to suffer significant harm; and by taking the appropriate action with the aim of making sure they are kept safe, both at home, and at school. So are teachers receiving suitable training in order to be able to identify abuse?

In my experience in relation to child protection issues, there are two types of teachers - those that have been in post for many years, and those that have qualified in the last 5 years. The training that both sets of teachers receive is totally inadequate, and falls far short of what is necessary or indeed has been set out in Every Child Matters.

All new teachers have to undertake a Postgraduate Certificate in Education, which focuses on the theory of teaching and learning, and this leads to Qualified Teacher Status. The PGCE course prepares graduates in the various elements of teaching, yet provides little or no child protection training. The Universities that do provide training allocate at best 3 hours, often delivered by a non-child protection expert.

What concerns me, and should concern you, is how we can we expect new and enthusiastic teachers to identify children who are suffering abuse, or who want to speak out, unless we train them appropriately. After all, children spend more time at school and in contact with teachers than they do in any other environment, yet our teachers are the least prepared.

So, what about existing teachers that have been in post for many years? The story here is even worse. I recently spoke with two teachers who had been in post for 15 and 20 years respectively. Neither had ever received any child protection training. I have heard this story repeated by many teachers and the picture is almost always the same - no training in child protection for members of staff, other than the designated school child protection officer. True, it is

better than nothing to have the designated officer trained, but is this all that we expect when the government's own slogan is 'Every Child Matters'?

In 2002 research was carried out by the NSPCC, focusing on Child Protection in Education, which identified that 94% of Local Education Authority schools had a designated child protection teacher in place, with 99% having policies and procedures. This is as it should be. However, when the designated teachers were asked if they felt other teachers were suitably qualified to recognise signs of abuse in children in their care and act on them, 88% felt that not all would. The situation has not changed some five years later; our government is still failing our children and teachers.

You can implement policies and procedures and guidelines but without child protection training, they have little meaning and value. Such training enables teachers to identify signs and symptoms of abuse, signs of grooming and inappropriate behaviour by other adults or teachers, reporting procedures and safe practices for working with children. There are enormous benefits for our teachers in receiving child protection training, none more so than the protection of children.

As well as protecting children, training is also valuable to enable teachers to protect themselves. After all, child protection training is as much about protecting the adults who work with children. Teachers can often be in vulnerable positions when they work with children, and it is often bad practice and inappropriate behaviour that gives rise to a child feeling uncomfortable or a concern being reported. Simple things such as spending time in a one- to-one situation, the way children are spoken to and treating children equally, are just some of the issues that teachers face on a day-to-day basis in the classroom.

For me, the message is simple. It is for the Government, Local authorities, and schools to take immediate action and invest in our teachers, equipping and training them in safeguarding our children. If the aims of Every Child Matters are to work and be more than political spin, it should be compulsory for every teacher to undertake basic level child protection training during initial teacher training and at regular intervals thereafter. The question is, will such an investment be made or are we still to be no further forward than we were in 2002?