



NC041005

Should I talk to parents before making a child protection referral?

Jenni Whitehead advises on when and how to talk to parents before making a referral to children's social care

You should always consider talking to parents before making a referral to children's social care, and it is generally thought best practice to tell the parent/s that a referral will be made. However, there are some exceptional situations in which named persons should always seek advice before approaching the parents:

- **Where there are concerns that a child may be suffering sexual abuse by a person in the family, particularly if there is a suggestion that a parent is involved.** Whereas most parents who have physically hurt their child will admit to doing so, sexual abuse perpetrators are particularly skilled at grooming their child to keep silent and are not likely to admit sexual abuse. Talking to the parent before making a referral may serve to warn a perpetrator to shut their victim up. In such circumstances social workers are allowed to speak to the child without the consent of the parent and school is often the most suitable place for such an interview to occur. If such a request is made to a school it is the headteacher's decision as to whether this takes place on school premises. However, the 1989 Children Act requires schools to 'assist' children's social care when they are carrying out child protection investigations and the Education Act 2003 places specific duties on schools to work with partner agencies to protect and promote the welfare of children. It is therefore unlikely that a headteacher would refuse to allow a social worker to speak to a child on school premises when it is believed that to not do so would leave a child at risk of significant harm.

- **In circumstances where it is believed that a young person is being forced into marriage.** School-based staff are advised not to talk to parents as this may put the young person at considerable risk. Professionals are also asked not to attempt to mediate between parents and young person. Always seek advice before acting, either from children's social care or the Forced Marriage Unit.

- **Where there are concerns that a parent may be fabricating and or inducing illness in a child.** This situation is often particularly complex and extremely dangerous for children. It demand multi-agency work to avoid the parent playing one agency off against another. Always seek advice from children's social care before speaking to the parent.

- **Organised abuse where either more than one adult is involved or where one adult is involved with a number of children.** If it appears that the child is being abused by a group of adults or alongside other children it is difficult to know whether one or both of the parents are also

involved. Always seek advice from children's social care before approaching the parents.

- **In any situation that it is your professional judgement that to speak to the parent would place a child at risk of significant harm.**

Clearly at some point, even in the circumstances described above, the parents have to be told that a referral has been made. However, the decision as to how to tell, when to tell and who tells the parent should be a joint one between school making the referral and children's social care as the receiving agency.

Information

Giving information to parents about the school's role in child protection helps. This information can be given in the form of a leaflet or by including it as a section in the handbook your school gives to parents when new students are first enrolled. Whatever format chosen, such information needs to make it clear that school will make referrals to children's social care if they have concerns that the child is at risk of significant harm. Having such information readily available in school won't stop parents being angry at the point of referral but might serve to calm the situation a little, as it will be clear that schools have a statutory duty to report their concerns and that this applies to all families.

In most cases school will decide to speak to parents before making a referral, if only to inform them of the intention to do so. In some cases speaking to the parent can alleviate concerns: the parent may well shed some light on a situation that has become worrying or give a perfectly good explanation for whatever has caused the concern. However, our decision-making in such situations must be steered by the Children Act 1989, the first principle being 'the child's needs are paramount'.

Take care of yourself

Talking to parents can be very nerve-wracking especially if previous knowledge suggests that the parent will react angrily. If you have to confront a parent who you are wary of make sure you have somebody with you and tell others where you are and who you are with. Make sure you use a room that has an escape route for the parent that does not involve going through you to get out of it.

Prepare for unexpected disclosures. I remember a parent saying to me, 'I am glad you have made a referral. I knew it shouldn't be happening but didn't know how to stop it.' Make sure you ask for support when you need it and take some recovery time after talking to parents about these issues.

I remember a parent saying to me, 'I am glad you have made a referral. I knew it shouldn't be happening but didn't know how to stop it'