

Now is the time to talk to children about abuse

The NSPCC's latest campaign aims to help stop abuse before it starts, by empowering children with the knowledge to keep themselves safe – in an age-appropriate way.



According to NSPCC research, two children in every primary school classroom have suffered abuse or neglect. Yet until recently child abuse was often only picked up at secondary school (or even later) when children became more aware of the outside world and developed more confidence to share their stories and compare experiences.

In 2009, the NSPCC started to develop a primary school service that would tackle abuse at an earlier age, focused on pupils aged nine to 11. While ChildLine (which is run by the NSPCC) is still there for children of any age, they wanted to build some simple objectives, aimed at reaching as many children as possible and making them aware of abuse. 'We wanted to develop a primary service with prevention at its heart,' explains Lee Mitchell, Head of School Services, at the NSPCC. 'Instead of

teenagers discovering they have experienced abuse after the event, and telling us "I wish I had known", we want younger children to be armed with information and be able to tell us "now I know".'

The message

The current NSPCC campaign *Now I Know* aims to ensure that older primary school pupils are aware of abuse in its various forms, and empowered to take action in a situation, or as a situation begins to develop. While this may be something in the home environment, children should also be encouraged to talk about anything that worries them at school or other organised groups, online, or among their friends.

Pupils are taught to identify the trusted adults in their life – who would they feel comfortable to approach with fears or anxieties? Just as they need to identify supportive and sympathetic adults, children are also taught to follow their own instincts in identifying those that they do not feel ready to trust – rather than claiming that any adult or professional should automatically be trusted, the

Dawn Francis-Pester
Education writer, Hounslow

campaign encourages children to be realistic and discerning. Most children do have networks of family members, neighbours and other supportive adults, but a few may need to look further afield to find an adult they can trust.

Having learnt about different forms of abuse and identified supportive adults, children are taught practical skills for dealing with situations that do not seem healthy or feel right. Different options and approaches are taught, and they learn to pick up the language that will help them express their thoughts and feelings clearly and directly.

The tools

Following the initial planning stage, in 2010 the NSPCC piloted models that were aimed to work with older primary school children. Working closely with schools, these models were then carefully evaluated and tweaked as necessary.

Over 4,500 primary schools have now been reached, and the message always begins with an assembly. Children are given a definition of abuse and how to move forwards if they are worried. This is then followed up with classroom sessions which back up the message and give children more practical information.

The classroom sessions are designed to be participative and interactive, including practical exercises and discussions. Some forms of abuse are more obvious and easier to detect than others; there are sessions focusing on neglect, which is more of a grey area and can cause confusion. One animation focuses on a boy called Guy who is neglected. Children are then asked various questions to develop their understanding of the issues and possible relevance to their own lives. *What is Guy feeling at this point?* and *What could he do?*

The community

Rather than being the responsibility of one particular teacher, the message is delivered through a community network of school volunteers and teachers, left to permeate through school and home cultures.

'While we are informing children about abuse,' Lee Mitchell explains, 'the wider community began to see that safeguarding is everyone's responsibility. Teachers learn to be more observant, listening to children and taking them seriously, but it needs to be a shared responsibility with other adults. If a child decides to confide in a trusted adult, that adult owes it to the child to be receptive.'

The NSPCC tries to approach issues with openness and transparency but Lee says they are happy to be challenged. 'We are not here to scare children, or ruin their innocence,' he explains, 'and we want parents to feel comfortable and up to speed with what we are doing. Anyone can look at the materials we use, and we can also provide more specific advice if this is appropriate in certain circumstances.'