

Keep Children Safe!!

The main strands of the Every Child Matters agenda includes one which requires us to “keep children safe”. Very reasonable, indeed essential, but to what does it specifically refer? During the lifetimes of most of us we have encountered numerous events which have impacted, directly or otherwise, upon the safety of children. My own memory produces recollections of Aberfan in 1966 when 116 children from the village school died, of Dunblane thirty years later when a gunman killed 16 children and their teacher, and of the incident in nearby Wolverhampton that same year when a nursery nurse, Lisa Potts, was seriously injured protecting her class from a machete-wielding attacker. Most of us will also recall the horrific cases in recent years beyond the shores of this country, most recently in Finland, when children were attacked in the “safety” of their own school or college.

These cases have all been traumatic and dramatic – they have all had national or even international impact and we have taken steps, following these incidents, to tighten up the security in our schools to minimize the risks to children and to staff. We have been all too well aware of the dangers inherent in our road system and have made numerous attempts to reduce their impact upon children. Much has been done (although much remains to be done) to improve levels of road safety and safety in the home.

We have addressed issues of drug abuse, alcohol and nicotine addiction and in the last year or so in particular we have attempted to impact upon healthy eating which, although really picking up the “keep children healthy” strand of ECM, arguably is dealing with a form of safety.

Have we done enough? Have we addressed all the possible risks to our children? We know that children themselves are doing much to counter bullying in schools – but that mention should remind us that the dangers which surround children are not only the overt physical ones.

To some extent we have become used to the forms of risk that can impact upon children – mostly because they are physical, we can visually identify the effects and the causes – and for these reasons we can make at least a half-decent attempt to deal with those self-same causes. Reference to bullying should, however, serve to remind us that, sometimes, the dangers are less easy to spot and therefore more difficult to address.

Threats brought about by paedophiles at one time were thought relatively easy to identify; they had to be able to come into contact with children in order to become a threat to them, and that meant that by ‘policing’ what activities were engaged in by children, this did give parents (in particular) the chance to monitor the contacts they made and to deal with them appropriately. That is not to say that problems did not occur – harm was done and, even although wrong-doers were sometimes caught and dealt with, there were often long-term issues for affected children and their families.

In recent years however a new source of paedophile activity has emerged, one which is far more difficult to police easily. That source is the Internet and particularly the

use of chat-rooms and what are referred to as social networking sites. Sites in question include Facebook, MySpace and Bebo but many others exist as do sites which support chat-rooms to which young people can sign up. In so many ways these sites do absolutely no harm and can be quite entertaining for young people – indeed, even of value – but it is very easy for anyone to infiltrate them and engage in communication with a potentially vulnerable young person.

A major problem with the Internet is not only that one might be dealing with a faceless (and placeless) correspondent who might live in Australia or, just as easily, in the next road, but also that there is really limited international legislation able to police *both* source *and* recipient of messages since each may live in different countries and so not be subject necessarily to a common legislative process. This, fraught, area is being addressed but progress is, inevitably, quite slow.

An organisation known as CEOP (Child Exploitation and Online Protection Centre) was created in the Spring of 2006 and it works throughout the United Kingdom to tackle issues of child sex abuse. It provides advice for parents, young people and children through the website www.thinkuknow.co.uk which would be well worth a visit by parents, governors and teachers alike. CEOP has developed strong international links and it involves police, business organisations and charitable bodies in its work; it too has its own web-site at www.ceop.gov.uk and this too should be visited.

Currently there are millions of images of child abuse on the Internet and there is a trade in their exchange between paedophiles – but every image that is displayed (or which may in future be displayed) is created as the direct consequence of a child being abused in some way and this must stop. Apart from the exchange of images the Internet is being used for “grooming” vulnerable young people who may become the next victims in this vile trade. Those who carry out grooming activities are frequently plausible and may often pretend to be young people of a similar age or background to the intended victim in order to gain their trust and to establish communication. Vulnerable youngsters often seek friendship through these social networking sites and can so easily become prey to paedophiles. CEOP has strongly urged that such sites should display an on-screen button that a user could press so as to report (potential) abuse if they felt uncomfortable with the way a dialogue was proceeding but this is slow to take off – surely an aspect which governors could pursue by making a request for their inclusion to those who run such sites.

Children, rightly, are strongly urged always to take someone with them if they agree to meet with someone with whom they have corresponded over the Internet – and even then only to meet in a suitable public place. Recent research has shown that 80% of children do in fact follow this advice – unfortunately 80% of *those* same children were found to take along another child, not an adult.

Schools (and parents) need to do much to minimize the attendant risks to children and young people – and governors do have a responsibility to ensure that this is done. For a starting point a visit to the “thinkuknow” website would be invaluable as it contains much helpful advice – access also to the CEOP site may provide much additional, and invaluable, information. On the CEOP website everyone should

watch “Claire’s video” which provides a lesson to all adults who may need persuading that there is little or nothing to worry about.

We have a clear duty of care towards children and vulnerable young people and must increase all our efforts to keep them safe. As governors we should therefore be using all means to push for suitable education so as to reduce, ideally to eradicate, these risks and to support the work of bodies which, like CEOP, have like objectives.

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