

# Minute Learning

## **Zak's Story:**

Zak lived with his mother and younger sibling, they moved address across county borders on several occasions without informing agencies. This made it difficult for practitioners to maintain contact with them. Zak's parents were separated but his father visited the family home. He received treatment at hospital for a health condition and due to this, Zak's parents requested that restrictions be placed on his activities in school. An early help assessment was completed after hospital staff raised concerns about Zak's welfare, but his parents did not fully cooperate with the process. Zak was electively home educated since the start of the Covid 19 pandemic. In 2022, aged 11, Zak was tragically killed by his father at the family home. His father had initially reported that Zak had suffered an unwitnessed fall from a tree. He had not been in a school environment for 21 months and he had last been seen by a health professional 19 months earlier. It is now known that Zak's mother was estranged from her family and friends and that his father displayed coercive and controlling behaviour towards her and that he had treated Zak very differently to his sibling.

## **Local Child Safeguarding Practice Review:**

Derby and Derbyshire Safeguarding Children Partnership (DDSCP) commissioned a review of the practice surrounding Zak and his family to help identify the improvements needed to safeguard and promote the welfare of children in future. Some of Zak's family members helped to identify the key learning areas and shape the recommendations which are outlined in the review. The review was published in August 2024: [Zak - LCSPR \(July 2024\)](#) alongside a [Summary of Progress](#) which shows developments made by agencies since Zak's death. The key learning areas identified in the review have shaped several best practice principles to help support practitioners and their managers when they are working with children and their families where elective home education is a feature.

# Key Learning Areas: **Best Practice Principles**

## **Recognising and Safeguarding Vulnerable Children**

- Carefully listen to children, especially when they may be about to make an allegation of abuse and where possible, speak to them alone.
- Remain alert to the possibility that parent(s) may prevent their children from disclosing abuse to practitioners.
- Act quickly when a safeguarding concern is identified to help reduce the risk of further harm being caused to the child.
- When emotional abuse of a child is witnessed, try to defuse the situation, record the incident, the actions taken and gather information from agencies to inform a safeguarding referral. Outline any emerging pattern of emotional abuse in the safeguarding referral.
- Consider whether the behaviours displayed by children in school, including taking food from others, may indicate abuse or neglect.
- Be curious with parents when they request restrictions on their children in school due to health concerns. Seek advice from health professionals about whether the restrictions are necessary, consider how the restrictions may impact on the child and think about how best to support them with health difficulties.
- Be curious about situations where parents may adopt different approaches to siblings.
- Communicate openly and honestly with parents when there are safeguarding concerns to help maintain a constructive relationship with them.

## **Coercion and Control**

- Remain vigilant to the possibility of hidden men in families and consider the impact of them on the safety of children, including how they may take steps to prevent practitioners from discovering abuse.
- Stay alert to signs that children and parent(s) may be victims of domestic abuse. Remain vigilant to indicators of coercion and control.
- Be aware that parents who are victims of domestic abuse may behave secretly to disguise harmful behaviour.

## **Elective Home Education (EHE)**

- Remember that EHE arrangements may intensify the vulnerability of children at home and could increase their exposure to harm.
- Consider that some parents may pursue EHE for their children to hide safeguarding concerns and to avoid the involvement of services.
- To help prevent silo working and to promote the welfare of children, establish robust arrangements which support regular communication with families and between organisations including schools, the EHE and children missing education services, early help and safeguarding teams and health services.
- Use a system which allows safeguarding information to be inputted and shared with the EHE service prior to a child being de-registered from school and where there is oversight of children who are electively home educated.

# Key Learning Areas: **Best Practice Principles**

## Early Help Assessments

- Take sufficient time to engage parent(s) and apply additional curiosity, especially if there are concerns that they may be trying to hide safeguarding issues by controlling the assessment process.
- Use supervision sessions and oversight from managers to help identify any gaps in the assessment, to reflect on concerns and to consider whether escalation is necessary.
- Use local guidance and assessment tools to ensure that all forms of abuse, neglect and violence are considered. Ensure assessments include a thorough analysis of risk, need, protective factors and strengths.
- Speak to parents separately to help identify any concerns about abuse or neglect and to explore their relationship and experiences in greater depth.
- Ask children what life is like for them and check that they know how to ask for help.
- Use internal safeguarding arrangements and multi-agency advice lines to strengthen thinking about safeguarding concerns, particularly when parents have not engaged with the early help assessment process.
- Where there are safeguarding concerns, remember that a lack of parental consent is not a barrier to gathering information from agencies to help determine the best way to support and protect a child.

## Transient Families

- Remember that children's vulnerabilities can increase if they move areas, especially if their family structure changes or they lose their support network.
- To help stay alert to safeguarding issues when children move areas, liaison between agencies across borders should be timely and supported by the sharing of written or electronic information.
- In undertaking joint work, agencies should show curiosity when a family's circumstances change, especially where there are frequent changes of address and attempts should be made to ensure that the circumstances of each child in a family is clearly known.
- Agencies working together across geographical borders should check if they have different interpretations of national guidance. They should seek to understand any differences so that a co-ordinated and consistent approach is provided to families.
- Where it is known that a child is electively home educated and living out of area, their health records should be shared across geographical borders.

# Further Reading

**DDSCP: Early Help Assessments: 7 Minute Briefing June 2024:** Top tips for completing early help assessments.

**DDSCP: Guidance for Completing a Family Early Help Assessment (May 2020):** Provides support to practitioners who are completing an early help assessment and action plan when there are concerns for a child's welfare, where they have emerging needs or their needs are unclear and where they may need input from coordinated services.

**Department for Education - Children's Wellbeing and Schools Bill (March 2025):** Outlines measures to ensure that children not in school are safe, including the use of a compulsory register and restrictions on children being home educated where there are safeguarding concerns.

**Derby City Council: Elective Home Education:** Advice and support about elective home education.

**Derbyshire Local Offer: Elective Home Education:** Details the responsibilities and legal duties of parents, schools and Derbyshire County Council in relation to elective home education.

**Derbyshire and Derby City Threshold Document (December 2024):** Supports the identification of children's needs to help determine the appropriate level of intervention.

**Derbyshire Schoolsnet:** Explains procedures for when a child is withdrawn from school to be educated at home.

**HM Government: Working Together to Safeguard Children (December 2023):** Guides multi-agency working to help, protect and promote the welfare of children.

**Keeping Children Safe in Education (2025):** Key paragraphs referencing elective home education (178-181).

**NCPCC Learning: Unseen Men, Learning from Case Reviews (2022):** Highlights the issues of not identifying or assessing key men involved in the care of children who died or suffered harm.

**Safe Lives: Ending Domestic Abuse - Coercive Control:** Highlights the signs of coercive control and how to respond.

**The Child Safeguarding Practice Review Panel: Safeguarding Children in Elective Home Education (May 2024):** Outlines common themes, patterns and learning from local child safeguarding practice reviews and rapid reviews to help safeguarding partners protect children who are electively home educated.

**The Families First Partnership Programme Guide (March 2025):** Sets out how every family can access the right help and support that they need with a strong emphasis on early intervention to prevent crisis.