

HIDDEN HARMS

Hidden harms are exactly what they say on the tin- they are risks and dangers that are harder to spot, aren't immediately obviously or seem invisible in everyday life. They can occur behind closed doors, online or are kept concealed for a range of reasons including coercion, manipulation,[CS1] fear or lack of awareness.

There is no definitive list of hidden harms, as almost all types of abuse can have hidden components, but there are some that all safeguarding professionals should be aware of and have increased vigilance for.

For example, research commissioned by the Children's Commissioner for England estimated that only around one in eight children who experience sexual abuse are identified by professionals, highlighting the significant challenge of recognising hidden harm.

These can include, but are not limited to:

Emotional abuse	Coercive control	Neglect
Exploitation (CCE or CSE)	Domestic abuse	Online abuse or grooming
Financial abuse	Substance misuse	Honour based violence
Sexual abuse	Modern slavery	Parental mental health issues
Fabricated or Induced illness (FII)		Female Genital Mutilation (FGM)

WHY HIDDEN HARM IS SO OFTEN MISSED



Abuse Isn't Always Obvious

Many people associate abuse with physical injury, but the most common forms of harm are often less visible.

Neglect and emotional abuse can be difficult to spot because they rarely leave obvious physical signs and may develop gradually over time



Children May Not Tell Anyone

Children who are experiencing harm often stay silent due to fear, shame, loyalty, or manipulation.

If they do disclose, it is usually through small hints, changes in behaviour, or partial conversations rather than a direct account.



Warning Signs Can Be Overlooked

Adults sometimes dismiss concerns as temporary family difficulties, challenging behaviour, or a difficult phase.

This tendency to explain away signs of harm can prevent timely intervention and support.



Harm Can Feel Normalised

Children who have experienced abuse, neglect or exploitation over a long period may not realise their experiences are harmful.

Some are actively groomed to believe what is happening is normal, deserved, or their own choice.

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INDICATORS

As with any part of Safeguarding, there is no definitive list of indicators because no two children will experience abuse or neglect in the same way. But there are signs that we can train staff to see that cross over all types of abuse, these include:



Sudden or noticeable changes in emotions, attitude or behaviour - as professionals we know what is normal for our children, so staff need to be trained to notice and record unusual changes or differences in how a child is acting or presenting.



Regression or behaving in ways that are more typical of a much younger child - some children who experience abuse or neglect will appear to take a 'step back' in their development, this can be in things such as toileting, but also in the way they speak and interact with others or even in their learning.



Changes in appearance or physical presentation - a child may regularly appear unkempt, exhausted, hungry or with injuries that cannot be explained. This may be a sudden change or decline over time.



Demonstrating sexualised language, knowledge or behaviours beyond their age or stage of development - if a child is being sexually abused, they may show related harmful behaviours when around their peers. This could include use of language, sharing or talking about pornography or indecent images or acting inappropriately around others.



Showing anxiety about certain people, places or returning home - it's important to look for signs around key times of day or children's reactions to everyday occurrences, a child may be reluctant to go home or with a certain adult or flinch if an adult moves too close to them.



Reacting strongly to raised voices, conflict or unexpected physical contact - children who have experienced trauma or are experiencing hidden harms may react differently to usual. They may overreact and have a greater or more explosive response or underreact to something and seem totally unphased or indifferent.



Frequently missing school, avoiding activities or becoming socially isolated - we know that attendance is a key factor in safeguarding and needs to be closely monitored to allow for spotting trends and patterns. Also, the reasons behind absence or changes in attendance need to be understood first and foremost from a safeguarding perspective, rather than a data driven approach.



Appearing unusually watchful, anxious, overly obedient or afraid of making mistakes - children experiencing harm will often be hypervigilant for danger and put their own 'strategies' in place to keep themselves safe - this may mean they avoid conflict, people please or become overly self-critical.

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CREATING A CULTURE OF CURIOSITY

Professional curiosity is the thoughtful and respectful drive to explore beyond the surface. It means asking insightful questions, seeking clarity and recognising when something doesn't feel right, especially to identify risks and safeguard those who may be at risk of abuse or neglect.

Professional curiosity has to be at the heart of effective work with children, young people, families and professional colleagues. It helps us understand people's experiences, perspectives and circumstances so that we can provide the right support and help them achieve the best possible outcomes.



Notice the subtle signs.



Look beyond the obvious.



Question assumptions professionally.



Stay curious and reflective.



Follow concerns through to resolution.

PROACTIVE ACTIONS

Schools and education settings need to approach hidden harms as 'it could happen here' and always be vigilant for the signs and symptoms, no matter how small. There are a number of ways you can be proactive in identifying children who may be suffering from hidden harms, including:



- Build trusted relationships between pupils and staff through regular check-ins.
- Train all staff, no matter their role, to recognise subtle indicators of abuse, neglect, exploitation and mental health concerns.
- Use pupil voice surveys to identify emerging concerns and unmet needs.
- Ensure clear, age-appropriate education on relationships, consent, online safety and healthy boundaries.
- Ensure children know how and where to seek help, both in and outside school.
- Maintain effective safeguarding recording and information-sharing systems.
- Regularly review safeguarding data to identify trends and recurring concerns.
- Engage parents and carers early when concerns are identified, where appropriate and safe.
- Pay particular attention to vulnerable groups, including children with SEND, young carers, and those experiencing disadvantage.
- Establish a strong pastoral support system for pupils requiring additional help.
- Encourage staff to report concerns immediately, no matter how minor they may appear.
- Use safeguarding audits and reviews to identify gaps in practice.
- Regularly reinforce the message that safeguarding is everyone's responsibility.

We all know that keeping children safe must be our priority and to do this, we need to see beyond the obvious. Through quality relationships, building trust and using our professional curiosity, we are able to uncover the hidden harms and take appropriate action to protect the children in our care.