

Safeguarding Blog: Safeguarding Lessons from the Sara Sharif case

The murder of ten-year-old Sara Sharif is a disturbing reminder of the responsibility schools carry in protecting children. The recent Child Safeguarding Practice Review Executive Summary paints a picture of systemic failings and missed opportunities across agencies. For schools, the lessons are urgent and sobering: children can be hidden in plain sight, and safeguarding practice must go beyond compliance to proactive protection.

Sara's death is a tragic reminder that safeguarding is everyone's responsibility. Schools cannot afford to operate in isolation or assume that compliance alone is enough. By embedding vigilance, curiosity, cultural competence, and strong information-sharing practices, schools can help ensure that no child is hidden from view and that safeguarding failures are not repeated.

Sara's case illustrates how easily a child can disappear from professional oversight. When a child transitions from school to elective home education (EHE), schools lose the valuable daily contact that often helps spot early signs of vulnerability. Rather than viewing EHE with suspicion, it is essential for schools to approach these changes with heightened vigilance and proactive support. With the upcoming Children's Wellbeing and Schools Bill set to introduce new measures around EHE, schools have an opportunity to strengthen their safeguarding response. By treating all withdrawals as important moments for careful review and ensuring robust attendance monitoring and escalation procedures, we can work together to make sure no child slips through the cracks.

The review also highlights the dangers of coercive control. Sara's father was a serial abuser who manipulated professionals, presenting a façade of compliance while continuing to exert control. This is a reminder that perpetrators can groom staff as well as victims. Schools must ensure that staff understand the dynamics of domestic abuse, including disguised compliance, and avoid relying solely on parental accounts. Professional curiosity, asking difficult questions, probing inconsistencies, and refusing to accept superficial explanations is essential.

Cultural and language barriers played a role in this case too. Sara's mother was denied interpreter support in court, and cultural explanations, such as Sara wearing a hijab at the age of eight, were accepted without deeper inquiry. Schools must be alert to the possibility that cultural practices may mask safeguarding concerns. Seeking expert advice, ensuring interpreters are available, and approaching cultural issues with sensitivity but also with curiosity, are all vital steps in protecting children.

Perhaps most importantly, the review shows how fragmented information can lead to tragedy. Agencies failed to join the dots, and opportunities to intervene were missed. Schools are often the first line of defence and a recognized protective factor. Their role in sharing concerns promptly and ensuring information is triangulated cannot be overstated. Safeguarding discussions must always consider worst-case scenarios, however unthinkable they may seem.

Top Tips for Best Safeguarding Practice

- **Trigger Immediate Checks for Elective Home Education (EHE):** As soon as a parent notifies the school of their intention to withdraw a child for EHE, treat this as a safeguarding

alert. Promptly review the child's safeguarding record, speak directly with the child (if possible), engage with parents/carers, notify the local authority, escalate any concerns, and document all actions. These steps ensure that no child is removed from school without careful consideration of their safety and welfare, and will become even more vital with the upcoming Children's Wellbeing and Schools Bill.

- **Be Professionally Curious:** Encourage staff to probe inconsistencies, ask difficult questions, and share concerns as well as follow up on sudden changes in behaviour.
- **Strengthen Attendance Monitoring:** Treat all withdrawals for EHE as safeguarding alerts, not just administrative processes. Audit attendance and absence procedures to prevent children from disappearing unnoticed.
- **Embed Domestic Abuse Awareness:** Ensure staff training covers the dynamics of domestic abuse, including coercive control and disguised compliance.
- **Promote Cultural Competence:** Use interpreters by offering language support for families and children who need it to ensure that language barriers are not masking safeguarding concerns.
- When cultural issues arise that staff are unfamiliar with, encourage staff to respectfully ask questions about cultural norms and practices, rather than make assumptions.
- **Get expert help:** Consult cultural advisors or community groups when needed.
- **Train staff:** Include cultural awareness in safeguarding training.
- **Connect with communities:** Build relationships with local cultural and faith groups.
- **Challenge bias:** Remind staff to reflect on their own biases and avoid stereotyping families based on culture, religion or language.
- **Share concerns:** Document and escalate cultural issues that may impact child safety.
- **Prioritise Information Sharing:** Document concerns clearly, share information promptly, and escalate when explanations do not align with evidence.
- **Think the Unthinkable:** Always consider worst-case scenarios in safeguarding discussions, however uncomfortable they may be.
- **Work Together and Never Decide Alone:** Safeguarding is a shared responsibility. School staff should always consult with colleagues, safeguarding partners, and external agencies when concerns arise. Multi-agency collaboration ensures that decisions are well-informed and that no child is left at risk due to isolated decision-making.

Author: Soola Georgiou

Principal Officer Safeguarding in Education