

Child Protection Statement

Introductory Statement

The Board of Management, staff and representatives of parents of St. Declan's Special School agreed the following policy. Our school caters for children experiencing emotional and behavioural difficulties and high functioning autism.

Children with emotional and behavioural difficulties and high functioning autism are more vulnerable and consequently more at risk of becoming victims of abuse for the following reasons:

- Poor communication skills
- Limited sense of danger
- Possible need for intimate care
- Greater reliance on adults to help child self-regulate and set boundaries
- Need for attention, friendship or affection
- Limited assertiveness and poorer self-confidence
- Developmentally poorer understanding of sexuality or sexual behaviour than peers
- More vulnerable to online grooming
- Fear of not being believed

Behavioural and communication problems often occur together (e.g. Cross, 2004) *Children First 2017* highlights the fact that mental health issues and communication difficulties may place children at greater risk of abuse or neglect (p11)

In an effort to address the personal safety needs of children, the Stay Safe pack is available to assist teachers with this work. The revised Stay Safe program is available at this link: <http://www.pdst.ie/staysafe>. Also, the Stay Safe Walk Tall seminar is available when you scroll to the bottom of <http://www.pdst.ie/staysafe>.

Teachers and Special Needs Assistants have a vital role in supporting their safety and should therefore have access to training in child protection. (www.tusla.ie/children-first/children-first-e-learning-programme)

Rationale

The Board of Management of St. Declan's School has adopted the *Children First: National Guidance for the Protection and Welfare of Children 2017* (Department of Children and Youth Affairs) and the *Child Protection Procedures for Primary and Post-Primary Schools (revised 2023)* <https://www.gov.ie/en/policy-information/d7be05-child-protection/> (Department of Education & Skills 2017). The school aims to provide its pupils with the highest standards of care and protection, in order to promote each child's well-being and safeguard him/her from harm while in the school.

Relationship to Ethos

St. Declan's School seeks to help all pupils to grow and develop into healthy, confident, mature adults, capable of realising their full potential. We strive to create a happy, safe environment for the children where they feel secure, knowing that if they have concerns, they will be listened to with understanding and respect and that action will be taken to address those concerns.

Aims

This policy aims to

- Develop awareness and responsibility in the area of child protection among all staff members and wider school community (Teachers, SNAs, Bus Escorts, Swim Teachers, Ancillary staff, Parents)
- Ensure that all staff members are familiar with the “*Children First*” and DES guidelines and procedures in relation to child abuse
- Put in place clear procedures for all personnel dealing with suspicions and allegations of child abuse
- Identify curricular content and resources that contribute to the prevention of child abuse and which also enable children to deal properly with abuse if it occurs
- Identify other policy areas that need to be amended in light of the guidelines

Roles and Responsibilities

- The Board of Management has primary responsibility for the care and welfare of all pupils
- The Designated Liaison Person has specific responsibility for child protection within the school
- All staff have a general duty of care to ensure that arrangements are in place to protect children from harm

Copies of the following guidelines are available in the school and it is the responsibility of all staff to familiarise themselves with the guidelines.

- *Child Protection Procedures for Primary and Post-Primary Schools (revised 2023)* (Department of Education & Skills 2017)
- *Children First: National Guidance for the Protection and Welfare of Children 2017* (Department of Children and Youth Affairs)
- *especially*
 - o *Chapter 2 Definition & Recognition of Child Abuse*
 - o *Chapter 3 Basis for Reporting & Standard Reporting Procedures*
 - o *Appendix 1 Signs and Symptoms Of Child Abuse*

Designated Liaison Person (DLP)

The Board of Management has appointed **Annie Devine**, as Designated Liaison Person (DLP) with specific responsibility for child protection. Should circumstances warrant it, **Darragh McWalters**, the deputy principal, shall act as Deputy DLP. The DLP has specific responsibility for child protection and will represent the school in all dealings with Tusla, An Garda Síochána and other relevant parties in connection with allegations of abuse. All matters pertaining to the processing or investigation of child abuse should be processed through the DLP. Any staff member who is party to a child protection concern should proceed with absolute discretion and confidentiality.

Role of the Designated Liaison Person (DLP)

- The DLP acts as a liaison with any outside agencies such as Tusla, An Garda Síochána, and other parties with child protection concerns
- The DLP will inform all school personnel of the availability of *Children First: National Guidance for the Protection and Welfare of Children (revised 2023)*. S/he will circulate the guidelines and make a copy available in the office for all staff to access and suggest staff read Chapters 2 & 3 Appendix 1 of the Children First 2017 guidelines
- The DLP will be available to staff for consultation regarding suspicions or disclosures of abuse. S/he will keep records of these consultations.
- The DLP will seek advice from Tusla.
- The DLP will report suspicions and allegations of child abuse to Tusla or/and An Garda Síochána based on this advice.

- The DLP will maintain proper records in a secure, confidential manner and in a secure location.
- The DLP will keep up to date on current developments regarding child protection.

Guidelines for the DLP in handling reported concerns and disclosure

- Where the DLP/Deputy DLP have concerns about a child, but are not sure whether to report the matter to Tusla, they should seek appropriate advice. To do this the DLP/Deputy should make informal contact with the local assigned (on duty) Social Worker where the child lives. The DLP/Deputy in this case, should be explicit that s/he is requesting advice and not making a report. If advised to report the matter, the DLP will act on that advice.
- A report will then be made to Tusla by the DLP/Deputy in person, by telephone or in writing, including email. In the event of an emergency or non-availability of Tusla staff, the report should be made to An Garda Síochána. The DLP should also report the matter to the Chairperson of the BOM, who should then follow the procedures as outlined in Chapter 2 of Children First National Guidelines for the Protection and Welfare of Children (revised 2023).
- A standard reporting form is completed by the DLP/Deputy as comprehensively as possible (See Appendix 1, Child Protection Guidelines and Procedures, DES).
- Parents/guardians will normally be informed that a report is being made but is not required under the Children First Act 2015. It may be decided that informing the parent/carers is likely to endanger the child or place the child at further risk. The decision not to inform the parent/carers should be briefly recorded together with the reasons for not doing so.
- When the allegation is against the DLP, the chairperson of the BOM then assumes responsibility for reporting the matter to TUSLA and filling in the standard reporting form.
- Where there are allegations or suspicions of Peer Abuse the DLP will follow the same procedures.
- Parents of all parties will be notified and the DLP will inform the Chairperson.
- Principal and class teachers will make arrangements to meet separately with all parents, to resolve the matter.
- The school will make arrangements to minimise the possibility of the abusive behaviour recurring.

Prevention

The ***Stay Safe*** programme is the primary resource used in this school plays a valuable role in helping children develop skills to recognise abuse and potentially abusive situations. The programme is taught as part of the school's Social, Personal and Health Education (SPHE) curriculum under the strand unit "Safety and Protection".

Procedures

All staff (teachers, SNAs, bus escorts, swim teacher, ancillary staff, etc.) in this school will follow the recommendations for reporting concerns or disclosures as outlined in "*Children First*" and in the Department of Education and Skills document "*Child Protection, Guidelines and Procedures*".

Practice

The staff and Board of Management of this school have identified the following as areas of specific concern in relation to child protection. Following consultation and discussion the staff and Board of Management have agreed that the following practices be adopted:

1. Recruitment and selection of staff

When recruiting staff (and volunteers) the school needs to satisfy itself that they select people of the highest calibre insofar as can be determined. While correct procedures must always be followed in relation to advertising, interviewing, and the selection of staff, other practices should also be considered.

All applicants should be required to supply in writing information which includes:

- Appropriate personal details – address, PPS number, and other details;
- A resume of past and current work/volunteering experience, indicating relevant qualifications or skills acquired; explaining gaps on resume;
- At least two references including addresses and telephone numbers of referees. Verification of references will be sought through making verbal contact with the referees.
- Garda vetting, where necessary and allowed by law, will be sought but it is important to note that vetting is not in itself a complete safeguard, as many perpetrators of abuse are not known to the authorities.

1. General Conduct

It is imperative in all our dealings with the children in our care that a balance is struck between the rights of the child and the need for intervention. In general any

physical contact between school personnel and a child should be in response to the needs of the child. While physical contact can be used to comfort, reassure or assist a child the following should be factors in assessing its appropriateness:

- It is acceptable to the child concerned;
- It is open and not secretive;
- It is appropriate to the age and developmental stage of the child.

School personnel should not do things of a personal nature for a child which the child can do for him/herself. Inappropriate physical contact also includes rough physical play and horseplay (tickling, wrestling etc.)

All children should be treated with equal respect – favouritism is not acceptable. School personnel should never engage in or allow:

- The use of inappropriate language or behaviours e.g. sarcasm;
- Physical punishment of any kind;
- Sexually provocative games or sexually suggestive comments about or to a child;
- The use of sexually explicit or pornographic material etc.

All media products (DVDs, CDs etc.) should be checked for their appropriateness with regards to age and suitability. Where a doubt exists in this regard, principal, parents and Board of Management should be consulted as necessary.

It is incumbent on the Board of Management that all school personnel are familiar with the DES guidelines on child protection and to ensure that they are adhered to in the event of concerns or disclosures around child protection. The DLP should be notified promptly of any concerns with regard to the behaviour of a staff member or any allegations of abuse made by a child or an adult.

1. Toileting/Intimate care

Children with specific toileting/intimate care needs

Normally a child with specific toileting needs will have access to a Special Needs Assistant. After the child is enrolled in the school a meeting will be convened at which all school personnel involved with the child will attend along with the child's parents. At that meeting the needs of the child should be addressed and agreement reached as to how the school can meet those needs. It is important that those involved in the intimate care needs of the child agree practices which are acceptable to the staff, the child and the parents. The Board of Management should be made aware of the practices agreed.

Toileting Accidents

Toileting accidents are not uncommon particularly at junior level, and it is therefore prudent that schools address how these situations will be dealt with in the school. Clean underwear and suitable clothing will be kept in the school so that if a pupil has an 'accident' of this nature they will in the first instance be offered fresh clothing into which they can change.

If the pupil, for whatever reason cannot clean or change themselves, the child will be assisted by members of staff.

1. Changing for games, PE and swimming

In our school parents are requested to ensure that their children wear suitable clothing and footwear on days when they have PE, games or swimming. Pupils will be expected to dress and undress themselves for games/PE/swimming. Where assistance is needed this will be done in the communal areas and with the consent of parents. Under no circumstances will members of staff or volunteers be expected to, or allowed, to dress/undress a child in a cubicle/private area.

1. Supervision of children

Children are supervised from 8.50 a.m. until 2.30p.m. for all normal school days. During breaks teacher and SNAs will supervise. Any accidents (requiring attention within the school) will be recorded in the accident report book. Any strangers who approach the children will be asked to identify themselves. Children will not be permitted to speak to passers-by during outings.

Staff will not take children, on journeys, alone in their cars. Children will not be released to adults who are unknown to the teacher/school staff unless parents have informed the school in writing or by telephone authorising the teacher about the new arrangement.

Where one parent informs the school that another parent is not allowed access to their children the school will require a copy of court orders which outline details of same. In the event of a parent not complying with a court order an Garda Síochána will be summoned to the school to enforce it.

1. Individual sessions

Where possible children will be taught in small group settings, but on occasions, and in their own best interests, children may require individual tuition/consultation. Every effort will be made to ensure the protection of the child and staff member and to this end the door will always be open/or in a room with class window (such as

conservatory, the hall, and entrance way) and the session conducted in clear view of passers-by.

1. Visitors/guest speakers

Visitors, volunteers and guest speakers will not be left alone with children. The school will check out the credentials of the visitor/guest speaker and will ensure the content/material in use is appropriate.

1. Internet safety

The school's Acceptable Usage Policy will address child protection concerns regarding internet usage (see separate policy)

Guidelines for Recognition of Child Abuse

All signs and symptoms must be examined in the total context of the child's situation and family circumstances. There are commonly three stages in the identification of child abuse.

These are: –

- Considering the possibility
- Looking out for signs of abuse
- Recording of information

Suspicious of Abuse

Staff members who suspect abuse should refer to Children First National Guidelines for the Protection and Welfare of Children (revised 2023), especially

- *Chapter 2: Child Abuse – What is it? How do I recognise it?* – Read the entire chapter to include
 - o *Reasonable Grounds for Concern (page 6)*
 - o *Types of child abuse and how they may be recognised*
 - o *Reporting a concern about a child*
- *Chapter 3: Mandated Persons*

Staff members should observe and record over time the dates, signs, symptoms, behaviour causing them concern.

They should inform the DLP and pass on all records.

If the reporting person or member of the school staff and the DLP is satisfied that there are reasonable grounds for the suspicion/allegation, the procedures for reporting as laid out in 'Children First' – Chapter 2 (entire chapter), will be adhered to.

Handling Disclosures from Children

When information is offered in confidence the member of staff will need to act with sensitivity in responding to the disclosure. The member of staff will need to reassure the child, and retain his/her trust, while explaining the need for action and the possible consequences, which will necessarily involve other adults being informed. It is important to tell the child that everything possible will be done to protect and support him/her but not to make promises that cannot be kept e.g. promising not to tell anyone else. The welfare of the child is regarded as the first and paramount consideration. In so far as is practicable, due consideration will be given, having regard to age and understanding, the wishes of the child.

The following advice is offered to school personnel to whom a child makes a disclosure of abuse.

- Remain calm.
- Listen to the child with sensitivity and openness.
- Take all disclosures seriously
- Do not ask leading questions or make suggestions to the child
- Offer reassurance but do not make promises.
- Do not stop a child recalling significant events
- Do not over react
- Explain that further help may have to be sought
- Record the discussion accurately and retain the record of dates, times, names, locations, context and factual details of conversation.

This information should then be passed onto the DLP and a record will be retained in the school.

The Chairperson of the Board of Management will be informed before the DLP makes contact with the relevant authorities unless the situation demands that more immediate action be taken for the safety of the child in which case the Chair may be informed after the report has been submitted.

Any Professional who suspects child abuse may inform parents/carers if a report is to be submitted to Tusla or An Garda Síochána unless doing so is likely to endanger the

child. Reporting to parent/carers is not legally required; good judgement by the DLP and BOM should be made.

In cases of emergency, where a child appears to be at immediate and serious risk, and a duty social worker is unavailable, An Garda Síochána should be contacted. Under no circumstances should a child be left in a dangerous situation pending Tusla intervention.

Child Protection Meetings / Case Conferences

- A request is made from Tusla through the DLP who should consult with the Chairperson of the BOM of the school. The Chairperson may seek clarification through the DLP as to why the attendance of the school employee is necessary and ascertain who else will be present.
- The school employee may complete a report for the meeting/conference.
- The school employee will be advised if children/parents/guardians are going to be present. The school employee may contact the Chairperson of the Child Protection Meeting for advice.
- The school employee may keep a child's behaviour under closer observation, if requested to do so. This may include observing the child's behaviour, peer interactions, school progress or informal conversations.
- In all cases, individuals who refer or discuss their concerns about the care and protection of children with Tusla staff, should be informed of the likely steps to be taken by the professionals involved. Where appropriate and within the normal limits of confidentiality, reporting staff will be kept informed about the outcomes of any enquiry or investigation following on from their report
- Teachers attending a child protection meeting/case conference should familiarise themselves with the protocol outlined in pgs. 13-14 Child Protection Guidelines and Procedures, DES.

Allegations Against School Employees

The most important consideration for the Chairperson, Board of Management or the DLP is the safety and protection of the child. However, employees also have a right to protection against claims which are false or malicious.

As employers, the Board of Management should always seek legal advice as the circumstances can vary from one case to another.

There are two procedures to be followed:

1. The reporting Procedure

2. The Procedure for dealing with the Employee.

The DLP has responsibility for reporting the matter to Tusla. The Chairperson, Board of Management has responsibility, acting in consultation with his/her Board, for addressing the employment issues. ***If the allegation is against the DLP, the Chairperson of the Board of Management will assume the responsibility for reporting the matter to Tulsa.***

Reporting

When an allegation of abuse is made against a school employee, the DLP should immediately act in accordance with the procedures outlined in “Child Protection.”

A written statement of the allegation should be sought from the person/agency making the report. The DLP should always inform the Chairperson of the Board of Management.

School employees, other than the DLP who receive allegations against another school employee, should immediately report the matter to the DLP. School employees who form suspicions regarding conduct of another school employee should consult with the DLP. The procedures outlined will then be followed.

The chairperson of the Board and DLP should make the employee aware privately

1. That an allegation has been made against him/her
2. The nature of the allegation
3. Whether or not Tusla or An Gardaí has been/will be/must be/should be informed.

The employee should be given a copy of the written allegation and any other relevant documentation. The employee should be requested to respond to the allegation in writing to the Board of Management within a specified period and told that this may be passed to the Gardaí, Tusla, and legal advisers.

The priority in all cases is that no child be exposed to unnecessary risk. Therefore, as a matter of urgency, the Chairperson should take any necessary protective measures. These measures should be proportionate to the level of risk and should not unreasonably penalise the employee in any way unless to protect the child.

If the nature of the allegations warrant immediate action in the Chairperson's opinion, the Board of Management should be convened to consider the matter. The Board will consider feedback if any has been received from Tulsa, Gardaí or relevant source. This may result in the Board of Management directing that the employee absent him/herself from the school forthwith while the matter is being investigated (Administrative Leave). When the Board of Management is unsure as to whether this

should occur, advice should be sought from the Gardaí and/or the Child Care Manager of Tulsa and the legal advisers to the Board of Management.

Administrative Leave

Should the Board of Management direct that the employee absent him/herself as above, such absence of the employee would be regarded as administrative leave of absence with pay and not suspension and would not imply any degree of guilt. The DES should be immediately informed.

Board of Management

The Chairperson should inform the Board of Management of all the details and remind the members of their serious responsibility to maintain strict confidentiality on all matters relating to the issue and the principles of due process and natural justice.

Success Criteria

We will evaluate the success of this policy using the following criteria:

- Delivery and participation by all staff in training
- Delivery of the SPHE curriculum
- Resources to support the delivery of SPHE
- Delivery and participation by children in the Stay Safe Programme
- Assessment of these procedures by participants following a child protection case
- Feedback from all staff

Timeframe for Implementation

These procedures will be implemented following ratification by the BOM.

Timeframe for Review

At the first staff meeting of every year the DLP will remind all staff of the guidelines and copies of Chapter 2 & 3 of The Children First Guidelines 2017 and Child Protection Guidelines and Procedures, DES will be given to those who require them.

A review will be conducted based on the criteria above, following any and all incidents when the guidelines are used.

Responsibility for Review

- DLP, Principal, All Staff and Board of Management

Review and Special Resolution adopted 9th November 2011 following publication of revised 'Children First' guidelines and the Department of Education and Skills' Child Protection Procedures for Primary and Post Primary Schools 2011 (see below)

Special resolution in respect of Child Protection Policy at St. Declan's School

The Board of Management recognises that child protection and welfare considerations permeate all aspects of school life and must be reflected in all of the school's policies, practices and activities. Accordingly, in accordance with the requirements of the Department of Education and Skills' Child Protection Procedures for Primary and Post Primary Schools, the Board of Management of St. Declan's School has agreed the following

1. The Board of Management has adopted and will implement fully and without modification the Department's Child Protection Procedures for Primary and Post Primary Schools as part of its overall child protection policy.
2. **The Designated Liaison Person (DLP) is Annie Devine**
3. **The Deputy Designated Liaison Person (Deputy DLP) is Darragh McWalters**
4. In its policies, practices and activities, St. Declan's School will adhere to the following principles of best practice in child protection and welfare:

The school will

- recognise that the protection and welfare of children is of paramount importance, regardless of all other considerations;
- fully co-operate with the relevant statutory authorities in relation to child protection and welfare matters
- adopt safe practices to minimise the possibility of harm or accidents happening to children and protect workers from the necessity to take unnecessary risks that may leave themselves open to accusations of abuse or neglect;
- develop a practice of openness with parents and encourage parental involvement in the education of their children; and
- fully respect confidentiality requirements in dealing with child protection matters.

The school will also adhere to the above principles in relation to any adult pupil with a special vulnerability.

- The policy has been made available to school personnel and the Parents' Association and is readily accessible to parents on request. A copy of this policy will be made available to the Department and the patron if requested.
- The policy will be reviewed by the Board of Management once in every school year.

This policy resolution was adopted by the Board of Management in September 2024.