Keeping safe

The views of principals, teachers and other school staff in relation to teaching “keeping safe” messages in primary schools in Northern Ireland

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## Glossary of general terms

### Appropriate and inappropriate touch
Taken from the Children’s Knowledge of Abuse Questionnaire (Tutty, 1995):

> Sometimes you feel good when someone touches you – those are good touches – like hugs and gentle pats on the back. Some touches feel bad – like pinches or bites. They hurt or feel uncomfortable. Even kisses from someone you don’t like can be bad touches. Sometimes touches are confusing – that’s when it’s hard to decide if they are good or bad. For example, someone you like might give you a hug, but they might squeeze too hard. You are the one to decide if a touch is good or bad, because you know how it feels for you.

### Bullying
Defined by Olweus (1994) as “aggressive behaviour or intentional ‘harm doing’ that is carried out repeatedly and over time in an interpersonal relationship characterised by an imbalance of power”.

### Child
Defined by the Children (NI) Order 1995 as being a child or young person up to 18 years of age.

### Child Protection Support Service for Schools (CPSSS)
Based within the Education Welfare Service in each education and library board area, the service provides child protection advice and training to designated teachers and school governors.

### Code of practice
Defined by the Education (NI) Order 1996 as referring to the formal process of assessing special educational needs.

### Controlled school
Under the management of the school’s board of governors, with the employing authority being the education and library board for the school’s region in Northern Ireland.

### Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment (CCEA)
A unique educational body in the UK bringing together the three areas of curriculum, examinations and assessment.

### DCSF
Department for Children, Schools and Families.

### DHSSPS (NI)
Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety (Northern Ireland).

### Domestic abuse
Violence that occurs within families or in the home.

### DTCP
Designated Teacher for Child Protection.

### EAL
English as an additional language.

### Integrated school
A school that brings pupils, governors and staff together in roughly equal numbers from Protestant, Catholic, other faith and no faith backgrounds. These schools are developed, supported and promoted by the Northern Ireland Council for Integrated Education.

### Key Stage 2
In Northern Ireland, this covers Primary school years 5, 6 and 7 with children aged 8 to 11.

### Mainstream school
Any school not designated as a special school.

### Maintained school
In this report, this term refers to Catholic Maintained schools, which are owned by the Catholic Church through a system of trustees and managed by a board of governors. Recurrent costs are met by the education and library boards, who also employ non-teaching staff. Teachers are employed by the Council for Catholic Maintained Schools (CCMS).

### NSPCC

### Ofsted
Office for Standards in Education, Children’s Services and Skills.

### Parental involvement in preventative education
A broad concept that may include a parent: (1) allowing their child to participate in an education programme in the classroom; (2) reinforcing skills taught in school at home; (3) participating in the delivery of class lessons; (4) attending prevention and parental awareness programmes; (5) educating their child themselves regarding the detection and reporting of maltreatment; and (6) taking active steps to reduce risk factors in their child’s life (Finkelhor, 1984; Nye et al, 2006; Reppucci et al, 1994; Tutty, 1997).

### PD&MU
The personal development and mutual understanding curriculum.

### Preventative education
In this report, this term refers to teaching “keeping safe” messages about bullying, child abuse and domestic abuse to children in primary schools in Northern Ireland.
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PSNI
Police Service of Northern Ireland.

Relationship and sexuality education (RSE)
A lifelong process that encompasses the acquisition of knowledge, understanding and skills, and the development of attitudes, beliefs and values about personal and social relationships, and gender issues.

SEN
Special educational needs.

SENCO
Special educational needs coordinator. Special education is the education of students with special needs in a way that addresses the students’ individual differences and needs.

Special school
Article 3(5) of the Education (NI) Order 1996 defines a special school as “a controlled or voluntary school which is specially organised to make special educational provision for pupils with special educational needs and is recognised by the Department [of Education] as a special school”.

Statement of SEN
According to the Education (NI) Order 1996, following formal assessment of special educational needs, the education and library board makes and maintains a formal statement of need and of the provision required to meet that need.

WAG
Welsh Assembly Government.

Glossary of research and statistical terms

Instrumental case study
The case study in this report comprises a number of primary schools. According to Wellington (2000), instrumental case study designs are useful in providing insight into a particular issue, while Denzin and Lincoln (2000, p437) stated that: “The case is of secondary interest, it plays a supportive role, and it facilitates our understanding of something else. The case still is looked at in depth, its contents scrutinized, its ordinary activities detailed, but all because this helps the researcher to pursue the external interest.”

NVivo
A qualitative data analysis computer software package.
1 Introduction

The primary aim of this research was to engage school staff (including school leaders, teachers, classroom assistants, and other professionals working in the special education sector) as key stakeholders in exploring their views and experiences in relation to teaching “keeping safe” messages through preventative education within primary schools in Northern Ireland. A series of focus groups were employed within phases 1 and 2 of the research.

This research also sought to identify the professional training, development and support needs of school staff in relation to the development of effective preventative education within primary schools.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Key recommendations from the research</th>
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<tr>
<td>• Relevant government departments in Northern Ireland should embrace the opportunity that exists to deliver effective preventative education in primary schools within the context of a wider public health approach to keeping children safe. The Department of Education (NI) should lead this development.</td>
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<tr>
<td>• The Safeguarding Board for Northern Ireland (SBNI) should consider the development and implementation of a public education campaign to engage and educate parents about the benefits of preventative education.</td>
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<td>• The Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety (DHSSPS) should ensure that children’s social care services are appropriately resourced to respond effectively to disclosures that arise from teaching “keeping safe” messages and to provide ongoing therapeutic support.</td>
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<tr>
<td>• The Department of Education (NI) should fully resource and implement a comprehensive package of training, development and support for teachers and other school staff to equip them to deliver effective preventative education.</td>
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<td>• Implementing effective preventative education should be an integral part of a school’s development plan and should be supported through the education sector’s training and development infrastructure, eg included in initial teacher training (ITT), continuing professional development (CPD) and leadership training. It should incorporate:</td>
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<td>- the development of a child-centred ethos among school leaders;</td>
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<td>- opportunities for school staff to explore their concerns about teaching “keeping safe” messages, and to practice and develop their confidence, competence and skills in handling sensitive issues;</td>
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<td>- the promotion of effective multi-agency working with particular focus on relationships between school staff, social services personnel and other agencies;</td>
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<td>- the provision of ongoing support in relation to teaching preventative education and responding appropriately to disclosures; and</td>
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<td>- the development of effective processes to engage, educate and support parents regarding preventative education, and to maximise the input of external agencies to support the work of teachers and other school staff.</td>
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<td>• The Department of Education (NI) should provide a range of resources to facilitate teachers and other school staff to deliver key prevention messages to children attending primary and special schools.</td>
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NSPCC services in Northern Ireland focus on the most acute forms of abuse and the most vulnerable children at highest risk. The services provided include treatment for children who have experienced abuse, as well as support for those who have been exposed to domestic violence. The NSPCC also provides support for looked after children and for young witnesses who have to go through the trauma of giving evidence in criminal trials. The new ChildLine Schools Service provides information to children in primary schools about how to protect themselves from bullying and child abuse.

The NSPCC Strategy 2009–2016 focuses on the following priorities:

- neglect
- physical abuse in high-risk families (violent adults, alcohol and drug abuse, and mental health issues)
- sexual abuse
- children under one
- children with disabilities
- children from certain black and minority ethnic (BME) communities
- looked after children.

Background

Prevalence and impact

Child maltreatment incidence and prevalence data confirms that many children living in Northern Ireland, the Republic of Ireland and Great Britain experience bullying (including cyberbullying) and domestic abuse, as well as physical, sexual and emotional abuse and neglect in their daily lives (Asmussen, 2010; James, 2010; Pereda et al, 2009; Scott, 2009). A number of national studies on bullying (ARK, 2009; DCSF, 2009; Livesey et al, 2007; WAG, 2009) indicate that approximately 40 per cent of children experience bullying, with some variation according to age, child characteristics and type of bullying (Fekkes et al, 2005; James, 2010). Children perceived by their peers as being “different”, for example in terms of their sexuality (ChildLine, 2006; Hunt and Jensen, 2007) or having a special educational need or disability (Mencap, 2007; Staff Commission for Education and Library Boards Northern Ireland, 2009), are more vulnerable to bullying and other forms of maltreatment (Morris, 2003; Oosterhoorn and Kendrick, 2001). Seminal research by Sullivan and Knutson (2000) in Nebraska confirmed that children with communication impairments, behavioural disorders, learning disabilities and sensory impairments were 3.4 times more likely to be maltreated than those without.

However, international data also indicates that many children who do not have special educational needs or a disability also experience maltreatment. In conducting the NSPCC Child Maltreatment in the United Kingdom prevalence study (n=2,869), Cawson et al (2000) documented that 7 per cent of those surveyed experienced serious physical abuse at the hands of parents or carers. Six per cent experienced frequent and severe emotional maltreatment, 6 per cent experienced serious absence of care, while 5 per cent reported a serious absence of supervision.
Furthermore, 1 per cent of children under 16 experienced sexual abuse by a parent and a further 3 per cent experienced sexual abuse by another relative during childhood. Eleven per cent of children experienced sexual abuse by people known but unrelated to them, while 5 per cent experienced sexual abuse by an adult stranger or someone they had just met. Cawson (2002) later reported from a secondary analysis of the study data that 26 per cent had witnessed violence between their parents at least once and 5 per cent reported this violence as frequent and ongoing. In Northern Ireland, the most recent prevalence research reported that 11,000 children were living with domestic abuse (DHSSPS, 2005). It is also important to note that the actual prevalence of maltreatment experiences may be four to six times higher than what is documented in available research and official statistics (Everson et al, 2008; Humphreys and Mullender, 2000).

These experiences are associated with negative health, development and wellbeing outcomes in the short and longer term (Finkelhor, 2008; Goddard and Bedi, 2010; Hawker and Boulton, 2000; Lazenbatt, 2010; Shevlin et al, 2007). In particular, they have been associated with poorer educational outcomes: directly, through children experiencing feelings of not belonging at school and obtaining lower achievement scores (Glew et al, 2005; Kolko et al, 2002); and indirectly, through poorer engagement arising from poorer mental health and wellbeing (Goddard and Bedi, 2010; Hawker and Boulton, 2000; Humphreys and Mullender, 2000; Kitzmann et al, 2003; Shevlin et al, 2007) and poorer physical health (Springer et al, 2007). The negative impact is often further exacerbated by the fact that many children do not tell of their maltreatment experience or seek support until they reach adulthood – if at all (Allnock, 2010; Cawson et al, 2000; Featherstone and Evans, 2004; Jensen et al, 2005). Moreover, it is highly significant that some children do not tell because they fail to recognise their experience as inappropriate or abusive (Berger et al, 1988; Cawson et al, 2000; Children’s Commissioner for Wales, 2004).

**Safeguarding the welfare of children: the role of the school**

Significant developments in legislation, policy and guidance in Northern Ireland and in other countries (DfES, 2003) over the past two decades have identified a clear role for the education sector and schools in safeguarding the welfare of children (Baginsky, 2007; Edwards et al, 2010; Vincent, 2010). In Northern Ireland, this is clearly evident in Our children and young people – our pledge: A ten year strategy for children and young people in Northern Ireland (Children and Young People’s Unit, 2006), the overarching policy framework that identifies “living with safety and stability” as one of its key outcomes, as well as in key legislation, including the Children (Northern Ireland) Order 1995, the Education and Libraries (Northern Ireland) Order 2003 and the Safeguarding Board Act (Northern Ireland) 2011. Section 10 of this act sets out a clear duty to cooperate in relation to education and all other relevant agencies within the context of the newly established Safeguarding Board for Northern Ireland (SBNI). This statutory duty and responsibility on education and schools to safeguard the welfare of children is also evident in a range of key guidance documents including Co-operating to Safeguard Children (DHSSPS, 2003), the Area Child Protection Committee (ACPC) Regional Policy and Procedures (2005) and the Department of Education Circular 1999/10 Pastoral Care in Schools: Child Protection (Department of Education [NI], 1999).
Until relatively recently, education and schools focused primarily on secondary prevention in fulfilling this statutory duty. In the main, their focus related to stopping maltreatment experiences that had already begun by creating a culture of listening within schools to promote children’s disclosure, responding appropriately to such disclosures and working effectively within a multi-agency context to ensure children and their families received appropriate support (Cornelius and Resseguie, 2006; Foshee et al, 1998; Murray and Graybeal, 2007).

Development of the Independent Counselling Service for Schools (ICSS) and the Child Protection Support Service for Schools (CPSSS) has facilitated and supported schools’ role in this regard in Northern Ireland.

However, a notable shift in government and education policy over the past few years has broadened the focus of education and schools to include prevention and early intervention approaches concerned with promoting children’s personal development and wellbeing; a shift “from a narrow child protection focus on children who have been abused and neglected towards a wider focus on safeguarding and protecting all children” (Edwards et al, 2010; Vincent, 2010, p11). At a strategic level, this has contributed to the development of the pupil emotional health and wellbeing programme by the Department of Education (DE [NI]) and their collaborative working across government departments and sectors to implement the *Tackling sexual violence and abuse: a regional strategy 2008–2013* (DHSSPS, 2008) and *Tackling violence at home: a strategy for addressing domestic violence and abuse in Northern Ireland* (DHSSPS, 2005) strategies. Education and schools are now presented with a significant mandate to contribute to primary prevention: preventing maltreatment from occurring in the first place by teaching “keeping safe” messages so that children learn to recognise inappropriate and abusive behaviour, understand that it is never right or acceptable, challenge such behaviour and access appropriate help and support. Moreover, the revision and introduction in 2007 of the Northern Ireland Curriculum incorporating a statutory personal development (PD) element for 4 to 16-year-olds provides a unique and significant opportunity to achieve this; embedding the teaching of “keeping safe” messages within and through the PD and citizenship curricula and cross-curricular themes, as well as whole-school approaches.

Also of significant importance in this regard is the developing school of thought that schools must address socio-environmental barriers to children’s learning before children can progress academically. The General Teaching Council for Northern Ireland (GTCNI) competencies, *Teaching: the reflective profession* (2007), require teachers to have “developed a knowledge and understanding of the factors that promote and hinder effective learning, and be aware of the need to provide for the holistic development of the child” (p22). Teachers are required to consider the key aspects of emotional and behavioural difficulties, including trauma, child abuse and bullying (GTCNI, 2007). In developing this argument, McCallum (2001) cited the USA Department of Health and Human Services (1984, p1): “Child abuse and neglect are clearly related to learning. Research has indicated that abused and neglected children often demonstrate significant learning problems and below grade-level performance in key academic areas. If schools are truly to teach, they cannot ignore the reasons why children cannot learn.”
This is further supported by a growing body of robust evidence that indicates a positive association between promoting children’s wellbeing and academic outcomes (Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning [CASEL], 2007). Durlak et al (2008) concluded from a meta-analysis of 207 evaluative studies that school-based social and emotional learning programmes yield positive outcomes for children’s social and emotional development in a number of areas, such as social and emotional skills, classroom behaviour and conduct problems, while also enhancing academic achievement in both the short and longer term.

**Safeguarding the welfare of children: the role of the teacher**

For many teachers over a large number of years, promoting the social and emotional development of the children they teach has been a critical and central aspect of their role (Furedi, 2009; McCallum, 2001). Congruent with adopting a liberal philosophy on the nature and purpose of education, many teachers have developed their role in supporting and promoting the holistic development of children in preparing them for life (Cohen and Garner, 1967; Furedi, 2009). It is also important to acknowledge that some teachers who embrace a more conservative philosophy of education perceive their role primarily in terms of promoting academic attainment (the 3Rs) and place less emphasis on the pastoral element (Cohen and Garner, 1967). However, many teachers report this pastoral element as being core to their professional identity and a source of professional satisfaction. This was confirmed in a study of teachers’ personal and professional identities (n=300) where Day et al (2006, p604) noted: “pivotal to that sense of belonging were the relationships they formed with their class: the sense of union and unity they had been able to create within the group and the investment they had made in the lives of children.” Swann et al (2010) also documented, from a national study carried out in England, the importance of teachers’ pastoral role to their conceptions of professional identity.

Furthermore, children report valuing the pastoral support received from their teachers and often choose to confide in their teachers about worries, concerns or abuse (Farrand et al, 2007; Smith, 2006). Teachers are ideally placed to identify and respond to children’s concerns by virtue of their training and understanding of child development, their unique position of being able to detect changes in children’s behaviour over time, and the potential for developing significant relationships with children (Baginsky, 2007; Cerezo and Pons-Salvador, 2004). Teachers have been actively involved in secondary prevention for a number of years (Baginsky, 2003; Baginsky, 2007; Goebbels et al, 2008; McCallum, 2001; McKee and Dillenburger, 2009; Webb and Vulliamy, 2001). Yet reports indicate that teachers have found this challenging both in terms of responding to and reporting children’s disclosure (Abrahams et al, 1992; Bunting et al, 2009; Goldman, 2007; Walsh et al, 2006; Young et al, 2008), and in working collaboratively with statutory partners to secure an effective pragmatic response and support for children and their families (Baginsky, 2007; DHSSPS, 2005; Edwards et al, 2010; Horwath, 2009; Ofsted, 2010).
A recent evaluation, *The adequacy, accessibility and integration of services to support the emotional well-being and health of children and young people in the Greater Enniskillen area of Fermanagh*, reported by the Education and Training Inspectorate (2009) confirms the importance of teachers’ role in secondary prevention within schools across Northern Ireland today: “It is clear that the current teaching staff in schools require an increasing range of professional skills to recognise, and respond effectively to, the additional needs of learners. With growing frequency, schools need to deploy staff to foster and develop links with a widening range of statutory agencies and health professionals.” (p14)

Many teachers have also incorporated primary prevention within their role, teaching preventative education through a range of curricular programmes, including personal, social, health and economic (PSHE) education (Fincham, 2007; Formby et al, 2011; Ofsted, 2010), substance abuse prevention (Buckley and White, 2007; Sy and Glanz, 2008), and social and emotional learning and mental health (Durlak et al, 2008; Sawyer et al, 2010). Perusal of the literature concerned more specifically with teaching “keeping safe” messages confirms that many teachers are already engaged in this area (Barron, 2009; Barron and Topping, 2009; Cornelius and Resseguie, 2006; Cross et al, 2011; Foshee et al, 1998; MacIntyre and Carr, 1999; Mishna et al, 2009). However, robust evaluative studies that indicate the effectiveness of teaching “keeping safe” messages have, to date, paid relatively little attention to investigating the significance of teachers’ contribution in this regard (Foshee et al, 1998, 2000; Rispens et al, 1997; Zwi et al, 2007). While Davis and Gidycz (2000) did attempt to do so, they found no significant results in relation to the contribution of teachers over and above other instructors. While evaluating the *Tweenees Violence is Preventable* programme in Scottish schools, Barron (2009) documented the significant contribution of teachers and external agency staff in increasing children’s knowledge, intentions to report and their reporting behaviour. Durlak et al (2008) reported similar findings in relation to teachers’ contribution to effective social and emotional learning programmes. Other studies that have tracked the implementation of programmes teaching “keeping safe” messages have also suggested the important role teachers have to play (Briggs and Hawkins, 1997; Johnson, 1995; Whiteside, 2001).

**Building a school’s capacity to teach “keeping safe” messages**

Perusal of the findings from these implementation studies point to the need to involve teachers in programme development (Whiteside, 2001) in building a schools’ capacity to teach “keeping safe” messages. Following a narrative review of school-based child sexual abuse programmes, Barron and Topping (2009) concluded the importance of teacher involvement to promote ownership; teachers themselves have identified this as core to their professional identity and very important in fostering their motivation and commitment (Day et al, 2006; Swann et al, 2010). The provision of quality training, development and support (Park-Higgerson et al, 2008) that acknowledges teachers’ concerns and meets their needs has also been identified as an important consideration. In South Australia, Johnson (1995) noted that inadequate training and support contributed to poor implementation among primary teachers (n=33) who reported remaining too uncomfortable to teach the more sensitive issues relating to child sexual abuse and violence, even after a minimum of six hours of training.
They identified the following issues in relation to the training and support they received: teachers being given permission to avoid aspects of the programme they found too upsetting during training by leaving the room or tuning out; teachers extending this permission to their own non-teaching of such aspects; teachers questioning the accuracy of prevalence rates of abuse; teachers inaccurately perceiving the programme as being most relevant to those who had been abused rather than as a primary prevention strategy; and insufficient school support for teachers.

The literature clearly highlights teachers’ expressed need for training and support, to enable them to teach sensitive messages effectively. Teachers report being apprehensive about addressing topics like domestic violence and sexual touching (Johnson 1995; Lalor and McElvaney, 2010; Whiteside, 2001). A recent audit (Dáil, Dublin, Parliamentary questions, 2009) investigating implementation of the statutory Stay Safe programme introduced in the Republic of Ireland in the 1990s documented that 263 schools (8.8 per cent) were not teaching the sections on inappropriate sexual contact and secrecy, while 472 (15.81 per cent) of schools were not teaching the programme at all.

Similarly, studies by Abrahams et al (1992), Formby et al (2011) and Ofsted (2010) have all documented teachers’ avoidance of sensitive subject material. Some teachers also report training needs with regard to secondary prevention in responding to disclosures that may emerge when children are taught “keeping safe” messages, particularly among newly qualified teachers or teachers still in training (Brown, 2008; Goldman, 2007; McKee and Dillenburger, 2009), and among experienced teachers particularly in relation to domestic abuse (Young et al, 2008). Johnson (1995) recommended that: “Teachers’ personal beliefs, attitudes and feelings need to be addressed in any school-based primary prevention initiative…training approaches and school support mechanisms need to focus on methods by which teachers can resolve the dilemmas…in ways other than radically dismembering the programme.” (p259)

Promoting teacher self-efficacy through appropriate training and support has been associated with successful implementation of preventative education (Sy and Glanz, 2008). Moreover, facilitating teacher collaboration and support within and outside of their profession has been identified as an effective model of providing continuing professional development that is associated with enhanced self-efficacy, greater commitment to changing practice and willingness to try new things (Cordingley et al, 2003, 2005; Garet et al, 2001). If teachers are to be effective in promoting the development of preventative education in Northern Ireland, the training, development and support they receive should be informed by current education thinking and policy development in this area. This is evident in Teaching: the reflective profession (General Teaching Council for Northern Ireland, 2007) and Teacher education in a climate of change – the way forward (Department of Employment and Learning and Department of Education, 2010).
Adopting a whole-school approach that integrates preventative education within and through all aspects of school life and that involves the whole-school community has also been identified as significant in building a school’s capacity to teach preventative education. Cross et al (2011), Farrington and Ttofi (2009) and Vreeman and Carroll (2007) all documented the significance of this approach in relation to teaching bullying prevention messages, as did Barron and Topping (2009) in relation to child sexual abuse prevention.

Consulting with key stakeholders

In 2008, the NSPCC engaged the DE (NI) in exploring the development of preventative education within primary schools by carrying out an in-depth consultation with key stakeholders. This consultation represented a necessary first stage in the development of an evidence-informed programme that is attuned to the cultural sensitivities and context of Northern Ireland. It was imperative that the consultation engaged school staff (including school leaders, teachers, classroom assistants and other professionals working in the special school sector) as key stakeholders (Barron and Topping, 2009): first, to explore their views and experiences in relation to teaching “keeping safe” messages through preventative education within primary schools; and second, to identify their professional training, development and support needs in relation to the development of effective preventative education within mainstream and special primary schools.

Design

Figure 1: Study design
This research study comprised two sequential phases: phase 1 (Nov 2008–June 2009) employed an instrumental case study involving primary schools (mainstream and special) located within the geographical area of Ballymena District Council within the North Eastern Education and Library Board; phase 2 (Oct 2009–June 2010) extended the research study into the remaining four education and library board areas across Northern Ireland. A range of research methods were employed across both phases of the research study.

This summary report presents data and significant findings that emerged from engaging and consulting with teachers and other school staff as a key stakeholder group within phases 1 and 2 of the research study. A series of focus groups were hosted in both phases. The objectives and methodology adopted for this research are described first, followed by the significant findings.

**Objectives**

- To describe the experiences and attitudes of school staff (including school leaders, teachers, classroom assistants and other professionals working in the special school sector) to teaching “keeping safe” messages within primary schools.
- To ascertain the views of school staff (including school leaders, teachers, classroom assistants and other professionals working in the special school sector) about what should be taught as “keeping safe” messages and how these messages should be taught within primary schools.
- To identify the barriers and factors that would facilitate school staff (including school leaders, teachers, classroom assistants and other professionals working in the special school sector) to teach “keeping safe” messages within primary schools.
- To identify the resource and support implications that would arise out of teaching “keeping safe” messages within primary schools in Northern Ireland.

### 2 Overview of phase 1: focus groups with teachers and other school staff

**Methods**

Between November 2008 and March 2009, a series of nine focus groups were hosted with teachers, classroom assistants and allied health professionals working in primary schools in the case study area. A focus group is an in-depth, open-ended discussion that facilitates exploration of a particular issue, making explicit use of the interaction between group members, with a view to generating “high-quality data in a social context where people can consider their own views in the context of the views of others” (Patton, 2002, p386; Kitzinger, 1994). This method has been widely used in conducting sensitive research with adult stakeholders including teachers and health professionals, for example in relation to school-based sex education in Namibia by Mufune (2008) and in Australia by Milton et al (2001).
The focus group discussions carried out as part of this research therefore provided valuable insight into the facilitative factors as well as the barriers to teaching “keeping safe” messages in primary schools in Northern Ireland (Kitzinger, 1994).

A narrative vignette was also used to stimulate and aid discussion. These are short stories about hypothetical characters in specified circumstances, to whose situation the research participants are invited to respond, considering what the character or they themselves might do in the given situation (Finch, 1987; Hughes, 1998). To date, vignettes have been widely used in the conduct of sensitive research (Finch, 1987; Flakerud, 1979; Fleming et al, 2001; Hughes, 1998), including that concerned with child abuse and domestic abuse (Buckley et al, 2007; Carleton, 2006; Forslund et al, 2002; Nayda, 2004; Reynolds and Birkimer, 2002). Vignettes are considered a useful aid as the concrete situation depicted in the vignette not only provides a focus and a springboard for discussing sensitive issues (Hughes, 1998) but also promotes fuller discussion by those who do not have first-hand experience of teaching or being taught “keeping safe” messages (Hazel, 1995). Moreover, responding to a hypothetical situation may work to discourage the participants from giving socially desirable responses in light of prevalent social or professional norms.

Participants
The total sample of participants who took part in the focus groups was 50. The sampling and recruitment strategy employed in this research sought to include representation from the range of school management types and school sectors, as well as rural/urban location and school size. Five homogenous groups were facilitated within larger teaching staff groups, comprising participants with a range of management, pastoral and teaching experience. Two heterogenous groups were facilitated in a neutral venue, clustering teaching participants from a number of smaller schools across a range of management types. The composition of these cluster groups facilitated exploration of differences in attitudes and perspectives across school management type in relation to teaching “keeping safe” messages in primary schools in Northern Ireland (Gill et al, 2008). Two further homogenous groups were facilitated within the special school sector with classroom assistants (n=5) and allied health professionals (n=6) to explore the contribution of other special school staff in the teaching of “keeping safe” messages.

Data collection and ethics
A broad topic guide was used (Morgan, 1998) alongside the narrative vignette (see figure 2) to stimulate and support the focus group discussion. The vignette was informed by key themes evident in the research and practice literature, and was developed in consultation with participants to ensure its appropriateness, readability and relevance to the context and to support the credibility and validity of subsequent findings (Finch, 1987; Hughes, 1998). A post-focus group questionnaire was also used to explore participants’ experience of taking part and, in particular, of the vignette.
Ann is the vice-principal of Fairfields Primary School, a controlled school in the Ballymena area with an enrolment of 320 pupils. She has responsibility for pastoral care and has always had an interest in this aspect of a child’s education. The local education and library board has approached Ann to see if the school would be interested in taking part in a pilot programme on teaching “keeping safe” messages.

The senior management team decides the school should take part in the pilot project. Ann is given the responsibility of taking this forward. She approaches Emma, a key stage coordinator about being involved. However, Emma is not happy to do so as she does not have the expertise nor does she consider this should be part of her role as a teacher. Ann then approaches the staff team asking for two volunteers to get involved in the delivery of the programme.

Peter, who has been teaching in the school for five years, volunteers to get involved. Ann has provided Peter with the project materials and given him the contact details of the link person on the board. On reading through the various sessions, Peter feels himself becoming quite anxious about having to deliver some of the topics as he feels they are very sensitive. He is concerned that a child might disclose abuse during the class and how he might handle that. He is also finding himself worrying in case a false abuse allegation might be made, or that addressing abuse in class may raise the anxieties of the children. He asks to meet Ann for additional support and mentoring but finds she does not share his concerns. She highlights the fact that it is a pilot and encourages him to see it as a learning opportunity.

Ethical approval was granted by the NSPCC research ethics committee and the research was carried out in accordance with British Education Research Association (BERA) guidelines (2004). Participants were provided with an information leaflet detailing the research aims, what participation involved and how the data would be used. Their written, informed consent was sought prior to the focus group (Wilkinson, 2008). Participants were also informed that they could withdraw from the discussion at any point and that the data would be reported in a way that would protect their anonymity. They were also made aware that, should the discussion raise concern about the safety of a child or children, the NSPCC would take appropriate action to ensure children’s safety through the school’s child protection policy and procedures (DE, 1999). Participants were made aware that the discussion might prove sensitive and were asked to take care in disclosing and participating. The hypothetical nature of the vignette situation provided participants with personal space to determine an appropriate level of personal engagement and disclosure within a potentially sensitive discussion (Barter and Renold, 1999). Participants were also provided with details on accessing help and support including the NSPCC Helpline and ChildLine numbers.

**Analysis and reporting**

A content analysis (Wilkinson, 2008) of the data was carried out by two members of the research team using the NVivo qualitative data management package and based on the five-stage framework proposed by Ritchie and Spencer (1994). This involved the following: reading the transcripts several times to become familiar with the data; thinking about the similarity and diversity of experience; understanding the opinion within the data to begin the process of identifying key themes and sub-themes; comparing data across different groups of participants and identifying key quotes; building a short story around each key theme and sub-theme; and finally, building the main story in the data by considering the links across themes and key quotes.
3 Findings and summary of phase 1: focus groups with teachers and other school staff

Key findings from the phase 1 focus groups

- Teachers reported varied states of readiness to embrace the development and teaching of “keeping safe” messages through preventative education in primary schools. Significant differences were evident across school sector and management types in teachers’ attitudes, experiences, and their training, development and support needs.

- Teachers and other school staff report varied practice in how they currently taught “keeping safe” messages. The special school sector reported teaching more-sensitive messages like appropriate and inappropriate touch than the mainstream school sector. Compared with integrated schools and Catholic Maintained schools, controlled schools reported teaching less sensitive messages, focusing instead on accident prevention, internet safety, bullying and stranger danger. External agencies were often used to teach “keeping safe” messages.

- Teachers varied in the attitudes they expressed about the role of the school and the teacher in safeguarding the welfare of children, both in terms of preventative education and secondary prevention. A minority of participants expressed reluctance for schools and teachers to take on the responsibility for teaching “keeping safe” messages. It was acknowledged that teachers, classroom assistants and allied health professionals all had a key role to play in teaching “keeping safe” messages to children in the special school sector.

- Teachers and other school staff working across all school sectors and management types reported feeling ill at ease and a lack of confidence with regard to teaching sensitive messages. However, teachers within Catholic Maintained schools reported greater confidence, having had the experience of teaching formal relationships and sexuality education (RSE) programmes developed for all Catholic Maintained schools.

- Participants highlighted the opportunity presented by the revised Northern Ireland Curriculum to embed the teaching of “keeping safe” messages within primary schools. Moreover, they recommended that any approach to development in this area should include integration across all aspects of the school, comprehensive training, development and support, and should involve the whole-school community.

- All participants expressed a need for comprehensive training, development and support to teach “keeping safe” messages.

The analysis revealed a range of issues pertinent to the debate around teaching “keeping safe” messages through preventative education in primary schools. Participants across all of the school management types and sectors, as well as multidisciplinary professional boundaries, displayed a keen consciousness and concern for the safety of the children in their schools. Yet clear differences emerged within and across groups in relation to participants’ perceptions, concepts and understanding of keeping safe, and the role of the school and the individual teacher with regard to preventative education. Furthermore, these focus group discussions illuminated a range of doubts, concerns and uncertainties, and identified significant training, development and support needs that relate to any development in this area.
Identifying themes

Six key themes emerged from analysis of the data:

Theme 1: An overview of the “keeping safe” debate
Theme 2: A focus on intervention, reacting and responding
Theme 3: Approaching and embracing prevention
Theme 4: Limits to the role of the school
Theme 5: The role of the teacher, classroom assistant and other professionals
Theme 6: Building a school’s capacity to teach “keeping safe” messages through preventative education

Within each of these themes, a number of sub-themes also emerged.

Theme 1: An overview of the “keeping safe” debate

While participants within and across all of the focus groups demonstrated an awareness of and concern for the general safety and wellbeing of children, clear differences emerged in relation to their perceptions, concepts and understanding of keeping safe. In particular, those working within the special school sector welcomed and embraced the opportunity to participate, expressing the view that: “A lot of the time, special schools get left out of a lot of things” (teacher in a large, urban, special school; 39 years’ experience; deputy DTCP). Moreover, participants differed greatly with regard to the ease with which they approached and embraced the discussion of this relatively sensitive issue: for some, the introduction of the vignette provided a necessary and safe platform from which to engage in the discussion.

The meaning of this key theme was explored through the following five sub-themes:

1. The safety of children is paramount – “a duty of care”
2. The meaning of safety and “keeping safe” – “a whole, integral part of every day”
3. Focusing on stranger danger – “buzzer systems, signing in and visitor labels”
4. Bullying – “keeping the child safe…from other children!”
5. Abuse – “Pandora’s box…”

Sub-theme 1: The safety of children is paramount – “a duty of care”

All of the focus group discussions began with an invitation for participants to explore their understanding of the concept of keeping safe. It quickly became evident that participants across all school management types, sectors and professional disciplines held the clear view that ensuring children’s safety is a significant part of school life. The overall consensus was that in school, the welfare and wellbeing of children should be paramount. For some working with relatively more vulnerable children in special schools and in Catholic Maintained mainstream schools located in areas of high social deprivation, this translated to an holistic concept of “care”, as suggested in participant’s language, which included “main priority”, “hugely important”, “duty of care” and “caring ethos”.

“From the minute you get them in the morning until you get them home, you are keeping them safe in all areas and all aspects of teaching.” (teacher and DTCP in a large, urban, special school)

“They’re a person you know and you see them every day…hungry, cold, dirty or… I would feel that very strongly …and would be very proud to say that we have a very caring ethos here…it’s built in…it’s just the way we think.”
(vice-principal of a large, urban, Catholic Maintained school)

Some participants expressed the view that teachers have a core role to play in this area:

“It’s actually the teachers who will be the first port because we have the children six hours a day and we know our class so probably…if you’ve a good relationship with your class…you’ll be the first one…the child goes to.”
(teacher in a large, rural, controlled school; six months’ experience)

Others displayed greater reticence in acknowledging the role of the teacher and highlighted a number of concerns around this, including the increasing demands being placed on schools, teachers and the curriculum, as well as teacher confidence in dealing with sensitive material (see key themes 4 and 5).

Sub-theme 2: The meaning of safety and “keeping safe” – “whole, integral part of every day”
In general, participants working in mainstream primary schools embraced the discussion of what keeping safe means more tentatively than those working within special sector primary schools. Teachers, classroom assistants and allied health professionals working on a daily basis with children possessing moderate and severe learning difficulties, and a diverse range of associated complex needs, focused more immediately on the personal safety of the children and “protection from harm” (allied health professional in a large, urban, special school). All of these participants strongly asserted the relative vulnerability of the children in their care: the allied health professionals highlighted the challenges to children’s personal safety presented by their inability to understand right and wrong, or indeed abuse, their dependence on others and their ability to communicate that to others.

“…wouldn’t have the cognition to recognise abuse.” (allied health professional in a large, urban, special school)

The discussion within mainstream schools tended to focus primarily in the first instance on physical safety, including road safety and safety from electricity.

“Keeping the children safe physically – that’s the first thing that comes into your head…It’s a very, very broad term, ‘keeping safe’. It would be first of all physical then emotional…” (principal of a controlled school; participated in the cluster focus group)

“…then things about stranger danger; so keeping safe when there are strangers and how you respond, how you would do things like that.” (teacher in a large, urban, integrated school)
In many cases, the participants only began to explore the more sensitive elements of “keeping safe” when prompted by the introduction of the vignette (see figure 2) and the moderator’s questions. It was often then that more sensitive issues, including internet safety, child abuse and domestic abuse, were raised. Many participants across all focus groups identified with the vignette scenario and the teacher’s anxiety and discomfort around delivering sensitive messages. Indeed, many considered this “a very normal reaction” and “typical” of the reactions found within schools (principal of a medium, rural, Catholic Maintained school; participated in the cluster focus group).

Sub-theme 3: Focusing on stranger danger – “buzzer systems, signing in and visitor labels”
Participants across all groups conveyed an implicit assumption that the school itself is a safe place for children, both in terms of the physical environment and the people within. This was clearly evident in one focus group where the teacher participants devoted considerable time to discussing strategies like “buzzer systems, signing in and visitor labels” (principal of a controlled school; participated in the cluster focus group) that were used to manage the risk posed by visitors or adults who were not part of the whole-school community. The participants appeared to interpret “keeping safe” in terms of physical safety and, beyond that: stranger danger; keeping children safe from the “sexual predator” (principal and deputy DTCP in a large, rural, controlled school; 29 years’ experience); and visitors on the school site who were not “legitimate” (principal of a small, rural, Catholic Maintained school). Some participants developed this concept further, highlighting the dangers associated with technology:

“With the internet, they could be seeing strangers from all over the world sitting in their own room.” (teacher in a large, rural, controlled school; six months’ experience)

Sub-theme 4: Bullying – “Keeping the child safe…from other children!”
Bullying emerged as a “keeping safe” issue in a number of the focus group discussions, in particular a reported increase of emotional and relational bullying among girls where particular girls were excluded from the group. Furthermore, the teacher participants across a number of groups expressed concern that many children continue to have a poor understanding of what constitutes bullying, as distinct from bad behaviour.

“When you mention the word ‘bullying’, everyone has been bullied and then what happens is the child who is actually being bullied is the one who is saying nothing.” (principal of a medium, rural, Catholic Maintained school; participant in the cluster focus group)

Sub-theme 5: Abuse – “Pandora’s box…”
The majority of participants across all focus groups recognised the imperative on schools to respond to children’s disclosures of abuse and the importance of this response for children’s long-term wellbeing. Some participants felt that abuse, including domestic abuse, permeated into the classroom whether or not children were explicitly taught about it in school.
“Children disclose things to you and tell you things that they just drop casually into the conversation that might give you cause for concern.” (teacher in a large, urban, integrated school)

They also expressed the view that teachers were well placed to recognise abuse and needed to be aware and vigilant. This was considered more challenging within certain circumstances, including with more vulnerable children in special schools, with children experiencing neglect, as well as with children who have been exposed to abuse from an early age; all of whom may be limited in their ability to recognise or communicate their experience. Dealing with domestic abuse was also highlighted as very challenging, in particular explaining the concept to children and taking appropriate action.

“It’s getting the right terms and getting the right stuff to the children so they know exactly what is and what isn’t domestic violence.” (teacher in a large, rural, controlled school; six months’ experience)

These views on the role of the teacher were disputed within one focus group comprising primarily older school principals drawn from the controlled sector, where dealing with abuse was likened to opening “Pandora’s box” or a “can of worms”.

“Yes, there may be a can of worms you need to open but when you take the lid off – how do you get it back on again or who deals with it and how is it dealt with?” (principal and deputy DTCP in a large, rural, controlled school; 29 years’ experience)

Further discussion within this and other groups unearthed a number of fears that underpinned such views, including fears around “planting seeds of fear” in children and exposing them to a “very harsh world” (teacher in a large, urban, integrated school), as well as how to ensure children come forward with genuine concerns (see themes 4 and 5 for more detail).

**Theme 2: A focus on intervention, reacting and responding**

The majority of participants across all groups acknowledged the key secondary prevention role that schools and all of their staff have to play in responding to disclosures of abuse and other forms of maltreatment, and working to support those children in a multi-agency context. Some differences emerged in terms of teachers’ readiness and ease with this role. Moreover, differences also became evident across and within groups on the importance of making children aware of their right to feel safe and what to do when they do not feel safe.

The meaning of this key theme was explored through the following three sub-themes:

1. Reacting and responding – children are “not just a name on a page”
2. Disclosure – “it’s cut and dry – your first priority is to go and speak…”
3. Children need to know “they have a voice and it will be listened to”
Sub-theme 1: Reacting and responding – children are “not just a name on a page”
Despite the fears acknowledged, the majority of participants were unequivocal in expressing the view that they have a central role to play in children’s lives. Many expressed a strong desire to help and support children through difficult times. The discussions also suggested they were fully cognisant of the unique opportunities their roles presented for identifying and supporting children experiencing difficulties, particularly those experiencing abuse in all its forms in the home.

“As teachers, you do notice the changes in certain children; sometimes you think their whole demeanour suddenly changed.” (teacher in a large, urban, integrated school; nine years’ experience)

Yet these teacher participants were clear that safeguarding the welfare of these children was not the responsibility of any one individual or profession but rather everyone’s business. Despite this acknowledgement, the classroom assistant participants working in the special school sector complained that they themselves, while working in a close and intimate way with individual children, are often not provided with appropriate or follow-up information concerning the children in their care.

Teachers demonstrated a commitment to seeking “professional expertise beyond what we know” (teacher in a large, urban, integrated school). They spoke of having sought valuable support from others, including their designated teacher for child protection within the school and the child protection support service for schools with their education and library board. This support was valued in terms of inspiring confidence among teachers and “taking the pressure off” (teacher in a large, urban, controlled school):

“We would find support. We would move it on with an outside agency or whatever needed to be done. We would never be left wondering ‘what do I do?’.” (teacher in a large, urban, controlled school)

Sub-theme 2: Disclosure – “it’s cut and dry – your first priority is to go and speak…”
Participants across all of the focus groups highlighted the importance of knowing the school’s child protection policy and procedures, and taking immediate action when concerns were raised or a disclosure made in relation to a child. Teacher participants reported valuing the established procedures and reporting structure, as well as proper documentation.

“If there’s any issue at all…rather than ‘we’ll leave it for a couple of days and see what happens or if it comes up again’, anything of any nature, your first priority is to go and speak rather than sit back and let it go because one day may be a day too many.” (teacher in a large, urban, integrated school; nine years’ experience)
However, a small minority of teacher participants acknowledged concerns about dealing with child protection issues:

“I think ‘please don’t disclose anything to me’ because I personally feel it places such a burden on you…What do you do about this…to me it places the teacher in an awful dilemma.” (principal of a controlled school; participated in the cluster focus group)

The majority of participants expressed concerns specifically in relation to responding to domestic abuse, with some reporting that children in their schools had disclosed horrific incidences. Participants commented on the challenge teachers face to respond so that the child does not feel they are betraying a parent by telling:

“...if you meet the worst-case scenario, you know exactly what you have to do in order to manage that situation. Domestic abuse, personally I find harder…if it’s harming the child or threatening the children, it’s on the child protection…but it’s much more difficult when you step in, how you step in and you don’t have the same code to follow as you do with child abuse.” (teacher in a large, urban, integrated school)

Sub-theme 3: Children need to know “they have a voice and it will be listened to”

Participants across all groups advocated the importance of children having someone in school to tell if they do not feel safe, opportunities to tell and being made aware of this support. Yet varied views emerged across the groups in terms of raising children’s awareness in this regard. For example, one focus group comprising principals primarily from controlled schools expressed relatively conservative views suggesting that children should neither be encouraged nor discouraged from telling when they do not feel safe. These participants considered that children should receive the following information in school:

“What they should do…who the DTCP is…make them more aware that there is an avenue for them in school.” (principal of a controlled school; participated in the cluster focus group)

Conversely, participants in other focus groups advocated a more liberal children’s rights-based approach, arguing that children need to be made aware of their right to be treated well and to feel safe. This view was supported by all of the participants working in the special school sector, who viewed children having a voice and being heard as core to their concept and understanding of “keeping safe”.

“Keeping safe – that’s all about trust…the children need to know they have a voice that’s going to be heard. They need to know that when they are talking to us, when they have a problem…they have a voice and it will be listened to.” (classroom assistant in a large, urban, special school)
Yet participants were acutely aware of the challenge this posed within the special school sector:

“All the children are vulnerable, and lack of communication is a big problem.” (teacher in a large, urban, special school)

“Just imagine a child who can’t speak through the systems that are used to communicate. There seem to be symbols that are recognised by everybody, like ‘hunger’, ‘sleep’ or ‘tired’. They are day-to-day symbols. There’s no symbol really to say ‘abuse’.” (allied health professional in a large, urban, special school)

These child-centred views were also evident across a number of other groups, where teachers advocated making children aware of their right to feel safe and how to tell when feeling unsafe:

“If something happens to you that makes you upset, makes you worried, makes you uncomfortable or if somebody tells you to keep something secret and it’s clearly not a comfortable secret – that’s the time you need to go and talk to somebody. And we need to communicate that to children.” (teacher in a large, urban, integrated school)

“Hopefully [they] do know and should know that their class teacher or a classroom assistant or myself or dinner staff, there is always going to be somebody who will listen.” (teacher in a large, urban, integrated school)

**Theme 3: Approaching and embracing prevention**

The majority of focus group participants identified the benefits of embracing and teaching “keeping safe” messages through preventative education in terms of building children’s resilience and fostering a sense of personal responsibility to take care. Participants across the groups reported using a variety of approaches and resources to teach “keeping safe” messages within their existing practice. However, for the majority, this related primarily to dealing with less sensitive issues.

The meaning of this key theme was explored through the following three sub-themes:

1. **Strengthening children – “promoting their self-esteem, their uniqueness…that they have a right to all of that”**
2. **Current practice – “goes down very easily with parents”**
3. **Dealing with sensitive material – “the nitty gritty”**

**Sub-theme 1: Strengthening children – “promoting their self-esteem, their uniqueness…that they have a right to all of that”**

Within some groups, the concept of building children’s resilience emerged while participants teased out the potential for schools and teachers to teach “keeping safe” messages through preventative education.

“You maybe want to encourage more resilience.” (teacher in a large, rural, controlled school)
“Making them aware of risks all around them and dangers, and how to cope with those, and cause and effect, and responsibility as well.” (principal of a controlled school; participated in the cluster focus group)

The concept of building resilience in children was closely aligned with developing a sense of responsibility to look out for themselves, in essence giving them “resources to draw on” (teacher in a large, rural, controlled school).

“They need to learn rather than just locking themselves up somewhere where nobody can get at them. Learning what’s right and what’s wrong.” (teacher in a large, rural, controlled school)

**Sub-theme 2: Current practice – “goes down very easily with parents”**
The discussions highlighted that within all schools, children are taught about general safety issues, including keeping safe on roads, building sites and railways, with quad bikes, medicines and electricity. Teachers reported that this “goes down very easily with parents” (principal of a Catholic Maintained school; participated in the cluster focus group) and was considered comfortable to teach. The discussions also highlighted that children were being taught about stranger danger and internet safety.

“Outside school and classes, they are independent on the computer and they go to all these websites by themselves …typing in things…so they could get into a chatroom…it would be important to make them aware.” (teacher in a large, urban, Catholic Maintained school)

“It’s a big, wide world and lots of people can access their details and so on.” (teacher in a large, urban, controlled school)

Teachers reported using a variety of approaches and resources in teaching “keeping safe” messages to children across different age and key stage groupings. These included circle time, DVDs (eg *Keep yourself safe* for Primary 4 pupils), specific programmes (eg *Education for Love*) and inviting in external agencies like the Police Service for Northern Ireland (for Primary 6 and 7 pupils).

“Circle time has led to…discussing matters; children giving their opinion about issues they are discussing, whether it’s bullying or something like that.” (teacher in a large, rural, controlled school)

It also became evident throughout the discussions that schools varied in how and to what extent they integrated these messages within the life of the school and the curriculum. This variation included integration within extra-curricular clubs, as a cross-curricular theme, and whether this involved every class teacher or just some teachers.
Sub-theme 3: Dealing with sensitive material – “the nitty gritty”

While teachers across focus groups reported varied practice in teaching “keeping safe” messages, many acknowledged the challenge of dealing with sensitive material of this nature. For example, one principal who described progressive practice in implementing RSE explained the challenge involved in introducing this programme for the first time in her school:

“I never wanted to be the principal in charge of introducing sex education.” (principal of a medium, rural, Catholic Maintained school; participated in the cluster focus group)

“With P7 [Primary 7], I would do the ‘good secrets, bad secrets’ kind of thing as like an almost ‘make it fun’ like a circle time kind of activity. The ‘touch’ thing, no! I would be too afraid of what would come out of it.” (teacher in a large, urban, integrated school)

The discussions, particularly those within the heterogeneous cluster focus groups, also highlighted that differences existed across controlled, maintained and integrated schools with regard to the teaching of sensitive material. This included the implementation of the statutory RSE programme, which teachers indicated was embedded within the curriculum in maintained schools. This was facilitated by the Education for Love programme, which was highly regarded by the teacher participants: “…touched on in every year group the whole way through the school”. However, when children reached Primary 7, the classes then incorporated issues around “sexuality, puberty and development” (principal of a small, rural, Catholic Maintained school; participated in the cluster focus group).

However, one vice-principal from a controlled school reported very different practice:

“We have no formal programmes, nothing like that in place. Our P1s, 2s, 5s and 6s have their lifelong learning boxes; they have advice curriculum training. We’ve some PD&MU ideas; we touch on different cards, and safe and sound booklets, and very general booklets. But that is all we are doing within our school…so we have nothing like this here or know nothing about that.” (vice-principal and pastoral care coordinator in a large, urban, controlled school)

As the discussion within this group developed, it became apparent that that particular school’s board of management had decided that RSE was not to be implemented directly but covered within the PD&MU curriculum. Moreover, it was reported that the school principal did not regard PD&MU as an “essential use of time at the minute” (vice-principal and pastoral care coordinator of a large, urban, controlled school), all of which gave rise to RSE being delivered in a way that empowered teachers to “leave out the ‘S’ [sexuality]” (vice-principal and pastoral care coordinator in a large, urban, controlled school).
This practice of opting out of teaching sensitive material was also confirmed by other participants from controlled schools across other focus groups:

“We haven’t come into the nitty gritty of how children protect themselves from different types of dangers.”
(principal of a controlled school; participated in the cluster focus group)

**Theme 4: Limits to the role of the school**

Participants within and across all groups acknowledged a notable shift in the home/school boundary in recent years. Differences emerged across groups with regard to participants’ acceptance of responsibilities that prior to this belonged to parents and the home. A number of concerns relating to the teaching of “keeping safe” messages through preventative education were explored.

The meaning of this key theme was explored through the following four sub-themes:

1. **A limit to our remit – “we can’t fix what’s outside of the school”**
2. **Curriculum overload – “somehow or other schools will fix everything”**
3. **Teaching “keeping safe” messages – “opening a can of worms”**
4. **Finding a balance – “children have a right to a childhood”**

**Sub-theme 1: A limit to our remit – “we can’t fix what’s outside of the school”**

Throughout the focus group discussions, teachers, particularly those working in integrated and maintained schools, highlighted the limits to what can be achieved by teachers and schools.

“There’s a limit to our remits. All through my career, my training has been that if we are aware of a weakness in a child’s background, we do what we can to work with that and with the child. But we also have to know that we can’t fix what’s outside of the school. I am not talking about child protection here, I am talking in general. You know, with the culture at home is different to what we would like if it was our child…We can do what we can do while we have the child in school during the day…we can’t expect to change what’s at home for the child.”

(teacher in a large, urban, integrated school)

**Sub-theme 2: Curriculum overload – “somehow or other schools will fix everything”**

In teasing out the potential for schools to embrace a role in teaching “keeping safe” messages through preventative education, teachers across all school types acknowledged how a changing society with relatively weakened family and church structures had contributed to greater expectations being placed on schools to fill the gap once filled by these institutions.

However, differences emerged across groups and in particular across school types (controlled, maintained and integrated) with regard to how schools should respond to these increasing expectations. In general, participants drawn from controlled schools appeared much less accepting of schools taking on these additional responsibilities.
“Teachers, I think for a long time, have felt that we have become the butt of all of society’s problems…it doesn’t matter if it’s Women’s Aid reaching out about domestic violence and saying ‘we will do a programme in schools’ or whether it’s Action Cancer doing a non-smoking programme: somehow or other schools will fix everything.” (principal and deputy DTCP in a large, rural, controlled school; 29 years’ experience)

“I think there’s a big onus put on schools to deliver an awful lot, which maybe is unfair because schools have enough in terms of the normal curriculum.” (principal of a controlled school; participated in the cluster focus group)

This burden on the curriculum was also acknowledged by participants working within maintained schools:

“I think one of the reasons that teachers are against all this is that it’s yet another thing on top…of…PD&MU…pastoral care, that’s another big block of the curriculum that will be landed on teachers…There are so many things to try and cover, you just don’t have enough time to deal with it in depth. Sometimes you just dip in and then you skim on over to the next thing” (teacher in a large, urban, Catholic Maintained school)

Despite this, these participants also conveyed a strong commitment to take on the responsibility of teaching “keeping safe” messages once appropriate training and support is provided:

“I think, yes, as teachers we have to be doing it…it’s a fact of life now and…unfortunately it’s part of society today” (teacher in a small, urban, Catholic Maintained school)

“I would disagree with teachers saying that its not their remit, not their responsibility. However, I think the teachers get so much landed on their plate and you do need specialist training if you really want to deliver that kind of support to the child.” (allied health professional in a large, urban, special school)

Sub-theme 3: Teaching “keeping safe” messages – “opening a can of worms”

Concerns around secondary prevention and dealing with the fall-out from teaching “keeping safe” messages were raised in all of the focus group discussions involving teachers. Participants shared experiences of working in schools where such issues were avoided for this reason:

“I had a former [school] principal one time who said ‘if you don’t have a problem then don’t address it’ and we didn’t. Now I can see maybe where he was coming from with it.” (principal and deputy DTCP in a large, rural, controlled school; 29 years’ experience)
One school principal used the analogy of “opening a can of worms” to encapsulate the concerns and fears of teachers that related primarily to the reaction and response of children and parents to the teaching of “keeping safe” messages. These concerns and fears included:

- Providing information to children and parents might result in more distress and make things worse for the child who is already experiencing abuse in the home;
- False allegations could be made by a child who has a vivid imagination or who doesn’t fully understand the messages being taught in school, for example in relation to appropriate and inappropriate touch; and
- A teacher’s poor handling of the situation could do more harm than good.

**Sub-theme 4: Finding a balance – “children have a right to a childhood”**

The teacher participants across a number of focus groups also raised concerns about teaching children “very strong messages at a very young age” that might rob them of a “right to grow slowly” (teacher in a large, urban, integrated school). Some expressed “a sense of unease…a sense of exposing children to a very harsh world” (teacher in a large, urban, integrated school).

“It’s very hard to teach awareness without putting a fear factor into it.” (teacher in a large, urban, integrated school; nine years’ experience)

The discussions highlighted a number of strategies that could be employed to enable “keeping safe” messages to be taught effectively and appropriately to children without frightening them. These included the selection of teaching methods appropriate to children’s age and stage of development, accessing and using appropriate teaching materials and resources, as well as utilising all opportunities within the curriculum and life of the school to reinforce messages to children.

**Theme 5: The role of the teacher, classroom assistant and other professionals**

The challenge involved in teaching sensitive material was acknowledged by the majority of participants across all focus groups, with many participants reporting a lack of confidence and feeling ill at ease in this regard. Differences emerged across school sector and management type in relation to whether teaching sensitive material should fall within the role of the teacher or that of an expert brought in from an outside agency.

The meaning of this key theme was explored through the following two sub-themes:

1. Addressing sensitive issues – “you are frightened…you don’t know how to approach it”
2. “We are teachers…we are not professionally trained” – “inviting other people in to talk about it who are experts”
Sub-theme 1: Addressing sensitive issues – “you are frightened…you don’t know how to approach it”

In addition to concerns raised about the impact on children of teaching sensitive messages, teacher participants across a number of focus groups also identified their own discomfort and lack of confidence about teaching sensitive material as being a key concern.

“I think in terms of abuse I certainly wouldn’t, as a teacher, feel comfortable with taking even the P7 class through what might happen in any kind of specific detail. That age would not be good.” (teacher in a large, urban, integrated school)

“There are certain areas of “keeping safe” that I feel uncomfortable teaching. There’s that whole side of intimacy with parents and that sort of thing. I tend to give that a wide berth as much as I can because I just don’t feel safe…I don’t feel confident enough to be able to teach that.” (teacher in a large, rural, controlled school)

“I would be nervous. I’m [the] PD&MU coordinator but I mean, I would not be ashamed to say that I would be very anxious.” (teacher and PD&MU coordinator in a small, urban, Catholic Maintained school)

It was clearly acknowledged within all of the focus groups that, in order to be effective, this type of sensitive material needs to be delivered by someone who is confident and at ease with it.

“…because there’s nothing worse for a child if their teacher is sitting going ‘now, um, er, now, er’…so you need to make sure that [s/he] is confident in delivering the programme.” (principal of a Catholic Maintained school; participated in the cluster focus group)

“If somebody who is not comfortable is trying to deliver it, then the children are going to get anxious about it and see it as something wrong or whatever.” (teacher in a large, urban, special school)

This concept of confidence and comfort in teaching sensitive material was teased out further within one particular cluster focus group discussion. Leadership was identified as critical. One principal from a maintained school shared the learning from implementing the RSE programme within her school, acknowledging how in the first instance, they as a staff were uncomfortable with the sensitive content:

“I’m not comfortable either and that’s fair enough…as principal the buck stops so you just have to get on and do it…we were definitely not comfortable and we thought we weren’t doing it but the parents convinced us. Through listening to them, all the teachers thought this was really valuable – we are going to have to do it.” (principal of a small, rural, Catholic Maintained school; participated in the cluster focus group)
The need for quality training and support to enable staff to deal with their concerns and develop confidence to teach sensitive material effectively was highlighted across all groups:

“We are not trained enough. We are not trained in how to deal with it.” (principal of a controlled school; participated in the cluster focus group)

“I think it’s all down to training and the investment put into the training, and the time given to the teachers for the training…and support must be there, it’s part of our pastoral care.” (teacher in a large, urban, Catholic Maintained school)

However, some participants presented an alternative solution of leaving the teaching of sensitive material to experts from outside agencies:

“Perhaps we leave it to other professionals to come in and we would organise special assemblies to deal with more sensitive issues rather than staff dealing with it in their classrooms.” (principal of a controlled school; participated in the cluster focus group)

Sub-theme 2: “We are teachers…we are not professionally trained” – “inviting other people in to talk about it who are experts”

This option of bringing in outside experts emerged primarily in focus groups comprising teachers working in controlled schools. They cited additional benefits in terms of “keeping safe” messages being delivered effectively and consistently to all children across all schools:

“The scenario here is…it needs to be somebody who is properly trained in child counselling or something like that so if you do come up with a problem, if there is a can of worms there then they know exactly what they are doing. We are teachers, we are not counsellors…we are not professionally trained.” (teacher in a large, rural, controlled school)

In some of these groups the discussions evolved further, exploring the role of teachers and schools in our society. Clear differences emerged in the way teachers across different types of schools perceive this role and more specifically, their role in teaching “keeping safe” messages to children through preventative education. Teachers working in controlled schools expressed more conservative views in relation to their role and that of schools:

“I am speaking on behalf of my assumptions about the staff I know about in school – it would just be a complete ‘…no. That’s not part of my duties. I am not responsible for that’ and they wouldn’t be doing it.” (principal of a controlled school; participated in the cluster focus group)
“First of all, the children are safe when they come to school but then there’s the matter of educating, in my view, in basic skills and it’s the three Rs – reading, writing and arithmetic. To me, those are the values that we should have.” (principal of a controlled school; participated in the cluster focus group)

These views contrasted sharply with teachers working in maintained and special schools, where a more holistic child-centred view of schooling and of the teacher’s role was presented, and within which the teaching of “keeping safe” messages was more readily embraced:

“There’s more of a care…sense of care…personal care for the child rather than…just teaching them…a job…just the academic side of things.” (teacher in a large, urban, Catholic Maintained school)

“From the minute you get them in the morning until you get them home, you are keeping them safe in all areas and all aspects of teaching.” (teacher in a large, urban, special school)

**Theme 6: Building a school’s capacity to teach “keeping safe” messages through preventative education**

Overall, participants acknowledged the opportunity presented by revision of the Northern Ireland curriculum to embed the teaching of “keeping safe” messages within primary schools. A number of key elements within any development of this nature were identified and explored. These included the adoption of an integrated approach involving the whole-school community, and the provision of quality training and ongoing support to meet the varied needs of teachers and other school staff.

The meaning of this key theme was explored through the following five sub-themes:

1. Revising the curriculum – a “great window for planning”
2. Whole-school approach – “encompass all the people who are involved with the child, including parents”
3. Connecting with parents
4. Ongoing training, development and support for staff – “training and investment is paramount”
5. Differences within and across schools – special educational need, age, status, class and culture

**Sub-theme 1: Revising the curriculum – a “great window for planning”**

The teacher participants across a range of focus groups highlighted that introducing the revised curriculum in Northern Ireland presented schools with an opportunity to plan, develop and embed the teaching of “keeping safe” messages within the curriculum and life of the school.
The process of reviewing school policies following inspection was also identified as providing a further opening in this area.

“I think you’ve a great window now with the new curriculum that schools are sitting and thinking ‘well, what do we specifically plan to do in P1 and P2 and P3’ and so on in terms of PD&MU…We are happy we are doing a reasonable amount. I think we are looking at the moment as a school: ‘how can we plan this more deliberately’?” (teacher in a large, urban, integrated school)

Sub-theme 2: Whole-school approach – “encompass all the people who are involved with the child, including parents”

All of the groups advocated strongly for adopting a whole-school approach if preventative education to teach “keeping safe” messages was to be effectively embedded and taught within primary schools.

“I would prefer to have the thing as an integral part of the school. The whole ethos of safety in the school rather [than]…on a Thursday afternoon at 2pm we start talking about safety…” (teacher in a large, urban, controlled school)

In exploring this further, participants indicated that this should be embedded within the life of the school and should be the responsibility of and involve everyone: school management and leaders; teachers, including designated teachers for child protection; non-teaching school staff; other professionals working in school; children; parents and the wider family circle; the community; and external partner agencies across the voluntary and statutory sectors.

Effective support and input from other statutory (eg health, social services) and voluntary (eg NSPCC, ChildLine, counselling organisations) partner agencies was highlighted as critical by all participants:

“I’ve never had an experience where, if I phoned social services or if I phoned the designated officer at County Hall, that I don’t get a quick and sensible and supportive response.” (teacher in a large, urban, integrated school)

“I think there is a genuine desire that when some of these issues are brought up in school, there has to be the input from those other organisations who have, and I use the word ‘responsibility’ carefully, but who have a responsibility in that area.” (principal of a large, rural, controlled school; 29 years’ experience)

Sub-theme 3: Connecting with parents

The need to connect with and develop a partnership relationship with parents emerged as significant in all of the focus group discussions.
“It’s definitely a partnership…as teachers and as a school you intend it to be a partnership and at the start of the year all the teachers do introductory talks and the parents are all invited. We tell them about the school, that particular school year and what’s going to be happening and if you have any worries this is who you would come and see. But as these things go, you can invite them to come in and be your partner but you might not get everybody there. Certainly, 50–60 per cent of the parents will come and see you and will talk to you on a regular basis, and if they have a worry they will phone you.” (teacher in a large, rural, integrated school)

As the discussions developed, participants shared a range of examples of how they work to build partnerships with parents. These included examples of consulting parents on policy development and review, as well as on the development of new initiatives (eg sustainable transport initiative), providing them with regular updates and information (eg safe internet use in the home) and seeking their consent where appropriate. Within the special school sector, participants also described hosting “Parent Matters” courses and providing a daily written update on children’s health, development and progress. Participants also acknowledged that these parents are often inundated with contact from professionals, including schools, social workers, occupational therapists and speech therapists.

As the discussions in the focus groups developed, participants explored the benefits of working in partnership with parents, which included the opportunity to educate parents themselves.

“If parents aren’t informed, they will be the first at the door wanting to know what’s going on and ‘why is my child coming home with literature?’ and all this talk about ‘what’s going on in class and we know nothing about it?’.” (teacher in a large, urban, integrated school; nine years’ experience)

Seeking informed parental consent to introduce sensitive material emerged as a very significant issue for many participants concerned about “treading on parents’ toes” (teacher in a large, rural, controlled school). In particular, teachers working within controlled and integrated schools expressed strong reservations about engaging in any discussion of sensitive material (including responding to a question raised spontaneously by a child) without parental permission.

“Maybe it depends on your school. They just wouldn’t mention that openly in our school so it’s…strange the different approaches that we are having. We wouldn’t have that open discussion. Yes, if it was through a PD&MU lesson and something was maybe touched on, somebody might bring up. Yes, you would comment on it but you wouldn’t do any more because we would be scared of the outcome of the parent ringing up and saying [s/he] was discussing [the case] today in class with my children.” (vice-principal of a large, urban, controlled school; participated in the cluster focus group)
Sub-theme 4: Ongoing training, development and support for staff – “training and investment is paramount”

Participants across all focus groups were unequivocal in highlighting the need for in-depth training and ongoing support for the whole-school staff to enable “keeping safe” messages to be taught effectively in primary schools.

“It can’t be just we’re gonna train every teacher for a day…go out on a course…there has to be back-up, there has to be links…if someone had a problem…the support should be given to that person so that they may be able to deliver it.” (teacher in a large, urban, Catholic Maintained school)

“Everybody could be involved…not teachers one day and assistants the next.” (teacher in a large, urban, special school)

The discussion in the focus groups comprising teachers working in controlled schools tended to focus on the need for further training, not only with regard to teaching “keeping safe” messages through preventative education, but also with regard to secondary prevention – responding appropriately to disclosures of abuse.

“We are in loco parentis and even more than that, sometimes children would say things to us they won’t ever say to a parent. I just feel that we are not adequately trained to deal with that. I just feel we need more training and there’s a lot of things we are asked to do as [school] principals but that is one thing I do feel inadequately trained for.” (principal of a controlled school; participated in the cluster focus group)

While the need for further training in responding to children’s disclosures was echoed among other groups of teachers, those working in maintained schools more readily explored their need for training in relation to preventative education and the teaching of “keeping safe” messages. Drawing on their past experiences of implementing the RSE Education for Love programme, participants explored potential models to train, support and build the school staff capacity so that preventative education would be embedded within schools. These participants proposed that opportunities to work with smaller groups of children be explored, as well as the provision of intensive support to small clusters of schools.

Participants working within special schools identified further differences in the need for training and support across schools and sectors, highlighting their need for training and support in tailoring messages, and indeed creating individualised programmes to meet the varied and specific learning needs of children within their schools.
Sub-theme 5: Differences within and across schools – special educational need, age, status, class and culture

In addition to the differences noted between the special and mainstream primary school sectors, the discussions also highlighted a number of other social and cultural differences across schools and the school population that should be considered and accommodated if “keeping safe” messages are to be effectively taught in primary schools.

These differences gave rise to many challenges across schools. For participants working within the special school sector, these challenges included conveying complex “keeping safe” concepts, such as appropriate and inappropriate touch, in a way that children can understand.

“I think it depends on the cognitive ability of the children, as some of the children…where I work…wouldn’t understand a lot of the messages that we are trying to convey to them.” (teacher in a large, urban, special school)

“I have a couple of children in my class…and they are constantly going about saying ‘I love you’ and ‘I want a hug’ and they are blowing kisses, even to taxi men and people they don’t know.” (teacher in a large, urban, special school)

Other focus group participants working across a range of mainstream primary schools spoke of diversity in terms of income, social class status and children with English as an additional language (EAL). Some of the schools reported that 30–40 per cent of their population were EAL children and highlighted the challenge of teaching complex “keeping safe” messages across a language and cultural divide.

Social class status emerged as a significant issue across the focus group discussions. Participants asserted the need for vigilance and openness in identifying neglect and other forms of abuse in all schools, and in particular in middle-class schools, where it may be less visible.

“Sometimes, it’s quite difficult to know because…they are middle-class families…you are assuming things are OK at home…Domestic violence can be pretty well hidden sometimes in an affluent home. Unless you get a disclosure…” (teacher in a large, rural, controlled school)

Furthermore, participants across all groups asserted the need for messages to be tailored appropriately to the age and developmental stage of the children, and for the complexity of the messages to be progressed in a phased, incremental way year on year. Good resources were identified as very important in this process.
Summary of phase 1: focus groups with teachers and other school staff

In summary, the phase 1 focus groups engaged teachers and other school staff in exploring their views and experiences of teaching “keeping safe” messages through preventative education. A number of barriers and facilitators to developing and teaching preventative education were highlighted, as were significant training, development and support needs for the whole-school staff. A series of focus groups were also facilitated with school principals and vice-principals from primary schools across Northern Ireland during phase 2 of the research study. These aimed to explore if the findings from the instrumental case study in the Ballymena District Council area were transferable to and representative across other areas in Northern Ireland, and also to clarify issues that emerged within the phase 1 findings, particularly participant perceptions on the role of the school and the teacher in teaching “keeping safe” messages. Furthermore, the phase 2 focus groups aimed to explore participant experiences with regard to good practice in professional development training for teachers and other school staff.

4 Overview of phase 2: focus groups with principals

Methods

A series of six focus groups were hosted with principals and vice-principals working in schools across the five education and library board areas between October and December 2009. This method has been widely used to explore the views and experiences of a range of professionals with regard to sensitive issues (Jordan et al, 2007; Kitzinger, 1994; Milton et al, 2001; Mufune, 2008), including within phase 1 of this current study. Therefore, the use of focus groups was selected as the most appropriate method for phase 2 of this study, which concerned not only exploring how representative and transferable the findings from the phase 1 case study were across other areas in Northern Ireland, but also teasing out some issues that emerged within phase 1. Participants within the phase 2 focus groups were provided with a series of verbatim excerpts from phase 1 findings to stimulate and focus their discussion.

Participants

A purposive random sampling strategy (Denzin and Lincoln, 2000; Kitzinger, 1994) was used in recruiting a total of 36 participants. One heterogeneous/cluster focus group was hosted within each education and library board area (a second group was hosted within one area because the first discussion failed to record). Each group comprised participants from special and mainstream schools, including from controlled, maintained, integrated and, in some cases, Irish-medium and independent schools. Overall, participants worked in schools of different size in both rural and urban locations, and in areas of both high and low social deprivation. They reported a range of teaching experience (spanning between 13 and 37 years) and a range of pastoral experience/roles that included SENCO (special educational needs coordinator), DTCP, pastoral care coordinator, home/school liaison officer and parent coordinator.
Data collection and ethics

The focus groups were hosted in a neutral venue in a hotel within each education and library board area. At the outset of the group, the group moderators delivered a short presentation on the overall research project. This included details of the research aim, phases and elements completed to date, the phase 1 focus groups with school staff, and the purpose and format of the phase 2 focus groups. Participants were also provided with information on what participation involved and how the data would be used.

A series of excerpts from the phase 1 focus group findings were used to stimulate and focus the discussion. These included verbatim participant quotes in relation to particular issues that emerged within the phase 1 groups, including the role of the school (for example, delivering sensitive messages, academic/pastoral split, home/school boundary), the role of the teacher (for example, safeguarding, responding to disclosure or prevention, use of external agencies), and the training, development and support needs of teachers and school staff delivering “keeping safe” messages. In the first instance, participants were asked to read these excerpts and comment if the inherent views were representative of school staff and schools across Northern Ireland. Participants later returned to these excerpts in teasing out some of the issues further.

Ethical approval was granted by the NSPCC research ethics committee and the research was carried out in accordance with British Education Research Association guidelines (BERA, 2004). Participants’ written, informed consent was sought prior to the focus group. They were also informed that they could withdraw from the discussion at any point and that the data would be reported in a way that would protect their anonymity. They were also made aware of the need to take care during the potentially sensitive discussion and were provided with details on accessing help and support, including the NSPCC Helpline and ChildLine numbers. The participants were also made aware that, should the discussion raise concern about the safety of a child or children, the NSPCC would take appropriate action to ensure children’s safety through the school’s child protection policy and procedures (DE, 1999).

Analysis and reporting

A content analysis (Wilkinson, 2008) of the data was carried out by one member of the research team using the NVivo qualitative data management package and based on the five-stage framework proposed by Ritchie and Spencer (1994).
5 Findings and summary of phase 2: focus groups with principals

Key findings from the phase 2 focus groups

- The views and experiences of teachers and other school staff concerning the teaching of “keeping safe” messages through preventative education in primary schools reported within the phase 1 case study were not considered representative of those working more widely in schools across Northern Ireland. While the concerns raised within phase 1 were acknowledged within the majority of groups, all of the phase 2 participants expressed positive attitudes to embracing and embedding preventative education within all aspects of the leadership and teaching practice within their schools. Some reported existing positive practice in this regard.

- A number of school-level factors emerged as significant in influencing positive practice in relation to teaching “keeping safe” messages through preventative education. These included child-centred leadership and ethos, school profile characteristics (size and pupil–teacher ratio), pupil vulnerability (social deprivation and special educational needs) and the relationship of the school in the community. School management type did not emerge as having a significant influence on practice despite appearing important within the phase 1 case study.

- All participants expressed the view that schools and their wider support services within education and social services require appropriate resourcing if preventative education is to be effectively developed across primary schools. Participants considered that strategic leadership is required from the Department of Education and the Education Training Inspectorate, as well as appropriate funding, training and support for personnel, and relevant materials linked to existing curriculum developments. This resourcing is required for teaching “keeping safe” messages to children as well as secondary prevention, ensuring that emerging disclosures are appropriately responded to and managed within a multi-agency context.

- All participants expressed an unequivocal need for a comprehensive package of training, development and support to be provided to facilitate schools to engage in a long-term process of building their capacity to teach preventative education. Participants recommended a number of key elements within this package, including adopting best-practice models of delivering continuing professional development, grassroots development involving teachers, and adopting a whole-school approach that engages all school staff, parents and external agencies across the statutory and voluntary sectors.

This series of focus groups highlighted differences between the views and experiences of school staff working in primary schools across Northern Ireland and those working within the case study area with regard to the teaching of “keeping safe” messages through preventative education in primary schools. The differences related to the significant school-level factors influencing the teaching of “keeping safe” messages, reported practice and identified needs for training, development and support in this area.
Identifying themes

Four key themes emerged from analysis of the data:

1. Confirming the views and experiences of schools across Northern Ireland in relation to teaching “keeping safe” messages
2. School-level factors that influence the teaching of “keeping safe” messages
3. A question of resourcing schools
4. Providing appropriate training, development and support to schools

Within each of these themes, a number of sub-themes also emerged.

Theme 1: Confirming the views and experiences of schools across Northern Ireland in relation to teaching “keeping safe” messages

At the start of each focus group discussion, participants were asked to consider and comment on the findings from the phase 1 case study carried out within the Ballymena District Council area. All participants (irrespective of school sector, management type, size or location) expressed unequivocally that these findings could not be considered representative of the views and experiences of those working in primary schools across Northern Ireland. However, it is important to acknowledge that participants identified with some of the positive attitudes and practice described within the case study findings. Moreover, many acknowledged and indeed empathised with a number of the concerns raised in relation to teaching “keeping safe” messages in primary schools. Yet these concerns and issues were perceived not as insurmountable barriers but rather as challenges that could be overcome in developing and implementing the teaching of “keeping safe” messages.

The meaning of this key theme was explored through the following three sub-themes:

1. Preventative education – core to a school’s role
2. Whose job is it…teacher or outside expert?
3. Acknowledging the challenges

Sub-theme 1: Preventative education – core to a school’s role

Participants across all groups refuted the notion that teaching “keeping safe” messages was not part of a school’s role in modern-day Northern Ireland society. In fact, within one group the participants highlighted the links to promoting positive mental health as part of the wider drive to prevent suicide among young people. Some participants expressed more ardent views than others with regard to the centrality of preventative education in the life of the school. For example, one principal stated that he was so shocked by the verbatim extracts from the phase 1 findings that he wondered if they had been presented as a set-up to enliven the discussion. Many participants did, however, acknowledge the changing home–school boundary, with schools now taking on more responsibility for issues traditionally the preserve of parents and the home.
“The teaching profession should have moved on from these attitudes...people are sticking their heads in the sand.”
(principal and DTCP in a large, rural, controlled school in the Southern Education and Library Board [SELB] area; 28 years’ experience)

Other participants argued that teaching “keeping safe” messages through preventative education was core to the aims and purpose of education and schools, and key to overcoming barriers to learning so that children can reach their full potential. This was evident in the following focus group discussion extracts:

Participant 1: “This is about safeguarding children in the broader sense of...I can’t see any school that can be doing its job properly that couldn’t be engaged in this...it seems to be so fundamental that the physical and emotional wellbeing of the children is key to any form of education. I mean you can’t learn if you’re coming to school physically damaged or mentally scared or worried or anxious.” (principal of a large, urban, controlled school in the South Eastern Education and Library Board [SEELB] area; 36 years’ experience)

Participant 2: “Your mind is elsewhere.” (principal and DTCP in a medium, rural, integrated school in the SEELB area; 22 years’ experience)

Participant 1: “Yeah, so I mean we’ve got to.”

Another focus group participant also commented:

“I find it quite surprising that so many people don’t seem to think that it’s their responsibility and that it’s something that they can opt out of, and if we accept education as the wholeness of every child then it’s not only not a cop-out, it’s also an incredibly important and relevant aspect of every child’s education...It isn’t a choice really that we have the pleasure of making, I think it’s a necessity and if we don’t do it, I mean if we don’t teach literacy, somebody may in that child’s life teach it, but if we don’t teach this, nobody teaches it.” (principal and DTCP in a small, rural, Catholic Maintained school in the SELB area; 30 years’ experience)

Some participants, in particular those working with more vulnerable children either in special schools or mainstream schools in areas of high social deprivation, spoke of existing good practice within their schools in teaching “keeping safe” messages through preventative education.

“In an area like where I am, the teacher is more aware of what is going on, more aware of the children and more sensitive to their needs and again it’s blended into the curriculum – it’s not just ‘this is going to be keeping safe time, this is my timetable for it today’, it’s blended in as you said, into the curriculum – it becomes part of the class meeting in the morning or it’s blended into their literacy and other areas of the curriculum.” (principal and DTCP in a medium, urban, Catholic Maintained school in the Belfast Education and Library Board [BELB] area; 29 years’ experience)
Sub-theme 2: Whose job is it…teacher or outside expert?

All participants across the six focus groups advocated strongly in favour of teachers taking the lead role in teaching “keeping safe” messages to children in primary schools. The majority considered that every class teacher has a role to play in this area.

“If teachers do not like it, they should not be in the job.” (principal and DTCP in a large, rural, controlled school in the SELB area; 26 years’ experience)

However, some participants did propose that in larger schools or in situations where a particular teacher felt unable to do so, another teacher within the school who possessed a keen interest and flair for this area could provide support in the classroom and overall leadership across the school.

“It doesn’t surprise me, I have to say, that teachers would be afraid or cautious or nervous about delivering it because it’s so sensitive. So I can understand that but then I feel quite strongly that probably the teacher is better placed than bringing in somebody because it is such a sensitive area and it can be upsetting and so on for children, you know, that [a] relationship of trust is established.” (principal and DTCP in a small rural Catholic Maintained school in the Western Library and Education Board [WELB] area; 21 years’ experience)

In contrast to the case study participants, no one recommended bringing in experts from external agencies to teach “keeping safe” messages as a way of relieving the teacher of this role and responsibility. Many participants drew on their experience of working with such experts to support the views expressed during the discussion:

“I think you need the teacher within the school that the child is comfortable with and that the child knows, and I think external agencies to support that teacher, not to replace the teacher, is my view.” (principal and DTCP in a small, rural, Catholic Maintained school in the SELB area; 31 years’ experience)

“When you’re getting someone to come in, you’re asking them to come in not because you want to offload but that you want to look at them as the expert in that field to learn from them so that you can take whatever they have delivered to the children and use that within your own context. But what I’m saying is sometimes getting people in could be very hit and miss…you’re maybe looking at what’s being delivered and thinking ‘I maybe could have done a better job myself’.” (vice-principal and home/school liaison in a large, urban, integrated school in the BELB area; 25 years’ experience)
Sub-theme 3: Acknowledging the challenges

Despite being unequivocal in deeming the teaching of “keeping safe” messages core to the school and the role and responsibility of the teacher, the majority of participants acknowledged many of the concerns expressed by those who took part in the phase 1 case study. However, those concerns were raised and considered in a pragmatic solution-focused manner.

Teachers’ unease and discomfort in dealing with sensitive issues and their need for training and support emerged as a significant issue. To highlight this, one participant drew on a related experience of being seconded to their education and library board to support teachers in embracing and implementing the PD&MU curriculum:

“The new personal development curriculum…there is an element of how to protect themselves. Now teachers were drawing up lesson plans and they were happy to formulate lesson plans on meeting the stranger, meeting people you didn’t know and when it came to people closer to home, they just said ‘we cannot do this’. Now that was a room full of year 6 teachers and all of them said ‘no, this is something we don’t feel we’re trained in’ – that it’s a very specialist role.” (principal and DTCP in a medium, rural, controlled school in the SELB area; 17 years’ experience)

Other key concerns raised by focus group participants related primarily to:

- the resource required to engage effectively in multi-agency working in dealing with disclosures of abuse that may well emerge more frequently as a result of teaching “keeping safe” messages to children.

  “I could spend my life going to case conferences; my wife recently said ‘you’re not a school principal or a teacher, you’re a social worker’. I have about three, if not four, cases every week and I can understand totally when a teacher says ‘I don’t want to hear this conversation’ because they know what happens next.” (principal and DTCP in a large, urban, controlled school in the SELB area; 28 years’ experience)

- teachers perceiving new developments, such as preventative education (and the associated training), as an add-on within an overcrowded curriculum. Some participants proposed the solution could be found within child-centred leadership and ethos.

  “I also think that education has changed so quickly over the last few years that teachers are always saying…‘this is another thing they’re handing to us’…when you set them down and talk it through, it’s not another thing that’s been handed down, it’s something you’ve been doing for years…it’s your ethos and your culture, as you say, and how you approach what you’re doing with your staff within your school and how it fits into it.” (principal, SENCO and DTCP in a medium, urban, controlled school in the BELB area; 25 years’ experience)
participants working in the special school sector echoing the concerns expressed by their counterparts within the case study around the challenge of conveying “keeping safe” messages appropriately to meet the needs of their learners.

“Parents aren’t keen on them knowing about good touch/bad touch because they don’t understand. It makes them feel good, they don’t differentiate between what’s good and what’s bad or who should be doing it or who should not. If they’re developmentally two and they’re chronologically 19, where is the…what path do you go with that? There’s age-appropriate, there’s not age-appropriate. It’s very complicated.” (principal and deputy DCPT in a small, urban, controlled school in the WELB area; 14 years’ experience)

the challenge associated with engaging parents in teaching “keeping safe” messages, which was identified across all of the focus groups. However, within some groups, the discussion developed further to include the need to educate parents in parenting skills and appropriate parental behaviour, for example to safeguard the welfare of children living in families with fundamental religious beliefs.

“I’m dealing with a situation in school where it’s a very well-respected family circle…in many ways the children are very well looked after…they’re well fed, they’re well clothed, they’re in school on time…but they do not see that there is a problem with lifting a brush and crashing it down on a six-year-old’s shoulder because he did something wrong. So there is a lot of education to be done around what is appropriate.” (principal and DTCP in a medium, rural, integrated school in the SEELB area; 22 years’ experience)

**Theme 2: School-level factors that influence the teaching of “keeping safe” messages**

In recruiting participants to the phase 2 focus groups, the sampling strategy ensured appropriate representation from special schools and from schools across maintained, controlled and integrated management types. This was to facilitate further exploration of the impact of school management type, in particular, on attitudes and experiences in relation to teaching “keeping safe” messages. However, the discussion across all focus groups confirmed that, while school management type emerged as significant across the case study schools within the Ballymena District Council area, it was not significant in shaping attitudes and practices in primary schools more widely across Northern Ireland.

Rather, a number of other school-level factors were identified as significant in influencing attitudes and practice in relation to teaching “keeping safe” messages. These included school leadership ethos and style, school profile characteristics, including school size, pupil–teacher ratio within class groups and pupil vulnerability, either in terms of special educational needs or socio-economic deprivation.
The meaning of this key theme was explored through the following four sub-themes:

1. Child-centred leadership
2. School-profile characteristics
3. Pupil vulnerability
4. The school in the community

Sub-theme 1: Child-centred leadership

Participants within all six focus groups asserted the importance of a child-centred leadership style and ethos in prioritising the teaching of “keeping safe” messages to children. In fact, participants identified this concept as the most significant factor in determining a school’s focus and practice in this area, and in safeguarding in general.

“Now before I became principal myself, I worked under two different principals who had very varying views to this whole home/school boundaries and, I mean, that did impact on how you talked to children. It did impact on the kind of pastoral care that was done and it did impact on how teachers received the messages and, you know, I think leadership is probably one of the key factors.” (principal and DTCP in a medium, rural, Catholic Maintained school in the North Eastern Library and Education Board [NEELB] area; 33 years’ experience)

“I think also the care of the child and the child being centre to everything and paramount – that’s not just your pastoral care meetings or your child protection. I mean, we had a numeracy meeting yesterday – it was every child had only one chance to go through this school and every child has only one chance to be a P3 and they need the best possible teaching. They need the differentiation. They need the care. They need the understanding and that would go through our curriculum, like traditional curriculum areas as well as the pastoral and I think it’s a whole ethos, it’s a whole package if you like, the pastoral and the curricular and the modelling – all part of that word ‘ethos’.” (principal and DTCP in a medium, rural, Catholic Maintained school in the NEELB area; 33 years’ experience)

“I think still the culture and the ethos underpins everything because when you walk in to somebody else’s school you can smell it, you can feel it, you don’t have to even go beyond the foyer of the school – you don’t have to go in to the classrooms.” (principal and DTCP in a small, urban, controlled special school in the BELB area; 19 years’ experience)

In order to isolate a number of key elements of the concept of child-centred leadership, participants in all of the discussions explored and dissected their experiences of working across a variety of schools in a variety of contexts. Most significantly, this included having and relentlessly pursuing a vision that places the child and their welfare, their safety, their happiness at the heart of everything and everybody in the school. Communicating that vision to “everybody connected with the school” (principal and DTCP in a small, rural, Catholic Maintained school; 31 years’ experience), including non-teaching staff and parents, was also highlighted as a core element.
One school principal spoke of being open and explicit with parents on their first induction evening, explaining about the school’s duty to care and its safeguarding responsibilities – making parents aware that if their child came to school with a black eye, the school would be asking parents what happened. The quality of relationships within the whole-school community was also identified as a core element of child-centred leadership and ethos.

“It’s about an ethos of respect and if it’s there, you will see it between the children.” (principal and DTCP in a small, rural, Catholic Maintained school in the SELB area; 31 years’ experience)

“…but it’s how you treat your staff…if you do not treat your staff well, what message are you then transmitting to pupils?” (principal of a small, rural, Catholic Maintained school in the NEELB area; 15 years’ experience)

The importance of creating a non-threatening environment within the school where everyone could feel at ease and had appropriate opportunities to seek support was also identified within one group as being an important element of child-centred leadership and ethos.

Focus group participants also identified the following range of attitudes and activities that they did not consider congruent with child-centred leadership:

- adopting an academic focus to the relative neglect of the holistic care and development of the individual child;
- failing to acknowledge or consider the varied and individual needs of children, some of whom experience difficulties and need support at different times;
- ticking boxes in relation to pastoral care activities with many teachers feeling this is not part of their job; and
- concern about protecting the reputation of the school as one that does not have bullying or child protection issues.

Sub-theme 2: School-profile characteristics

Within three of the focus group discussions, participants identified school size as having a very significant influence on adopting a preventative approach to their safeguarding responsibilities, and more specifically to the teaching of “keeping safe” messages. This was evident in the following extract from one of the discussions facilitated within the SELB area:

Participant 1: “…and it’s easier, I’m well aware that that is perhaps the biggest perk in being in a small school is that intimacy, knowing of children. I mean if you said to a child in P4 now I could nearly tell you their standardised scores never mind their personalities because the numbers are limited…knowledge is so much more extensive and so much more intense and also very often you’re teaching as well as leading.” (principal and deputy DTCP in a small, rural, Catholic Maintained school in the SELB area; 30 years’ experience)
Participant 2: “So you have that great knowledge of the children, because you have them for a minimum of two years in a little school.” (principal of a small, rural, Catholic Maintained school in the SELB area; 15 years’ experience)

Participant 3: “It goes back to the old cliché of a small school being a family.” (principal and DTCP in a small, rural, Catholic Maintained school in the SELB area; 31 years’ experience)

This intimate, family-oriented outlook within smaller schools described above was associated with benefits and opportunities that facilitated the teaching of “keeping safe” messages. These included the existence of long-established, good relationships with parents, many of whom may have attended the school themselves. This was identified as providing schools with an in-depth knowledge and insight regarding children’s needs, as well as opportunities to work closely with and to educate parents in meeting those needs. Some participants reported that, as a smaller school, they could be more flexible and adaptable in introducing and interweaving “keeping safe” messages through the curriculum and all other aspects of school life, for example, in response to an event in the external or home environment. Others highlighted how within small schools with a relatively small number of staff, more opportunities are available to develop and support staff on an ongoing basis, thus building their capacity to teach “keeping safe” messages.

“…because as a staff we’re small so…we plan together…so it’s maybe easier in saying to people ‘if you’re uncomfortable with this, speak out and tell me’…I think sometimes in a big, big staff there are some people who will sit back because they’re a wee bit afraid or intimidated to speak their minds.” (principal and DTCP in a small, urban, controlled school in the BELB area; 25 years’ experience)

“You get children in a classroom who play with themselves. Little boys’ hands down trousers, you know, when teacher is reading a story…and little girls who sit inappropriately and poke, and those have to be dealt with in a way by the teacher…those are things and issues I think that you need to talk out as a staff and it’s almost like a process of how you go about doing that…we’ve discussed all of that sort of thing but we’re a small staff and perhaps it’s easier for us to sit round and look at that when we’re talking about good touching…” (principal and DTCP in a small, urban, controlled school in the BELB area; 25 years’ experience)

Class size was also identified as a significant factor influencing the teaching of “keeping safe” messages through preventative education. Participants described how within a smaller class, more time was available for “keeping safe” messages, either with the class group or working individually “and talking through problems like that…sitting with a class of 15 makes a big difference in the amount of emotional, social…whatever you call it…special time you can give that child.” (principal and DTCP in a small, urban, controlled school in the BELB area; 25 years’ experience)
Sub-theme 3: Pupil vulnerability

Pupil vulnerability, including socio-economic status and special educational needs, emerged as a significant factor influencing the teaching of “keeping safe” messages within all of the focus group discussions.

With regard to socio-economic status, participants working in schools with high levels of social deprivation highlighted how some of the children in their care were living and dealing with complex social issues (including poverty, alcohol abuse, teenage parents, family breakdown and suicide). They stressed the necessity for schools to adopt a pragmatic approach to accommodate and meet the needs of these children and to safeguard their welfare, including through preventative education.

Other focus group participants stressed the importance of this approach to their practice in working with vulnerable children with special educational needs:

“You’ll find that smaller schools and special schools would tend to do that anyway…have quite a heavy PSHE type kind of programme in the school where maybe the children that they have and the backgrounds that those children have…that the school are more involved, know more about…and so it’s almost taken for granted that you deal with those on a day-to-day basis and you build your curriculum around certain issues. So for example, in our curriculum, we would have about keeping safe, you know all the usual road safety and all that kind of stuff but also you know good touch and bad touch and…who to speak to, what to do if you don’t feel safe, how to act, who you can go to, all that kind of thing.” (principal and DTCP in a small, urban, controlled special school in the BELB area; 19 years’ experience)

Sub-theme 4: The school in the community

Participants across all groups identified the community within which the school sits as being significant in influencing the teaching of “keeping safe” messages through preventative education. For participants working within small rural communities, this related to the challenge of dealing with sensitive material among people (staff, parents) who knew each other very well and the repercussions should the school need to deal with increased disclosures arising from children being taught “keeping safe” messages. Participants’ concerns related to being poorly supported by other agencies in passing on disclosures and hence being left with severely damaged relationships within and between families and the school within the context of a small community.

Despite this, there was a clear acknowledgement across all of the groups of the need to work effectively with other agencies in the community in delivering preventative education.
“…so it’s relationships between the teacher and parents, teachers and children and the school in the community. We only see the children for a very, very small time but it’s quite intense time that we do see them – those four or five hours in the day – so we also need to develop relationships with other people, other agencies that support our children because they can see, they go to their homes and can see another aspect of their lives…so it’s having a multiple approach to it – a multi-agency approach.” (principal and DTCP in a Catholic Maintained school in the BELB area; 29 years’ experience)

“Even in a school of 130, I would be in core group meetings weekly…but up to that I was in your situation where I didn’t know, I didn’t know who the social worker was, hadn’t met them before, but actually the paradox is, having gone to core group meetings, there’s a relationship built up with the local social workers and we feel, we feel better equipped now and we feel more comfortable around the area and working with families through social workers.” (principal of a small, urban, integrated school in the SELB area)

**Theme 3: A question of resourcing schools**

The question of resources emerged on many occasions and in many guises within each of the six focus group discussions. For some participants, this related to being provided with a clear steer and leadership from the DE (NI) in relation to preventative education of this nature. For others, resources were viewed as related to money, time and people – not only to teaching “keeping safe” messages through preventative education, but also to engaging in the secondary prevention activity of responding appropriately and supporting children who come forward to disclose maltreatment experiences. Furthermore, the need for appropriate training and teaching materials also emerged within all of the group discussions as a resource issue.

“Please back it up by support, by time, by everything else because you could talk here…but you know we all go back to school and there’s something else on our desk and unless there is the time and the support and the effort put in for this to run properly, it will be another…something else set on the shelf among all the other files…through no fault of anybody’s” (principal and DTCP in a medium, rural, controlled school in the SELB area; 17 years’ experience)

The meaning of this key theme was explored through the following five sub-themes:

1. Department of Education leadership
2. Money to support and bring ethos to life
3. Time to engage in multi-agency work
4. Prescriptive schemes of work
5. External agencies to provide support to schools
**Sub-theme 1: Department of Education leadership**

Participants within a number of the focus groups queried the DE (NI)’s view on the development of preventative education. Within two groups in particular, they asserted the significance of strategic leadership from the DE (NI) and from the Education and Training Inspectorate in developing and implementing effective preventative education to teach “keeping safe” messages in primary schools.

“I don’t think we should be having the discussion about whether we should be asking parents ‘shall we teach…?’ I think we should be telling them ‘this is what we will be doing as part of our curriculum’ and the Department [of Education] needs to grasp the nettle and say ‘this is what we will…’ I mean, we have a responsibility to protect children and to work with children. You cannot leave that to ‘I opt out of…’. How can you let a child be left in a situation where a parent is abusing or a grandparent is abusing and they’re able to do it because they don’t allow their child to participate in pastoral care activity? It’s crazy…It’s different now if we’re talking about RSE – there are real challenges at RSE about how explicit the material should be – whether contraception, abortion etc. That’s quite a different thing but in terms of protecting children – the line needs to be drawn.” (principal of a large, urban, controlled school in the SEELB area; 36 years’ experience)

This was developed further by others within this group who called for teaching “keeping safe” messages to be mandatory for all schools, including independent schools. Participants within another focus group highlighted the need for any development of preventative education to fit with existing developments and structures (eg inspection, CPSSS) in the interests of promoting implementation and sustainability.

**Sub-theme 2: Money to support and bring ethos to life**

The need for money to facilitate the effective development and teaching of “keeping safe” messages in primary schools emerged consistently across all of the focus group discussions.

“If we agree that this is a role that is fundamental to the schools existence, it’s got to be recognised as an issue that has to be resourced properly so we can cope with it, because if we’re doing this all the time…we are not doing English and maths.” (principal and DTCP in a large, urban, controlled school in the SELB area; 28 years’ experience)

Moreover, participants were passionate in asserting their views in this regard: within one group, two of the participants drew on the analogy of the principal as circus ringmaster to convey the pressure they deal with on a daily basis, juggling the balls to ensure effective curriculum delivery while creating a child-centred pastoral environment that optimises children’s learning and development.

Others highlighted the importance of appropriate funding (including sub-cover) to enable schools to develop their practice in line with their child-centred ethos and vision.
“I know you’re going to come back to the parenting classes and things like that but certainly money had to be available…because I was released from class to instigate parenting. I had training with Barnardo’s as a parent facilitator, but money is involved in that and I was released from class to do parenting classes, but money has to be available to bring somebody in to take my class. I do home/school liaison. So certainly it is very much a part of the culture and ethos within our setting, but then we’re very fortunate because we have the funding to be able to facilitate that.” (vice-principal and DTCP in a large, rural, Catholic Maintained school in the BELB area; 31 years’ experience)

In other focus groups, participants spoke of the need to have more appropriately trained people on the ground and an appropriate physical space – just being there – as an available presence in order to provide children with opportunities to talk should they need them.

“We really do need, I think, more staff to be there on hand, actually being out in the playground because that’s where most of the conversation comes out of: playground, dinner time, in the morning, breakfast clubs.” (principal and DTCP in a large, urban, controlled school in the SELB area; 36 years’ experience)

“Because what you say to someone in the playground is as important as what you teach them in a lesson on keeping safe. It’s very difficult to do that. You can do the nuts and bolts but it’s how you deal with the little instances or children’s concerns and worries, and staff having the expertise to do that. Some staff have that just naturally and it works because they’re very caring people who have good rapport with children. They’re the key pastoral people and educators – a classroom teacher in a primary school…and we need to empower them and skill them and give them confidence and, to me, any involvement I would want in this is that first.” (principal and DTCP in a large, urban, integrated school in the NEELB area; 40 years’ experience)

Sub-theme 3: Time to engage in multi-agency work

While within some of the groups participants acknowledged and welcomed the fact that teaching “keeping safe” messages would likely increase the level of children’s disclosure of maltreatment experiences, they also expressed concern about the time required to be effective in working collaboratively with other agencies to safeguard children’s welfare. Many participants reported a lack of time and capacity to engage in this multi-agency work, and indeed some conveyed a sense of frustration at their lack of resource in this regard:

“You are not adequately compensated for doing so, you’re doing somebody else’s job, you know you are…I don’t even know if you are given time out for a core group meeting…from my experiences, the better [you are] on the educational side of protection, the more you’re going to have to go to these things…The more you educate the children to disclose or to protect themselves, the more you’re going to have to go…and we’re expected to do this on top of other things we’re doing so I think that a fundamental issue to be addressed…we have got to be covered somehow.” (principal and deputy DTCP in a small, rural, Catholic Maintained school in the SELB area; 30 years’ experience)
“Now I had a teacher last week who had a disclosure on a Monday and spent two full days, two full days out. What happens to her class in that time? You know, deal with police, social workers, follow-up with parents, the whole operation…I can understand these people’s concerns but we have that duty to do that, the difficulty is in primary schools we do not have the personnel which you’re talking about, either the space, physical space or the personnel to deal with that.” (principal and DTCP in a large, urban, controlled school in the SELB area; 28 years’ experience)

**Sub-theme 4: Prescriptive schemes of work**

The need to incorporate the teaching of “keeping safe” messages through the taught curriculum was considered critical by participants in a number of focus groups. Within three of the group discussions, participants deliberated on the need to prescribe a structured programme and teaching materials to ensure “keeping safe” messages were taught to children across all schools.

“That’s the difficulty you’re in…the whole ethos of this reduced curriculum…it’s the minimum concept. You make your own concept…you make your own choices but obviously this is not going to suit because people are avoiding dealing with the abuse-sensitive issues in the same way as the mutual respect and understanding ones – the hardcore issues about religion…people, if they are in difficult areas just don’t go anywhere near it…So is this going to be something that is a resource or has it to become prescripted?” (principal and DTCP in a large, urban, controlled school in the SELB area; 28 years’ experience)

Some focus group participants considered this would support teachers who felt less comfortable with the content, providing them with the opportunity and experience to develop their confidence and competence:

“Well, I know that the personal development curriculum is there but some of the statements are quite broad and what I think is…if that’s our curriculum, take it and have a prescriptive programme from Primary 1 to Primary 7 with set lessons, so those teachers who don’t feel that comfortable…if they’re not comfortable…if they have a scheme to go by, they can follow through the school and then their own personalities can come through. They can embellish it as need be but at least that’s there for them and it’s a crutch, a wee bit of a support to help them.” (principal and DTCP in a medium, rural, controlled school in the SELB area; 17 years’ experience)

Others highlighted the importance of being provided with tried and tested teaching materials that staff could try out and build confidence with. The need for these materials to link with existing areas of the curriculum was also identified as significant in promoting implementation of any programme. Focus group participants felt that teachers often had little time back in school following training to digest their learning and explore how best to integrate and use materials within their day-to-day teaching. However, some other participants who already taught “keeping safe” messages within their school drew on this experience to express caution with regard to being too prescriptive in terms of the programme structure and teaching materials:
“I think teachers are very good at looking for little booklets that will do the job for them and sometimes in getting a little booklet that will do the job…you’ve missed a message or the children missed a message, whereas if it’s something that is done in a more imaginative way, it challenges the teacher to fit it in, you know…It’s maybe…this is Thursday and it’s 10 o’clock and I’ll just do that wee booklet for 15 minutes before I have my break with the children you know. Sometimes teachers say ‘oh, that’s great; I’ll have that so we’ll just do it this way’. And there are lots of teachers with lots of talent in how they approach things that by giving something that’s prescriptive, you can destroy what you’re trying to achieve.” (principal and DTCP in a small, urban, controlled school in the BELB area; 25 years’ experience)

In a similar vein, some other participants drew attention to the wide range of excellent resources that already exist, and the need to organise and integrate these within existing resource banks collated by CCEA for teachers to “dip in and out of” (principal in a large, urban, controlled school in the SEELB area; 36 years’ experience) in teaching keeping safe messages within a broad framework.

**Sub-theme 5: External agencies to provide support to schools**

The issue of limited resourcing within partner agencies to support schools in secondary prevention (managing disclosures that may arise from teaching “keeping safe” messages) emerged as a very significant concern within all of the six focus group discussions. While participants called for greater resourcing and provision of counselling and therapeutic support for children across primary and special schools, their main concern related to the lack of resource within social services.

“Social services…there’s a whole different issue about; you never get through, you never get the same people twice and the system breaks down from our point of view at social services level for all sorts of reasons. And schools are left very vulnerable in terms of parents, when somebody arrives at the door with the police and blah, blah, blah, been there, done that – got the T-shirt.” (principal in a large, urban, controlled school in the SEELB area; 36 years’ experience)

As the discussions developed within many of the focus groups, a number of serious implications for schools’ role in safeguarding the welfare of the children in their care became evident. These related to receiving appropriate and timely communication having made a referral, and schools’ perception that referrals have not being taken seriously or investigated appropriately. Participants reported that this impacted on teachers’ confidence and willingness to make referrals and, in effect, teachers making judgements with regard to referral thresholds.
“That’s the bit that’s very untidy. I go to case conferences with social services and their role is terribly stretched. I mean, when we refer, we expect something to be done. Their capacity to do something is very, very limited – very, very limited. So that interface to me is important and if it isn’t working, then it destroys the confidence of the teacher going through that whole process, because there’s negative aspects if you lose a family or all their relations…so you’d have to balance over losing them. I don’t mean losing them physically in numbers but losing their confidence and any benefit that the child is going to get out of it. Sometimes you have to be sure your action is such that it will do that because actually, if you do it and nothing happens, the child’s in a worse position.”

(principal and DTCP in a large, urban, integrated school in the NEELB area; 40 years’ experience)

Focus group participants also expressed frustration at the lack of professional respect shown by some colleagues in social services for the contribution of schools to multi-agency working focused on safeguarding the welfare of children.

“What I don’t like about social services meetings when I go to them is that they think they have it sussed and we’re kind of like just the wee boys and girls brought in to do our 10 minutes and then sit there quietly. They’ve no bloody idea you know because they’re doing all these different things, but my view is that we’re the ones actually dealing day-to-day consistently with the family and the child and, you know, the little girl…with all due respect, the wee girl sitting across who’s a social worker this week won’t be the one next week or the week after. That’s my experience year after year, you know, it’s a revolving [door]…on maternity leave or away sick or they’ve left her in a different department, you know, but we are the one consistent thing and we’re not given, I don’t think, appropriate acknowledgement or respect for that.” (principal in a large, urban, controlled school in the SEELB; 36 years’ experience)

Other focus group participants shared experiences that highlighted a lack of inter-professional awareness and understanding on the part of some colleagues in social services for the way that schools work:

“…and they phone you and they want the answers now…they’ll not say ‘can I phone you at 3:30pm’ or…they ring at 10am and you maybe are teaching your class and you have to go out and talk and gather information in your head that you know is so vital for these people.” (principal and SENCO in a medium, rural, controlled school in the WELB area; 27 years’ experience)

Overall, participants expressed a strong desire for training and development opportunities in order to build positive working relationships with social services colleagues within their local area.
Theme 4: Providing appropriate training, development and support to schools

The provision of appropriate training, development and support to schools emerged within all six focus groups as very significant – if not the most significant factor from the participants’ perspective – and associated with the effective development and teaching of “keeping safe” messages through preventative education in primary schools. Participants’ focus was concerned primarily with “building capacity over a long period of time…that really seems to be the need” (principal and DTCP in a large, urban, maintained school; 23 years’ experience). This concept of building capacity included the provision of high-quality training and ongoing support to the whole-school community – leaders, teachers, other school staff and parents – to facilitate the teaching of “keeping safe” messages within and through all aspects of school life.

“You are in charge and responsible for that whole child at every facet of their development and I feel it is important that we as a staff are given the training and equipped well enough to deliver a programme and to take on board those issues, the thorny issues, but it’s bringing the parents on board as well to close that circle.” (principal and SENCO in a medium, rural, controlled school in the WELB area; 27 years’ experience)

The meaning of this key theme was explored through the following four sub-themes:

1. Effective models of continuing professional development
2. Building comfort, confidence and competence in handling sensitive issues
3. Engaging parents
4. Maximising use of external agencies

Sub-theme 1: Effective models of continuing professional development

Participants within all six focus group discussions identified and explored a number of potential models of providing continuous professional development training and support to school staff. However, they focused initially on the essential elements of any model that would be effective in building schools’ capacity to teach “keeping safe” messages. These elements included adopting a grassroots approach to development, involving all the staff in the school and providing ongoing support.

“What’s also needed is teachers…if teachers are involved in it and the programme was created by teachers with teacher input, they’ll take it on board much quicker.” (principal of a small, rural, Catholic Maintained school in the SELB area)

Moreover, the need to involve the whole-school staff and not just teachers was strongly asserted within the majority of group discussions. Participants identified that, as school leaders, they had to date received little or no training and development that would assist them in creating a child-centred ethos within which to embed the teaching of “keeping safe” messages. Many considered that while creating this ethos was encouraged, the skills to do so were not nurtured, fostered or taught. Rather, they were viewed as stemming from the personality, vocation and personal character of individuals leading schools.
Like their counterparts who took part in the case study within the Ballymena District Council area, participants identified that non-teaching staff within schools had a key role to play in developing and teaching “keeping safe” messages. Participants considered that many had a unique relationship with the children, lived locally and were likely to be aware of events in the community that might impact on children and therefore need to be included in any training, development and support initiatives.

“It’s what happens outside the classroom as well I think, the key people in all of this are the likes of your classroom assistants and your ancillary staff who are walking around the playground and maybe having a casual chat or seeing a child who’s sitting on their own or whatever, and I think as a leader you need to make sure that you’re not just always directing things at teachers in something like this.” (principal of a large, urban, controlled school in the NEELB area; 14 years’ experience)

Within the focus group in the SEELB area, one of the participants shared their experience of seeking advice, support and learning from the independent school counsellor, as the group explored the potential for non-teaching professionals working in the school to contribute to the ongoing continuing professional development of school staff in this area:

“You need that expertise in your school and it’s a great, great, great asset to have…the number of times I’ve sat down with…and talked to her about things…the teachers would talk to her about things. You’ve that extra view, that sensitive understanding view about how things can be dealt with, managed and so on.” (principal of a large, urban, controlled school in the SEELB area; 36 years’ experience)

“It’s a capacity-building exercise really, having somebody like…in a school and teachers, because they’re actually learning every time they have a discussion.” (principal and DTCP in a medium, rural, integrated school in the SEELB area; 22 years’ experience)

As the discussions evolved, participants within each and every group highlighted the need for school staff to be supported on an ongoing basis throughout the development and teaching of “keeping safe” messages.

“Rather than delivering your training on a Tuesday and away you go for the rest of your teaching career…I think it has to be something that’s always there and people can go back and say, you know…‘how do I go about this if this reaction was made and what do I do?’…You need support there I think.” (principal and SENCO in a medium, rural, controlled school in the WELB area; 27 years’ experience)

This need for ongoing support was strongly asserted both in relation to teaching preventative education and also secondary prevention that may arise if more children disclose maltreatment experiences. Some participants reported valuing the support received in this regard from the CPSSS, while others identified the education and library board staff welfare service as a potential source of support to school staff.
“I would say very few of us actually sat round like this and talked as regards what we have found and how we felt about things, and I’m sure people are going to go away here today quite relieved, but it’s a fact that we’re the coal face, and when you’re the coal face and you’re constantly the coal face, at some particular stage cracks will appear so the fact that people would…to get feed back, to vent – that’s a good point.” (principal of a small, rural, Catholic Maintained school in the SELB area)

“I think teachers need support…I know ourselves – we’ve had a few experiences where children have disclosed things and you move it on and, yes, other agencies come on board but you know the teachers and the principals and the designated teachers are left there and you go home and you carry it with you and you hold it but you’re left…and I think when other teachers see how people feel and react from it, it makes them maybe think twice – well is this a route I want to go down?” (principal and DTCP in a medium, rural, controlled school in the SELB area; 17 years’ experience)

Clustering was identified by participants within all focus groups as a potentially effective model of providing this type of ongoing support. In relating their experience, both past and current, to focus group members, participants identified a number of important benefits that could be derived from using this model in building a schools’ capacity to teach “keeping safe” messages through preventative education. These benefits included opportunities to share and view good practice, as well as to debrief, ventilate and provide peer support to colleagues facing similar challenges. Participants within the NEELB area spoke of a principals’ cluster group that organised shared training and school development days for staff, while other participants commended the application of this model in implementing the enriched curriculum.

“It was teachers sharing good practice and through doing that you learnt an awful lot and your teacher also came back with a buzz of ‘hey, you know I’m going to try that’…and because of money and everything else, clustering got lost in the system and I think that although we’ve all been brought out to have our training on the revised curriculum – it’s big sessions in big rooms. It’s not going back to small groups, sitting down together and saying…‘…how we tackle it’…sometimes talking in a small group situation like that… teachers sometimes do feel a wee bit easier talking in their year group…because you can all recognise what is happening in that group.” (principal and DTCP in a small, urban, controlled school in the BELB area; 25 years’ experience)

Some participants highlighted the need for clusters to be structured and led. Others suggested that social services’ input would be invaluable in this context. However, in another focus group, participants acknowledged that extended school activities greatly reduced school staff time to cluster.

Other suggested models of providing continuing professional development training and support to school staff included adopting a whole-school development planning model, whereby the whole-school staff were assigned to pastoral or curricular groups and tasked with exploring, developing and implementing a particular element of the whole-school plan. The groups were rotated on an annual basis and this was viewed as fostering responsibility, knowledge and skill development in the whole-school staff within a supportive context.
A partnership working model, based on sharing knowledge and expertise across schools and school sectors, was also highlighted as having potential to provide ongoing support to staff in teaching “keeping safe” messages; in particular, sharing expertise across the special and mainstream sectors with regard to teaching “keeping safe” messages to children with special educational needs and disabilities.

“It would be very important for you not to just think that it’s only special schools that need that kind of support…we always talk about a closer partnership with the special school because you have a certain expertise and, you know, more expertise than maybe we do in those kind of specifics.” (principal and DTCP in a medium, rural, integrated school in the SEELB area; 22 years’ experience)

The challenges associated with this model were also acknowledged within the BELB focus group:

“But it takes people at the top with vision to attempt to do that and because budgets are so tight and funding is so, you know, you’re getting a little bit of money from here and you’re not letting go and know you’ve applied for that because they’ll apply for it and I mightn’t get it.” (principal and DTCP in a small, urban, controlled school in the BELB area; 25 years’ experience)

The cascade model currently used to train whole-school staff in child protection policy and procedures was also discussed within a number of focus groups. Participants drew on this experience to highlight that they would need a range of resources and ways of delivering the message to staff to enable them to make effective use of this model in building their school staff capacity to teach “keeping safe” messages.

“It’s me that does the training and, yes, my main aim is to get the same messages but I like to vary the training because you can’t get up and do the same thing – people are going to switch off…I would like some support on a rolling programme of really suitable training for staff that is interactive because I think the best bit is when they really are talking. Yes, you can use scenarios and I do use scenarios but this is, what, the ninth year I’ve done it and it’s hard to keep it alive.” (principal and DTCP in a medium, rural, integrated school in the SEELB area; 22 years’ experience)

An online model of providing training and support was also highlighted in one of the focus group discussions. Other models considered to have potential included the DTCP in the school being relieved of some other duties and tasked with supporting colleagues in teaching “keeping safe” messages, or a seconded teacher working in an advisory capacity to support a small number of schools.
Sub-theme 2: Building comfort, confidence and competence in handling sensitive issues

The challenge for school staff in dealing with sensitive issues emerged as a key concern for participants across all of the six focus groups. Their concerns and identified needs for training and support were two-fold, relating both to the teaching of sensitive messages through preventative education and to secondary prevention in managing disclosures effectively within a multi-agency context: in particular, at the interface with social services.

“There are some of these issues I can deal with, you know, watching out for strangers and so on but there are some people who do not like dealing with difficult issues and are not equipped. A teacher came in yesterday with a dictionary found in school…‘do you know there’s bits in this dictionary about sex’ or something like this and they just felt this was totally inappropriate to have available in school.” (principal of a small, rural, Catholic Maintained school in the SELB area)

“We did training recently for child protection in school and some staff find it very difficult to listen to…some people couldn’t bring themselves to read it and you have to respect that so you can’t expose people to more than they’re able emotionally to deal with.” (principal and DTCP in a medium, urban, controlled special school in the SEELB area; 16 years’ experience)

“I think there’s a fear factor here, there’s a lot of teachers very fearful in this area and they’re justifiably fearful, if I may say so, because I would say there’s nobody in this room who hasn’t walked themselves or been walked into a quagmire in the past over one of these issues where children have made a disclosure, an outsider has made a disclosure and that can leave people very wary of listening with the correct ears the next time this happens or picking up on something that they’ve observed.” (principal and deputy DTCP in a small, rural, Catholic Maintained school in the SELB area; 30 years’ experience)

Participants were unequivocal in asserting the need for good quality training and support to be provided, and highlighted the need for this to be conceived as an ongoing process of development that began within initial teacher training (ITT).

“It’s growing people, it’s about the ethos of the school, whether it’s a school that allows you to grow as people and it takes into account that it’s a slow process, and it’s through dialogue and engagement and being perceived, being able to talk openly about things and being able to share and support each other.” (principal of a large, urban, controlled school in the SEELB area; 36 years’ experience)

A number of key elements were identified, including the need to extend training and support to the whole-school staff including classroom and support assistants. The exclusion of staff other than the DTCP and their deputy from existing training hosted by the education and library board staff was considered a limitation, as was the fact that there was limited availability and a waiting list to access a place.
Participants drew on this experience to highlight the need for appropriate resourcing of training, development and support for school staff with regard to “teaching keeping” safe messages.

“I go on the training, my deputy designated teacher goes on the training but I would actually like to see it more open, for example my SENCO who is working with some of the most vulnerable children in school – I really think she should have the opportunity to do the full training. I have an assistant in my school who is the kind of very approachable assistant who if there were a disclosure made she’s quite likely to be the person that it’s going to be made to.” (principal and DTCP in a medium, rural, integrated school in the SEELB area; 22 years’ experience)

Reflecting further on their prior experiences of training received, participants noted the need for it to be well-focused, realistic and relevant in terms of dealing appropriately with the issues people were facing on the ground. These included how to manage case conferences and work effectively in a multi-agency context. A number of focus group participants were highly critical of the fact that much of the training they currently received was delivered by people who they considered were out of touch with current practice and the challenges faced by teachers in schools. Some proposed that experienced teachers should be seconded out of school for short periods to share and model good practice across other schools.

“But they need to be hands-on. There’s no point giving overheads and powerpoints and things like that.” (principal and DTCP in a medium, urban, Catholic Maintained school in the BELB area; 29 years’ experience)

Furthermore, in deliberating on the relevance of training in relation to their current practice, focus group participants within one group indicated that that a ‘one size fits all’ approach would be much less effective than one that acknowledged and took account of the fact that schools were at different starting places in teaching “keeping safe” messages. Some participants proposed that a tiered package of training, development and support be developed and used in conjunction with a school-level audit to identify individual school’s needs in this regard.

**Sub-theme 3: Engaging parents**

The importance of engaging and involving parents in the teaching of keeping safe messages through preventative education emerged as a key concept within each of the six focus group discussions. Participants across all groups asserted the need to inform, educate and support parents in this regard.

“I think maybe working with our parents before we work with our children would be a route to have the relationship and the confidence from our parents as to what it is, what the programme’s about, what it entails, before we go down the route of standing in front of the class on a Tuesday afternoon and ‘let’s deliver this to the children’. I think your parents would have to be totally on board and at ease.” (principal and SENCO in a medium, rural, controlled school in the WELB area; 27 years’ experience)
Focus group participants reported that, through lack of education and awareness, many parents did not understand or recognise inappropriate parenting behaviour. They, therefore, neglected to promote the development of positive self-esteem and resilience in their children, and to facilitate their children’s access to inappropriate television and internet use. The need for parental education was highlighted in particular in relation to the teaching of “keeping safe” messages through preventative education. A number of participants also highlighted parents’ need for support in this area, in particular, parents of children with severe learning disabilities in relation to managing inappropriate behaviour between children.

“I mean, I’ve a parent who was totally lost and I think they need some support mechanisms in there for how to best cope with it all and they do not want to take the wrong attitude because the other pupil hasn’t done it in a predatory way but still he has touched her child and expressed something. It wasn’t done in a way that was meant to be of a sexualised…but because of the age, when something happens so quickly and then the pupils use their own words, it frightens the parents and makes them feel all the more vulnerable for the future. So there is definitely support required for the parents.” (vice-principal in a medium, urban, controlled special school in the SEELB area; 37 years’ experience)

Despite many participants reporting having developed excellent relationships with parents, others noted the challenge schools face in engaging parents in the life of the school and more specifically in the teaching of “keeping safe” messages through preventative education. Participants working in special schools asserted the particular challenge this presented for them, stating that many of their parents did not wish for their children to be exposed to sensitive and potentially frightening material. Within some groups, participants recommended that parents should be targeted with strong messages about the prevalence and impact of maltreatment through public education.

Participants across all focus groups expressed a need for training to engage parents. They also expressed a strong need for support from partner agencies in relation to secondary prevention following a disclosure, in order to ensure that relationships with parents were not damaged unnecessarily and that parents remained engaged with the school.

“A couple of years ago, we invited a lady to speak to parents on risk-taking behaviours, and one parent turned up that evening. That disappointed me, so I don’t know how we will encourage our parents. At the moment, obviously, they’re happy with the school as we’re running our procedures but I just feel there’s a gap there and I don’t know how to bring parents in.” (principal and deputy DTCP in a small, rural, Catholic Maintained school in the SELB area; 30 years’ experience)
Sub-theme 4: Maximising the use of external agencies

Within all of the focus groups, the issue of external agencies teaching “keeping safe” messages emerged and was deliberated. Participants reported that many organisations were available and engaged in teaching preventative education in primary schools. However, in some cases, concerns were raised in relation to the accuracy of the message and the skills of the facilitator to communicate the message effectively to children. The benefits reported include the opportunity for school staff to develop their skills and overall capacity to teach “keeping safe” messages.

“The children will be with the facilitators in a different way than they may be with their classroom teachers, so we find that beneficial, not as a replacement of but certainly as a way of supporting.” (principal of a medium, urban, integrated school in the SELB area)

“Because the girl who came in…came back on numerous occasions to take groups of children or classes, and the teachers learned a great deal just about the strategies that were coming through and how to put them into place and how to operate them. And I have to say that sort of support, I think, gave teachers a lot more confidence in dealing with issues or even trying to spot issues…but I thought that support for the teachers just embedded everything in place, and I think that’s where agencies coming in can help.” (principal and DTCP in a large, urban, controlled school in the NEELB area; 24 years’ experience)

Furthermore, participants acknowledged that in order to make effective use of external agencies in this regard, schools themselves had a responsibility and role to play, and needed to be appropriately resourced to facilitate this.

“It’s expectations as well, and how teachers and the person coming in perceive what it is, the job that they have to do at that particular time and that’s why I say it’s planning time and teachers. You don’t always get that time…how many times have we had community police in and you’re saying ‘constable is coming in to see you at 3 o’clock to talk about your programme and it’s a five-minute chat’ and away they go and they come in and deliver something that you’re not as a teacher sure until you’ve been through the first tranche of it what is happening. And it’s time and building in time for things like that…it depends on the manager whether they have the capacity to allocate that time to allow that teacher time to set the scene.” (vice-principal in a large, urban, integrated school in the BELB area; 25 years’ experience)
6 Strengths and limitations

Strengths

- This study generated new evidence in relation to the views of school staff about the strategic development of school-based preventative education in Northern Ireland.

- The use of focus groups provided an opportunity for school staff across different roles, levels of experience and school type to explore their experiences and perspective on the issues they considered most relevant to the development of preventative education. Moreover, focus groups facilitated a process of engaging and consulting with this key stakeholder group, and fostering their involvement in the process of developing preventative education in primary schools.

- The adoption of the two-phased approach facilitated an in-depth case study, as well as a series of focus groups with school leaders from across Northern Ireland, ensuring robust data and findings, and providing a sound evidence base from which to develop practice.

Limitations

- The process of recruiting participants resulted in school staff volunteering and self-selecting to take part in the focus groups and, therefore, the findings may not be representative of the views of all school staff across Northern Ireland.

7 Discussion and conclusions

Discussion

This report has presented some of the most significant findings from an in-depth consultation about the teaching of “keeping safe” messages through preventative education in primary schools. Initially, this involved principals, teachers and classroom assistants in mainstream schools and other professionals working in the special sector in the Ballymena District Council area; subsequently, principals and vice-principals working in schools across the five education and library board areas in Northern Ireland were also engaged in the research.

Legislation, policy and guidance in Northern Ireland and in other countries (Children and Young People’s Unit, 2006; DfES, 2003) over the past two decades has identified a clear role for the education sector and schools in safeguarding the welfare of children (Baginsky, 2007; Edwards et al, 2010; Vincent, 2010). To date, their focus has been on secondary prevention – creating a culture of listening in schools, responding to disclosures and working effectively within a multi-agency context to ensure children and their families receive appropriate support (Cornelius and Ressegue, 2006; Foshee et al, 1998; Murray and Graybeal, 2007).
However, at a time when UK government policy has broadened the focus of education and schools to include prevention and early intervention approaches, and as many children continue to suffer maltreatment (Cawson, 2002; Cawson et al, 2000; Scott et al, 2009) and experience a range of negative health, wellbeing and development outcomes (Finkelhor, 2008; Goddard and Bedi, 2010; Hawker and Boulton, 2000), it is timely to explore the contribution of schools to primary prevention – that is, preventing maltreatment occurring by teaching “keeping safe” messages through preventative education.

While little attention has to-date been placed on the significance of teachers’ contribution to the robust evaluative studies exploring the effectiveness of teaching “keeping safe” messages (Foshee, 1998, 2000; Rispens et al, 1997; Zwi et al, 2007), it is clear from the wider literature that for many teachers promoting the social and emotional development of the children they teach has been a fundamental aspect of their professional identity and role (Furedi, 2009; McCallum, 2001). Many teachers have been involved in preventative education, including teaching “keeping safe” messages through a range of curricular programmes (Barron, 2009; Barron and Topping, 2009; Cornelius and Resseguie, 2006; Cross et al, 2011; Foshee et al, 1998; MacIntyre and Carr, 1999; Mishna et al, 2009). It is significant, therefore, that this study sought first to explore their views and experiences in relation to teaching “keeping safe” messages through preventative education and, second, to clarify the factors that influence current practice in this area with a view to informing the development of preventative education tailored to the needs, cultural sensitivities and context of Northern Ireland. Overall, the research findings presented here will inform the development and cost-efficient targeting of effective training, development and support in line with the expressed needs of school staff in relation to the teaching of preventative education within primary schools.

This study highlighted the perceptions, experiences and attitudes of school staff to teaching “keeping safe” messages within primary schools in Northern Ireland. In phase 1 of the study, there were clear differences in perceptions and understanding of “keeping safe”, and in attitudes to the teaching of “keeping safe” messages across school sector and management types. Teachers, classroom assistants and allied health professionals in the special school sector acknowledged that they had a key role to play in teaching “keeping safe” messages to children that focused more immediately on their personal safety, and reported that they were already teaching sensitive messages like appropriate and inappropriate touch. Those working in mainstream schools appeared to interpret “keeping safe” in terms of physical safety, bullying and, beyond that, stranger danger. These participants, particularly those from the controlled sector, tended not to include concepts like child abuse and domestic abuse, and expressed reluctance for schools and teachers to take on the responsibility for teaching “keeping safe” messages. As reported in previous research, those teachers and other staff who expressed a willingness to teach “keeping safe” messages also reported varying degrees of discomfort and confidence with regard to teaching messages about sexual abuse and domestic abuse (Johnson, 1995; Lalor and McElvaney, 2010; Whiteside, 2001).

While the concerns raised within the case study area were acknowledged within the majority of the focus groups, all of the school principals involved in phase 2 of this research expressed positive attitudes to embracing and embedding preventative education within all aspects of the leadership and teaching practice within their schools.
Moreover, they argued that teaching “keeping safe” messages was core to the aims and purpose of education and schools, and as identified in the research literature, key to overcoming barriers to learning so that children could reach their full potential (Durlak et al, 2008; McCallum, 2001). School leaders will need to be cognisant of and address the concerns expressed by teachers and other school staff with regard to the delivery of “keeping safe” messages as they work to embed preventative education in the curriculum and ethos of their school. Acknowledging and addressing the genuine concerns expressed by teachers and other staff will also be key to the success of any training, development and support package developed to build the whole-school capacity to teach “keeping safe” messages.

This study sought to ascertain the views of school staff about what should be taught as “keeping safe” messages and how these messages should be taught within primary schools. While different opinions were expressed as to what “keeping safe” messages should be taught, all groups identified the benefits of building children’s resilience, promoting their awareness of risks and a sense of responsibility to look out for themselves. Discussions highlighted that children were being taught about stranger danger and internet safety, but to a lesser extent about child abuse and domestic abuse. Participants felt that concerns about making children more fearful and exposing them to a harsh world could be alleviated by the careful selection of teaching methods and appropriate teaching materials, as well as by utilising all opportunities within the curriculum and life of the school to reinforce key messages. School leaders in phase 2 expressed an even stronger commitment to teaching “keeping safe” messages, including those messages perceived as more sensitive, once appropriate training and support was provided. This training and support must challenge the myths associated with stranger danger and address the concerns expressed about delivering sensitive messages to children. Training should build teachers’ confidence and skills to respond appropriately to sensitive issues and disclosures in a multi-agency context.

Relevant to the discussion about how “keeping safe” messages should be taught was the debate about who should actually deliver those messages: teachers or external speakers? As in previous studies, participants in phase 1 – largely from the controlled sector – valued external speakers delivering sensitive messages instead of teachers, who expressed discomfort and lack of confidence. They cited the benefits as being external speakers’ ability to deliver messages effectively and consistently, and to responding appropriately if issues were raised (Barron, 2009; Formby et al, 2011; Thiara and Ellis, 2005). By contrast, in phase 2, participants advocated emphatically that teachers take the lead role in teaching “keeping safe” messages, with input from expert external personnel when required. Participants strongly recommended that prevention education should be embedded across the curriculum and integrated across all aspects of school life. It should involve the whole-school community, including: school management and leaders; teachers, including DTCPs; non-teaching school staff; other professionals working in school; children; parents and the wider family circle; the community; and external partner agencies across the voluntary and statutory sectors.
Ellis (2008) confirmed the importance of building the capacity of teachers to deliver sensitive messages if schools want to provide continuity and progression to learners, and make an impact on school culture. Furthermore, research (Barron and Topping, 2009; Farrington and Ttofi, 2010; Vreeman and Carroll, 2007) has shown that an approach that embeds preventative education in the curriculum and ethos of the school is effective in building a school’s capacity to teach preventative education with regard to child sexual abuse prevention (Barron and Topping, 2009; Cross et al, 2011; Farrington and Ttofi, 2009) and in terms of both primary and secondary prevention outcomes (Cornelius and Resseguie, 2006; Foshee et al, 1998; Murray and Graybeal, 2007).

Participants highlighted that effective support and input from other statutory (eg health, social services) and voluntary (eg NSPCC, ChildLine, counselling organisations) partner agencies was critical to secondary prevention.

The research also identified the barriers and factors that would facilitate school staff to teach “keeping safe” messages within primary schools. In phase 1, a number of barriers were identified with regard to the primary and secondary prevention aspects of teaching “keeping safe” messages. While teacher discomfort and lack of confidence in the teaching of sensitive messages was a key concern, the ever-expanding role of the teacher and curriculum content, and destroying children’s innocence were also identified as concerns. For all participants and particularly those working within the special school sector, concerns included the challenge of conveying complex “keeping safe” concepts in a way that children could understand. Other participants highlighted the challenges of teaching complex “keeping safe” messages across a language and cultural divide. Consistent with previous research (Abrahams et al, 1992; Bunting et al, 2009; Goldman, 2007; Walsh et al, 2006; Young et al, 2008), teachers expressed concerns about responding appropriately to disclosures, and primarily school leaders expressed concerns related to working collaboratively with statutory partners to secure an effective, pragmatic response and support for children and their families (Baginsky, 2007; DHSSPS, 2005; Edwards et al, 2010; Horwath, 2009; Ofsted, 2010). The barriers and concerns identified and explored in detail in this research will be invaluable in the development of a package of training and support for school staff. The genuine concerns expressed largely by teachers in phase 1 of the study must be addressed if preventative education is to be fully implemented.

The current Northern Ireland curriculum was identified by participants as providing the opportunity to embed the teaching of “keeping safe” messages within primary schools. Moreover, a number of school-level factors emerged as significant in facilitating positive practice in teaching “keeping safe” messages. These included child-centred leadership and ethos, school profile characteristics, pupil vulnerability and the relationship of the school in the community. Participants identified the important role of parents, and the need to explore ways to connect with and develop partnership relationships with parents to facilitate preventative education. These significant factors should be considered if preventative education is to be effectively developed and implemented across primary schools in Northern Ireland.
Participants identified a number of resources that would facilitate schools across Northern Ireland and their wider support services within education and social services to effectively develop preventative education. Strategic leadership from the DE (NI) and the Education and Training Inspectorate was considered important to promote implementation and sustainability by embedding preventative education within existing structures. Appropriate funding and time were identified as essential for schools to make appropriately trained staff available to respond to children and engage in effective collaborative working to safeguard the welfare of children when concerns arise. There was general agreement that in order to promote the implementation of preventative education, teaching materials and resources linked to the current curriculum need to be made available.

Lastly, participants identified the resource and support implications that would arise out of teaching “keeping safe” messages within primary schools. Participants in both phase 1 and phase 2 expressed an unequivocal need for a comprehensive package of training, development and support to be provided to facilitate schools to engage in a long-term process of building their capacity to teach preventative education. Participants recommended that consideration be given to adopting best-practice models of delivering continuing professional development. As in previous reviews and literature (Barron and Topping, 2009; Day et al, 2006; Swann et al, 2010), participants confirmed the merits of involving teachers in programme development to promote ownership and commitment. Participants also clearly identified the need to adopt a whole-school approach that engaged the whole-school staff, parents and external agencies across the statutory and voluntary sectors (Cordingley et al, 2003, 2005; Garet et al, 2001). They also highlighted that any package should acknowledge variation in existing attitudes and practice across schools with regard to teaching “keeping safe” messages and should facilitate schools to tailor training, development and support to their individual needs. The package should incorporate the development of a child-centred ethos among school leaders, with opportunities for all of the school staff to acknowledge personal beliefs and attitudes (Johnson, 1995), and practice and develop their confidence (Sy and Glanz, 2008). It should also incorporate opportunities to explore effective multidisciplinary and inter-agency working in the context of secondary prevention; that is, the development of effective processes to engage, educate and support parents regarding preventative education and the provision of ongoing support. Moreover, as previously identified elsewhere (Buckley and White, 2007), participants identified their responsibility to maximise the input from external agencies by ensuring that materials were well presented in a timely way to complement previous messages delivered and were consistent with the ethos of the school.

Conclusions
While detailing the concerns of teachers and other school staff, this research study shows considerable support among school leaders and school staff for the development of preventative education to teach children in primary schools in Northern Ireland how to keep safe from bullying, domestic abuse and child abuse. The current focus on prevention within legislative and policy developments in Northern Ireland, teacher competencies and the statutory provision of PD&MU in the curriculum all contribute to the positive climate that exists for such a strategic development in the context of a wider public health approach.
While principals, teachers and other school staff identified a number of potential barriers, they also demonstrated an appetite to embrace preventative education within the ethos of their schools and work collaboratively with parents and other stakeholders. To make this a reality in Northern Ireland, significant resource investment will be required to provide a comprehensive package of training, development and support to the whole-school community. This should be informed by best practice models of delivering continuing professional development, taking into account the expressed needs of teachers and other school staff, as well as the factors identified as significant in promoting positive practice. Training and support packages should acknowledge variation in existing attitudes and practice across schools, and should facilitate schools to tailor training, development and support to meet their individual needs within the context of their own school development plan.

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