

Mysterious marks

When you have safeguarding concerns about one of the children in your care, it is important to play things by the book, says **Paul Dix...**



One morning you notice unusual marks on Charlie's arm. The first time you saw them you weren't quite sure, but now he has finally taken his jumper off they are quite clear. You were going to ask him about them but something stopped you. They look like burn marks or scratches, perhaps 5cm in length but discoloured, maybe even infected. Both marks are on the forearms. Charlie's mum is not just a mum at the nursery but a personal friend. She has had three children come through the nursery, and you know the family well. But these marks look odd and you cannot ignore them. Charlie hasn't mentioned being in pain and he is certainly not troubled by them. Yet his jumper is on again and you suspect that he is actively trying to hide the marks from you.

As you arrive home from work later that day the marks are still bothering you. It is probably nothing, but best to make sure. You resolve to take action in the morning..

How do you respond?

Mum's the word - talk to Mum and put your concerns to her directly. She is a good friend and will understand that you are just looking out for Charlie.

Charlie says - talk to Charlie and see if he can clear up the mystery. It will be much easier to get the truth from the horse's mouth.

Up a level - flag a possible child protection issue with the member of staff in charge of safeguarding.

The consequences

Mum's the word

You steal yourself to talk to Charlie's mum. Unsure of how to approach the subject you clumsily scoot around with questions about how Charlie is feeling and whether or not he is happy. The conversation is awkward and Mum,

Sasha, is clearly confused. You only have a short time before the children are tired of waiting outside and interrupt you. In a desperate attempt to hurry to the point you pose a clumsy and ultimately disastrous question. "Charlie has nasty scars on his arm and I wondered why?" is answered with a long silence, then, "How dare you!" a heel turn, slamming door and some permanent damage to your friendship.

When the inevitable complaint email comes in you realise just how inept you have been. You now have to explain yourself to the boss and worry that a formal warning might be winging its way towards you. Somewhere in the back of your mind the phrase, "Not your job to investigate" echoes.

Talking behaviour

- What might be the unintended consequences of talking directly to Mum?
- Is it okay to develop close friendships with parents?
- Is it your job to investigate?

B **Charlie says**
 Walking and talking with Charlie in the yard seems the best time to open up the conversation. You ask him about the marks on his arm, but he is not keen to reveal the answer. He diverts the conversation a few times. You ask to see his arm, but he is not willing to let you examine closely. He doesn't want to show you. Yet you persist and, after some gentle cajoling and a promise to keep a secret, he reveals to you that he made the marks with his older sister. "There was lots of bleeding and some got onto the curtains in my room", he explains. "Mum called an ambulance and the police came," he continues. "The helicopter landed in the back garden and monkeys ran out with banana guns."

You being to wonder if all or any of Charlie's account of events is entirely accurate. Still no closer to discovering what the marks on his arm might be you wonder if talking to Charlie was the right decision. A small voice chimes in with, "I wasn't supposed to tell you," and you are now worried that within the fantasy there is some darker truth.

Talking behaviour

- Should you encourage children to disclose information to you?
- How might Charlie explain this conversation when he gets home?
- What should you do now?

C **Up a level**
 Although you think that it might be too soon to report it, you go to talk to the designated safeguarding officer (or Maureen, as she is more commonly known). She reassures you that you were absolutely right to come and speak to her first, and asks you to write down the facts. She helps you separate it from the suspicions and half-truths. You breathe a huge sigh of relief when she explains that you will not have to investigate or involve yourself further beyond remaining vigilant. Your relationship with Charlie's mum is safe, and you are no longer carrying your suspicions alone. You are relieved but still worry about the real reason behind the marks. Maureen has promised an update and you are content that you have done all you can.

A few days later Maureen comes to see you. It seems that Daddy is to blame. He bought the children gruesome make-up and they went nuts with it. Apparently it wasn't

just the curtains that were 'bled' on. The sofa, bannisters and two dogs were also victims of the chaos. Mum had tried to clean them up, but she suspects there are still some left over fake scars being hoarded...

Talking Behaviour

- Do you know who the designated safeguarding officer is in your workplace?
- What will Maureen do with the information you have given her?
- Will Maureen have to reveal where the report came from?

Which approach did you use?

A YOUR BEHAVIOUR STYLE **Fools rush in**

That little voice was right. You are not Poirot. Put the notebook away and take down the pictures of suspects accumulating in your mind. Your vigilance is excellent but it doesn't make you Taggart's apprentice. Think carefully before you act. Consult the agreed procedures, ask for help, talk to your colleagues. Even better, talk to Maureen.

B YOUR BEHAVIOUR STYLE **Slippery bananas**

Your gung ho intervention is reckless. Encouraging children to disclose personal information is fraught with danger for everyone concerned. It is also not your job to do this. You cannot promise children that you can keep their secret. If a child discloses information to you, you must record and refer it.

C YOUR BEHAVIOUR STYLE **Pure procedure**

Keep to the agreed and consistent policy. Spot on. If you have any suspicions about a child's safety then report the facts to the designated safeguarding officer. She will have been trained to manage information and will deal with your concerns quickly and efficiently. Don't worry that it might seem trivial. Don't worry if you are close to the family. Don't worry if the story contains banana guns or monkey helicopters!

findoutmore

Paul Dix is author of *Taking Care of Behaviour* and runs a leading training consultancy. If you want to learn outstanding safeguarding practice for yourself, have a look at Paul's Online Safeguarding Course. Visit www.pivotaleducation.com/online-courses-resources or join the conversation on Twitter @PivotalPaul



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