



Retaining Pupil Trust without Promising Confidentiality

Guidance for school staff

Introduction

In our work with schools and other organisations, we are often asked questions about how to tackle the issue of confidentiality when working with vulnerable pupils. We have provided some suggestions to guide your thinking which we hope will prove valuable to yourself or your colleagues. Many staff will feel completely comfortable with this topic, but we know from experience that many staff would appreciate some support. This guidance is written in the spirit of supporting the good practice we see in schools every day and draws on the knowledge of many experienced colleagues who have learnt by doing and also reflects the opinions of young people who we regularly consult in our work.

When in doubt, colleagues should always be encouraged to discuss any concerns with their child protection officers.

We hope that child protection officers and other experienced staff will find this guidance a useful starting point when exploring the many issues surrounding confidentiality with colleagues.

If you have any suggestions for improvement – or if there are other topics you would like us to develop resources or guidance on, please don't hesitate to be in touch.

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Involve the pupil

In order to retain the pupil's trust they need to feel informed or involved in the process of informing others. They have a right to know who knows what about them – and why.

When considering passing on information about a pupil to other people such as parents or other members of staff, always consider who, what, why and how with the pupil before you disclose details of their difficulties to anyone else.

WHO should you talk to?

Discuss with the pupil who you think needs to be told about their difficulties. This list will depend on your school's policies and procedures and the severity of the issues being discussed but people you might want to consider sharing some information with include:

- The pupil's parents
- Your child protection or emotional wellbeing lead
- The pupil's form tutor
- Your school nurse / counsellor
- A close friend of the pupil

If the pupil seems especially concerned about parents being informed then you might want to remind the child of the school's child protection policy. Parents must not be informed if this may put the child at further risk, however children need to understand fully the ramifications of child protection concerns being raised. Where there is any doubt, you should seek the advice and support of the school's child protection office who may explore the issue further with the child before, between you, you make a decision about the best course of action.

WHY should you talk to them?

Talk to the pupil about why or why not specific people should be told about difficulties.

When a pupil understands that information about their difficulties will only be shared with people who need to know they will feel reassured. Pupils often imagine their concerns will be shared with everyone which can leave them feeling vulnerable and out of control – which may exacerbate any unhealthy coping behaviours.

Reasons for sharing this information with other people might include:

- You have to, it's part of the school's policy
- This person may be able to offer emotional or academic support
- This person may be able to help the pupil access specialised support where needed
- They may have been worrying about the pupil and will be relieved that steps are being taken to address things (this is often the case with parents)



- They need to know so they can make certain allowances for the pupil (e.g. homework extensions, allowing them to leave class)
- It is helpful for more than one person to be involved in supporting the pupil in case you are absent and they need someone to talk to

Where you feel it is appropriate to escalate concerns to a more experienced or specialised colleague, it is important to explain to the young person your reasons for doing so as pupils can often mistakenly assume negative reasons for this passing on or sharing of responsibility – perhaps that their concerns are too big and scary for us to hold, or that we are not interested in supporting the young person ourselves. By providing clear explanations to the pupil we can help to allay their concerns and prevent them retreating back inside themselves which can often happen when they begin to regret having made a disclosure.

WHAT will you say?

As well as agreeing who you should speak to and why, you should discuss with the pupil exactly what information will be shared. It's likely that the pupil has told you a lot more than needs to be passed on and there may be some aspects of what they've shared that they consider to be embarrassing or highly personal and would prefer you left out when passing the information on. Between you and the pupil you should be able to agree the headlines that each person needs to know in order to be able to offer the most appropriate support or follow up.

You may need to share more information with some people than with others.

In general the pupil will feel happiest if you share a minimum of information. As they become more comfortable with talking about their difficulties, they may be willing to share more information but never assume. Always keep the pupil informed so they know exactly who knows what and why.

HOW will you tell them?

Talk to the pupil about how the people you've agreed will be told about their difficulties. Do they want you to pass on the information? Would they like to do it themselves? Would they like you to support them in having the conversation? Perhaps they'd like to work with you to write a letter if they think a face-to-face conversation would simply be too difficult. Think too about where the conversation should take place: at school? At home? Outside of school? All these seemingly small factors can make a huge difference to a pupil who is panicking about their secret 'getting out'.

Allow the pupil to feel in control

The important thing about this process is that you're enabling the pupil to feel like they're retaining some control. Of course you'll have to do some steering to make sure that the appropriate people are informed, but if you work with the pupil and allow them to input into the process then they will feel like you're on their side and that this process is happening with them not to them. This is a very important distinction.

