CHILD PROTECTION DURING COVID-19

Supporting the youth work sector with child protection considerations during Covid-19 and its related control measures.

WORKING WITH YOUNG PEOPLE DURING COVID-19

Youth work can be the source of safety and security for so many young people in Ireland. Covid-19 and its necessary control measures compound the challenges for vulnerable and at-risk young people.

The current situation:
- **Signifies the disruption of a support network for many young people in Ireland**
- **Puts young people and families who are already vulnerable under stress**
- **Heightens the risk of abuse and neglect.**

This can create confusion for the organisations that support these young people too.

We are all working together to navigate these unprecedented circumstances, so the NYCI Child Protection Programme has put together some information to support the youth work sector to continue their commitment to child protection in their practice.

MANAGING THE SITUATION

ALL PROJECTS SHOULD:
- Coordinate with local services and combine efforts
- Keep up to date with local project closures so that you can signpost young people to available services
- Familiarise yourself with the relevant phone-based and online support services for young people. Make these details available to them, where appropriate.
- Check national youth and community work platforms for guidance, support and information-sharing
- Share information from official sources only and be consistent. Nominate 1 or 2 persons to coordinate any communications to staff and young people about Covid-19.

IF YOUR PROJECT IS STILL PHYSICALLY OPEN:
- DCYA have guidance for acute services that need to remain physically open. This can be accessed here
- Conduct a risk assessment for staff, volunteers and young people whilst your project is open during this period.
- Make sure you have updated contact details for the young people in your service, stored appropriately.
- Ensure you have the HSE Covid-19 information freely available and displayed clearly in the physical spaces you use

IF YOUR PROJECT IS PHYSICALLY CLOSED:
- Ensure that there are risk assessments in place for staff and young people and highlight relevant services, where appropriate
- Identify high risk young people to ensure there is a support plan in place for them during this period.
- Establish plans for contact for young people
- Use your organisation and technology appropriately to connect young people into wider community needs and programmes during this difficult time
- Ensure you have the HSE Covid-19 information freely available and displayed clearly in the digital spaces you use
- Make sure you have updated contact details for the young people in your service, stored appropriately.

Tusla are available for informal consultation and advice over the phone, not just reporting.

TRANSLATING YOUR CHILD PROTECTION POLICIES AND PROCEDURES

It is likely that your existing child protection policies and procedures do not encompass these unprecedented working conditions. Firstly, this is OK! Policies are 'living documents' and can be continuously updated as your circumstances and employee/volunteer requirements change.
Consider the following:

- The *National Guidance for the Protection and Welfare of Children (2017)* highlights the steps involved in carrying out a risk assessment. Using this, as well as the original risk assessment from your organisation's current Child Safeguarding Statement as a guide, conduct a straightforward risk assessment of the new working situation; the digital youth work you are providing.

- Review your child protection policies and procedures. Do they translate? If not, there is no need to reinvent the wheel. Develop a simple and concise child protection procedure for the new Covid-19 situation that complements your policy. It should address the following:

--> How to report child protection concerns when working from home?
--> What are the new risks for young people with your organisation moving certain youth work practices online?
--> What are the new risks for staff/volunteers with your organisation moving certain youth work practices online?
--> What do you need to put in place to make it safe for the young people and your staff/volunteers?
--> What will the new contact arrangements be for the Designated Liaison Person?

The National Guidance for the Protection and Welfare of Children (2017)

CARRYING OUT A RISK ASSESSMENT
As part of the risk assessment process, your organisation should reflect on what specific risks arise as a result of the service you provide and how these risks can be managed. The following steps in the diagram are a guide to help your organisation consider where the potential for risk lies and how these risks can be managed.

STEP 1
Identify potential risks
- Think about who or what might cause harm to children or young people using your service.
- Make sure all persons in the service, including children, are involved in this process. Different people will have different perceptions of what is a risk.

STEP 2
Rank each risk
- Rank each risk in terms of low, medium and high risks.
- To help rank each risk, consider the likelihood of the risk occuring and how serious the consequences could be.

STEP 3
Control and manage the risks
- Who owns the risk? Assign risk owners.
- What current controls are in place to reduce the risk?
- What future actions must be done to reduce the risk?
- What else do you need to do about the risk?

STEP 4
Monitor and review
- Are the controls effective?
- Are the actions effective?

It is not possible to eliminate risk completely, but risks can be significantly reduced if they are properly managed.

WITHIN YOUR OWN SERVICE

- Stay connected within your own organisation and professional network
- Use digital technology to facilitate connectivity amongst teams and colleagues
- Make sure you have contact details for everyone you need to, stored appropriately.
- Establish home working support, protocols and guidance for this period
- Establish processes for resource and information management /sharing (including data)
- Ensure staff are well supported during this challenging time and have appropriate supports and guidance.

REMEMBER THE BASICS

Covid-19 has presented a whole new way of living and working for the youth work sector. This might feel overwhelming, particularly when considering safeguarding and child protection, but remember: your child safeguarding responsibilities as an organisation have not changed, it's just that the circumstances are different. What requirements (both legally and within your own organisation) do you have for employees/volunteers working with young people? **Moving this work online should not change this.**

Online or offline, safeguarding requires a whole organisation approach, and an online space still needs to be a safe space. Consider the following (this is not an exhaustive list):

Garda Vetting
If the role constituted relevant work before Covid-19, this still should still apply if you are engaging in the same work online with young people.

Training
A worker should not engage in any youth work practice online if they are not appropriately trained in line with your organisational requirements.

Ratios and Oversight
Communicating one-on-one online is the equivalent of meeting a young person in a room one-on-one. If the work required supervision or multiple staff/volunteers before, then this should apply online too.

Staff Support
Try to sustain your support structures for your staff and volunteers wherever possible. Meetings, supervision and informal check-ins- can these be moved online?

Permission and Consent
Review the parent/guardian consent and permissions your organisation has in place. If they do not specifically address online interactions, then this will need to be put into place. Ascertain the best way to achieve this (e.g. online consent form, email communication with parents etc.) that can complement your existing permission arrangements. It should clarify exactly what your online interactions will be.

Record Keeping
Translate the key principles of your existing record keeping requirements to these new working arrangements, wherever possible. Particularly with child protection concerns, these will need to be recorded accurately and securely.

Code of Conduct
Where you have a Code of Conduct for young people, translate those into what they would look like when participating in online groups and all online interactions.

CIRCUMSTANCES THAT CAN MAKE YOUNG PEOPLE MORE VULNERABLE

There are young people and families whose circumstances can make them more vulnerable during periods of stress and disruption, for example:
- Unemployment and housing issues
- Poverty
- Social exclusion and discrimination
- Mental health issues
- Drug and alcohol abuse
- Parental intellectual disability
- Children with disabilities
- Drug and alcohol misuse
- Family conflict

Stigma and discrimination related to COVID-19 may make children more vulnerable to violence and psychosocial distress. Control measures that do not consider the gender-specific needs and vulnerabilities of women and girls may also increase their protection risks.

When you are completing your risk assessment, consider all of these factors. Children and families who are already vulnerable due to socioeconomic exclusion or those who live in overcrowded settings are particularly at risk.

⚠️ There is no 'one size fits all' guidance for this situation. Just as you made decisions as an organisation against the backdrop of Children First to inform your existing policies and procedures, similarly, you will have to tailor this as an organisation to working remotely and engaging with young people online.

KEY SUPPORTS

Coronavirus and Covid-19
HSE
www.gov.ie
Child Protection
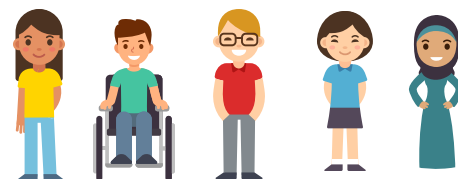Tusla
NYCI Child Protection Programme
Online Safety
webwise.ie
NYCI Web Safety in Youth Work

Supports for young people
ISPCC 24-Hour Childline
Crisis Textline
NYCI: Mental Health Signposting

Digital Youth Work
www.digitalyouthwork.eu
NYCI: Steam and Digital Youth Work
Skill IT Digital Pathways for Youth Work
Screenagers Digital Youth Work Guidelines

Supports for Parents
Barnardos Parent Support Line
webwise.ie Parents Hub