



SUBMISSION

ON

**CHILDREN FIRST
GUIDELINES**

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1. RECOMMENDATIONS - ASPECTS OF CHILDREN FIRST GUIDELINES

1. First and foremost, the Children First Guidelines should be put on a statutory footing. In terms of a child's safety this must take precedence over everything else, including any reservations that may exist with mandatory reporting.
2. When tracking referrals, Principals often report that the response to filing a report varies from one HSE region to another. There also appears to be a 'weighting' system applied by HSE in some regions in dealing with reports of abuse. If such 'weighting' systems apply they should be fully transparent and published.
3. Over half of Principals surveyed (900 responses) stated that *neglect* is the single most important factor impacting on a child's welfare in school. Yet it is the one area that gets least attention from the HSE. It is also the area of child abuse that Principals struggle most with in terms of at exactly which point in time to formally report it. The dilemma for schools is that when *neglect* is reported, whatever trust the parents had in the school, is suddenly destroyed. Consequently, the school is no longer able to work with members of the family who may be attempting to in address aspects of the *neglect*. Furthermore, if no action is taken by the HSE, the decision to report has inadvertently disimproved the welfare of the child. There is a clear need for separate and additional guidelines with specific reporting criteria and timeframes, when dealing with *neglect*. Such guidelines will greatly assist the Designated Liaison Person in dealing with and deciding the appropriate time to make a formal report.
4. All staff, teachers and SNAs, need training and not just the Designated Liaison person. This is particularly important in recognising the symptoms of abuse and knowing the procedures to follow.
5. Greater emphasis and clarity is needed in determining the nature and speed of response from the HSE and Gardaí. There is also a need for a consistent response to reports of Child Abuse in all HSE areas. A lead social worker should be assigned to each case reducing the impact of the frequent turnover of junior social workers. Schools report that they often deal with a myriad of people relating to the same case. This must equally be as confusing for the families involved. Similarly, when the HSE does intervene with families there should be an avoidance of multiple agencies visiting the home.
6. The Designated Liaison Person, usually the Principal, on making a referral sometimes feels that they, or other staff members, may be in personal danger when it becomes known that a report has been submitted through the school. Where the DLP has reason to believe that filing a report may affect their personal safety, the guidelines should allow for the name and role of the reporter to be recorded, but not made known to the Parent/Guardian. A similar protocol should exist in the case of number 3 above. Most primary schools are very much a part of their community. It is ultimately in the best interest of children's safety and welfare that Principals and teachers are given the maximum protection from any threat to their personal safety.