



Spotting Safeguarding Concerns

in Children Who Do Not Speak (or Have Limited Verbal Communication)



Research and safeguarding reviews consistently highlight that children who do not speak, or who have significant communication difficulties, may communicate distress through their behaviour, body language, emotions, routines and relationships rather than through verbal disclosure.

Staff should be particularly vigilant to the following:

Changes in Behaviour



Be curious about changes in behaviour, particularly sudden withdrawal, increased anxiety, aggression, self-injurious behaviour, or emotional outbursts that are out of character. These may be a child's way of communicating distress or harm.

Regression in Development



Pay attention to regression in development, such as loss of independence skills, toileting difficulties, increased dependence on adults, or reverting to earlier behaviours.

Communication Changes



Notice changes in communication patterns, including reduced eye contact, loss of previously used communication skills, reluctance to use AAC, PECS, signs, symbols or communication devices.

Recognising Safeguarding Concerns Beyond SEND



Be alert to children whose behaviours are repeatedly dismissed as part of their SEND needs. Research shows that distress can sometimes be incorrectly attributed to a child's condition rather than explored as a potential safeguarding concern.

Loss of or Reduced Indicators of Fear or Discomfort



Look for non-verbal indicators of fear or discomfort around particular people, places or activities, such as freezing, flinching, avoiding, hiding, crying, or attempting to leave situations.

Changes in Attendance, Engagement or Participation



Watch for changes in attendance, engagement or participation, including reluctance to come to school, reduced concentration, or avoiding specific lessons, adults or peers

Signs of Distress



Observe whether the child appears to be communicating "no", "stop", "help", "hurt" or "worried" through gestures, behaviour, symbols or other alternative communication methods.

Understanding Individual Communication



Ensure staff understand the child's individual communication methods and record any concerns accurately, including what was observed rather than assumptions about why it occurred.

Possible Neglect or Abuse



Monitor for physical signs of possible abuse or neglect, including unexplained injuries, changes in personal hygiene, weight loss, tiredness, inappropriate clothing, or repeated accidents.

Creating Opportunities to Communicate



Create regular opportunities for the child to express preferences, choices and concerns using their preferred communication system. Giving children a reliable way to communicate is itself an important safeguarding measure.

Key Message!

Children who do not speak still have a voice. Safeguarding concerns may be communicated through behaviour, body language, emotions, routines, play, relationships and alternative communication systems. Staff should remain professionally curious, record concerns promptly, and share them with the DSL whenever something does not feel right.