



MORE THAN A POLICY: BUILDING CULTURES OF SAFETY IN AFTER SCHOOL PROGRAMMES

WESTERN CAPE COMMUNITY OF PRACTICE

March 2026



THE
**LEARNING
TRUST**
BEYOND THE CLASSROOM

What is Safeguarding?

“Safeguarding is the ongoing commitment, embedded in people, policies, and practice, to protect children from harm and create the conditions in which they can feel safe, be heard, and can thrive.”

This is the essence of what after-school programmes (ASPs) seek to provide for learners. At its core, **safeguarding** goes beyond responding to incidents; if done well safeguarding is proactive, shaping how staff are recruited, how programmes are designed and how **relationships** with learners are built.

On **24 March 2026**, practitioners and facilitators from across the Western Cape gathered for a Community of Practice (CoP) session focused on child safeguarding in ASPs.

The session was a space for honest reflection, shared learning, and practical problem-solving, drawing on real experiences from the ground.





Understanding the World Children Are Living In

A critical starting point for any safeguarding conversation is an honest reckoning with the realities children face every day. This is done not to overwhelm, but to ground practitioners in the realities and the urgency of the work.



Risks children face in their communities:

-  Emotional neglect and abuse
-  Physical neglect and abuse
-  Physical neglect and abuse
-  Substance abuse - in the household and sometimes by children themselves
-  Violent crime and gangsterism
-  Family issues

Children do not leave these realities at the gate. Notably, practitioners remarked that safeguarding concerns are rarely isolated incidents, they are often interconnected and rooted in a combination of home environments and broader community contexts. A child exhibiting signs of substance abuse, for example, may also be experiencing emotional neglect.

“What they are seeing on a daily basis is not ok for a child of their age”

—TLT Partner

This requires practitioners to be aware of the holistic conditions of the child, not just the presenting issue. Children carry their **home** and **community environments** and everything they have witnessed into programme spaces. This shapes their behaviour, their capacity to engage, and their readiness to trust.

By the same token, direct exposure is not always required for harm to occur, witnessing violence, abuse or substance abuse still has a significant emotional and psychological impact on a child.

The reality is that there are not enough safe spaces or safe intergenerational relationships for South Africa's young people. ASPs have a unique opportunity, and a responsibility, to fill that gap. The role for ASPs, therefore, is to gently introduce a new normal where healthy relationships are modelled and a new reference point for how people treat each other is established.

Building Conditions for Trust

Before any child discloses something difficult, the conditions for **trust** must already exist. Participants reflected that **safety** is not a policy; it is a relationship, built slowly over time. Correspondingly, trust is not given, it is earned through consistent presence, genuine care, and demonstrated confidentiality.

“Build friendship with young people – have fun with them and they start trusting you and opening up.”



“If a child is involved, I am involved”

– this phrase shared by a practitioner reflecting on their own growing awareness captures the shift in mindset that underpins the importance of creating spaces of trust and safety for learners to enable disclosure. Safeguarding is not a role assigned to one person in an organisation but rather it is a shared value, culture and responsibility that begins the moment an adult enters a relationship with a child.

One of the richest discussions in the session centred on what it means to genuinely embed safeguarding across every level of an organisation. **MathMoms** presented their **Triangle of Trust Model** – a framework that positions safeguarding not as a compliance exercise but rather as a value expressed through recruitment, staff wellbeing, programme design and community presence.

MathMoms’ Approach to child safeguarding is built on three pillars:

1. Grounded & regulated adults

“Everyone experiences trauma, everyone experiences stress” Judy-Ann Cilliers, MathMoms

- Security checks & vetting
- Staff mentorship and group cohesion
- Embodied therapy techniques (e.g. journalling, meditation, music, and breathwork) help facilitators develop their emotional intelligence and strengthen their capacity to hold challenging conversations.
- Holding space for children requires facilitators to be grounded. Self-regulation and co-regulation with learners emerged as important.

2. Lighthouses in the community

- Having known and trust figures in the neighbourhoods where learners live
- Programme become a safety network, not just a service point.
- Children and families know where to go in crisis.
- Built through consistent, long-term presence.

3. Seeds of Safety

“Create the conditions for children to feel safe to share if something terrible happens”

- Having visual tools to identify and name learners’ emotions
- Play and movement are used to regulate the nervous system
- Develop emotional language with learners



Several practices stood out as central to enabling disclosure:

- Being honest about what confidentiality means from the beginning, particularly when information must be shared – children need to trust that they will not be surprised.
- Longevity matters – children open up to staff who they believe will stick around.
- Facilitators who share similar lived experiences or backgrounds to those of learners create a sense of being genuinely understood.
- Having fun with children and young people builds authentic connection that eventually makes it easier to talk about hard things.
- Using affirming, non-judgmental language signals to a child that what they share will be received with care.
- Offering alternative ways to communicate – i.e. writing notes instead of speaking can reduce anxiety for young and anxious learners.
- Sometimes children find it easier to open up to peers than to adults. Where possible, peer support structures and group activities can compliment the one-one-one trust between adult and child.
- Creative approaches and means of expression such as art therapy and body maps give children tools to express what words sometimes cannot.



This framing, safeguarding as a value, invites ASPs to go beyond asking whether or not they have a policy in place, but rather to interrogate whether every aspect of the work reflects a commitment to safety and the dignity of children.

“Check yourself! You need to be in a space emotionally that allows you to hold space for them.”

Responding When Disclosure Happens

Before a child discloses a safeguarding concern, a key to responding is understanding disclosure in the first place. Children may disclose abuse or concern spontaneously or in small pieces of information first. Similarly, at times, disclosure may be triggered by another event (i.e. a medical concern, behavioural change).



Image 1: Box Breathing Diagram Example

Types of disclosure:



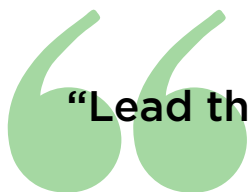
For this reason, when a child does disclose, how a facilitator responds in the moment can determine whether the child feels supported or retreats into silence. Participants shared clear, practical guidance on what to do and what to avoid.

What to do:

- Listen fully without interpretation and give the child your full attention – let the learner speak completely before responding
- Use open, simple and inviting language: “is there anything else” which encourages without leading.
- Affirm without making promises – be honest about your role while still making the child feel heard and safe, “I will keep you safe, but some more people need to know in order to help”.
- Focus on what you have heard and what the next steps are – not on fixing the problem immediately.
- Build staff debrief time after a session with a child – this enables reflection and processing.
- Document carefully – use exact words, context and emotions and do not add anything.

What to avoid:

- Adding your own words, assumptions or interpretation to what the child shares.
- Asking leading questions that could influence the child’s account.
- Do not jump to conclusions – proceed slowly and do not rush the child.
- Asking the child to repeat their disclosure to multiple people – this could lead to re-traumatisation.
- Over-identifying emotionally with the child’s situation – this can cloud objectivity.
- Staying in the room if you recognise your own triggers – take a step back and delegate accordingly and with care.
- Do not delay reporting.



“Lead them to a place where they can know that the answer is within themselves”

— Tassin Davids, Education Without Borders

Practitioners' Obligations

A key tension named by practitioners is the one between building trust with a child and following formal reporting requirements; this is real and deserves to be named honestly.

The solution is not to choose one over the other, but rather to be transparent with children from the beginning about what confidentiality means and what the limits are.

Practitioners also reflected on the emotional challenge of staying objective when they care deeply about a child. Although this is not a problem, it needs to be paired with the intentional act of listening without projecting personal experiences and feelings onto the child's situation.

Mandatory Reporting and Form 22

- Every person working with a child has a legal obligation to report disclosures – if you do not report suspected abuse or a safeguarding concern and an investigation reveals that you were aware, it could lead to a fine or prosecution.
- Build relationships with social workers to better aid referral pathways.
- Be mindful about how disclosures travel across an internal team – unnecessary repetition of the child's disclosure may cause further harm.
- Work with School Based Support Teams (SBSTs) for ongoing case management.
- If ever in doubt on how to handle or proceed with a safeguarding issue, Child Line South Africa is available 24/7 on a free helpline (116) to offer counselling and guidance.



Form 22 must be completed and submitted to statutory social workers. Access the form [here](#).






From Policy to Practice

The session surfaced an honest picture – that not all organisations present had a child protection or safeguarding policy in place. Those that did acknowledged gaps between what the policy said and what actually happened in practice.

Some of the most common challenges identified:

- Policy training that is infrequent, too theoretical or fails to adequately equip staff with real-world scenarios.
- Uncertainty about duty of care – where it starts, where it ends, and who is responsible for what
- Fear around formally recording sensitive information, or anxiety about saying the wrong thing when disclosure takes place.
- Referral systems that rely too heavily on a few individuals within and/or outside of the organisation.

Recommendations from practitioners for closing the gap between policy and practice:

-  1. Ensure you adapt any policy template to your specific context of work – make it your policy!
-  2. Integrate incident reporting into policy documents so it feels embedded rather than an added administrative task.
-  3. Move beyond once-off training by introducing quarterly, scenario-based sessions that build confidence through dialogue.
-  4. Address limited reflection time by incorporating brief weekly debrief check-ins to surface concerns early.
-  5. Ensure annual reviews of curriculum and safeguarding policies are informed by feedback from learners, caregivers, and staff.

CASE STUDY - SoHK's Approach: Safeguarding from the Inside Out

School of Hard Knocks (SoHK), a mental health and sport-for-development organisation running NxtGenSchools and many other programmes, shared how they are building safeguarding into their organisational DNA.

Internally: a safeguarding policy specific to their context has been developed, they have a dedicated safeguarding team, clear escalation and reporting processes and mandatory therapy for all staff.

Externally: have established long-term partnerships with host schools and active collaborations with SBSTs and partner organisations, including joint case management. Their guiding principles for safeguarding are informed by strong recruitment, an organisational culture of care, and always navigating the grey areas with the best interest of the learner at the centre.

Safeguarding is not only about protecting children; it also requires that staff and volunteers are protected from false allegations and unclear situations. The group explored how to navigate physical contact, professional boundaries, and institutional risk thoughtfully.

- Maintain professional boundaries consistently. If there is any doubt about whether an action could be misinterpreted, steer firmly on the side of caution.
- Physical gestures such as high-fives and fist bumps can replace ambiguous gestures like hugs in everyday interactions.
- If an allegation is made against a staff member, hear the child first and remove the child from the space; interview the staff member separately and consider the history of both parties and then determine appropriate next steps.
- Programmes involving physical activity – such as theatre and sports – should introduce explicit consent check-ins, “Can I touch you here?” or “Are you comfortable with this activity?”. A sit-out policy also ensures no learner is placed in a compromising position.
- Sozo Foundation raised the importance of vetting staff members prior to the commencement of employment.
- Conduct child sex offender registers checks and police clearances, and Form 29 (Part B of the National Child Protection Register) for all staff and volunteers and have a clear organisational policy on what criminal records constitute a risk.



“We embed our curriculum and create a culture of care and put into practice what we will teach the learners”

—Nikita Govender, School of Hard Knocks

As organisations take these conversations back into their own contexts, the following questions may serve as prompts for team reflection and planning:

- How do we create regular, structured space for staff to process what they are holding? Not just in crisis but as part of our weekly rhythm?
- Are our safeguarding trainings clear and scenario-based to genuinely prepare staff for real situations?
- Do all staff and volunteers clearly understand their mandatory reporting obligations such as the Form 22 process?
- Does our programme reflect values of safety and dignity?
- Who are our formal and informal referral partners, and are those relationships strong enough?



RESOURCES:

1. **Child South Africa - National Helpline 116** (free from all networks)

Website: www.childlinesa.org.za

2. **Connect Network**

Website: <https://connectnetwork.org.za/>

FIND OUT MORE:

1. MathMoms - <https://mathmoms.co.za/>

2. School of Hard Knocks (SoHK) - <https://www.schoolofhardknocks.co.za/>

3. The Sozo Foundation - <https://sozo.org.za/>

CONTACT US



Address:

WE WORK
173 Oxford Road
Rosebank
Johannesburg

info@thelearningtrust.org

www.thelearningtrust.org



THE
**LEARNING
TRUST**
BEYOND THE CLASSROOM