

Abbi Jackson discusses a training programme for helping children feel protected.



In safe hands

We can't protect children every moment of every day. They need freedom to grow and develop into self-assured adults ready to achieve their true potential.

Childcare practitioners are ideally placed to help prepare children to recognise any unsafe situations they come across, and empower them in using planned strategies. The Safe Hands programme, developed by Sandra Brown OBE, is a simple but highly effective way of teaching children how to protect themselves.

A former primary deputy headteacher, and head of childcare in a further education college, Sandra is nationally recognised due to her bestseller *Where there is Evil* (Pan) on the disappearance of 11-year-old Moira Anderson from the Monklands of Scotland in 1957. It has been the subject of several television documentaries - Cutting Edge, Unsolved, Psychic Private Eyes, and others.

Successful sales of Sandra's book ensured the launch, in 2000, of the Moira Anderson Foundation, a national Scottish charity that believes in 'tackling child abuse together'. This year has seen the now updated version of *Where there is Evil* being published in Germany, the Netherlands and Austria.

The main aim of the Moira Anderson Foundation is to support children and families affected by childhood sexual abuse, assist with cases going to court, including help with criminal injuries applications, and to provide training for professionals, practitioners, educationalists and others who work directly with survivors of abuse right across Scotland. The success of the Safe Hands training is now becoming nationally acclaimed.

The programme is based on the principles of 'Protective Behaviours' training:

Theme 1 - Everyone has the right to feel safe all of the time

All people, no matter who they are or what they have done in the past, have the basic human right to feel safe. They may not realistically be safe, but they have the right to feel safe.

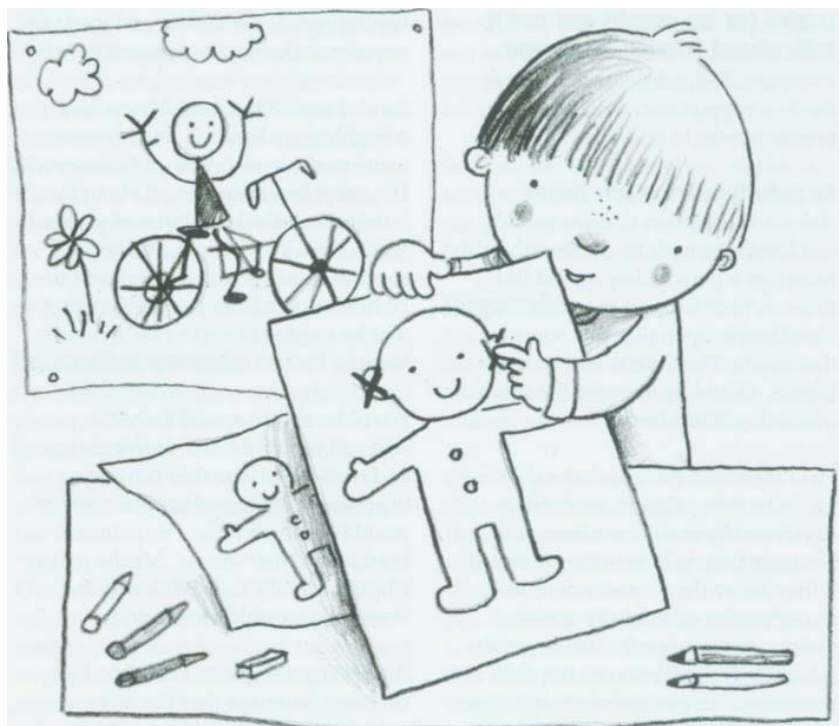
An activity to try - The Continuum of Safety

■ Ask children to describe safe feelings. Little ones might say 'having a cuddle'. Some might suggest being warm; feeling loved; being secure, peaceful or calm. Older children **might talk about** a sense of belonging.

■ Now talk about when it is 'fun to feel scared'. Let their imagination lead them. They might identify scary films, fairground rides or riding a bike with no hands. They could draw or write about when they think it is 'fun to feel scared' and have their work displayed on brightly coloured zigzag 'scary' background paper.

With the 'fun to feel scared' feelings the child can still decide whether they are enjoying it or whether it is too much and they want to stop. They also know that the feeling will end when that film finishes, the ride stops or they get off the bike, for example. The child is still in control.

■ If their choice is removed, they are not in control and do not know when the scared feelings will stop and then their body will start to tell them with early warning signs. Provide children with a template gingerbread person (or they could draw their own). Ask them to draw all the body signs of a scared person. There are over 1,300 physical responses to fear. Sandra notes: 'One little boy drew big black crosses over the ears of his gingerbread person to represent himself not being able to hear anyone clearly when he got really scared.' She calls these early warning signs the 'oh, oh' feelings. They are the body's way of telling us we are in danger



Case Study 1

'I thought our three-year-olds were too young to do this, but in groups of two we worked on the concept and I was staggered at who the children chose as their trusted adults and their reasons why each person was suitable. I felt it was ok at this stage for them to name their teddy or their pet because as they review their Safe Hands network over time more significant suitable adults will start to emerge.

'Our headteacher wants each teacher all the way up the school to continue helping the children develop their Safe Hands. It's so simple but could have a phenomenally positive impact. I think that access to this programme should be a given right of every child wherever they live.

Jannette, early years practitioner

and children must be permitted and encouraged to listen to their 'oh, oh' feelings to protect themselves from danger. The quicker children learn to recognise, acknowledge and trust these feelings, the more appropriate choices they have at their disposal to keep themselves safe.

Theme 2 - There is nothing so awful (or so small) we can't talk about it with someone

Everyone, both adults and children, needs a support network - trusted people to turn to in difficult times.

An activity to try - Safe Hands

Ask all the children to draw round one hand. For each finger they should nominate a person they would like to be on their support network. They should write each person's name on the fingers. The thumb, and only the thumb, should be reserved for a person inside the child's home.

The rationale for this is that a child might be being abused, worried or frightened by a someone living at home, so they will be better protected if they know they have options to share worries with adults outside their immediate family. If close adults acknowledge and endorse the child's nominated support network, it relieves the child of feeling like they are

betraying their family by talking about concerns with someone else.

Before including each adult, children should check if they have these qualities:

- Good listener.
- Will believe what the child tells them.
- Be available.
- Be sympathetic.
- Not be shockable.
- May have experienced similar things to the child.
- Will do something to help.

Children need to be assured that if the first person they talk to on their network doesn't fulfil what they need, then they should keep going round till they find someone who does. It is important for children to revisit their support network periodically, so they are sure the people are still available, still fit the 'job description' and the child still feels comfortable in approaching them. They own this hand diagram personally and they can remove or change anyone as they wish.

Sandra says: 'One child I knew had a big blow-up baseball hand he was using to show who was on his network. His mum had forgotten all about the training months later, but was amazed when her son, who had additional support needs, asked for the hand to be lifted down from the shelf, stating that he needed to review his network because his taxi driver was leaving.'

For older children, add the wrist and cuff onto the hand drawing and then make sure they have the telephone numbers of agencies who could help them if they were in real trouble 'up their sleeve'. Maybe police, Childline, NSPCC, or Moira Anderson Foundation would be suitable.

Adults can also protect children by choosing language that observes everyone's right to feel safe. This

includes being constantly aware of all our modes of communicating and realising how we could be misinterpreted or taken literally by a listener.

I explained the Safe Hands exercise to my children after attending a talk last month. Jack carefully drew round his hand and, without a second's thought, automatically named his childminder and her husband as people he thought would be good to tell if something or someone was making him feel scared.

He has had lots of changes of teacher this year and things are difficult at home since his dad was made redundant. His childminder has been a consistent figure in his life, so I was very pleased he felt so sure that she and her husband would not only listen, but also help him decide what to do about his worry or take action for him if necessary.

For more information contact:

www.moiraanderson.org.uk
or tel: 0123 660 2890.

www.protectivebehaviours.co.uk
or tel: 0190 579 9957.

Abbi Jackson, trainer and education writer.

Case Study 2

'The Safe Hands programme is so simple and flexible it can develop lifelong skills of assertiveness and problem solving.

'It empowers children to make their own decisions, rather than having adults imposing solutions upon them, but gives adults reassurance that children are prepared for the many scary or worrying situations they might encounter along their journey.

'And most of all it promotes a happy, healthy lifestyle where children can take risks appropriate to their natural development within a secure framework of safety. Applied in the context of children safeguarding themselves, this has the power to save lives.'

Aileen, parent of Jack (eight) and Holly (five)