Sara Sharif Safeguarding Practice Review

7-Minute Multi-Agency Practice Briefing

Why this review matters

Sara Sharif was a 10-year-old child who was murdered by her father and stepmother in August 2023. The review found no single point of failure. Instead, concerns, information and opportunities to protect Sara were spread across multiple agencies and over many years. The review challenges all practitioners to recognise cumulative harm, maintain professional curiosity and develop a holistic understanding of children's lives. [surreyscp.org.uk]

1. See the Whole Child: Build the Bigger Picture

One of the strongest themes in the review is that important information existed across agencies, but it was not consistently brought together to create a comprehensive understanding of Sara's lived experience. Historical concerns about domestic abuse, court proceedings, previous safeguarding involvement and emerging concerns were often viewed in isolation rather than as part of a developing pattern of risk.

Children rarely experience harm through a single event. Risk is often cumulative, with a series of sometimes seemingly low-level concerns combining to indicate significant harm.

> Practice messages:
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> - Consider current concerns alongside the child's full lived experience
> - Be professionally curious about patterns, escalation and recurring themes.
> - Look beyond the immediate presenting issue.
> - Draw on information held by other agencies whenever possible.
> - Ensure historical information actively informs current assessment and decision-making.

2. Respond Robustly to Injuries, Behavioural Changes and Inconsistent Accounts

In the months before her death, professionals identified facial bruising, changes in Sara's demeanour and inconsistent explanations for injuries and absences. The review concluded that safeguarding processes did not adequately respond to these concerns or fully explore what they might mean when viewed together.

Children experiencing abuse frequently communicate distress through changes in behaviour, attendance, presentation or relationships. These signs can be as important as verbal disclosures.

> Practice messages:
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> - Treat unexplained injuries and bruising seriously.
> - Explore inconsistent explanations with professional curiosity.
> - Consider whether behavioural changes may indicate fear, abuse or neglect.
> - Ensure safeguarding decisions are informed by multi-agency discussion.
> - Avoid relying on a single explanation when other evidence suggests concern.

3. Understand Why Children May Not Tell Us

Throughout her life, Sara was described as cheerful, resilient and loyal to her family. We now know that during this period she was experiencing significant abuse. The review highlights how children may be unable to disclose harm because of fear, loyalty, love, coercion, grooming or normalisation of abuse.

A child's presentation alone should never be viewed as evidence that they are safe.

> Practice messages:
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> - Do not assume that a child who appears happy is free from harm.
> - Remember that children often protect those who abuse them.
> - Understand the impact of coercion, control and family loyalty on disclosure.
> - Balance the child's expressed wishes with all available safeguarding information.
> - Remain curious when concerns exist, even when a child does not disclose abuse.

4. Recognise Post-Separation Abuse and Ongoing Perpetrator Risk

The review found that the seriousness of Sara's father's history of domestic abuse was repeatedly underestimated. Following separation, professionals did not consistently recognise the continuing risks he posed to both adults and children. His behaviour demonstrated how perpetrators can continue to exert control, manipulate professionals and use family court processes to achieve their objectives.

Domestic abuse should not be viewed as an isolated incident or historical event. Children can continue to be affected long after parental separation, especially where coercive control and manipulation remain present.

Practice messages:

- Separation does not automatically reduce risk and can sometimes increase it.
- Be alert to post-separation abuse, coercive control and ongoing manipulation.
- Consider how perpetrators may groom professionals and present as cooperative.
- Do not assume attendance at a perpetrator programme means risk has reduced.
- Assess parenting capacity and child safety independently of the perpetrator's self-report.
- Keep the focus on the lived experience of the child and the impact of the perpetrator's behaviour on family members. [surreyscp.org.uk]

5. Children Must Not Become Invisible

The review concluded that Sara's father and stepmother used elective home education to keep her hidden from professional view during the final months of her life. Once she was removed from school, she was not seen at home by any professional.

The review highlights how a child's withdrawal from school can significantly reduce opportunities for professionals to see, hear and understand their daily lived experience. Reduced visibility can make it harder to identify emerging concerns, monitor wellbeing and recognise indicators of abuse or neglect.

Practice messages:

- Consider safeguarding implications when a child is withdrawn from school. All agencies should understand their role in safeguarding children who are electively home educated, share relevant information, and consider whether reduced visibility may impact the ability to identify, assess and respond to risk. Practitioners should not assume another agency is maintaining oversight of the child's welfare.
- Be particularly alert where there is previous social care involvement or known vulnerabilities or emerging concerns.
- Ensure information is shared promptly across agencies.
- Consider how the child's voice and lived experience will continue to be heard.
- Question whether reduced professional contact may increase risks for the child.
- Maintain professional curiosity about who is seeing the child, how often they are being seen and whether there is sufficient independent oversight of their wellbeing.

6. Explore Race, Culture, Religion and Language

The review identified a lack of meaningful exploration of Sara's dual Polish and Pakistani heritage. It also found that her mother's need for interpretation support was not consistently recognised, affecting her ability to participate fully in decisions about her children.

Understanding race, ethnicity, culture, religion and language is a core safeguarding responsibility. Failing to explore these issues can result in important information being missed and families becoming marginalised within processes designed to protect them.

> Practice messages:
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> - Ask thoughtful questions about culture, identity, faith and family experiences.
> - Avoid making assumptions based on appearance, language or background.
> - Use professional interpreters whenever required.
> - Seek specialist advice when cultural issues are outside your expertise.
> - Reflect on how unconscious bias may influence assessment and decision-making.

Areas of learning

Elective Home Education (EHE): School vigilance was protective, but after EHE, professional visibility collapsed and curiosity waned.

Seeking, analysing and sharing of information: Intelligence existed across police, courts, health, and prior local authorities, but was not consistently integrated into a single working chronology. Risk decisions were sometimes made without full historic context.

The importance of robust safeguarding processes within a system that supports parents to care for their children: Sara appeared to be treated differently within the household; practitioners did not sufficiently explore the "meaning of the child' (e.g. gender, non-biological relationship to stepmother).

Working with perpetrators of domestic abuse: The father demonstrated a persistent pattern of coercive control and grooming of professionals, deflecting allegations and shaping narratives. Responses were not consistently perpetrator-focused, leading to minimisation and drift.

The role of Family Justice – safeguarding children in Care Proceedings and Private Law Hearings: Public Law outcomes twice fell short of protective plans originally sought by practitioners and contingency planning was not robust. The overall process of the Private Law proceedings did not maintain a sufficient focus on safeguarding.

Race, Culture, Religion and Ethnicity: Identity factors (race, culture, faith, migration, isolation) were not consistently explored with depth or confidence. Practice must be anti-racist, culturally curious, and avoid stereotypes.

Questions to consider

These questions are prompts for all professionals working with children and families to consider during supervision:

- What is the **pattern of the perpetrator's behaviour** over time? How do I know beyond their account? (triangulate with police, health, school, previous local authorities)
- Does our chronology show **cumulative harm** across years and places or are we reacting to isolated incidents?
- Have I **seen the child alone** and understood the "meaning of the child" in this family? Who is treated differently, and how do we know?
- What cultural/identity factors are present (race, faith, culture, isolation)? Have we sought **community or specialist advice**?
- What changes after EHE? How have **we maintained sight** of the child?
- Are **escalation** routes being used?

Further reading

→ Sara Sharif Child Safeguarding Practice Review – Full report

→ Sara Sharif Child Safeguarding Practice Review – Executive Summary

Key supporting resources

- Neglect toolkit
- Inter-Agency Referral Form
- 1 minute guide to Sarah's / Clare's Law
- Training
- IWC Domestic Abuse page
- IOWSCP Domestic Abuse page
- DA STOP pack
- DA referral pathway
- DA referral pathway for children and young people
- 7 golden rules for information sharing

- Engaging Parents who are Perpetrators of Domestic Abuse in Child Protection Processes
- Neglect Indicator and Thresholds chart [interactive]
- Practice Principles for the completion of chronologies
- Recognising and responding to the impact of cumulative harm
- Recognising and responding to child physical abuse
- Elective Home Education multi agency roles and responsibilities