

Response from Summerhill regarding the issue of Safeguarding and mixed sex accommodation

Autumn 2017

This is part of the response which we sent to the DfE to illustrate why we feel that we meet the requirement NMS (National Minimum Standard) 5.1 after the DfE over rode the ISI inspectors and therefore failed the school, requiring an action plan for our proposed changes.

Although changes would be hugely expensive and inconvenient – this was not about that. It is an issue that we feel is fundamental to Summerhill (and to humanity too come to that!) that contributes to gender equality and understanding.

The safeguarding system at Summerhill contains a number of quite unique features which perhaps people are not aware of; features which work to minimise any safeguarding risk.

Abuse of any type and of any degree can only occur when there exists some sort of power differential and Summerhill goes further than any other school to reduce, as much as possible, the power differential that can exist between students and between adults and students and thus reduce the risk of abuse, reduce the safeguarding risk. Put simply, minimise the power differential and you automatically begin to minimise the safeguarding risk. The reduction in the power differential at Summerhill School is achieved through the fact that the school is a democratic, self-governing community in which adults and students have complete parity of status.

‘Working together to safeguard children’ states:

‘Effective safeguarding systems are child centred. Failings in safeguarding systems are too often the result of losing sight of the needs and views of the children within them, or placing the interests of adults ahead of the needs of children.’ (*Working together to safeguard children*, HM Government, March 2015, p.9, para 20)

Summerhill School epitomises a child-centred approach to safeguarding. It is a place where the views of the child are constantly being expressed and heard, in particular, in the school meeting.

The daily life of the school is governed by the school meetings which are held regularly and in which everybody has an equal vote. The meetings are used to create, confirm and amend all the school laws which form the structure of expectations for the community of adults and students and it is here that much safeguarding is lived out and taught.

The school meeting is the forum to bring the whole school's attention to any safeguarding issues and at Summerhill, no form of abuse whatsoever is tolerated by the community. Any student or staff can bring any safeguarding incident to the meeting which is both a legislative and judicial body. Meetings are currently held twice a week but a special meeting can be called (with the permission of the 'chairman' who is a senior student) **by anybody, at any time, day or night**, if required. Thus, both students and staff are answerable to the whole community. Nobody in the school is exempt from this, and no subject is beyond the community's discussion.

The openness of the meeting system ensures that, for example, in a case of peer on peer abuse, the victim experiences the whole hearted support of the community whilst the perpetrator is not only 'fined' for his/her actions but also experiences the community's expressions of disapproval, including from their peer group, for his or her **actions**. This is an extremely powerful message because, unlike in an ordinary school, the message of disapproval is conveyed by the whole community and not by just one or two adults. Further, the discussion becomes an important safeguarding learning experience for everybody.

A variety of 'fines' can be imposed depending on the case. The community tries to find a 'fine' that is most appropriate to the offence and to the individual perpetrator.

It is important to note that a 'fine' is not given as a punishment but as a way in which the perpetrator can make amends to the community for their offence to the community. Further, the 'fine' serves to give the victim a sense that justice has been done. Once the 'fine' has been 'paid', the whole community, including the perpetrator, 'moves on' and the community disapproves very strongly of any harassment, any continuation of the argument, after the case has been brought to the meeting.

It must be emphasised that the vast majority of 'peer on peer' abuse cases brought to the meeting are low level harassment cases such as name calling etc. Further, there are very few specifically 'gender related' incidents. All incidents discussed in the school meeting are recorded in the meeting minutes.

The risk of abuse, the risk of any safeguarding incident, is further minimised by the use of elected ombudsmen (boys and girls) and beddies officers (boys and girls). Ombudsmen are older students, (though sometimes an adult stands and is elected), whose job is to respond to any immediate problems that may arise between students and, far more rarely, between students and adults. At present, we have ten ombudsmen of which five are boys and five are girls. If an ombudsman is unable to successfully mediate between the two parties, then he or she will bring the matter to the meeting. It is also possible for the ombudsman to bring the matter to the meeting irrespective of whether the issue has been solved or not and thus alert the whole community to a particular issue. Further, ombudsmen can represent students in the school meeting, if requested to do so.

Beddies Officers are older students (again, sometimes an adult stands and is elected) whose job is to put students to bed at night and to wake them up in the

morning. Beddies officers work in pairs and there is a different pair of beddies officers for each day.

The school meeting is not the only forum where much safeguarding is lived out and taught for it can also be found in a variety of formal and informal settings. Some examples include the sex and relationship discussions, where such issues as 'consent', 'sexism', 'pornography' and 'sexting' are debated, the online safety discussions and the numerous, small group or one-on-one conversations which can occur, day or night, in almost any area of the school.

The whole Summerhill experience leads the students to develop an inner self-confidence, which, amongst other things, empowers the students to raise safeguarding issues themselves, either publicly, or privately with appropriate individuals. Even if there is some hesitancy among certain students to initiate a discussion or express some concern, the very nature of the place (the 'panopticon'*) ensures that the adults in the community know what is going on and can, if necessary, initiate a discussion..

Thus, safeguarding is not an abstract, adult driven concept but something which is very real and something the students and adults at Summerhill actually live on a daily basis.

At Summerhill, we are very aware of the truth of the statement that 'Ultimately, effective safeguarding of children can only be achieved by putting children at the centre of the system.....' (*Working Together to Safeguard Children*, HM Government, March 2015, p.8, para 13). Further, we are very proud of the fact that Summerhill has been putting children at the centre of the 'system' since 1921 when AS Neill first started the school with '..... one main idea: to *'make the school fit the child* – instead of making the child fit the school.' (*Summerhill* A.S. Neill. Pelican Books. 1968, p.20)

Thus, we can claim to have a different but extremely robust safeguarding system which is well-fitted for the unique Summerhill environment and experience; an experience which enables pupils to grow in a family environment, free from the usual social prejudices found in most other schools, in particular, gender based prejudices. This in turn creates, throughout the school, a marked confidence and friendship between the sexes, and between all age groups. Central to this experience is the accommodation arrangements where the presence of girls on the same corridor as boys brings a greater equilibrium to the whole area.

Summerhill recognises that its approach might be considered unusual and that some people may look upon it with disapproval. However, these things are part of the philosophy of freedom and self-government, which is considered essential to the development of the student's emotional growth and well-being and which, over 95 years has proved to be successful.

Gender and age equality is a vital part of the Summerhill philosophy of education. It could be argued that a pronounced or a *'complete separation'* of the genders simply exacerbates the gender inequality that already exists in society at large and encourages gender discrimination. We see results throughout our school that living

closely together is a very positive experience for both boys and girls which they carry with them throughout life and which is often commented upon by former pupils.

* For further information on the 'panopticon' in relation to Summerhill, please see '*Can Liberal Education Make a Comeback? The case of 'Relational Touch' at Summerhill School*'. Ian Stronach & Heather Piper. *American Educational Research Journal*. March 2008. Vol 45 No. 1 pp.6-37