

Disability-inclusive child safeguarding guidelines

Part 1: Guidance for organisations



▶ An increase in disability mainstreaming means that children with disabilities are at risk of being included in programmes that do not effectively safeguard them.

These guidelines, developed by Able Child Africa and Save the Children International, seek to address this gap, supporting practitioners to deliver effective disability-inclusive child safeguarding practices and address the specific risks and barriers children with disabilities experience.

For ease of reading, we have developed these mini-read versions of the guidelines. Part 1 outlines practical guidance for organisations. Part 2 outlines practical guidance for practitioners. For a full glossary and resource list, please refer to the full guidelines.

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Disability and child safeguarding

Disability-inclusive child safeguarding means implementing child safeguarding systems that include **all** children, **including children with disabilities**.

Understanding disability

A child with disabilities is someone who has 'long-term physical, mental, intellectual or sensory impairments which, in interaction with various barriers, may hinder their full and effective participation in society on an equal basis with others'.¹

Applying the social model of disability to this definition, we understand that an individual's disability is a result of societal barriers to their inclusion and not as a result of their impairment. Although impairments can cause real challenges,

they are not the key disabling factor. Therefore, the full inclusion of children with disabilities will only be achieved by considering the way society reacts to a child's impairment and then identifying the different barriers that may put them at further risk.

This means that practitioners do not need to have in-depth knowledge about different impairments to be inclusive. Instead, they need to understand the types of barriers children with disabilities face, how they experience them and how to remove such barriers.

These barriers can be categorised most commonly into attitudinal, environmental, institutional, communication and financial.

Understanding child safeguarding

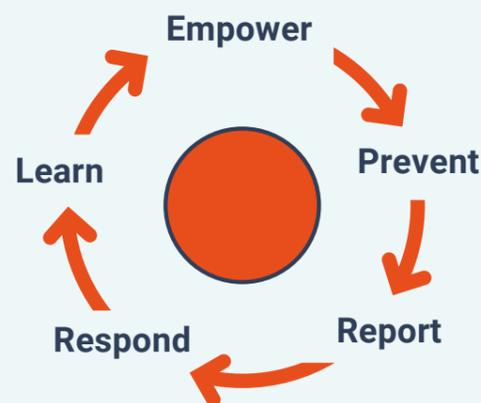
All organisations working with children are responsible for ensuring that their programmes are safe for children and that children are protected from harm while in their care. This includes children with disabilities.





Child safeguarding can be understood as a set of policies, procedures and practices used by organisations to ensure that work delivered is safe for children and that the organisation proactively prevents doing harm.ⁱⁱ

Organisations often structure their safeguarding work into a safeguarding cycle. This cycle is the same for safeguarding children with and without disabilities; the main difference being practitioners need to ensure the accessibility of each stage of the cycle for children with disabilities.



5 There are **five** stages of a safeguarding cycle, which are:

1. Empower

- Ensure all staff, partners, volunteers and representatives are aware of the potential for abuse of children with disabilities.

2. Prevent

- Ensure through culture, policies and procedures, that all staff, partners, volunteers and representatives minimise risk to children with disabilities.

3. Report

- Ensure all staff, representatives, communities, children with disabilities and their parents/caregivers are clear about what, when and how to report concerns.

4. Respond

- Ensure children with disabilities are listened to and that any reports made that concern them are responded to.

5. Learn

- Ensure accountability systems that include feedback from children with disabilities are in place and inclusive safeguarding processes are monitored and reviewed.

Risks of abuse that children with disabilities are subjected to

Children with disabilities are often deprived of appropriate care, education, health care, play, recreation and participation in their communities, and are at much higher risk of violence, abuse, exploitation and infanticide.

Children with disabilities compared with children without disabilities are:

- More likely to live in **poverty**.ⁱⁱⁱ
- Three times more likely to be **underweight**.^{iv}
- Three to four times more likely to be **victims of violence**.^v
- More likely to have a **mental health condition** or **psychosocial disability**.^{vi}

Children with disabilities are also less likely to be in systems that can offer access to protection systems, for example:

- **75%** of children with disabilities in some countries **never attend school**.^{vii}
- Children with disabilities are **17 times more likely to be institutionalised**.^{viii}
- Once in institutions, children with disabilities are **one hundred times more likely to die in an institution** compared with other residents.^{ix}

The impact of 'ableism' on organisational culture and child safeguarding

Often, the underlying reason for children with disabilities being at higher risk is linked to the deep-rooted stigma and discrimination they experience.



Girls with disabilities will experience discrimination and disadvantage on account of their disability, age and gender. As such, there is a significantly increased risk of sexual exploitation, abuse and harassment (SEAH) for girls with disabilities:

- Girls with disabilities are four times more likely to be sexually assaulted.^x
- It is estimated that between 40%–70% of girls with disabilities will be sexually abused before they reach 18.^{xi}



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Discriminatory attitudes may be the misconception that children with disabilities are in some way different, that their lives have less worth than the lives of children without disabilities, or that they do not feel, experience, or understand the same things as children without disabilities. Such attitudes often originate from ignorance, misinformation or traditional belief systems and provide justification and permission for children

with disabilities to be abused or for their abuse to be discounted.

Below are some examples of how unconscious bias and attitudes of individuals in an organisation can translate to organisational practices that prevent children with disabilities from accessing necessary child safeguarding measures, which can increase the risk of harm or actual harm children with disabilities experience:

Attitude	Consequence in organisational culture	Risk for child
Children with disabilities need a lot of support.	'We cannot include them', 'We cannot support them', 'They are not able to participate', 'It is too difficult', 'We cannot afford to support them'.	Creates exclusion from programmes and reduces independence and autonomy by removing opportunities for personal growth.
Children with disabilities can hurt themselves.	'They cannot take part in the activity', 'We cannot take the risk', 'We could be liable if they hurt themselves'.	Creates exclusion from programmes and reduces autonomy and choice, denying children with disabilities the same opportunities.
Children with disabilities cannot learn.	'Investing in them is not worth it', 'They would not understand so there is no point', 'It is better to only work with their parents', 'This activity is not adapted for them, so we cannot include them', 'We do not have time and resources to include them'.	Creates exclusion from programmes, limits access to important information, causes psychological harm and denies opportunities for trying, learning and developing new skills. Also reinforces dependency and ignorance.
Children who do not use a verbal language cannot communicate.	'We cannot consult them', 'It is impossible to understand them', 'We do not value their opinions', 'It is easier to not include them in the activity', 'There is no point in strengthening their self-advocacy skills'.	Creates exclusion from programmes and child safeguarding reporting routes. Removes choice and autonomy, causing psychological harm and hinders cognitive and social development, leaving children to suffer in silence.

Attitude	Consequence in organisational culture	Risk for child
Children with disabilities do not understand or do not care.	'They do not need to know', 'We do not share information with them', 'We rely on parents to explain things to them', 'We do not ask for their opinions', 'We do not investigate alleged harm or abuse', 'We do not report harm or abuse done to them'.	Creates exclusion from programmes and causes psychological harm. Can expose children to and reinforce trauma and danger.
Children with disabilities often make false or unclear allegations of abuse.	'I did not understand what had happened', 'It did not sound true', 'The child does not know what they are communicating', 'The child often says these things', 'The family/carer/support person said it is not true'.	Poses an extreme risk of abuse and causes physical and emotional trauma. Creates distrust and fear while ignoring the concern.

"Most of the organisations do not think about children with disabilities, yet they are the most forgotten!"

– Diane (youth in Rwanda)

How child safeguarding systems fail children with disabilities

Increasing awareness:

- Staff within support organisations may be unaware that children with disabilities have rights or indeed face barriers that relate to child safeguarding.

- Staff responsible for informing, preventing, reporting and responding are not aware of disability-inclusive protocols and good practices.
- Children with disabilities themselves are unaware they have the right to be safe from harm, especially when interacting with an organisation, its staff and its programmes.

Preventing:

- Children with disabilities or their families may not have had the opportunity to receive the same information as children without disabilities on their rights and what is acceptable or not.
- Information received by children with disabilities is often inaccessible.
- Staff may not be aware of good practice and the practical adjustments needed to remove barriers, which can cause harm during activities or other types of engagement.

Reporting:

- Children with disabilities may not have the confidence, communication skills or autonomy to describe what is happening to them when using standard reporting mechanisms.
- Children with disabilities may be more isolated, overprotected and less likely to interact with children without disabilities and adults (even if they attend activities or interact with organisations). This results in fewer opportunities to report an incident.
- Children with disabilities may not be able to access available reporting mechanisms.
- Children with disabilities may have been subjected to abuse their entire lives, reinforcing the view that the abuse and neglect they are experiencing is normal.
- Injuries or a difference in behaviour may be wrongly interpreted due to a child's impairment, leading to people who witness or suspect abuse failing to report.

“Reporting by calling the toll-free number or calling the staff members is not enough because some children with visual impairments cannot be able to use the phone for calling”

– Gloria (youth in Rwanda)

Responding:

- Children with disabilities may use a different form of communication than the one used by the person assigned to follow up and talk to the child.
- The person or persons who receives a report or conduct an investigation may use terminology or display attitudes that make a child with disabilities feel uncomfortable.
- Children with disabilities may not be able to answer questions without a support person or family member present, which can cause discomfort or a feeling of not being safe. This may also breach an organisation's confidentiality protocol.
- Children with disabilities may, due to their level of functioning, be unable to identify or remember the person who harms them.
- Children with disabilities may have had previous experiences of adults letting them down. As a result, they may find it hard to trust the person collecting information and supporting their case.

Planning for disability-inclusive child safeguarding

Safeguarding children with disabilities needs to be understood as a fundamental responsibility of an organisation instead

of an optional add-on. Many organisations will feel they do not have the capacity or resources to effectively safeguard children with disabilities. However, disability-inclusive child safeguarding does not need to be expensive, and there are strategies that exist for delivering disability-inclusive child safeguarding for small, under-resourced organisations.

SOLUTION FOR LEADERS

- Embed a message that disability-inclusive child safeguarding is not the responsibility of one person, and that is a **collective responsibility**.
- Actively ensure that **all staff are equipped** with relevant knowledge so that every person knows to ensure that any child safeguarding responses should be disability-inclusive.
- Smaller organisations can **merge child safeguarding and disability inclusion roles** into one role, which can be added to other responsibilities (not a dedicated role).
- Take advantage of the many **external resources** which will build knowledge for all staff; take ownership of openly learning more as a leader to set an example.
- Evaluate **existing disability inclusion and safeguarding expertise** among Board members and volunteers and support them in deepening this knowledge and taking on a champion role.
- Ensure disability-inclusive child safeguarding is mentioned as standard in **job postings** to start building expertise in the organisation; this may take time.
- Make the case **at an organisational level and to donors** to include more budget for accessibility and reasonable accommodation or repurpose existing funds. Emphasise the crucial importance of keeping children with disabilities safe in the projects they fund and are associated with.
- Allocate **small amounts for changes** to demonstrate commitment; many changes can also be made at no cost.
- There are many **free resources and training** available online; these should be utilised and regularly shared with staff.

“We do not have a staff member solely responsible for safeguarding so we do not all have time to do this work.”

“Our organisation does not have anyone with any expertise in disability-inclusive child safeguarding.”

“We do not have enough funding available to focus on disability-inclusive child safeguarding.”



SOLUTION FOR LEADERS

“We do not have enough time to add disability-inclusive child safeguarding to all policies and procedures.”

- There are **plenty of small but effective changes** that will not take too much time.
- Incorporate elements of disability-inclusive child safeguarding **into existing training** or other time spent on staff capacity building and look for **free online training** that staff can fit into their schedules.
- Remember that taking some time to implement and explain changes now **will save time in the long run**. It will be easier to embed a culture of disability-inclusive child safeguarding now so that it is included as standard instead of having to explain it repeatedly. It also saves the time it takes to deal with a safeguarding incident by preventing the likelihood of an incident occurring at all.

“We already have a Disability Inclusion Lead and a Safeguarding Lead, so this overcomplicates matters.”

- Make it clear that this is not an add-on or just for one person but an essential consideration that will be mainstreamed throughout all policies and procedures.
- Ensure all designated safeguarding staff are making their work disability-inclusive and that disability inclusion staff are maintaining and improving child safeguarding procedures.
- Leaders should encourage staff to think about this as a shared responsibility and to work collaboratively across specialisms.

The first thing an organisation must do to effectively safeguard children with disabilities is to build its internal systems in a way that defines, promotes and holds itself accountable to the safeguarding of all children, including children with disabilities. **Organisations should:**

- Ensure safeguarding children with disabilities is explicitly included in the job descriptions and performance objectives of all staff and in terms of reference with consultants.
- Provide clarity on who is responsible at different levels for monitoring and evaluating the organisation’s effectiveness in safeguarding children with disabilities.

- Encourage staff to engage and coordinate with disability inclusion specialists, including organisations of persons with disabilities (OPDs), to improve organisational disability-inclusive child safeguarding practices.
- Ensure the child safeguarding focal point on the Board of Trustees is effectively overseeing the organisation’s responsibility to include children with disabilities in child safeguarding policies and practices at a governance level and provide training where needed.
- Have robust systems in place to ensure the proper supervision of all persons working directly with children, particularly persons external to the organisation, such as volunteers and consultants.

- In larger organisations, map out how disability inclusion experts in the organisation work together with child safeguarding specialists to ensure the child safeguarding approach is disability-inclusive.

Remember

Disability-inclusive child safeguarding must be seen as the responsibility of **everyone** to see that children with disabilities are effectively safeguarded.

Within some organisations, lines of responsibility can become confused, particularly where different staff members are tasked with different roles.^{xiii} To successfully merge disability-inclusive child safeguarding into existing roles and responsibilities, organisations should:

- ✓ Ensure that children with disabilities are explicitly included in the Child Safeguarding Policy and Code of Conduct.
- ✓ Adapt existing training or provide additional awareness training to include disability-inclusive child safeguarding

- for staff, volunteers, consultants and stakeholders.
- ✓ Systematically follow up on disability-inclusive child safeguarding practices in regular project meetings, planning sessions and budget reviews to ensure prevention measures are being implemented correctly.
- ✓ Include disability-inclusive child safeguarding in project-level risk assessments.
- ✓ Work with other staff responsible for safeguarding to learn from and improve disability-inclusive child safeguarding policies and procedures based on real experiences.

Reviewing policies to safeguard children with disabilities

Organisations should conduct a review of their Child Safeguarding Policy to ensure the inclusion of children with disabilities is achieved. Children with disabilities should be listened to and consulted in this review, and in the development of safeguarding policies and procedures to ensure it responds to the risks they experience. **Please see Tool 1 in the full guidelines – A disability-inclusive Child Safeguarding Policy audit to support you in your review.**



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Recruitment of women with disabilities as a strategy for safeguarding girls with disabilities against sexual exploitation, abuse and harassment (SEAH)

Organisations should make efforts to:

- Employ women with disabilities as representatives and leaders within the organisation.
- Offer professional development and training to women with disabilities to ensure their voices are included in the design and implementation of child safeguarding systems.
- Train women with disabilities to receive and respond to safeguarding incidents to encourage girls with disabilities to report sexual exploitation, abuse and harassment.
- Involve women with disabilities in the design and delivery of training or materials on the risk of sexual exploitation, abuse and harassment for children, including the specific risks girls with disabilities face.

Leadership considerations for disability-inclusive child safeguarding

Budget considerations to safeguard children with disabilities

Organisational leaders must make realistic and practical changes that consider their organisation's available capacity, requirements and resources. It is acceptable, in the short run, to make minimal changes that reflect these considerations. Still, all organisations must take steps to ensure that they are confident that children with disabilities are fully safeguarded in their work.

At a minimum, budget allocation should include:

- Individuals whose job it is to ensure safeguarding policies and processes are disability-inclusive. Ideally, those responsible for safeguarding would also be responsible for disability-inclusive child safeguarding to avoid creating parallel roles and separating responsibilities.
- Basic adaptations and modifications to facilitate reasonable accommodation of children with disabilities.

Budget allocation should **ideally** also include:

- Designing and printing child safeguarding policies and related safeguarding tools or information in accessible and disability-friendly formats.
- Costs to facilitate staff training and recruitment of skilled disability inclusion personnel.

Advocating to safeguard children with disabilities

Leaders should be proactive at advocating upwardly and outwardly to promote the adoption of disability-inclusive child safeguarding at every level within and outside of an organisation. This includes its Board of Trustees and external bodies such as donors.

Donors, in particular, have specific interpretations of value for money, with some rejecting applications with higher costs for fewer number of participants despite a project being disability-inclusive. Instead of hiding or avoiding costs for disability-inclusive child safeguarding, leaders should instead actively encourage donors to prioritise budget for safeguarding and promote the equitable and rights-based arguments for effectively budgeting for children with disabilities.

Remember

To effectively safeguard children with disabilities, organisations must **advocate** and **encourage others to invest** in disability-inclusive child safeguarding

Applying a learning culture to safeguard children with disabilities

The requirement to safeguard children with disabilities needs to be actively embedded in an organisation's culture by senior leadership and be something that all staff members hold leadership to account on.

Organisations should promote the following messages when incorporating disability-inclusion into their child safeguarding systems:

- ✓ We are committed to safeguarding children with disabilities effectively and supporting our partners to do the same.
- ✓ We are committed to identifying gaps in our delivery of safeguarding children with disabilities and working to develop effective procedures to eliminate them.
- ✓ We recognise the increased risk of abuse of children with disabilities and particularly of the increased risk of sexual exploitation, abuse and harassment for children with disabilities and are committed to mitigating these risks.
- ✓ We are committed to identifying and learning from how we could have safeguarded children with disabilities better to improve next time.
- ✓ We recognise that a one size fits all approach to safeguarding children with disabilities does not work. We therefore encourage innovation and creative solutions.
- ✓ We are committed to sharing our gaps, lessons learnt and successes relating to safeguarding children with disabilities, both internally and externally, to ensure children with disabilities are better protected across the sector.

For guidance on the inclusion of children with disabilities in the safeguarding cycle; increasing awareness, prevention, reporting and responding, please see the full Disability-inclusive child safeguarding guidelines or the mini read, Part 2: Guidance for practitioners.

References

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- xii. Although some organisations have roles that combine child safeguarding and child protection, these guidelines will only refer to child safeguarding to not confuse the two areas.



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