

Creating safe environments for young people

Niall Moore

Hello everyone I think I know most of you now, but for anyone who doesn't know me I'm Niall and I am the Training Manager for the National Board for Safeguarding Children in the Catholic Church.

Part of my role is to provide training and policy advice to Dioceses and Religious Congregations across Ireland. One of the training programmes we have been delivering to a large number of Diocese and Orders is training for safeguarding committees.

As you all know, the Safeguarding Committee is responsible with the Church Authority to ensure that safeguarding standards are real and lived out by all personnel within the Congregation or Diocese. So as part of this training we spend a lot of time looking at the seven standards, and getting the members of the committee to really explore each standard and what it actually means in practice.

I just want to show you one example of the current standard 1- A written policy on child safeguarding.

Although this is only one example the words used are very similar to those contained in policies for Dioceses and Congregations across the country. So you should see a lot of the words that look familiar, but there are 2 phrases which tend to cause a bit of confusion- fundamental rights and participation.

These two phrases are intrinsically linked. The fundamental rights, which the policy references are the 42 rights contained in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child of which the Holy See, Ireland and Northern Ireland are signatories. One of those 42 rights is Article 12 more commonly called the participation right. Here is the wording of that right on screen.

This right looks straightforward on paper, but practicing what we preach is sometimes a lot more difficult. One of the leading theorists in this area is Laura Lundy who argues that this right is not just about giving

children a Voice, it is much, much more. She says that to truly fulfil this fundamental right we need to have 4 things.

Space- before you ask children what they think; you need to do it in a space in which they feel comfortable and in which they can talk freely.

Voice- Not everyone communicates in the same way, not everyone thinks in the same way and so careful preparation and thought needs to go into how you provide children with information to help them make an informed decision and contribute in a meaningful way when you ask for their opinion. As every youth leader or teacher knows, you may have spent hours preparing a lesson or session which you think will really motivate or engage young people, only to find that you have to quickly think on your feet and come up with something completely new, as what you'd planned doesn't suit the young people you work with. Not everyone has these skills and that's why it's so important to think about who works with or trains young people on safeguarding issues, it has to be the right person.

Audience- This sounds like a simple one, but you have to want to really listen to young people. Fr Hugh Lagan who works with survivors of child abuse, speaks about active listening and the importance of this process for the healing of the survivor. The same principal applies to participation, your physical presence isn't enough you have to really listen and take on board what young people say, it doesn't mean you have to do everything they say, but you have to respect their opinion and listen to them.

Influence- There is no point in putting all this effort into working with young people, and equally their effort in working with you, unless something happens. It's important at the outset to explain to young people what they will achieve by their participation and more importantly what won't be achieved. Be honest and realistic, many consultations which claim to be child friendly and engaging with children on the surface, fall far short of the mark set out by Article 12, and in reality are adults window dressing a workshop with young people to tick a box.

So now you know the theory, what about the practice? How does this participation right fit in the context of the Church? As you can see from the policy statements I displayed earlier, we as a Church aspire to value

children and young people for the life, energy and colour they bring to the Church. We want to value them as people with their own thoughts and ideas now. Not the future, but the present.

To try and demonstrate some of the theory I have been talking about, as part of the consultation of the draft standards we wanted to get young people's views on Standard 1- Creating and Maintaining Safe Environments. But we wanted to do it in a participative way, in line with the four elements of Article 12 I have just spoken about. So with me today I have Matthew and Euan.

Matthew is working towards his John Paul 2 award and is part of Dromore Diocese and Euan is part of the Youth Ministry Programme organised by the Presentation Brothers in Cork. We decided that to seek young people's views on the draft of standard 1, we needed to work with a group of young people to create a workshop to help others understand the purpose of what we were doing. Then using the workshop that the young people came up with, we'd deliver it to another group of young people to get their views on the draft standard.

So Matthew is going to speak first to outline his experience of creating the workshop, and then Euan will take over and talk about his experience of being a participant and will summarise some of the findings which came from the workshop that was delivered to a group of young people.

Matthew

Hello my name is Matthew Keown I am 17 and from Moira, County Down.

I was invited to take part in this workshop by my John Paul 2 Co-Ordinator Caitriona Hughes, although a very detailed letter was sent to me and my parents to get our consent for participating, it's safe to say that I didn't really understand what the seven standards were, or what they had to do with the every day life of the Church.

I went along to the first meeting with seven others and we met Niall. He outlined that the purpose of our meeting was to develop a workshop on one of the seven standards - which we could then use to work with

other young people, and following that one of us would be able to present our work at this conference today.

So after a few ground rules of the group including child protection we set to work. When Niall handed us out the draft standard and presented us with a list of questions that the National Board were asking adults to consult on- to me it made very little sense, mostly I found the language over complicated and a bit difficult to comprehend. Niall explained to us that the standards at present are not written for children, so one of our challenges in creating a workshop was to get them into a format which children could understand, to allow them fully to give their opinion. To quote another member of our group Blaitnaid this task felt 'overwhelming at first'.

To help us understand it a bit more. Niall split us into two groups and each group was told that they had been asked to setup a children's liturgy group in their parish with 30 children. Our task as participants was to consider how to make it as safe as possible for us as leaders and the young people in the children's liturgy group.

Naturally we all came up with points such as having an appropriate space to hold the group, finding suitable leaders etc. When we talked about it after with Niall we realised that we had, unknowingly, included most of the indicators in the Standard. Any points that we had missed out, were then a lot easier to understand when you put them into a very practical context. After two hours we realised, that going through the Standard in a very practical way, made it a lot easier for us all to understand and get our heads around, it allowed us to get involved and come to conclusions in our own way.

Two weeks later, we met again, and our task this time was to take what we'd learned and develop it into a workshop for other young people to consult on the draft Standard. As a group we thought that it would be a good idea to create a workshop that would be similar to what we had done, in order to help other young people understand the Standard in a practical way.

After much discussion and many ideas being put forward, we decided to do three things in the workshop. Firstly to help set the context, we wanted ask the participants, what they knew about how the church

involved young people. We wanted to do this to give the participants a bit of a sense of a whole range of areas where young people are involved.

Secondly we wanted to give the young people out a paragraph of the wording of the draft standard here you can see it on the screen:

As I said previously, as a group we struggled with the language and so we wanted to develop a way that the participants could point out the words that didn't make sense to them and suggest alternatives. We talked about lots of different ways to do this, and then I thought about asking them to try and condense the standard into the shortest amount of words as possible and then the participants could write down a list of words they struggled with. This way we could feed this all back to the National Office as part of the consultation on the standards.

Finally we wanted the participants to look at the indicators and see if they made sense. We liked the approach that we took in understanding the Standard so we decided to give the young people a scenario. They would be setting up the children's liturgy and would need to ensure that all measures had been taken in order to create a safe space for the children. We developed a system of questions around each indicator of the standard and came up with time frames for each activity in order to make sure that the workshop would run efficiently and that no one became bored.

This was a challenging task and we needed to merge some of the questions we had developed to ensure that the workshop remained fast enough to keep everyone's interest, but slow enough to allow the participants to come up with helpful suggestions that we could feed back to the National Board. Our hope was that by the end of the workshop the young people would have put the standard into concise and manageable words that would be more interesting and easily understood.

I will now hand over to Euan who was one of 10 young people who took part in the workshop we created.

Euan

Dia duit. Euan Lindsay is ainm dom agus is as chorcaigh me.

Before I start my presentation I would just like to tell you of one experience I have with the topic. In the summer-time I volunteer with the a church affiliated camp for young people. The camp's aim is to provide a fun, carefree week for many children from Cork city who may not otherwise get a holiday or just simply need a break.

Each group of kids is assigned five leaders for the week, of which I was one. One day three of us were bringing six kids outside to play soccer. Our two other leaders in the group were helping with the wash-up for lunch and were going to join us shortly. On the way outside one of the kids told me that he needed to go to the toilet upstairs.

This raised an issue. I knew from my child-safety training certificate that two leaders must be present to bring one child to the toilet. These were the rules. But by bringing the two of us leaders we would have to leave another completely reliable leader with the other five kids. This was against the guidelines, which were that two leaders must be present with the group. Eventually we managed to convince the child to wait cross-legged until the other two leaders returned and we were able to properly section out the jobs. That night I went home and I looked at the child safeguarding policy of the group online to see if there was any further information on these types of instances. What I found, well I was not pleased to see.

On the 6th of February three of my schoolmates and I and 6 students from another school in Cork attended a workshop which Matthew and his group had created, on the draft safeguarding standards of the Catholic Church in Ireland. This was only my second encounter with the Standard, even after being involved in Religious Summer Camps. I believe this to be one of the first problems of the Standard. Not enough people know that it exists. When the standards are finalised its important that awareness is raised with young people like myself that this revised, updated and modernised standard is in place. I think this would help to create a better sense of security for parents, guardians and kids alike.

The workshop was run by Niall Moore, Sister Collette Stevenson and Treise Lenihan who could not have been more accommodating and helpful. Everyone involved in the workshop from both Schools had been

involved in religious activities previously. It was positive for us to see that the Church was taking in the views of us as young people and also as leaders in church groups, on board.

The workshop began with us being asked about the religious activities available for young people in our areas. Many of us were only aware of mass; alter serving and children's liturgy. Some of us had heard of these things through word of mouth or through relatives and friends, never directly displayed by the church. After this we were given our first task in the form of the Standard. We were told that this standard was written with adults in mind, but we needed to give our interpretation as to how the language could be changed to make it clearer for a young audience.

We all picked out numerous problems within the standard. The first paragraph is one sentence. I am sure if I showed this to my English teacher I would not be receiving a high grade. Simply split the paragraph up into three sentences (show picture). By doing this it is not as challenging to read, for the children whom it is applies too. We were gasping for air by the end of the last line. Keep it Simple, Straightforward and to the point and people will be content.

Moving on to the second paragraph of the standard, there are quite a few phrases and things that are not immediately required. (Explain about paragraph, possible side-by-side of new and old).

We were then told to pretend that we were in charge of a children's liturgy group. We were asked the basic questions of who, what, where and when. One of the biggest things that we talked about was the leader selection process and how we can verify that the people in charge of the group were reliable and safe. Many people suggested different things but we all arrived on the conclusion that an application and interview process was the safest way. We were then asked possible questions about a variety of different occurrences within the group. Who makes the rules? Who deals with Parent Complaints? How do we cope with certain children who may have special needs? A wide variety of topics came up and we had to deal with them. The two groups that were there on the day were then asked to put the answers we had concluded into a list of 7 simple rules. Our rules dealt with:

Location

- The diversity of leaders, making sure that there are a good variety of leaders
- Establishing the rules and how we can maintain them with the kids
- Dealing with certain children who may have special needs
- Risk Management throughout the group
- Money: Who/how do we fund the activities.
- Having a go-to leader within the group to deal with parents and parent complaints
- But Most Importantly we all concluded on the fact that these rules and regulations are set up for the child to be safe and enjoy themselves. If the child is not having fun or getting involved, it is our job to make sure that something changes. The aim of these groups is to provide religious education in a fun way and if the child is not enjoying it, I can tell you from personal experience the child will learn a lot less.

By the end of the workshop we had created our own indicators of creating safe environments for children and when we compared them with the indicators written in the standard, we had touched on all of the points, which shows that breaking the indicators down in a practical way, worked for us to be able to critique them. However our biggest issue was language. I know that indicators are designed to assess best practice, but looking at just the wording- the phrasing suggests all the wrong things. "The Church Organisation has processes in dealing with children's unacceptable behaviour". It reads like the Church only ever deals with unacceptable behaviour, not positive, helpful or beneficial behaviour, just unacceptable behaviour. Now from having worked in Church organisations I know that this is not true but this is what the indicator suggests. The first 2 paragraphs of the statement of the standard is a lot more positive and I think if it is explained more clearly and simply, this may help overcome this perception.

At the end of the workshop we were able to stand up and have a cup of tea and a cake with everyone from each school present. This was my favourite part of the workshop. Every person there was there because it was something which they felt passionate about, no passengers. Everyone had contributed and at the end of the day we were all able to

talk over our ideas with each other, this is the way in which we worked the best.

The day was a fantastic experience for us, young people to get involved and engaged. It gave us a chance to speak our minds, something which from my experience does not happen very often. We all agreed that traditions and heritage is one of the most important things in our lives but so is development, and was great to see the Church continually trying to improve on its practice, and keeping up with an ever changing world. Thank You very much for listening.

What can be seen from both Euan and Matthew's presentation is what participation in action looks like. Involving young people and working with them can produce some great insights. If we compare the 4 elements of participation to their experience you can see that we deliberately met young people in a space which they were familiar and comfortable in, and one which was relevant to the questions we were asking them.

Voice- a lot of time and preparation went in from Matthew's group in really thinking about how we access young people's opinions in a meaningful way, armed with relevant information and context. I think today is a demonstration of how articulate and clear, they are in their own voice and representing the voices of the others in the group.

Audience- Audience was operating on a number of different levels, both myself and Colette were representing the National Board, and we needed to be actively listening to young people in a way that didn't take over, but allowed for collaboratively working with them, we didn't set the rules as adults, we worked with the young people in partnership to agree what would happen. But the other audience is you, have you been actively listening to what Matthew and Euan have said? What influence has it had on you?

Influence- This presentation is not a perfect example of participation there is a lot more we could do, to refine and build upon. From our perspective as the National Office, we will take all of the comments made by Euan and his group and will be including them in the revision of the safeguarding standard. What we will also do is to take the workshop that Matthew and his group have created and make it

available for anyone who wants to consult with young people on the draft standard as part of the consultation exercise that Teresa spoke about. What I hope this presentation has influenced you to do, is to think about young people in a different way, they need protection but they also need participation. They are not the adults of tomorrow, they are members of the Church today, people like Matthew and Euan who give voluntarily of their time to contribute to their community. They have opinions and thoughts and ideas which we need to hear. The next time you have to produce a child friendly poster, leaflet, code of conduct, attendance register, consent form, workshop or training- ask young people. Listen to what they have to say and do something with their opinions. In that way we as Church are truly living up to our promise about valuing young people's fundamental rights, and trying to work towards the example set by Jesus when he said- 'let the little children come to me'.

Many Thanks