



**The SBNI Mental Health Learning and Development Framework
supporting the Needs of Children and Young People in Northern Ireland**

February 2024

Introduction

The SBNI has adopted a strength-based, trauma-informed approach to safeguarding children and young people, underpinned by research relating to Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs). As part of this, the SBNI, in its Strategic Plan 2022-2026, has placed specific focus on ACEs for children and young people living in Northern Ireland which includes mental health issues experienced by both parents and children. The SBNI has committed as a strategic priority to:

- work with government departments and their agencies to help reduce the incidence of children and young people affected by mental health issues
- work with member and partner agencies to raise awareness among parents, carers and professionals of the impact of mental ill health and any associated stigma, on children and young people
- work with member and partner agencies to promote awareness for children and young people, their parents and carers in how to recognise, respond and seek help in relation to mental health
- work with partners to promote training in how to improve the recognition, assessment, and responses to children, young people and families experiencing the impact of mental health issues.

To help achieve this, a learning and development framework was developed by a working group, chaired by an Education Authority representative, and included representation from the Youth Justice Agency, the PHA, Health and Social Care Trusts, Action for Children and the SBNI. It was approved by the SBNI Board in February 2024.

The aim of this framework is for it to be utilised as a reference point and guidance by member agencies, partners and other associated organisations that deliver services to children, young people, parents and others. It includes the Northern Ireland context, differentiates the levels of training needs according to role and responsibility, and provides a comprehensive reference section.

N.B. This framework complements the existing SBNI Safeguarding learning and development framework and the additional frameworks developed by SBNI committees in 2023 and 2024, namely:

- child sexual exploitation
- domestic violence and abuse.

Background

The Mental Health of Children and Parents in NI: The Youth Wellbeing Prevalence Survey 2020, conducted by Queens University Belfast and Ulster University and commissioned by HSCB and the Mental Health Foundation reported:

- one in five (22%) parents or care-givers reported a previous diagnosis of any mental health disorder. Anxiety and depression were the most commonly diagnosed disorders
- parents in the most deprived areas in NI had higher rates of self-reported mental health problems (31.9%) than those in the least deprived areas (17.2%)
- children whose parents had current mental health problems were twice as likely to have an anxiety or depressive disorder themselves, highlighting the importance of the survey findings for both adult and children's service providers
- one in eight children and young people in Northern Ireland experienced emotional difficulties (HSB 2020 Youth Prevalence Study).

Initial results from Department of Health's Health Survey 2021/2022, published in November 2022, demonstrated that:

In 2021/22, more than a third (35%) of respondents reported having concerns about their own mental health in the past year. The SBNI is committed to understanding the impact of adversity and trauma across the lifespan and recognises that traumatic experiences, and exposure to violence, can lead to mental health issues. The [Commission for Victims and Survivors](#) estimates that over 200,000 adults in Northern Ireland have mental ill health as a result of the previous conflict in the country – many of whom will be parents or grandparents.

Parental psychological wellbeing can have a major impact on children; studies indicate that reduced parental psychological wellbeing increases the risk of children developing behavioural, social, emotional and educational problems, while some of the challenges of parenting can also impact adult mental health. The SBNI recognises that the importance of early intervention, along with appropriate support for parents and their families, is crucial to ensuring children are raised in environments that will help them to flourish.

In 2021 the National Children's Bureau in NI published a report¹ that considered the impact of COVID-19 on children and young people with special educational needs and disabilities in Northern Ireland. The report highlighted:

- increased social isolation and loneliness
- reduced support for parents and carers
- anxiety and stress
- forced separation of families due to various lockdowns and restrictions on travel
- reduced access to respite services.

¹ [The impact of COVID-19 on children and young people with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities: thoughts from our first wave of research \(Autumn 2020\) \(ncb.org.uk\)](https://www.ncb.org.uk/publications/2020/10/the-impact-of-covid-19-on-children-and-young-people-with-special-educational-needs-and-disabilities-thoughts-from-our-first-wave-of-research-autumn-2020)

AIM

This Mental Health Learning and Development Framework will contribute to the improvement in recognition and support for children, young people and their families affected by reduced psychological and emotional wellbeing.

Objectives

- To provide a Learning and Development framework which is responsive to the voices of children and young people affected by mental health issues.
- To provide a Learning and Development framework that highlights high quality training with respect to the impact of mental health issues on children, young people and their families including safety and risk, through a child protection and safeguarding lens, which takes account of single and multi-agency training, including its planning, delivery, monitoring and evaluation.
- Identify opportunities for developing and enhancing multi-disciplinary/multi-agency mental health education and training strategies across all sectors.
- Improve the competence of staff and volunteers involved in working with children and their families.
- Provide proportionate learning outcomes which should be achieved by staff/volunteers in any learning and development activity.
- Identify different levels of training commensurate with the level and nature of contact with children and young people, which take account of uni- and multi-agency planning, delivery, monitoring and evaluation.
- Inform commissioners, policy makers and those developing and providing education and training programmes, plus organisations and individuals to ensure that relevant, consistent and quality assured programmes are in place, accessible and delivered at the right level.

Values and principles

It is intended that the Learning and Development framework will reflect the following principles:

- is responsive to the needs and voices of children and young people affected by mental health issues
- applies trauma informed principles of safety, trustworthiness, collaboration/working together, empowerment, inclusion and choice (adapted from Harris and Fallot (2009); SAMHSA (2014)²)
- recognises the intersectionality of issues that can impact upon children and young people's mental health
- uses a rights-based approach to safeguarding children's learning and development in accordance with the UNCRC 1989 and the Human Rights Act 1998
- recognises safeguarding and protecting children and young people is everyone's business and all activity should be child-centred
- recommends a multi-disciplinary and multi-agency approach to meeting individual and/or organisational learning and development needs where appropriate and relevant
- acknowledges learning and development opportunities must be evidence based and fit for purpose and have agreed learning outcomes as identified in this framework
- accepts that organisations have the responsibility to ensure that all learning and development is related to, and demonstrated in, practice

² Adverse Childhood Experiences (L1) and Developing a Trauma Sensitive Approach to Practice(L2) modules available at:

www.learn.hscni.net or www.ascert.biz or <https://www.supporting-learning.com/learning-modules/supporting-pupils/adverse-childhood-experiences-aces>

- recognises that organisations have the responsibility to develop appropriate governance arrangements regarding the training of staff and volunteers in supporting the mental health needs of children and young people
- recognises that learning and development will support improved performance in safeguarding children and young people who are affected by mental health issues
- establishes that learning and development is not a one-off event; each organisation must take responsibility to understand and develop strategies which will help support staff volunteers and seek to identify the most appropriate and relevant opportunities to develop staff confidence and competence in their role. Learning and development with respect to mental health and safeguarding children and young people, is a developmental process and requires the investment of time and resources within organisations to create a competent workforce. It should also be responsive to different working practices that may evolve.

Target audience

The framework is aimed at all SBNI member agencies, any agencies providing services to a member agency under contractual/service level agreement and is applicable and relevant to all organisations and staff and volunteers who come into contact with children and young people, and their families. It also includes those who work with adults who are parents or those who have contact with children and young people through the course of their work and/or with service users who have contact with children. Safeguarding and protecting children and young people is the responsibility of every individual in Northern Ireland across all disciplines and sectors.

This framework has been developed in conjunction with the SBNI's Learning and Development Framework, designed in 4 levels which are not incremental but offer a continuum of learning and development where an individual may move between levels. Each

organisation should determine the level, developmental requirements and appropriate timescale for staff/volunteers to undertake the training. The appropriateness of the medium of training for a varied workforce should also be considered. The framework suggests timescales but each organisation is responsible for determining if staff/volunteers require a certain level within a specific timeframe, e.g. from date of appointment to a role. Where possible, organisations should take a multi-disciplinary/multi agency approach to accessing learning and development as this will help promote the use of shared language and understanding.

Level 1) All staff/volunteers within the organisation

Level 2) All staff/volunteers who have direct contact with:

- children and young people
- adult carers/parents and those who have regular contact with children
- adults known or suspected of posing a risk to children and young people.

Level 3) All staff/volunteers who:

- could potentially contribute to assessing, planning, intervening and evaluating the needs and risks for children and parental capacity where there are safeguarding issues
- have a managerial or supervisory role.

Level 4) All staff/volunteers with specialist roles and responsibilities including leaders and policy makers.

Level One All Staff/Volunteers within the organisation				
Knowledge Will have an introductory understanding of:	Learning Outcomes Will have the appropriate ability to:	Target Audience	Development Requirements	Organisational Responsibility
Terminology including: mental health, emotional health and wellbeing.	Understand and use a shared language that encompasses mental health, emotional health and wellbeing.	All staff or volunteers in the organisation.	Access to training and learning and development activity every three years which enables them to use their understanding and awareness at Level One. Suggested timescale of 1.5 hours.	This will be determined by the individual agencies and can take the form of any of the following: as part of induction or refresher training.
The importance of safe and trusting relationships for positive brain development and mental health.	Understand the benefits of healthy relationships and connections for support, and emotional health and wellbeing.			E learning programme programmes; facilitated awareness sessions (live or online).

The potential impact of Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) on development across the lifespan, the stress response and its impact on physiology.	Understand the healthy brain development stages and processes.			Updating through knowledge exchange/ sharing.
How to support a child/young person in emotional distress.	Understand the impact of stress, trauma and adversity on: healthy brain development; physical, emotional and social development and relationships .			
Suicide prevention awareness.	Prevalence of suicide. Basic understanding of how to respond.			
Individual Agency/staff policy and procedures including reporting, confidentiality and data protection.	Recognise and respond to distress in a compassionate way. Understand own role and role of others within			

	their organisation using safeguarding policies and procedures.			
The importance of self-care and organisational care for workforces.	Be aware of individual agency's supportive frameworks for staff wellbeing. Know how to access support as required within agency and in line with procedures.			
Services to support mental health and suicide prevention locally and regionally.	Know how to signpost to suitable services, and access information to support the wellbeing of children, parents, families and staff.			

Level Two <ul style="list-style-type: none"> All Staff/Volunteers who have direct contact with children, young people, adults, carers/parents, and those who have regular contact with children and their families through delivery of services 				
Enhancing understanding, building knowledge and skills	Learning Outcomes	Target Audience	Development Requirements; Frequency of delivery	Organisational Responsibility
How relationships and interactions shape infant, child and young person brain development and their mental health.	Be informed regarding healthy brain development and how this relates to positive mental health.	All workforces who meet criteria as stated above.	In person group session or facilitated e-learning every three years as a stand-alone event of at least a half-day duration.	<p>Determined by individual agencies. Additional learning and development activity outside the requirement may include the following and staff may need guidance on appropriate sources to access:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • in person group session • e learning • blended learning

Holistic approaches to mental health of children and young people along with supporting parents and carers.	Understand behaviour as an expression of distress, trauma, and/or early experiences. Understand behaviours within context of adaptive coping strategies. Adapt responses to needs of the child, adult, family.			Regular supervision opportunities for staff. Reflective practice Learning from Serious Adverse Incidents and Case Management Reviews.
The stress response system and how it impacts upon physiology; understanding the difference between tolerable and toxic stress.	Recognise when a child/young person/adult/family may require more specialist intervention.			

The signs and symptoms of emotional distress.	<p>Ability to recognise signs and symptoms.</p> <p>Be confident in skills and aware of own limitations.</p> <p>Understand the importance of listening and acknowledging child/young person's feelings to help reduce distress.</p> <p>Be able to respond compassionately.</p>			
How the physical environment can trigger and impact emotional responses.	<p>Apply this understanding to the environment and make appropriate changes.</p>			

The range of responses that can support the regulatory system in others.	Practise and use a range of straightforward techniques to support regulation in another person (services user, pupil student, colleague etc).			
Services to support mental health and suicide prevention locally and regionally.	Understanding of referral pathways and know how to signpost to appropriate services, and access information to support the wellbeing of children, parents, families and staff.			

Level 3) All staff/volunteers who: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • could potentially contribute to assessing, planning, intervening and evaluating the needs and risks for children and parental capacity (including where there may be safeguarding issues) • have a managerial or supervisory role 				
Knowledge & Skill	Learning Outcomes	Target audience	Development Requirements	Organisational Responsibility
<p>This may require specialised training (e.g. psychology, nursing, social work, youth work, counselling, teaching, policing etc.)</p> <p>OR may require managerial insight into demands of the work on staff being supervised, the organisational structures available to support the workforce/s and current evidence base.</p> <p>Understanding of:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • how mental health difficulties for parents 	<p>Confident, competent practitioners or manager of practitioners</p> <p>Competency attuned to role and responsibility</p> <p>Understanding of collaborative working with children and young people, and across agencies and sectors.</p>	<p>Could potentially contribute to assessing, planning, intervening and evaluating the needs and risks for children and parental capacity where there are safeguarding issues</p>	<p>Dependent on role, professional standards, organisational policy and procedures:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • meet organisational mandatory training requirements • maintain professional standards as dictated by professional bodies • supervision, reflective practice and learning from Significant Events Audit (SEAs), 	<p>Appropriate and proportionate to role and level of responsibility of workforce.</p> <p>Can take a range of forms e.g. post qualifying studies, attending conferences, special interest groups which is required for professional development and</p>

<p>may impact upon the child/ren, young people</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • range of mental health pathways • other professionals' roles • Stepped Care CAMHS model • benefits and challenges in formulation. 			<p>Serious Adverse Incidents (SAIs)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • more specialist training regarding child protection awareness, adult safeguarding • UNOCINI process • regular updates regarding best practice and theoretical developments. 	<p>confidence in this area</p>
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Level 4) All staff/volunteers with specialist roles and responsibilities including leaders and policy makers who: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> could potentially contribute to assessing, planning, intervening and evaluating the needs and risks for children and parental capacity where there are safeguarding issues have a managerial or supervisory role of such staff 				
Knowledge & Skill	Learning Outcomes	Target audience	Development Requirements	Organisational Responsibility
Specialist training including specific therapeutic interventions. Importance of regular supervision and/or clinical supervision. As a manager have appropriate training to have oversight of staff working in this area. As a manager have insight into impact of role on practitioner's own wellbeing.	Competence and confidence in using particular approaches evidenced by qualifications Competence and confidence in managing staff dealing with complex work. Recognition of secondary and vicarious trauma.	Practitioners in specialist roles.	Dependent on role/ managerial responsibility, the appropriate level of safeguarding training according to organisational requirements.	Offer opportunities for specialist training and development according to need, role and responsibility.

POLICY

- Co-operating to Safeguard Children and Young People in Northern Ireland DoH 2017 [Co-operating to Safeguard Children and Young People in Northern Ireland | Department of Health \(health-ni.gov.uk\)](#)
- [Mental Health Strategy 2021-2031 | Department of Health \(health-ni.gov.uk\)](#)
- Infant Mental Health Strategy 2016 [Infant Mental Health Framework for Northern Ireland | HSC Public Health Agency \(hscni.net\)](#)
- Keeping Children Safe: Our Duty to Care – Standards and Guidance for Safeguarding Children and Young People – [Keeping-Children-Safe-Our-Duty-to-Care.pdf \(volunteernow.co.uk\)](#) 2022
- Children and Young People's Strategy 2020-2030 Northern Ireland Executive [final-executive-children-and-young-people's-strategy-2020-2030 \(education-ni.gov.uk\)](#)
- [Understanding the Needs of Children in Northern Ireland - Revised June 2011 \(health-ni.gov.uk\)](#)
- Safeguarding Board for Northern Ireland Procedures [Safeguarding Board for Northern Ireland Procedures Manual \(proceduresonline.com\)](#)
- [Children & Young People's Emotional Health and Wellbeing in Education Framework \(final version\).PDF \(education-ni.gov.uk\)](#)
- A Life Deserved: A Strategy for Looked After Children. [doh-lac-strategy.pdf \(health-ni.gov.uk\)](#)
- Protect Life 2 – Suicide Prevention Strategy [Protect Life 2 \(health-ni.gov.uk\)](#)
- [Addressing Bullying in Schools Act \(Northern Ireland\) 2016 - Statutory Guidance for Schools and Boards of Governors \(education-ni.gov.uk\)](#)
- [CAMHS-Pathway.pdf \(familysupportni.gov.uk\)](#)

[NI Towards Zero Suicide Patient Safety Collaborative - NSPA](#)

ACTION plans

- Mental Health Action Plan [mh-action-plan-plus-covid-response-plan.pdf \(health-ni.gov.uk\)](#)
- [HSC Regional Staff Wellbeing Framework 0.pdf \(hscni.net\)](#)

- [Children & Young People's Emotional Health and Wellbeing in Education Framework \(final version\).PDF \(education-ni.gov.uk\)](#)

REPORTS/Research

- [The impact of COVID-19 on children and young people with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities: thoughts from our first wave of research \(Autumn 2020\) \(ncb.org.uk\)](#)
- An evaluation of the effectiveness of Emotional Health and Well-Being support for pupils in schools and EOTAS centres_ETI 2018
- [Northern Ireland : Mentally Healthy Schools](#)
- [niccy-still-waiting-report-sept-18-web.pdf](#)
- [Youth Wellbeing Prevalence Survey 2020 - DOH/HSCNI Strategic Planning and Performance Group \(SPPG\)](#)
- UNCRC report 2023
- [Growing Up Online: Children's online activities, harm and safety in Northern Ireland - an Evidence Report - Safeguarding Board for Northern Ireland \(safeguardingni.org\)](#)
- EPPOC Research and Data: Mental Health and Paramilitarism (December 2023) Ref RD1/23 (pending).

USEFUL LINKS

Youth Wellness Web [Youth Wellness Web – Children and Young People's Strategic Partnership \(CYPSP\) \(hscni.net\)](#)

Public Health Agency [Mental and Emotional Health and Wellbeing and Suicide Prevention Training Framework \(hscni.net\)](#)

[PHA - Welcome - PHA Standards Assessment Tool \(pharesourcehub.co.uk\)](#)

<http://www.publichealth.hscni.net/publications>

[Directory of services to help improve mental health and emotional wellbeing | HSC Public Health Agency \(hscni.net\)](#)

Education Authority [Health Well \(eani.org.uk\)](http://eani.org.uk)