



Practice review report: Vanessa George

These case studies are intended to raise issues in a practical application; bringing together the critical factors, particularly around multi-agency working. They will help to contextualise risk factors and raise questions about prevention within situations of known abuse, neglect and harm. They have been summarised to assist in this process, but more information is available in the actual review reports.

Context and background of review

A serious case review into the child abuse at Little Ted's nursery by Vanessa George, which led to her conviction, and those of four other people, was published. Vanessa George, a mother of two, was charged with seven offences, including two of sexual assault by penetration and two of sexual assault by touching. She was also charged with making, possessing and distributing indecent images of children.

Mrs George, 39, was arrested after indecent images of children taken at Little Ted's Day Nursery in Plymouth were found on a computer disc seized by police from a suspected paedophile Colin Blanchard in Manchester. Police said the photographs included pictures of children's torsos taken on a camera phone at the nursery, where Mrs George worked for two years.

Circumstances of, and challenges faced by, the individual

Vanessa George began to find time alone with children at Little Ted's, sometimes when she changed their nappies. She sexually assaulted them and used the camera on her mobile phone to record the abuse. She used objects found at the nursery in the assaults, but also smuggled a sex toy in for at least one attack.

Parents of some victims are angry that George was able to get such one-to-one access with children. Some accuse the nursery of poor management and claim that because the workers were good friends, the regime was too slack.

It was feared at one point that more than 300 children may have been abused. This has been narrowed down to 30 by police and she has admitted, making 124 images of children between December and June. She targeted younger children, possibly because she knew they would not be able to tell. Their faces were not shown, which has so far made identification impossible.

George would send the images on to Blanchard. Experienced detectives admit having felt physically sick at the content. The pair would also swap sexual images of themselves and share awful, dark, graphic fantasies. The communications steadily grew, and between December 2008 and her arrest in June there was a frenzy of exchanges – 10,000 contacts via phone, text, email, MSN.

What happened?

A married mother with two children, she appeared to be a valued member within her local community and had taken up the post at Little Ted's nursery some three years earlier. At some point in 2008, Vanessa George began an online relationship with Colin Blanchard (previously convicted of possessing indecent images of children). It was at this time that colleagues would later claim that they noticed a change in her behaviour. Vanessa George would send Colin Blanchard photos of her abusing children at the nursery and he would forward them to another lady with whom he had an online relationship, Angela Allen.



Why it happened?

The nursery was an unincorporated not-for-profit association 'owned' by a committee of trustees. However, the trustees interviewed were unaware of their responsibilities. The manager disputed Ofsted's claim that she was a trustee, while another trustee was found to be deceased.

No trustee meetings took place nor was there a proper constitution or any supervision of the manager's practice. Parents believed the manager owned the nursery and, like many of the staff, were unaware of the trustees and unclear about who to approach with concerns or complaints.

The nursery frequently operated outside staff:child ratios and there was no keyworker system in place. Staff were deployed in a loose way within the nursery, moving between different sections, as needed. Although the review noted that children were generally 'happy', several staff disputed this. Since the closure of the nursery and parents enrolling their children with different providers, they have commented on the qualities of high standard childcare.

There was no clear staff recruitment and selection policy and the manager had not attended safer recruitment training. George had been recruited via 'word of mouth' through the primary school, where the manager knew her in her school governor capacity. There are no records of an advertisement, formal interview or references for George's post, though there was a cleared CRB check.

This lack of transparency in provision of an accountable service contributed to an environment where Vanessa George could operate without challenge.

Staff had attended no safeguarding training or had attended courses a long time ago. There was no evidence to suggest that this training had been integrated into practice in a meaningful way. For example, staff did not seem to recognise that professional practitioners, including women (and in their case, Vanessa George), could pose a risk to children. George's conduct and sexualised behaviour in the nursery was not noted as a clear 'sign' that they may have a sexual predator in their midst.

There was no supervisory framework implemented at the nursery and as already demonstrated, the weak manager modelled blurred, professional boundaries and selective resistance to contact with outside agencies and did 'just enough' to stave off too much scrutiny by Ofsted.



Report recommendations

The serious case review into what happened at Little Ted's Nursery concluded that it "provided an ideal environment" for George to abuse. The review concluded that a combination of weak management, poor training and a lack of external scrutiny "provided an ideal environment within which George could abuse". And while it said no-one could have predicted George would be a risk to children, her colleagues failed to raise the alarm when her behaviour and conversations became increasingly sexualised.

The review exposed a significant disparity between Ofsted's view of the nursery and that of the Early Years Advisory Service. This raises important questions about the capacity of an Ofsted inspector to appraise standards during a one-off visit, every three years. A welcome recommendation is made for "a communication pathway to be established between Early Years Advisory Services within each local authority and Ofsted in order to ensure that local intelligence informs the inspection process".

Citation Plymouth Safeguarding Children Board (2010) *Serious case review overview report executive summary in respect of Nursery Z*. Plymouth: Plymouth Safeguarding Children Board.