

Norfolk Safeguarding Adults Board Manager's Blog

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How we all can be safeguarding 'fuses'

Getting ready for work a few Mondays ago, I went to iron a shirt. Or rather, I tried to, but I was getting no joy from the iron. I checked the heat setting and the power, till I narrowed down the problem to the fuse. I opened up the plug, changed the fuse, and thankfully the problem was solved.

I looked at this small piece of electrical engineering in my hand which had rescued my Monday morning. The fuse's function is to keep the iron safe. I began to think: what would be the safeguarding adult equivalent of the fuse?

When electricity was first introduced into homes in the 1880s, it was used primarily for lighting. Before wall-mounted outlets were developed, portable appliances such as vacuum cleaners, electric fans, smoothing irons and curling-tong heaters were connected to the light-bulb sockets using lampholder plugs. Not the easiest way to use these appliances!

The solution was the two-pin plug and wall sockets, which appeared on the British market around 1885. The first three-pin earthed (grounded) plugs were introduced about 1910. By 1915 there was a standardised system for plug and wall sockets.

The fuse was first invented by Thomas Edison in 1890 as an electrical safety device. It is a metal wire or strip that melts when too much current flows through it, thereby interrupting the current. A fuse is a sacrificial device: once 'blown' it must be replaced or rewired, depending on type.

Just as the fuse protects the iron from damage, how can we work in the same way to protect those vulnerable to abuse and harm? While many users of services may be vulnerable (or "at risk of harm") in one way or another, and defining the core concept of vulnerability is a challenge, there are easy and important ways we can all be 'safeguarding fuses' both in and outside of work.

For example:

- **Talking about abuse.** The more we talk about abuse of adults, the easier it is for the individuals we support and care for to speak about it.

Abuse thrives on secrecy, so the more conversations we have about it the better. This openness helps others to understand and recognise abuse and to speak to someone if they are concerned.

- **Reducing isolation.** Helping a person strengthen their social connections and networks is a protection against abuse. Those who are more isolated are at greater risk than those with strong social connections. Isolation has also been identified as a risk factor for family carers becoming perpetrators of abuse in community settings – those with less family support or social contacts are more likely to abuse ([Donohue et al, 2008](#)). A good example of how we can work to reduce social isolation in practice is [Norfolk's In Good Company campaign](#). Every conversation we have has the potential do this.
- **Being curious and asking questions.** If you are feeling something isn't right in a situation, it probably isn't. Asking a question (when it is safe to do so) can be just the opportunity someone might need to reveal what is happening to them. This is also referred to as professional curiosity and is an emerging theme in [Safeguarding Adults Reviews](#) and other reviews in Norfolk and nationally. The importance of professional curiosity has long been recognised in Children's Services, but is equally relevant to adult safeguarding work. NSAB has just published some [guidance on professional curiosity](#) (my thanks to Helen Thacker for writing this).
- Supporting a person to be **less physically dependent** or ensuring they are able to speak up if worried or that there is someone who can advocate for them. Those at greater risk of abuse and harm are those who are dependent on others to meet their needs. Helping the person gain or regain a degree of independence strengthens their locus of control, self-worth and confidence.
- **Feelings of low self-worth** in victims can mean that abuse goes unreported. A prior history of abuse, including abuse in childhood, can shape an individual's response to current abuse. Stigma and discrimination of vulnerable people can increase the chance of becoming a target for abusive types of behaviour. Giving clear signs that you can and will advocate for them may be just the signal the person needs to speak out, to seek support and help. This protects the person from future abuse.

Each of us has a critical role to play in protecting those at risk of abuse and harm in the same way that the fuse protected my iron from a surge of too much current.



Please don't underestimate how important this can be. Although a fuse is small, its ability to protect is significant. So, too, can one small action help prevent abuse.

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