Vetting and screening guidelines

Vetting and screening is not about ticking boxes to figure out if a candidate fits a particular profile of someone who might abuse children.

Instead, it is about gathering enough information to paint a complete picture of a candidate, to exercise professional judgement about whether the person is suitable for a particular role.

Look for patterns of concerning attitudes or behaviours

It would be rare to find a single piece of damning evidence suggesting a likely child abuser, it is more likely that patterns are likely to become evident in the candidate’s background and responses to questions.

Always consider the facts in context

(a criminal conviction, gaps in employment history, a negative reference)

Whenever possible, give candidates an opportunity to respond to concerns about their suitability.

If you have a doubt about a candidate, always follow it up – screeners should always ask follow-up questions until they are comfortable they fully understand the situation.

Ultimately, the vetting and screening process relies on the judgement of the person doing the checking. If this person does not have any child protection experience they should talk through the issues with a child protection specialist

What to look for in candidates

A candidate’s attitudes and past behaviour are likely to indicate their ability and willingness to promote a child protection culture in the workplace.

Questions should cover the candidate’s attitudes towards the control and punishment of children, issues of power and appropriateness, openness and trustworthiness and a willingness to protect children from abuse.

Deception and secrecy

Patterns of fraudulent behaviour, misdirection or misleading conduct, and other indications that a person is untrustworthy, should be explored further.

Protecting children requires openness and transparency. A candidate who expresses a willingness to hide things, including hiding the behaviour of children, is someone who may pose a risk. A candidate should be able to show that they do not collude with any behaviour that is damaging to children and if a situation arises, to be able to make difficult decisions to protect children.

However, while past secrecy or deception is always an issue that should be considered, it is important to understand the context fully, as there may possibly be a legitimate or compelling reason not to have passed on information.

Lack of boundaries or lack of understanding of appropriate conduct

Children’s workers should recognise the importance of boundaries and understand what constitutes appropriate and inappropriate behaviour around children. A candidate who seems to want solely to be a child’s friend, without a balancing recognition of their role and responsibilities, may place children in unsafe situations.

Similarly, candidates who feel emotionally closer to children than adults, who claim to have children as personal friends or who attribute childlike qualities to themselves, may have issues with maintaining appropriate boundaries while they work.

There is a key difference between a candidate who can relate well to children and who understands that they are in a role of power and responsibility and one who may treat children inappropriately or without professional distance.

Inappropriate attitudes to discipline

A person who has a negative, punitive or patronising view of children may not be able to deal with children appropriately when they misbehave or may not treat their problems with kindness and respect.

Lack of understanding of the needs of children

Children’s workers need to have a basic knowledge of child development, an interest in children’s issues, an understanding of the emotional requirements of children and be able to address children’s needs appropriately.

A candidate should be able to show evidence of empathy with children. The person should be able to demonstrate how to maintain professional boundaries, while also relating well to children

Gathering information from application forms

Application forms should always be used in addition to a CV and should enable the gathering of information on

* Past convictions and disciplinary matters.
* Unexplained gaps or omissions on the candidate’s work history.
* Qualifications awarded by unfamiliar bodies.
* Unusual working patterns, such as transiency or geographically
* Scattered short-term jobs.
* Reasons for leaving previous jobs.
* Inconsistencies in information.

These issues are common and often only require follow up for clarification rather than being evidence of an underlying problem. They can be explored further during the interview or when reference checking.

Interviews

All candidates should be interviewed face-to-face before being selected for a role that allows access to children. The way a candidate responds to careful questioning can provide substantial insight into their personality and their attitudes towards children. An interview also provides the opportunity to confirm the information collected through the application process and to clarify information previously given.

It is recommended that:

**Interview questions**

Avoid using many closed questions.

Asking questions about past actions can be very helpful, where possible, ask candidates to describe a specific example from their own experiences.

Questions should be designed to give information about the:

* Candidate themself.
* Candidate’s views on disciplining children and keeping safe around children.
* Candidate’s attitudes.
* Candidate’s experiences and relationships in working with children.

**Questions that provide information about the candidate themself:**

All qualifications and experience and how these relate to the role the candidate is applying for.

* The child protection training that the candidate has received.
* The training the person has had in child and adolescent development.
* Whether complaints have ever been made about the candidate’s professional practice and how they have responded to them.
* How they would describe their own personality.
* Whether they have ever been convicted of an offence.7
* Whether the candidate has ever been the subject of a complaints procedure during their employment.
* Reasons for leaving previous jobs.
* Why they applied for this position.

*Look for:*

* Honesty.
* An understanding of the needs of children.
* A real interest in this job.
* Personal awareness.

*Be wary of:*

* A self-view that is very different from how others describe the candidate.

**Questions that explore the candidate’s attitudes:**

Ask whether there has ever been a time when the candidate has had to deal with the following situations, and discuss the process and outcome. If that situation has not arisen, ask what the person would do if:

* A child or young person disclosed abuse.
* A child or young person lied to them or asked them to keep an inappropriate secret.
* A child or young person was cheeky.
* A child or young person hit them.
* They discovered two children fighting or engaged in sexual play or who had stolen property.
* A child or young person invited them to become involved in intimate or touching behaviour.
* A child or young person threatened to make a false allegation of abuse about them.

Attitudes showing respect for children and an understanding of appropriate ways of interacting with them.

*Look for:*

Openness and readiness to involve other people.

A willingness to act on information that suggests a child might be at risk.

*Be wary of:*

* Indications of blaming or belittling children.

Questions that indicate the candidate’s views on child safe practice:

* How they believe children should be disciplined.
* Their thoughts on being alone on the job with children and young people.
* The chances of abuse allegations being made about them, if they were accepted for the job.
* How to comfort a child or young person who has been hurt or needs consolation.

*Look for:*

* Understanding of safety around children.
* Understanding the needs of children.
* Understanding professional roles and behaviour.

*Be wary of:*

* Rigid and punitive attitudes.

**Questions that describe the candidate’s experiences and relationships in working with children:**

* What rewarding experiences they have had working with children.
* What difficulties they have encountered and how they overcame these.
* The exact nature of their previous work with children.
* The parts of that work they liked and disliked and the reasons for this.
* Whether they have ever taken a child they work with to their house and why.
* What they think constitutes professional practice when working with children.
* Other relationships they have with children outside the working or volunteer environment.
* The reason they think they get along with children or why children like them.
* The kind of relationships they hope to develop with the children and families in this organisation.

*Look for:*

* An understanding of boundary issues regarding themselves and children.

*Be wary of:*

* Lack of understanding of boundary issues regarding themselves and children.
* Lack of a sense of personal responsibility towards the safety of children.

If any of the candidate’s responses leave you in any doubt, explore the issues with searching, follow-up questions.

Referees and references

Checking references is one of the most important parts of the employment process and should be done thoroughly.

**Referees**

At least two referees should be contacted. Referees should be chosen for their recent knowledge and understanding of the candidate and for any role they held in relation to the candidate.

The current or immediate prior manager or supervisor of the candidate should always be contacted.

When a referee is involved with a business or organisation, it is safer to contact that person on a business telephone number to confirm they genuinely work for that employer.

Employers should be wary if the candidate has lived in the area for considerable time but cannot list any local referees or if the candidate is hesitant to provide telephone contacts for referees.

Disciplinary action regarding child safety or wellbeing provides warning signs and should be investigated fully. The candidate should be given an opportunity to provide an explanation and their response should be compared to the explanation provided by the referee.

**Written references**

Referees are likely to be more explicit in person and on the telephone than in writing. A conversation can explore issues but written references can leave much unsaid, so if possible, call rather than write.

**Questioning referees**

Speaking directly with a referee enables you to confirm other information provided by the candidate and to explore any concerns. Referees can confirm that the candidate is telling the truth in their CV, application form or at interviews. It is therefore useful to have the CV and application form available when calling a referee.

Generic questions can cover:

* Whether the referee considers the candidate suitable for the role and if not, why not.
* Whether they consider the candidate suitable to work with children and if not, why not.
* Details, including duties, position and job title, about the candidate’s employment.
* Specific evidence that the referee can verify, about the candidate’s performance during employment.
* Details of any concerns relating to the safety and welfare of children, or the candidate’s behaviour towards children.
* Whether there were any sanctions relating to the safety and welfare of children, including whether or not such sanctions have expired.
* Whether they would employ the candidate again.

The specific reason that the person left that role. Details of any disciplinary procedures that resulted in formal action against a candidate.

Example of specific questions:

* Do you trust the candidate and if not, why not?
* Have you ever had reason to suspect the candidate’s honesty?
* Has the candidate ever mislead you?
* Has the candidate ever been disciplined for misleading or fraudulent conduct?
* How would you describe the way the candidate acts around children?
* Was the candidate ever subject to formal disciplinary actions or complaints regarding their behaviour towards children?
* Do you think the candidate should be unsupervised around children?
* Was the candidate ever subject to formal disciplinary action or complaints regarding their disciplinary techniques?
* How well do you think the candidate understands children?

Educational checks

Educational achievements are frequently misrepresented on CVs simply because they are so seldom checked. Checking educational records also gives you an opportunity to learn more about a person’s honesty.

* Screen an applicant’s education by asking for certified copies of certificates or transcripts
* If you have never heard of the institution you might also want to check to see
* What type of institution it is
* What qualifications it awards
* Some detail about the content and value of those qualifications.