

Moving Beyond “It Can't Happen Here”: How Lessons from Steiner Waldorf Schools Can Inform Safeguarding Practice in the Early Years

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Abstract

This article explores the safeguarding challenges faced by Steiner Waldorf schools in the United Kingdom, examining how social class, community culture, and organisational structures can influence the identification and management of safeguarding concerns. A qualitative policy and literature review was undertaken using published case reviews, Ofsted inspection reports, safeguarding guidance, and documented incidents associated with the Steiner Waldorf movement. Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory provides the analytical framework for examining interactions between individual, relational, institutional, and cultural influences on safeguarding practice. Three themes emerged from the analysis. First, professional deference towards affluent and middle-class families was found to contribute to the under-recognition or under-reporting of safeguarding concerns. Second, the close-knit nature of Steiner Waldorf communities created barriers to whistleblowing, challenge, and external scrutiny. Third, while relational structures have exacerbated safeguarding risks in high profile cases, they can also support the wellbeing of our youngest children through the development of trust, collaboration, and community engagement. The findings highlight the complex relationship between privilege, community cohesion, and safeguarding practice. Effective safeguarding, particularly for younger children who may be less able to articulate concerns, requires strong external oversight, transparent reporting mechanisms, and trauma-informed approaches that balance trust with professional accountability.

Keywords: Independent Schools, Relationships, Safeguarding, Social Class, Ecological systems



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Introduction

Abuse and neglect are not class-dependent, they are found in all strata of our communities, but how they are responded to can be significantly influenced by perceptions of education and privilege (Bernard & Greenwood, 2019; Nicolas, 2015). This article explores the ethical considerations and barriers involved in safeguarding young children in independent, fee-paying schools with alternative pedagogical systems. We specifically focus upon Steiner Waldorf schools in the UK, as authors experienced in both teaching within, and researching with them. Our discussion focuses upon the role that class-bias can play in the safeguarding of children, as well as the role that cultural cognition plays within the micro, meso, exo and macrosystems (Bronfenbrenner, 1979) of the school community. The focus of this review is historical rather than evaluative. At the time of writing, the remaining Steiner Waldorf schools in the UK have achieved “Good” Ofsted ratings following substantial safeguarding reforms (Waldorf UK, 2025). The purpose of this study is, therefore, to examine historical lessons that may inform safeguarding practice within similarly close-knit and socio-economically privileged educational communities.

To understand the safeguarding landscape within Steiner Waldorf (SW) schools in the UK it is important to first contextualize the greater SW school movement that creates the exosystem for the children in SW settings. SW education was founded by Rudolf Steiner, a philosopher whose theories have been adopted by a

range of industries (for example farming, medicine, therapies and banking) and whose views make up the Anthroposophical movement (Zander, 2013). At the time of writing the UK hosts 17 independent SW schools, 1 academy, and 9 Early Years settings (Waldorf UK, 2025). SW schools in the UK are classified as independent schools, with the exception of Hereford Academy, which is publicly funded. Waldorf schools operate a tuition-funded model and, like the private sector in general, primarily serve families from middle- and upper-income brackets. Because these households are more likely to be in the top income category (Henseke et al., 2021) the majority of families attending SW schools are likely to be in a position of considerable socio-economic privilege (Levi & Seidl, 2023). Because of the values (Nagy & Bognár, 2026) and make-up of SW settings they create particularly unique microsystems.

Two of the largest and oldest flagship SW settings in the UK, were closed in 2019 and 2020 due to repeated failings to meet safeguarding requirements (Ofsted, 2016b–2019; Ofsted, 2019–2021). Correspondence between the chief of Ofsted school inspections, Amanda Spielman, and Damian Hinds, Secretary of State for Education at the time, illustrated that one of their primary concerns about the SW movement was safeguarding practice; and in particular the lack of accountability of the leadership in the safeguarding of young children (Spielman, 2019; Hinds, 2019). Ofsted’s late 2018 to early 2019 inspections covered nine Steiner Waldorf schools across state and independent settings. Six were judged inadequate, and safeguarding was assessed as ineffective in the remaining third of the schools inspected (Spielman, 2019). Amongst the four state-funded Steiner academies, three were rated ‘inadequate’ with safeguarding cited as a recurring issue.

At this time of crisis, Waldorf UK, the national organization that oversees all SW schools in the UK, went through a restructure. In a break away from the traditionally flat and insular governance, they hired a new executive (a Chief Executive Officer and Curriculum Lead) with combined experience of leadership within mainstream education, policy and law (Steiner Waldorf Schools Fellowship, 2019). One of the key developmental challenges of these newly appointed leaders was tackling the concept of ‘cosy relationships’ within SW settings. This issue was flagged by a particularly detrimental Ofsted report in 2016, where the SW school obtained an inadequate rating in their safeguarding. Following the inspection, prompted by allegations of inappropriate behaviour made against a teacher at the school, the Ofsted report read: “Relationships between members of staff and parents have become blurred. This has led to errors in judgement about what needs to be done and actions not being taken urgently enough” (Ofsted, 2016). As a result of this ‘insider’ culture, the reports stated the school had failed to take strong and effective measures when faced with a complaint against a staff member. The teacher was subsequently barred from the teaching profession (DfE, 2019).

‘Cosy relationships’ subsequently became recognised as a flaw of SW school culture, and something that needed to be tackled if young and vulnerable children were to be adequately protected. Rather than attempt to provide a definition of ‘cosy relationships’, below we present a vignette of the interconnectedness often found within SW schools. This is presented as a typical example of one early years (EY) setting, and although based upon several historical examples, small changes have been made to further obscure the recognisability of any individuals or schools:

Out of the 63 children on roll, 17 are staff children or closely related to a staff member (both from within the EY settings as well as the rest of the school). Out of the 14 members of staff within the EY setting, 8 have children within the school. Frequently teachers will teach the children of their colleagues within their own class. The microsystem within the school is tightly interconnected.

In the wider mesosystem, it is not uncommon for teachers at the school to have other children from the school on playdates with their own children on evenings and weekends. A large number of parents who are not staff members own small businesses within the local area; these businesses employ, or are frequented by, staff and families of the school. Even in the chronosystem, the history of connectedness within the school is prevalent. Parents, grandparents, and great grandparents often attended a SW setting, if not the same setting as their children or grandchildren.

One teacher at the school teaches in a room that was designed by a parent and built by another at the school. In his class there are children belonging to members of the medical support staff who work at a local

clinic, a local church leader, and multiple children of staff members. The governing body overseeing this teacher's work is largely made up of retired teachers from the same school, as well as multiple parents from throughout the school, one of whom has a child in his class.

This example demonstrates how the interwoven mesosystems of some independent schools can create multiple barriers to teachers broaching safeguarding concerns. The lines between personal and professional relationships can be blurred, parents are friends, governors, colleagues, they may even employ members of your family, thus increasing the possibility of both personal and professional ramifications should a concern be raised.

Methodology

This study adopted a qualitative documentary review approach, drawing on principles of literature review methodology (Snyder, 2019) and documentary analysis (Bowen, 2009). Literature reviews provide a recognised method for synthesising diverse forms of evidence and identifying themes within complex areas of inquiry, whilst documentary analysis offers a systematic framework for examining written records, reports, and policy documents.

Documentary sources were purposively selected for their relevance to safeguarding within independent SW schools in the United Kingdom. The review considered four principal sources of evidence: (1) Serious Case Reviews and Child Safeguarding Practice Reviews identifying social class as a potential barrier to intervention; (2) news reports documenting safeguarding concerns within the UK SW movement; (3) Professional Conduct Panel outcomes relating to teachers associated with SW schools; and (4) relevant Ofsted inspection reports. These sources were considered alongside the wider safeguarding and educational literature. All materials analysed were publicly available historical documents, including records held by the NSPCC and GOV.UK.

The documents were analysed thematically through the lens of Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological systems theory. Particular attention was paid to the ways in which social class, professional deference, community culture, and in-group dynamics may influence the recognition, reporting, and management of safeguarding concerns. Through this process, themes relating to privilege, accountability, community cohesion, and barriers to intervention were identified and explored.

Results and Discussion

The Intimacy of Steiner Waldorf communities, providing safety or increasing risk?

Although the interconnectedness of SW schools was viewed as a significant cause of risk by Ofsted in 2016, the positive relationships between setting and parents are widely viewed as a fundamental value in SW education, and one of the reasons why parents are attracted to the system (Easton, 1995; Tóth-Babcsányi et al., 2025). SW teachers view the close community created within the microsystem of the school as vital to its culture and work closely with parents from the moment that their children enrol at the school. They are invited to Parent Child groups, offered community, support, networking and parenting resources (Boland, 2007; Easton, 1995; Miller, 2007; Phillips, 2007), all intended to nurture a genuine feeling that practitioners are working together with families to support the child.

The deep insight into children's lives that such close relationships can nurture, and the enablement of parental voices within the young child's education, can serve to strengthen safeguarding, cultivating trust in the support the setting can offer (Daro, 2009; Ressler et al., 2019; Berkeley Graduate School of Education, 2025; Overdeck, 2024; U.S. Department of Education, 2012). Such ideals, and the value of them, are highly documented within the essays and literature that SW early years practice is based upon (for example, Nicol & Taplin, 2018; Oldfield, 2012; Long-Breipohl, 2012). And for many this is the attraction of SW, it weaves together family and school community, making schools a 'home from home'. This close, nurturing environment is reinforced by the children having the same class teacher for 8 years, and academic learning being delayed until the child is 7 years of age. These strong community ties can serve to enhance safeguarding, through increased advocacy, contextual understanding, and collective responsibility for the child's welfare. From this perspective,

community connectedness can strengthen protective factors in the microsystem of the school and support a more holistic approach to safeguarding.

What are the barriers to effective safeguarding in such contexts?

Paradoxically, the very conditions that foster a sense of security within insular communities may also create barriers to effective safeguarding. While close, collaborative relationships between families, educators, and the wider school community can foster trust, belonging, and a shared commitment to children's wellbeing (Barnhart, et al., 2022; Holland, 2014), the resulting relational enmeshment may also contribute to in-group dynamics that limit critical reflection and objective scrutiny (Fontes & Plummer, 2010; Lusky-Weisrose et al., 2022). Cultural cognition is defined as the tendency for people to match their ideas to those of “valued in-groups to avoid cognitive dissonance and demonstrate solidarity” (Kahan et al., 2012) and plays an important role here, as it can inadvertently discourage challenge. Cultural cognition can make it more difficult for safeguarding concerns to be recognised, questioned, or escalated. The close-knit microsystem of the school community therefore presents both opportunities and risks; whilst it can provide a protective buffer against external harms, it can also reduce the relational distance necessary for objective critique and professional challenge.

Loyalty to a close-knit community can develop a strong sense of collective identity, creating distinctions between ‘us and them’ and encouraging the maintenance of homeostasis (Kahan et al., 2012). Individuals derive security from ‘sameness’ and are wary of ‘other’, of ways that do not fit into their own logic or expectations (Cliffe & Solvason, 2016). Raising concerns is far more difficult, and far more risky, if it jars against the existing culture (Fontes & Plummer, 2010). Not only will safeguarding concerns be more difficult to voice in schools that exist as an isolated microsystem with an accepted discourse of ‘it can’t happen here’; but by speaking out, an individual may also run the risk of disrupting the very system that is viewed as surrounding and protecting the child (Sawrikar & Katz, 2017). Within such pressured contexts, professional hesitation (Farmer & Owen, 1995), combined with the hope that circumstances will improve without external support, known as the “rule of optimism” (Dingwall et al., 1983), can significantly inhibit the likelihood of concerns being reported. Consequently, the preservation of community cohesion can prevent the type of professional curiosity necessary for keeping our youngest, and most vulnerable, children safe.

Child neglect is one of the most prevalent forms of abuse in the UK (NSPCC, 2021), yet it remains one of the most difficult forms of harm for practitioners to identify and evidence (Wilkinson & Bowyer, 2017). Unlike more discrete incidents of abuse, neglect is often characterised by cumulative developmental impacts that emerge over time (Hildyard & Wolfe, 2002). As Daniel et al. (2010) note, neglect rarely presents as a crisis and may go unnoticed because it is normalised within the child’s everyday experience. These challenges may be further compounded within the dense social networks of SW schools, where increased familiarity can reduce professional objectivity. Bernard and Greenwood (2019) argue that neglect remains under-researched within middle-class contexts, despite evidence that social class and affluence can influence professional perceptions of risk. Within privileged communities, indicators of neglect may be less visible through a child’s physical presentation, clothing, or material resources. Instead, signs are likely to be more nuanced and therefore more easily overlooked, particularly in environments where practitioners are not expecting to encounter them.

While the close-knit microsystem of the setting will profoundly shape day-to-day safeguarding practice, it is also influenced by a macrosystem of middle-class privilege that can reinforce assumptions that statutory intervention is less necessary; particularly in educational communities perceived as morally distinctive and characterised by a strong sense of collective responsibility (Sobo, 2014, 2015). Such assumptions can reinforce a belief among both staff and parents that serious safeguarding concerns are highly unlikely to arise within their closed school communities or family networks (Blakemore et al., 2017). This ‘it cannot possibly happen here’ mentality, often rooted in cultures of privilege and trust, inevitably restricts the capacity of adults to recognise, question, and respond appropriately to safeguarding concerns (Smith & Freyd, 2014). However, documented safeguarding incidents within SW schools demonstrate that no educational setting is immune from abuse or harm (Grubb, 2021; Salisbury Journal, 2013; Staff, 2013).

Brabbs (2011) discusses how socially astute parents are more capable of manipulation when interacting with support services, and Bernard et al. (2023) discuss how middle-class families have the resources and cultural capital to resist social worker intervention. If social privilege can act as a barrier to effective intervention by social workers, despite their specialist knowledge and experience of safeguarding, it is important to consider how much greater this challenge may be for teachers who possess less training and experience in this area. The professional deference that social workers have been found to demonstrate toward middle class families, combined with SW teachers' fear of ostracism from the insular culture of staff and parents in the close-knit school microsystem, places any whistleblowing teacher in an extremely high-risk situation.

It has also been reported that wealthy parents are more likely to use their connections to avoid social services, and recognising the possibility of this may be intimidating to staff who consider speaking out (The Independent, 2018). Social class was perceived as playing a key role in the Serious Case Study of Family A, by Kingston Local Safeguarding Children Board in 2015. Carmi and Walker-Hall (2015, section 5.2.2) state:

The couple's affluent, middle class status, which together with their assertiveness, posed challenge to professionals, some of whom would not be used to this level of questioning. This was particularly the case in dealings with the father who as a lawyer and a company director was experienced as powerful.

A similar situation was seen in the Serious Case Study of "Frankie" from Wandsworth Safeguarding Children Board. Jeremiah and Brownjon (2020) discussed how the safeguarding review panel were influenced by the higher social standing of the parents involved in the claim, resulting in them being more deferential and less challenging than they would have been with parents of lower status. Their own education and status can work as a protective factor for parents (Turney & Tanner, 2001), and make their children more vulnerable.

Further obstructions might be found within the wider infrastructure, or the exosystem, of independent schools. The parent body of SW schools is often highly educated (in academic environments and the Anthroposophical movement). Therefore, it would be only natural for staff to find any confrontation between themselves and the parent body highly intimidating. This academically accomplished status would, likewise, be reflected in the governing body. Added to this is a financial imperative, whereby any confrontation could lead to the withdrawal of a child, at a time when SW schools, like all UK schools, are struggling financially (Bernard et al., 2023). The most recent two closures of SW schools were due to financial reasons (SMP Reporter, 2024).

The analysis identified six interrelated barriers to effective safeguarding within close-knit and socio-economically privileged educational communities. These included: (1) in-group loyalty and the maintenance of community homeostasis; (2) professional optimism and reluctance to escalate concerns; (3) assumptions associated with social class privilege and perceived low risk; (4) the hidden and cumulative nature of neglect within affluent contexts; (5) power imbalances between practitioners and highly educated or socially influential parents; and (6) institutional pressures associated with governance structures and financial sustainability. While each barrier operates differently, together they create conditions in which safeguarding concerns may be less readily recognised, challenged, or reported. Viewed through Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological framework, these barriers emerge not from individual failings alone, but from the interaction of influences operating across the microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, and macrosystem.

Moving forwards- how can this be tackled in similar schools?

To advocate for the child should be the core principle of all schools; all children have a basic right to be safe (UNICEF, 2022). Munro's (2011) review of safeguarding practice argued for a shift toward systems rooted in professional judgement, reflective practice and learning. The most recent safeguarding guidance from the government emphasises cultures of openness, transparency and professional curiosity (Department for Education, 2025). These things can prove difficult when they jar against longstanding school cultures. The way that the executive leads of SW schools in the UK tackled this was to open their school processes to scrutiny and advice from *an external source*, rather than risk fracturing the tight school community from within. This provided the opportunity for the school body to draw together in a collective response to external judgement, rather than cause fracture or dispute within the highly interconnected microsystem. Recognising that things needed to change, the guidance of an external expert provided the opportunity for collective changes to be

driven by reevaluating shared aims across the entire SW organisation, underpinned by shared values. However, there was still extensive work needed for all staff to accept that ‘it really can happen here’ and that significant recalibration was needed moving forwards, more details of how this was tackled in SW schools in particular can be found in Solvason, Hodgkins and Sutton-Tsang’s (2025) report *Steiner Waldorf: Distance Travelled*.

Whilst the safeguarding responsibilities of independent schools are no different from those of maintained schools, we have argued that barriers to effective safeguarding may manifest differently within closed school contexts. In particular, the close relationships of the microsystem, the interconnected networks of the mesosystem, and the influence of wider exosystem and macrosystem factors can create conditions in which challenge, professional curiosity, and external scrutiny become more difficult to initiate and sustain. Recognising these dynamics is an important first step towards schools developing a safeguarding culture that is both reflective and robust.

Drawing upon our own experience with independent schools, we have found that meaningful change is most likely to occur when schools are willing to engage critically with their own cultures and assumptions. Whilst we present the following approaches as strategies that have proven effective in practice, we acknowledge that pathways to successful change are highly contextual. Consequently, safeguarding development should remain an ongoing process of dialogue and reflection, both within the school community and with those external to it who may be better positioned to offer objective challenge.

A key aspect of culture change is the role of school leadership in establishing and modelling high standards of professional conduct (Munro, 2011). Where close relationships are valued, leaders must ensure that staff and parents share a clear understanding of the distinction between professional and personal relationships, and of the importance of maintaining appropriate boundaries (Aultman et al., 2009). Such clarity can help mitigate some of the challenges associated with dense social networks and reduce the likelihood that familiarity inhibits professional judgement.

Safeguarding responsibilities should be highly visible within the school. Staff, pupils, and parents should know who to approach with concerns and feel confident that these will be taken seriously and acted upon appropriately. A visible safeguarding team is most effective when supported by a culture that welcomes professional challenge and recognises safeguarding as a shared responsibility rather than the preserve of designated staff alone microsystem (Munro, 2011, Department for Education, 2025). Regular safeguarding training can help sustain professional curiosity, reduce complacency, and reinforce reporting procedures, while visible reminders of safeguarding processes and contacts ensure that concerns can be raised confidently and without delay (Brandon et al., 2020).

Robust systems for safeguarding documentation are important. Detailed and consistent record-keeping enables safeguarding teams to identify patterns of concern that might otherwise remain invisible, particularly in cases of neglect or emotional harm where individual incidents may appear insignificant in isolation (Nohilly & Treacy, 2025). Digital safeguarding platforms such as MyConcern and CPOMS have supported this work effectively in many schools by strengthening oversight, accountability, and information sharing.

Our discussion has highlighted the risks associated with organisational insularity. For this reason, the development of strong relationships with external agencies and specialist services is particularly important (Munro, 2011; Department for Education, 2025). Engagement with services such as the Single Point of Access (SPOA), Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS), and Multi-Agency Safeguarding Hubs (MASH) strengthens exosystem connections and provides opportunities for external challenge and support. Likewise, ongoing guidance from safeguarding professionals who sit outside the immediate school community can help identify blind spots and challenge assumptions that may otherwise go unexamined (Brandon et al., 2020).

Viewed through an ecological lens, these approaches seek not only to improve safeguarding procedures but also to reshape the relational and cultural conditions within which safeguarding takes place. By strengthening shared accountability, transparency, and constructive challenge across the microsystem, mesosystem, and exosystem, schools can begin to address the barriers identified throughout this paper and create environments in which the welfare of young children remains paramount.

Conclusion

In this article, we have explored the safeguarding risks that can emerge when schools develop a belief that they are somehow different from, or less vulnerable than, other educational settings. Through an ecological lens, we have argued that barriers to effective safeguarding can arise across the microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, and macrosystem, particularly where strong community cohesion, privilege, and insularity inhibit professional curiosity and challenge. In response to this, we have discussed practical ways in which schools can strengthen safeguarding cultures whilst retaining the positive aspects of close community relationships.

We acknowledge that even when a conscientious teacher takes the risk and steps forward to share concerns, there remains the possibility that no further action will be taken by the relevant authorities (as was found repeatedly in Brandon et al.'s 2020 review). For this reason, we highlight the importance of trauma-informed practice to protect the wellbeing of not only children, but also those staff supporting them. Trauma-informed approaches recognise the prevalence of adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) amongst all people (Felitti, 2019) and acknowledge that behaviour may represent a response to trauma (Fredrickson, 2019). Supporting practitioners to embed positive mental health strategies within education and care environments can contribute to healthier long-term outcomes and a more positive chronosystems for all pupils (Fredrickson, 2019).

It is important to remember that all behaviour is communication (Wilkinson, 2018). When practitioners adopt a trauma-informed approach, they communicate that an individual's experiences matter and that they will be heard and believed. This is important in any educational context, but particularly within communities where strong in-group identities may inadvertently marginalise alternative perspectives or discourage disclosure. In such contexts, the simple act of listening, believing, and responding with professional curiosity may be one of the most powerful safeguards available to our young children.

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