

ICS Safeguarding Newsletter 17

What children mean when they say “I’m fine”

Children and young people don’t always tell us directly when something is wrong. Often, they test the waters with small comments, changes in behaviour, or vague phrases that sound ordinary on the surface. This week’s safeguarding focus is about noticing those ‘small signals’ and responding in a way that keeps communication open.

Phrases that can be clues (especially if repeated)

You may hear:

- “I don’t want to go tomorrow.”
- “I don’t feel well.” (headaches/tummy aches that appear at certain times)
- “Everyone is being mean.” or “No one likes me.”
- “It’s fine.” / “Forget it.” (said quickly, with a closed expression)
- “Can I stay home?” (more than usual)
- “I hate school.” (from a child who previously seemed settled)
- “You wouldn’t understand.” (often from older children/teens)
- “It’s not a big deal.” (sometimes said when it *is* a big deal)

On their own, these phrases don’t automatically mean something serious. But patterns matter. A repeated comment, a change in mood, sleep, appetite, friendships, confidence, or online behaviour can be a child’s way of saying: “*I’m not coping*” or “*Something doesn’t feel safe*” — and I don’t know how to explain why.

What to say (and why it works)

The goal isn’t to investigate like a detective — it’s to create safety for your child to share.

Try:

- “I’m glad you told me. Tell me more.”
- “What happened just before you started feeling that way?”
- “If the feeling had a name, what would it be?” (worried/embarrassed/scared/left out/angry)
- “Has this happened before, or is this new?”
- “Where was it happening — in class, at break, online, or on the way to/from school?”
- “If this happened to your friend, what would you want them to do?” (this can really help older children open up)

These questions work because they are calm, curious, and non-judgemental. They help children feel heard without pressure.

What to avoid (even with the best intentions)

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When we're worried, it's easy to rush in with reassurance or quick solutions. Sometimes that closes the conversation.

Try not to lead with:

- "Are you sure?" / "That can't be right."
- "Just ignore it."
- "You need to be tougher."
- "I'll sort it out right now." (unless immediate safety is involved)

Instead, pause, listen, and let your child feel taken seriously.

A simple '3-step check' that helps at any age

If you notice a concerning phrase or change, try this:

1. **Notice** – "I've heard you say that a few times."
2. **Name** – "It sounds like something is worrying you."
3. **Nurture** – "You're not in trouble. I'm here, and we'll work it out together."

A note on older children and teens

As children get older, they often share less—not because they trust you less, but because they're:

- trying to manage things independently
- worried about 'making a fuss'
- scared of consequences (friendship fallout, devices being taken away, adults overreacting)

A helpful phrase is: "I won't overreact — but I will help."

It reassures them that telling you won't make everything explode.

For children and young people: If something feels wrong...

Sometimes our feelings are clues. If you feel worried, unsafe, or uncomfortable:

- Tell a trusted adult (at home or school)

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- If it's online: stop, don't reply, save evidence (screenshots), and tell an adult
- If you're not ready to talk: you can start with "Something's bothering me, but I don't know how to say it yet."

You never have to handle big worries on your own.

When to contact the school

Please reach out if:

- your child mentions feeling unsafe, threatened, hurt, or pressured
- there are repeated worries about a person (child or adult)
- you notice escalating anxiety, school refusal, or sudden behaviour changes
- your child shares anything about harmful online contact or messages

Our safeguarding team would always rather hear early, even if you're not sure. We can support calmly and discreetly.

Final thought: When children say "I'm fine," they may mean "I don't have the words yet." The most protective thing we can offer is a steady adult who listens, believes, and acts when needed.

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