

Safeguarding part two: keeping ourselves safe

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Introduction

In the first part of this two-part resource on safeguarding (*Music Teacher*, February 2026), we focused on the welfare of *children*, including spotting signs of potential abuse and how to report it.

In part two, we'll look at how we can keep *ourselves* safe. Teaching students in a one-to-one setting puts us, as well as our students, in a vulnerable position. An allegation of impropriety could destroy our career in an instant, and although it's essential to establish good working relationships with students and parents, we must, at the same time, protect ourselves from misunderstandings and false allegations.

Safeguarding in schools

If we teach in schools, it goes without saying that it's essential to comply with all safeguarding regulations. However, some rules may be imposed by senior management who have little understanding of what we do and how we work as visiting music teachers.

Unrealistic and unworkable rules may need to be renegotiated. At one safeguarding training session I attended, for example, VMTs were instructed to always have our doors open when teaching. When I pointed out the cacophony that would ensue – particularly from my own trumpet lessons (the noise my colleagues have to endure is bad enough through a wall, let alone through an open doorway) – the policy was quickly rescinded. The important thing here was not to ignore or break a rule, but merely get it changed.

Pointing out difficulties we may have in following rules does not imply that we have a cavalier attitude to safeguarding. It merely pre-empts any perception that we are breaking rules and not taking safeguarding seriously.

If we teach solely privately, we won't need to navigate any school rules, but it's worth giving some thought to how we present ourselves professionally and perhaps even produce a safeguarding policy of our own.

Maintaining professional boundaries

The nature of what we do often blurs professional boundaries. If we teach privately, students might come to our houses and see us in informal settings. Even if we teach in schools, we might still fit in extra lessons in our or our students' homes. Furthermore, we may wish to involve students in concerts and music festivals, and perhaps coach them in youth orchestras.

Although we might have the best intentions when mentoring a student, we need to take all necessary precautions to avoid any misunderstandings or accusations of grooming:

- ▶ Always copy parents into emails to students, and use a school email address where possible.
- ▶ Do not exchange personal phone numbers with students. If you need to contact a student urgently, text a parent and ask them to relay the message.
- ▶ Do not give lifts to students: it is the responsibility of parents to get students to events. You may also find that your insurance does not cover you.
- ▶ Although it's natural to form a closer bond with some students than with others, treat them all the same – don't give some students 'special treatment', such as gifts or birthday cards. Do not sign off any messages with a kiss.
- ▶ Don't get over-familiar and, if working in schools, strictly follow protocols about how students should address you. Sometimes you might see the same student in different contexts, so, for example, the student who sees me at a county youth orchestra (where tutors are on first-name terms) calls me 'Eddie', but in school (a more formal setting), they call me 'Mr Maxwell'.

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MONKEY BUSINESS/ADOBESTOCK

- Always dress appropriately. For lessons in schools, you'll probably have to comply with a school dress code. While private teaching can be more casual, it's still best to look business-like and not wear anything provocative or revealing.

Extra lessons at home

It may be possible for VMTs to give extra lessons outside of school. The terms of a teacher's engagement with the school is very important here. If you are *employed*, your contract may stipulate that you must have no contact with students outside school. If you want to give an extra lesson before an exam, for example, you must ask permission from the school. If you are *self-employed*, your contract is with the parents, not the school. The school has no authority to tell you how to run your business outside of school premises, so extra lessons can be arranged freely with parents.

Relationships

Friendships

It's perfectly normal to develop friendships with the *parents* of your students. Indeed, a close family friendship developed between my own parents and my piano teacher, which has endured for more than 50 years. However, you should not consider yourself friends with your students (unless they are adults). When teaching children, you operate under the principle of *in loco parentis* which essentially means that you have parent-like responsibilities. Teachers and students can of course forge close bonds over a love of music, but there are responsibilities that must not be forgotten and boundaries that must not be crossed.

If you have your own children who happen to be friends with your students, you might see them in very informal settings and have them round for play-dates and sleepovers. If you teach these children in a school, it may be necessary to declare this – do check the staff handbook or ask for advice. If they are private students outside a school setting, where the relationship is more casual and you have closer contact with the students' parents, this won't present a problem.

Romantic relationships

Romantic relationships between teachers and students are completely inappropriate, even if a student is over the age of 18, because there is an inherent power imbalance – the teacher has authority over the student. Similarly, forming a relationship with an ex-student might suggest that grooming has taken place, especially if the relationship develops immediately after the student has left school.

While it's not *illegal* to have a relationship with a consenting adult over the age of 18, there have been a number of cases where someone has been banned from teaching because they have formed a relationship with an ex-student, even when the relationship has started after the student has left school, and when the relationship appears to be happy and long-term. Of course, questions might not be raised if a teacher and former student bump into each other and get together, say, ten years after the student left school. There are no specific timeframes that are deemed acceptable – incidents of this kind are judged on a case-by-case basis.

If you suspect that a student has a crush on you, it's very important to report this to a DSL – you are in an extremely vulnerable situation and must ensure that your behaviour does not attract accusations of grooming.

Be aware that you might also attract the romantic interest of a student's parent. My naturally friendly nature was once misinterpreted by a student's mother, leading to a very awkward situation. Keeping all interactions completely professional can mitigate the risk.

Electronic communication

Personal devices

My iPad is my mobile teaching studio. Over the years, I've scanned all my teaching resources. In total, I have well over 1,500 scans, including general trumpet repertoire, beginner books, piano accompaniments, sight-reading resources, duets, aural tests and orchestral parts. I have also downloaded a large number of backing tracks, which I can play through my Bluetooth speaker. Add to that numerous apps, such as the ABRSM aural trainer, 'flashcard' apps for improving reading, a tuning machine and a metronome.

You can imagine my dismay when, at one particular school, I was summoned to the DSL and told that VMTs were not permitted to use personal devices. The reason given was that my iPad had a camera and I might take a photo or video of a child. I explained that I couldn't teach without my resources (and suggested that if the school didn't trust me not to take a photo of a child, they probably shouldn't trust me to be alone with a child). I asked if someone could examine my iPad's photo library after a day's teaching, to check I hadn't taken any illicit photos. Could my students' parents sign a declaration saying they were happy for me to use an iPad? The DSL offered me a school iPad to use, but didn't offer a solution as to the problem of transferring my huge library of resources onto the device. Being unwilling to continue teaching without any of my resources, I resigned.

Although they can of course be abused, personal devices are not an intrinsic safeguarding risk. Indeed, some schools insist on using your own device to take an electronic register – schools need to know where students are at all times, so if you mark a student on the online register as soon as they arrive, this will provide proof of where they are (and reassure their class teacher that they aren't using a 'music lesson' as an excuse to miss a class lesson).

When using your device for teaching, it's prudent to turn it onto 'airplane mode'. I once had a particularly foul-mouthed text from a friend pop up on my screen when I was playing duets with a student, which was a little embarrassing.

Schools generally take a dim view of having your phone on in lessons. If you do have your phone with you, ensure it's on silent or in airplane mode, and don't take calls in lessons. Remember that the parents are paying for that lesson time – you're not being paid to talk to someone else. You are also setting a bad example because students are usually forbidden from using phones in school.

School wifi

School wifi systems usually have extremely robust filters. This means that many sites are blocked. One school I worked at blocked Dropbox, which was frustrating, because some of my resources were stored there. If you want to play a YouTube video to a student, you might find this unavailable. However, if there's a site you regularly use in your teaching, you can ask the school to unblock it.

Remember that, when on a school wifi system, the system will recognise your device and monitor what you're accessing. This might get you in trouble if you visit any nefarious sites. Beware that an open tab or app may refresh in the background, *even if you aren't looking at it at school*.

Email

If you're employed by a school or music service, you will almost certainly be issued with a work email address. Most self-employed VMTs are similarly provided with an email, though schools, in trying to walk the tightrope of avoiding accusations of de facto employment, may be a little cautious here. A school email address can be construed as an indicator of employment (I've recently heard of some schools withdrawing school email addresses from its VMTs). Most schools, however, consider that communication outside the school system could potentially endanger students.

School email addresses usually need to go through an authenticator app, as an extra level of security. You can expect to be logged out every so often, and then you will need to input and re-authenticate your password.

Be circumspect when referring to students in any electronic communications using a school system. Parents have a right to see *all* messages that refer to their child, so if you refer unfavourably to a named student, be aware that the parents could potentially access this. Many schools insist on using students' initials in electronic communications, ostensibly to protect sensitive information about them, but this also mitigates against parents accessing candid messages about their children.

If you do use a personal email address, it's preferable to create one specifically for teaching, to keep students at a professional distance (you can also turn this off when on holiday or at weekends if you wish).

Social media

In school safeguarding training, you may be advised to keep your social media accounts private. This can be problematic for freelance musicians, where a social media profile helps to promote and advertise our work. One solution is to have 'private' and 'public' accounts. Remember that your public account will be visible to students and parents, so keep this professional and non-controversial.

Do remember that when recruiting, many schools employ specialist companies to screen your social media accounts. A colleague of mine was outraged when told they were deemed unsuitable to work with children because Facebook posts dating back 15 years included a risqué joke (not relating to children) and a profanity directed at Donald Trump. (The decision was later reversed on appeal.)

In the interests of maintaining a professional distance, do not accept friend requests from current students or parents. Schools are likely to advise you not to be social media friends with former students, but a certain amount of discretion can be applied here, especially if they're embarking on musical careers and you want to follow and support their progress.

Photos and videos

As a rule, avoid posting pictures of children and their names online (I sometimes see exam marksheets including the student's name, or photos of children clutching trophies at music festivals on my social media feeds). It really isn't a good look, especially if the child is in an identifiable school uniform. Some musicians feel the need to post a photo of every concert they're involved in (usually with the tedious caption 'my office for the day'). Try to resist the temptation to do this if the venue is a school. Even if there are no children in the shot, it shows that you've had your camera out and have been taking photos. Leave it to schools or parents to post their achievement – you can always 'share' the post if you wish.

If you really feel the need to use a photo or video – for example for marketing purposes – you must get clear and explicit consent from both student and parent (if the student is under 18). It's important to get this in writing, should you subsequently be challenged. Even if consent has been granted, don't assume that it applies forever – ask each time you want to use an image and remember that consent can be withdrawn at any time.

Touching students

When I was working towards my teaching diploma at music college, my teachers explicitly told us to push our hands against students' abdomens to check their breathing. In our classes, brass players had to give sample lessons, where we put our hands on each other, which admittedly felt a little awkward. I also recall, from college days, an internationally renowned brass player giving a masterclass. He got a female student up on stage to demonstrate breathing techniques and his hands seemed to wander a little further than absolutely necessary.

When I embarked on my teaching career, I must admit that I put my hands on students as my own teachers had done to me and as instructed to at college. Then I heard about a trumpet teacher who had been prosecuted for inappropriately touching a student. His defence was that he needed to touch his students to teach breathing techniques, and that it was all a misunderstanding. I resolved to keep a safe distance from students in future to avoid any accusations.

In addition to teaching breathing for wind players, there are many reasons why we might want to touch a student, such as adjusting posture, hand position, bowing arm, etc. Think of ways you can teach this without laying your hands on a student.

- ▶ Posture can be improved by looking in a mirror.
- ▶ Finger positions can be manipulated with a pencil or a bow, rather than skin-to-skin contact.
- ▶ A curved hand position can be achieved by getting a student to hold a small ball in the palm of their hand.
- ▶ Breathing can be checked by asking a student to push their own hands against their abdomen and feel whether it goes in or out when they breathe and blow. As a last resort, a trumpet or clarinet player could push the bell of their instrument against a student rather than using their bare hands.

If you decide that touching a student is unavoidable, explain clearly what you are trying to achieve and ask permission to do so.

If a student becomes upset

All teachers will have encountered a student bursting into tears at some point. This is not a safeguarding issue per se, and you only need to report it to the DSL if you have suspicions of a wider problem, or if the student discloses something directly. Usually, however, it's just that the student is having a bad day:

- ▶ They're tired.
- ▶ They've just done badly in a test.
- ▶ They've just had a class lesson where they didn't understand the content.
- ▶ They've just been told off by a class teacher.
- ▶ They've just had a disagreement with a friend.
- ▶ They just feel a little overwhelmed with life.

If they arrive for their lesson feeling fragile, asking them to play E flat minor melodic could easily tip them over the edge, and the tears might start flowing. In order to retrieve the situation and get the lesson back on track, it's usually best to abandon anything challenging and focus on something 'fun': play an old piece or play some easy duets – anything that makes them feel good and rebuilds their confidence.

If they get upset because of something you've said – perhaps they have misunderstood a throwaway comment or taken something intended as a joke personally – apologise immediately even if you don't feel as if you did anything wrong.

Whatever the reason, it's prudent to email the parents explaining that their child became upset in the lesson and, if you feel that it was something you did, try to diffuse the situation before it escalates. If you have the chance, also explain to their class teacher what has happened, just in case they return to their class lesson looking distressed.

Data protection

Under GDPR (General Data Protection Regulations), it's important to keep students' and parents' data safe. Examples of personal data can include:

- ▶ Names, addresses, email addresses and phone numbers of students and parents.
- ▶ Students' dates of birth.
- ▶ Information about health and special needs.
- ▶ Any safeguarding information.
- ▶ Records of invoices and payments.
- ▶ Lesson notes and timetables.

Many teachers and organisations provide a privacy statement explaining what data they collect, why they need it, and when they will delete it. For exam entries, you usually need to provide the exam board with a candidate's name and date of birth, and sometimes their address. If it's one of the mainstream exam boards, they will have a privacy policy, but it's worth checking. Once you've passed this information on, it's prudent to delete it from your own records. It's not a major problem to ask for the information again when they enter their next grade, and it's better than accumulating personal information.

If you use accounting software that automatically sends out invoices, you will need to input parents' data. It's your responsibility to check that this is secure and can't be exploited or leaked by the software provider.

The data we do hold must be protected securely. Personal devices where data is stored must be kept locked, and holding sensitive information on unencrypted memory sticks should be avoided. If you're working on a laptop or iPad in a public space and need to leave it unattended for a moment, ensure it is left locked. For an additional layer of security, keep contact details for students and parents on a password-protected document, rather than just in your general 'contacts' list. If your phone was snatched, for example, these details would remain safe. It's easy to put password protection on Word or Excel documents.

If you're aware of any potential data breaches, it's important to declare this to a school and the parents involved.

School rules

Schools have a code of conduct, which should be observed at all times. They will also have a whistleblowing policy, should you suspect a colleague of misconduct. If you don't feel able to raise concerns internally, use the NSPCC whistleblowing hotline.

Accusations

If an accusation of any form of misconduct is made against you, this can have very serious implications. It's important to be a member of the Musicians' Union or Incorporated Society of Musicians, who can give you advice and support.

During the course of your teaching, you should be keeping meticulous lesson records. If anything unsettling occurs in a lesson, this should be recorded and reported to a head of music or DSL if necessary. As previously mentioned, this might include a student breaking down in tears or developing feelings towards you. Don't ignore things or brush them under the carpet – declaring them promptly is for your own protection, and can diffuse a potentially volatile situation before it has escalated.

Summary

You can be warm, empathetic and light-hearted in your lessons, but don't get over-familiar with students. Don't have secrets or in-jokes, and don't share personal or intimate details. Imagine, at all times, that your lessons are being observed by your students' parents, the head of music and the DSL. If a problem does emerge, address it calmly and respectfully, before it gets out of hand.