



CHILD PROTECTION PROCEDURES

Parents' views and experiences regarding the child protection procedures in primary, post-primary, and special schools



NPC

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SUPPORTING CHILDREN



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NPC Vision

The National Parents Council want to see an Ireland where every child has the opportunity to reach their full potential

NPC Mission

The National Parents Council exists to ensure that all parents are supported and empowered to become effective partners in their children’s education. NPC will work to increase the capacity and capability of the education sector, to achieve true partnership and deliver better outcomes for all children and young people.

Values

NPC knows that when parents and schools work together, children do better. Therefore, NPC believes that in order to achieve this parents must feel:

Engaged: Parents must be actively engaged in the education of their children.

Supported: Parents’ involvement in children’s education must be supported by the attitudes, beliefs and practices of all members of the school and broader education community.

Partners: Parents must be viewed as partners in facilitating children’s learning and be supported in this role by the school and broader education community.

Valued: Parents should be viewed as full partners in the decisions that affect their children and their family.

Welcomed: Parents should be welcome in the school, and their support and assistance sought as a valuable resource to support children’s education in the school.

Connected: All communication and dialogue with parents must be regular, open, two-way and meaningful.

National Parents Council

Key Activities

SERVICE DELIVERY

NPC's services are developed to empower parents so that they can support their children in all aspects of education.

HELPLINE

The NPC helpline is a national confidential service for parents. The helpline staff listen and give information and support to parents to help them make the best possible decisions for and with their children.

TRAINING AND DEVELOPMENT

The NPC Training and Development programme is a national programme of training, development and support for parents. The purpose is to empower parents to play an active part in their child's education at every level.

WEBSITE

The NPC's website www.npc.ie aims to provide parents with information regarding education at early years, primary and post primary levels.

ADVOCACY

NPC engages in awareness-raising activities and campaigning and lobbying at a national level on the objectives of its Strategic Plan.

REPRESENTING PARENTS

NPC represents the voice of parents through representation on external bodies and other mediums. NPC consults with parents and brings parents' views to bear on education policy.

BUILDING PARTICIPATION

NPC builds participation strategies and activities to ensure parents and children are an integral part of the work of NPC.

Introduction

The Department of Education is currently reviewing the child protection policies in primary, post-primary, and special schools. This review is important to make sure children are kept safe in schools. It aims to check how well schools explain and follow child protection policies. The results will help improve the roles and responsibilities related to child protection in schools and create a safer, more supportive environment for all students.

As part of this process, the Department of Education asked the National Parents Council (NPC) to collect and analyse feedback from parents about their awareness and experiences with child protection procedures in schools. This report by the NPC seeks to provide an in-depth analysis of parents' views on the clarity, accessibility, and effectiveness of these procedures. It will explore key areas of focus, including parental awareness of the child protection procedures, awareness of the role of the designated liaison person, and experiences in these procedures when concerns arise.

Through this report, the NPC aims to highlight both strengths and areas needing improvement within the current child protection procedures. By identifying gaps and opportunities for enhancement, this report aspires to support ongoing efforts in creating a transparent, trustworthy, and child-centred approach to safeguarding in schools.

The findings presented here are based on the results of a survey and online focus groups conducted by the NPC from December 2024 to January 2025. The survey and invitation to the online focus groups were sent to all parents on the NPC mailing list who had consented to receiving such invitations. The survey was initially open for a short period of time from 12 December 2024 to 13 January 2025. During this time, a total of 962 people completed the survey. The online focus groups were held on 15 January 2025 with 18 participants. The opinions of the 980 parents who took part in the survey and focus groups will be shared in this report.

Survey

The survey included multiple-choice questions, with parents invited to select their responses. A summary of these responses will be presented in this report.

Focus Groups

On January 15, 2025, two online focus groups were conducted to explore parental insights into child protection policies in schools. Organised by the National Parents Council, the sessions included 18 parents and two representatives of the Department of Education.

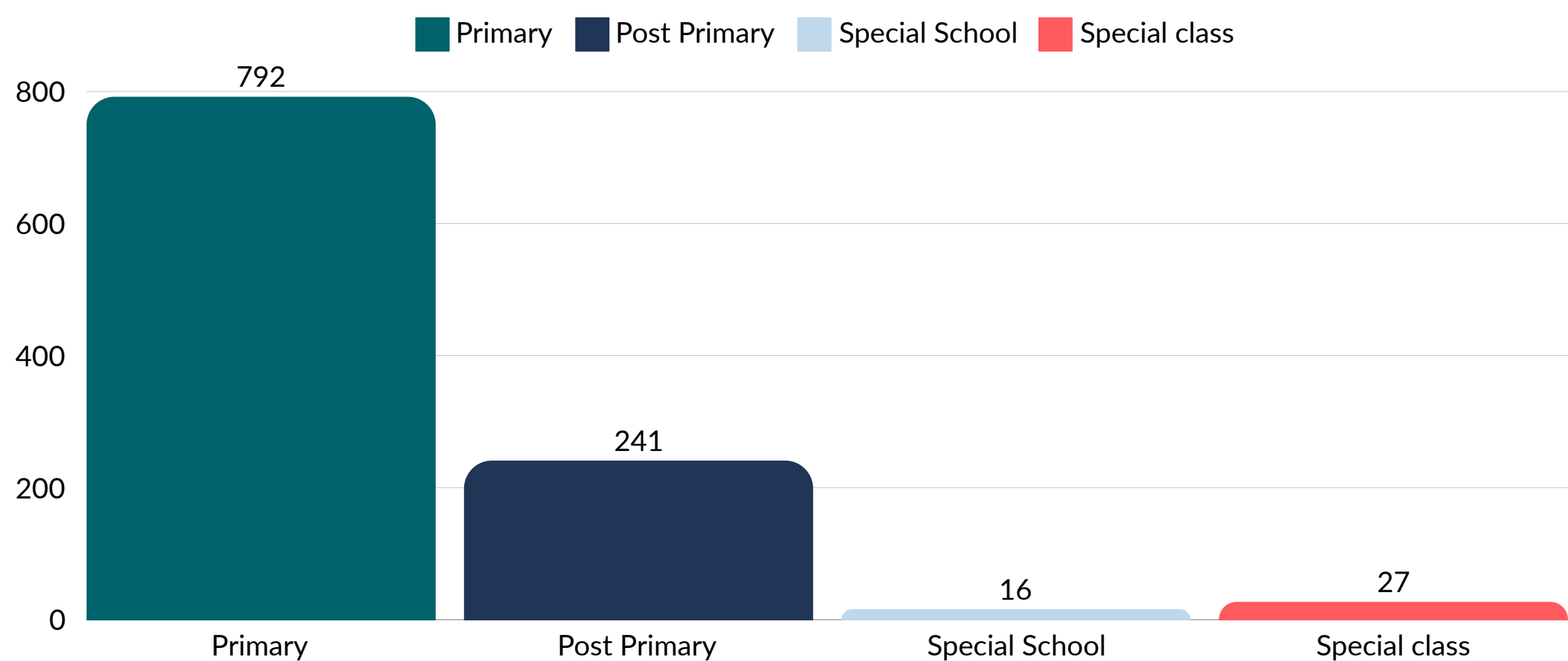
NPC introduced the sessions, explaining their purpose in evaluating and enhancing the effectiveness of the child protection procedures. Key points from the sessions included a presentation of the NPC survey results from 962 parents, showing mixed awareness of child protection procedures and varying effectiveness in their application.

Throughout this presentation, parents who participated in the focus groups were asked a series of questions so that the NPC could better understand their views on and experiences of the child protection procedures in schools. The questions can be grouped into the following categories:

- Awareness of child protection procedures in schools.
- Mechanisms for providing feedback on the child protection procedures.
- Evaluation of child protection procedures.
- Impact of Social, Personal, and Health Education (SPHE) and Relationships and Sexuality Education (RSE) programmes on safety.
- Child awareness and ability to act in unsafe situations.
- Parents' experiences with child protection procedures.

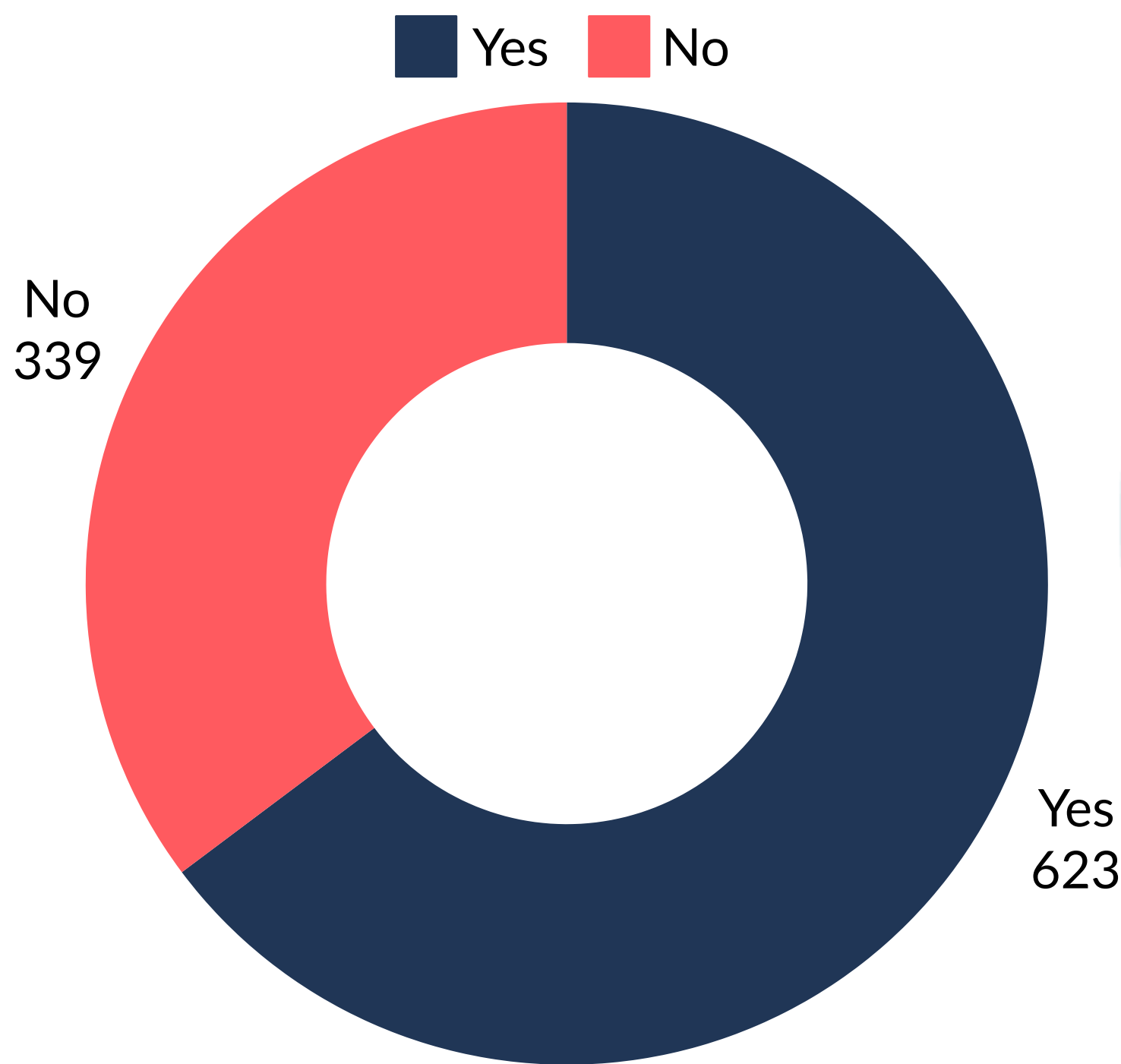
Survey Findings

When asked about the type of school their child attends, the majority of parents (74%) reported that their child is enrolled in a primary school. A smaller proportion (22%), have children attending post-primary schools. Only a few parents (3%), indicated that their child is in a special class, and a minority of 1% stated their child is in a special school (see Figure 1).



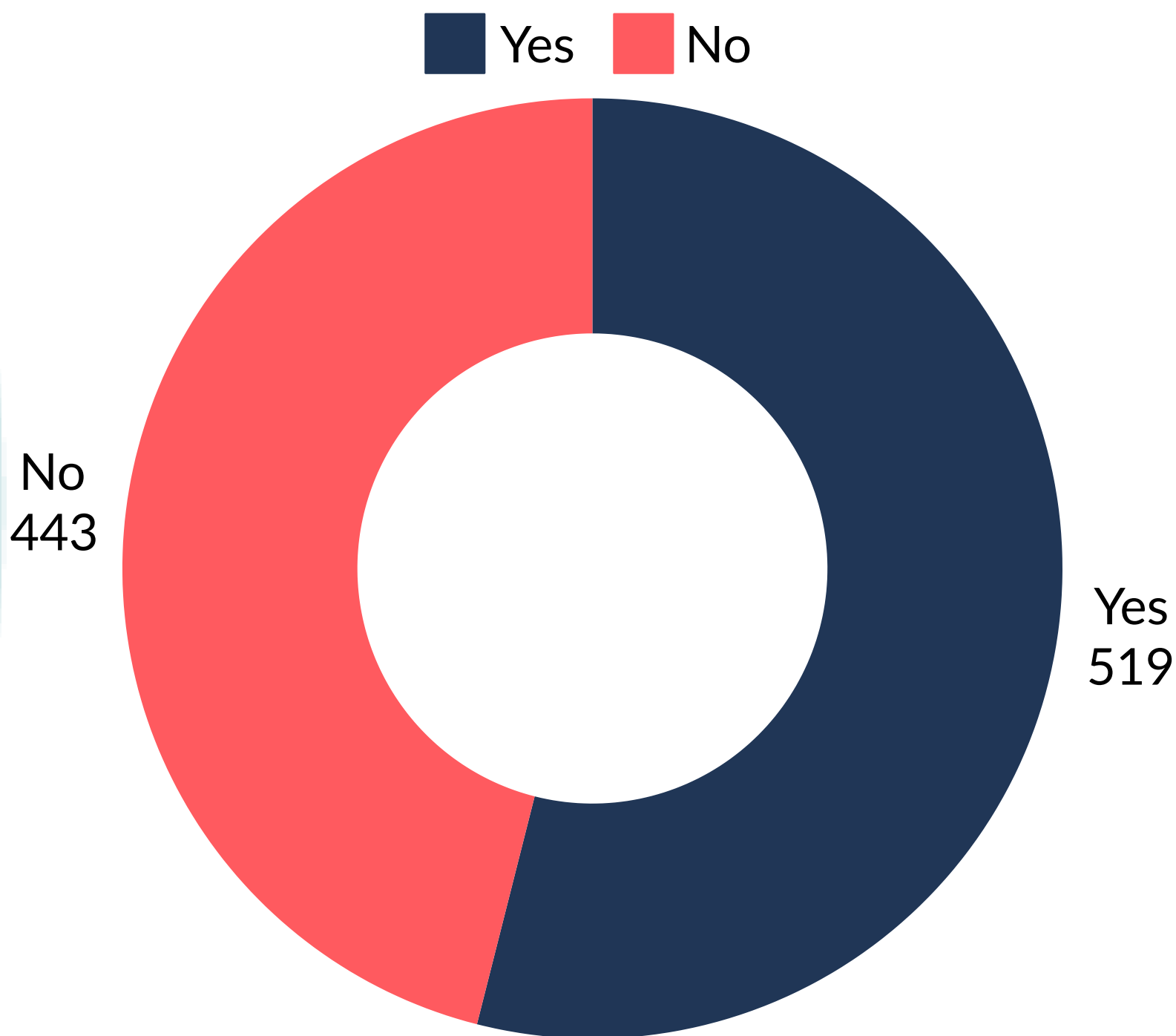
(Figure 1)
What type of school does your child attend?

When asked if they are aware of the Child Protection Policy in their child's school, the majority of parents (65%) were aware of the Child Protection Policy in their child's school, while a considerable proportion (35%) were not familiar with it (see Figure 2).



(Figure 2)
Are you aware of the Child Protection Policy in your child's school?

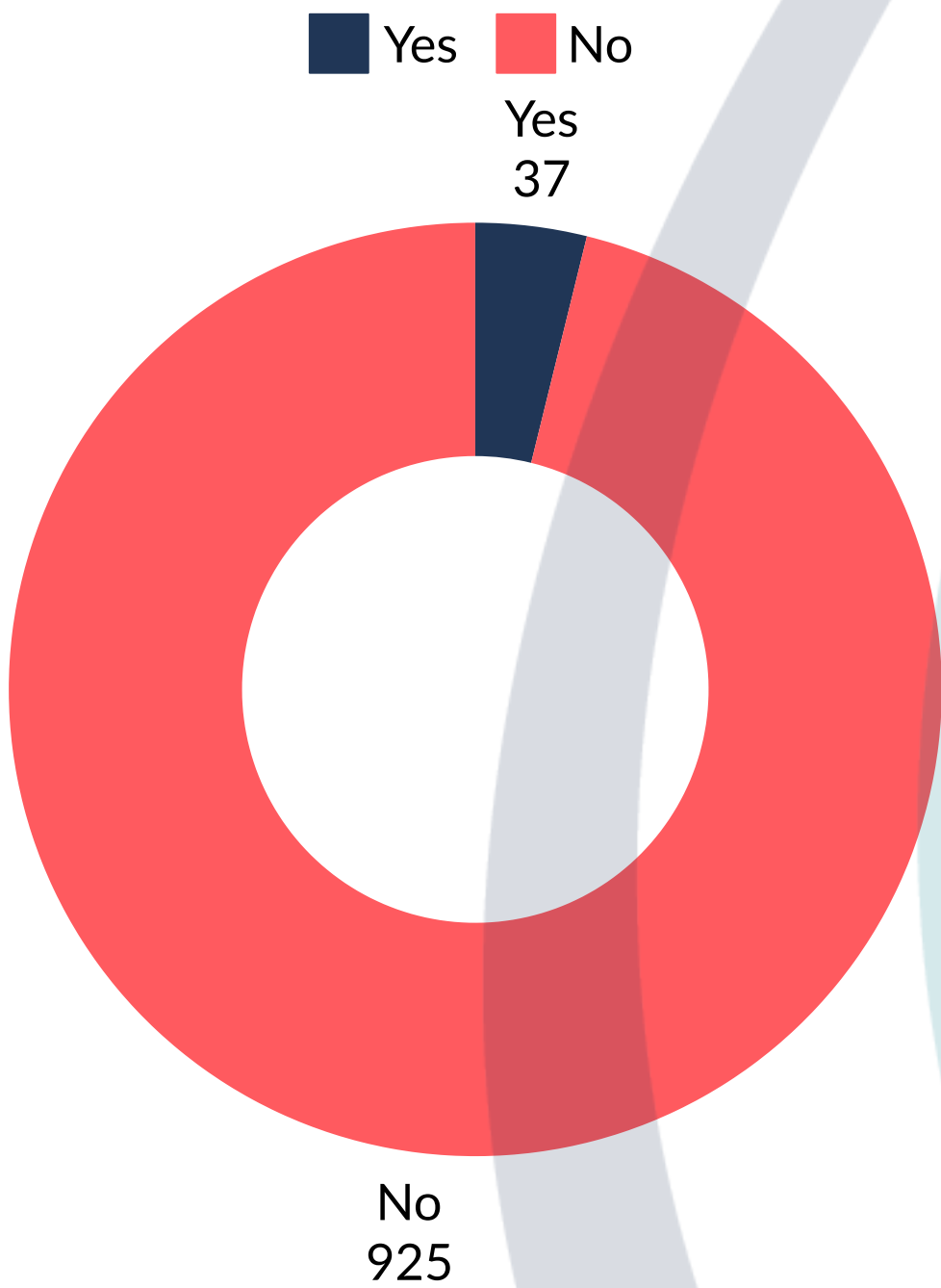
All parents were asked, if they had a child protection concern, would they know who to go to in their school, such as the Designated Liaison Person (DLP). Slightly more than half of parents (54%) knew who to approach for child protection concerns. In contrast, a nearly equal number (46%) were unsure of who to approach (see Figure 3).



(Figure 3)

Do you know who you would go to in your school, for example the Designated Liaison Person (DLP) if you had a child protection concern?

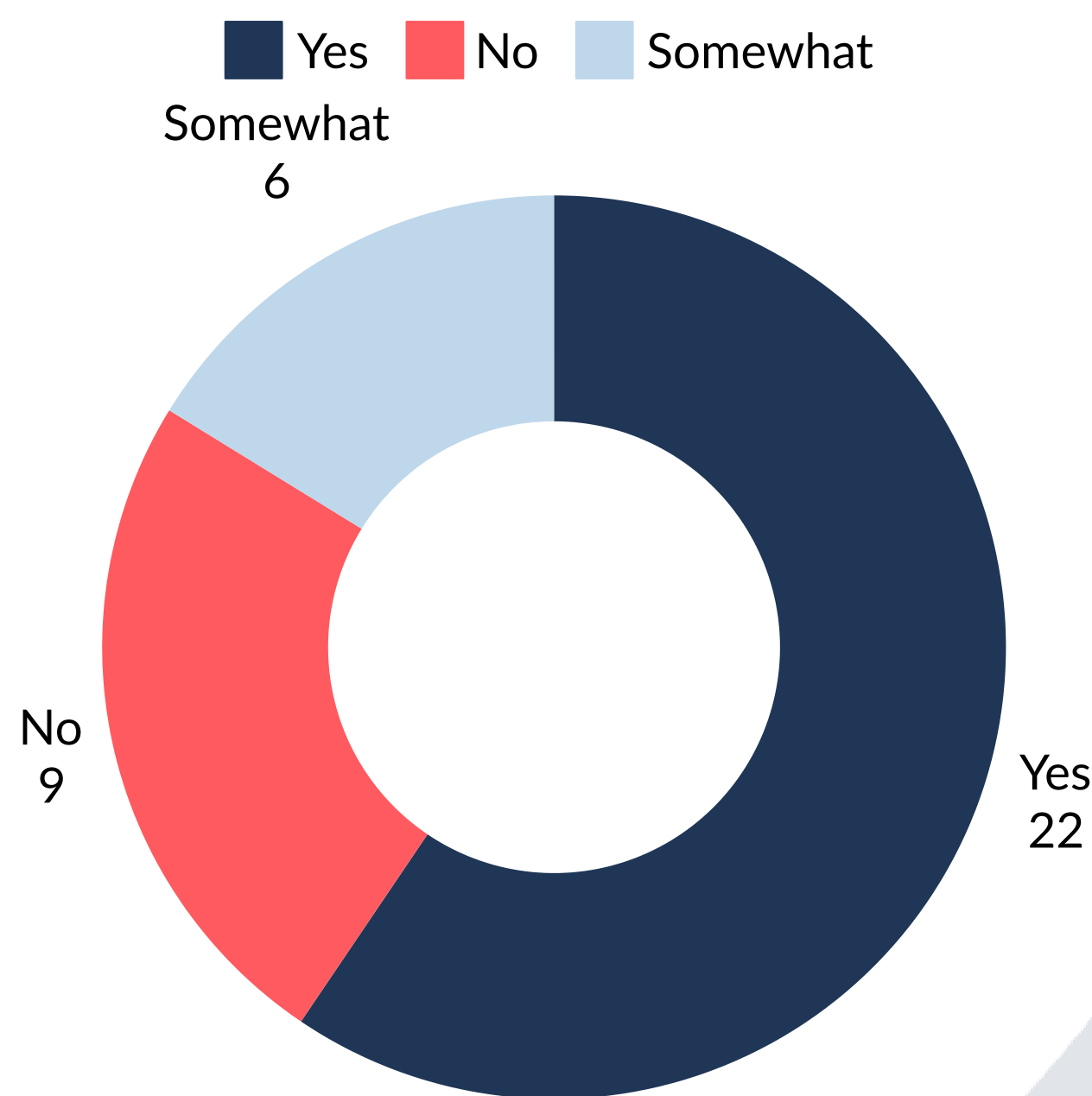
Parents were asked if they had ever used the child protection procedures in their child's school. The vast majority of parents (96%) reported that they had never used the child protection procedures in their child’s school, while only a small minority of 4% stated they had used them (see Figure 4).



(Figure 4)

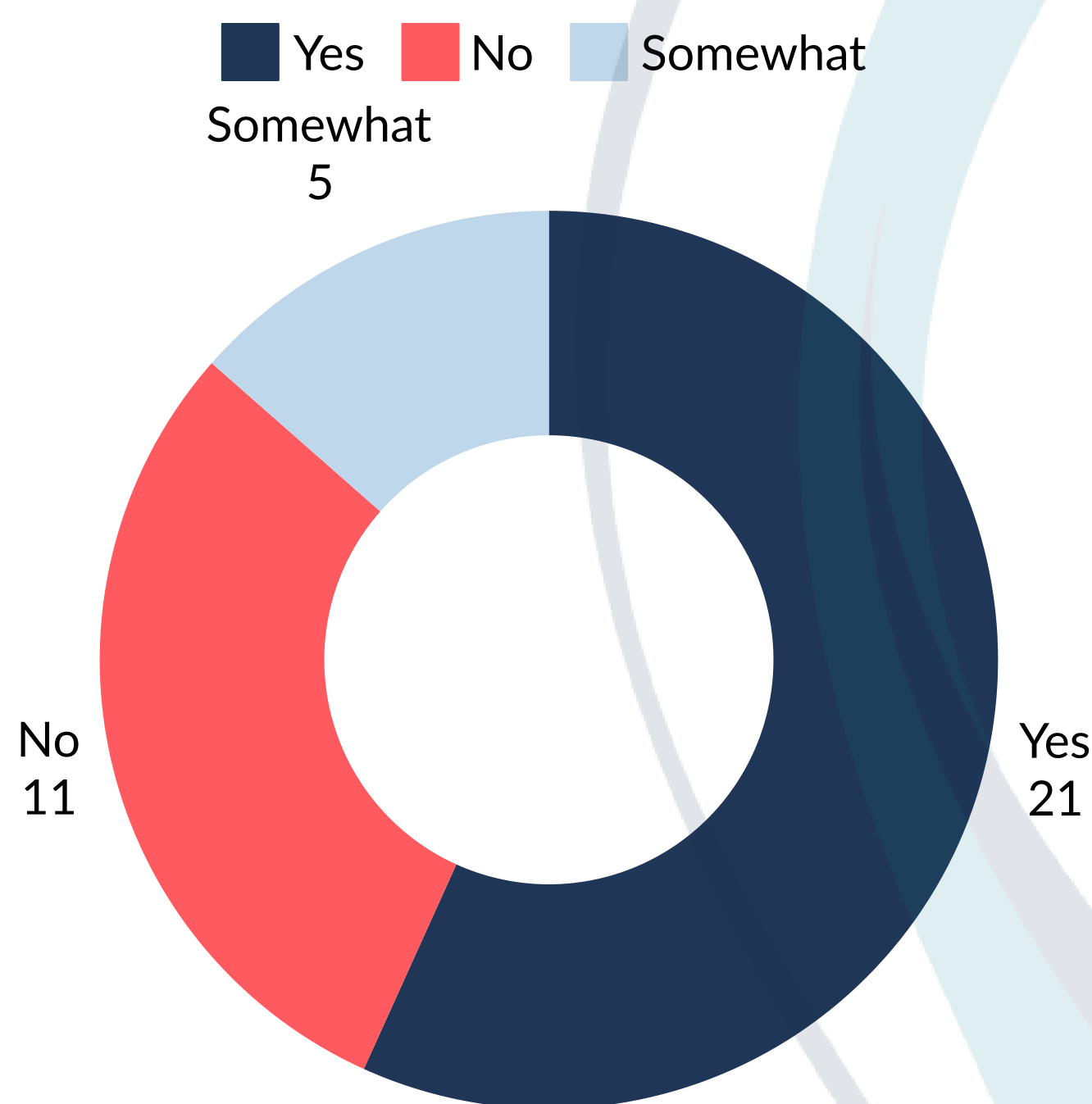
Have you ever used the Child Protection procedures in your child's school?

The 37 parents who stated they had used the child protection procedures in their child’s school were asked if they found the procedures easy to follow. Of these, (59%) said they found the procedures easy to follow, (25%) said they did not, and (16%) responded "somewhat." These results indicate that while a majority found the process straightforward, nearly 40% faced some level of difficulty (see figure 5).



(Figure 5)
When you used the Child Protection procedures did you find them easy to follow?

Of the 37 parents who used the child protection procedures, the majority (56%) found them effective in addressing their concerns. However, a significant minority (30%) felt the procedures were not effective, while a small percentage (14%) considered them somewhat effective.



(Figure 6)
When you used the the Child Protection procedures were they effective in addressing your concerns?

Online Focus Groups Findings

In the online focus groups, parents were asked to share their personal experiences with the child protection policies in their children's schools. The focus groups included a set of questions designed to gather feedback and help the National Parent Council better represent parents' voices. This part of the report will highlight both the positive and negative experiences parents shared, along with their suggestions for improving current child protection procedures. A total of 10 questions were asked during the discussions, as listed below:

1-Are there areas of child protection procedures that you feel are not working well in your child's school?

Parents pointed out that the implementation of child protection procedures in special education settings is not working well in three key areas, which are as follows:

1. Accessibility of the procedures for children and young people- Parents raised the issue that it is difficult to explain the procedures to children. Parents would like the procedures to be presented in a way that anyone can understand them or that a separate procedure is developed with accessible language for all. Parents also raised concerns that in certain circumstances a child may be unable to express themselves or raise concerns especially but not exclusively with regards to children who are pre-verbal or non-verbal. Collectively, these challenges make it hard to effectively implement the procedures in special education settings and require further adaptation and accessibility measures.
2. A few parents raised concerns about the implementation of the procedures, noting that some school staff are not mandated reporters, which they found surprising. The majority of parents in the session agreed that all staff should be trained and required to report child protection concerns to improve safety within the school. Parents also felt that teachers may lack adequate training on child protection policies, suggesting that additional support is needed to ensure staff are well-equipped to handle such issues.
3. Finally, and most concerning many parents have reported to NPC significant difficulties with issues regarding child protection concerns that they have regarding their children whilst in the care of the school. Parents reported that the child protection concerns they raised within the school were not reported to TUSLA but were instead handled inappropriately by the school internally. They presented that reporting concerns at times had led them to feel that they and in some instances their child, were treated negatively by the school following such reports.

Significantly parents also reported that if they made child protection reports to TUSLA regarding a concern involving a school staff member, they were instructed that they had to exhaust the school complaints procedure before reporting it to TUSLA, this being in clear violation of Children First.

2- How were you made aware of the child protection procedures?

Parents shared various positive ways they were made aware of the child protection procedures. Many mentioned receiving information through enrolment documents and newsletters, while others learnt about the policies at Parent Association (PA) meetings. A few parents also highlighted that they were familiar with the school's anti-bullying procedures, which were frequently discussed.

One parent became aware of the school's safeguarding procedures only after their child had finished the school term. They later discovered that their non-verbal child had been mistreated by a special needs assistant (SNA), but since the child could not communicate the issue, it went unnoticed by both the teacher and the parents. The parent highlighted a gap in safeguarding, particularly for children with special needs.

3- Were you consulted on the child protection procedures?

Most parents were given information about the policies, but not all felt involved in the decision-making. Some schools shared the details through notice boards and monthly newsletters so everyone could stay updated. There were examples given of monthly parents' meetings where parents can share their ideas and suggest changes on a range of policies. These ideas are then discussed further in board meetings. One parent shared that her small, family-focused school works closely with families by sending out various policies every year and asking for their feedback.

Still, some parents felt they were not properly included. They said they were only told about decisions but not asked for their input. It was also noticed that many parents do not fully read the emails sent about policies and may miss important information. For some, there was no chance to be consulted at all, which left them feeling left out.

The parents suggested that the schools could encourage more parents to join the monthly meetings where they can discuss policies and give feedback. Sending policies out every year for review and comments, as some schools already do, can also help parents feel more included. Sharing information in different ways, like emails, newsletters, and meetings, gives everyone more opportunities to stay involved.

4- Are you aware of ways that you could give feedback to the school if you had concerns about the procedures or how they are implemented?

Some parents feel confident about providing feedback to their school and feel supported in doing so. For instance, one parent shared that their school has an open-door policy, allowing easy access to the principal for any concerns. Another parent, whose child is in junior infants, mentioned she has not needed to give feedback yet but knows she can leave a note in her child's bag or contact the school secretary if needed.

However, some parents are frustrated with the feedback process. Parents of children in special education raised concerns about poor communication within schools. The majority of these parents highlighted concerns about the schools' inability to accommodate children (non-verbal) who were not able to express their needs effectively. The complaints process was also seen as slow and ineffective, with a suggestion to create a parental support unit to manage feedback more efficiently.

Some parents highlighted differences between primary and post-primary schools, with primary schools offering more guidance while post-primary schools leave parents to figure things out for themselves. Some parents also noted that while safeguards exist for children with special needs, they are not always properly implemented.

They also pointed out that leaflets and written materials often don't reach all parents, especially those with language barriers or busy schedules. Some suggested using videos or child-friendly materials, like cartoons, to make the information more engaging and understandable. Many agreed that the child protection procedures should be clearly visible on the school website, not hidden away, and communicated in a way that's easier to access and understand.

Many parents felt that schools should encourage more parental involvement and feedback, with some suggesting the use of modern communication channels like videos, social media, or TV ads to reach a broader audience. Many agreed that the school should foster stronger relationships with parents, which could help improve trust and better address concerns. One parent shared that their involvement in the Parents' Association helped improve their understanding of child protection policies, suggesting that schools could or should create more opportunities for parents to engage with the procedures.

5- Are there any elements of the child protection procedures that you feel are working really well?

One parent mentioned that different school policies are communicated effectively through the monthly Parents' Association meetings, which helps keep everyone informed. Additionally, strong relationships are built between teachers and children, and parents feel comfortable and supported within the school community. In that school children are treated as equals, and their opinions are respected. Teachers also use restorative practices and are aware of trauma, ensuring a compassionate approach to education.

6- Are there areas of child protection procedures that you feel are not working well in your child's school?

A few parents pointed out that the implementation of child protection procedures in special education settings is not working well in two key areas. First, it is difficult to communicate with the child and explain the procedures to them. Second, the child may be unable to express themselves or raise concerns. Collectively, these challenges make it hard to effectively implement the procedures in special education settings.

A few parents raised concerns about the implementation of the procedures, noting that some school staff are not mandated reporters, which they found surprising. The majority of parents in the session agreed that all staff should be trained and required to report child protection concerns to improve safety within the school. They also pointed out that teachers lack adequate training on child protection policies, suggesting that additional support is needed to ensure staff are well-equipped to handle such issues.

7- Is there anything you feel could be done differently that would improve child protection practices in your child's school?

Parents suggested a few ways to improve child protection practices at their child's school. One parent suggested using simple and clear language so everyone can understand. Terms like 'Tusla,' 'Deputy Liaison Person,' and 'Mandated Person' can be confusing for some parents.

Another parent pointed out that leaflets don't always reach everyone. Things like language barriers, busy schedules, and too much paper information can make parents lose interest. To help with communication, many parents suggested using short videos with simple language, child-friendly videos, or even cartoons. They thought the child-friendly version of the UNCRC (United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child) was a great example of how to make information engaging for children.

Some parents expressed the view that for child protection to work well, respect and rights need to be part of the school culture every day, so children feel safe and heard. A positive school culture is important for both students and parents to feel comfortable at school. For example, one parent mentioned that events like Wellness Week can sometimes feel like just a small effort.

8- Do you think what is being taught in the context of SPHE and RSE supports your child to feel safe both in school and in the community?

Parents had different opinions on whether the lessons in SPHE (Social, Personal, and Health Education) and RSE (Relationships and Sexuality Education) help their children feel safe at school and in the community. One parent said that their child feels safe and supported and another parent said they have not heard much about SPHE and RSE yet but are happy with what has been introduced and don't have any concerns.

Another parent of a young child (junior infant) shared that their child has been talking about safety while doing homework and during walks in the community. She noted that the school is helping her child learn about community safety.

One parent mentioned that they were not consulted about the Stay Safe programme introduced to their child in second class. They would have preferred to discuss these topics as a family first, emphasising that parents are the primary educators. The parent suggested the school hold information sessions to explain what will be taught to the children in advance.

Another parent said that for a child to feel safe at school, they need to trust the staff. Some children, especially those with different learning needs or from different cultures, have trouble making connections with teachers and other students. They felt the curriculum does not help with this. Without these connections, it is hard to trust others, and that can affect how safe a child feels at school.

9- Has your child had the opportunity to give any feedback about the content of what they are being taught in SPHE and RSE?

One parent said they checked the syllabus and talked about the lessons at home with their child. The parent's son was also given a survey at school to share his thoughts on the lessons.

Another parent felt that children usually talk to their parents if they have a problem, but there is a gap in communication with schools. They thought schools should be more in touch with parents, and parents should also get training on these topics. If school staff are trained, parents should be trained too.

Another parent mentioned that the school had sent out a notice about what would be taught in RSE, which mentioned training for staff and the Board of Management but did not mention anything about training for parents.

10- Do you think your child would know what to do if they felt unsafe with either another student or a teacher when in school?

Parents shared different views on whether their children would know what to do if they felt unsafe with another student or a teacher.

One parent felt that children in special education may struggle to communicate or understand what steps to take if they felt unsafe. In contrast, a few parents of children in a primary school said their child knows what to do, such as saying "stop," walking away, or telling someone. Another parent commented that they are not entirely sure what to do but felt confident they could find the proper procedures and follow them.

While some parents were confident their children would know what to do, others were uncertain. One parent mentioned that her child is in junior infants, so she was not sure. Another parent believed her child would know where to go if a student upset them, but she was unsure if they would know what to do if the issue was with a teacher.

A post-primary parent felt their son would not know what to do if he felt unsafe. One parent also said her daughter would know who to go to because she trusts her teacher, but if she was afraid of her teacher, she wouldn't know what to do.

The majority of parents stressed the need for better communication and for children's voices to be heard. One parent expressed regret about not sending their child to an Educate Together school, believing they handle such situations better. Additionally, one parent suggested that addressing such issues should involve a formal meeting rather than a casual conversation.

Personal Experiences in Dealing with the Child Protection Procedures

At the end of the online focus groups, participants were asked about their experience with the child protection policies at the school and how they could be improved. While no one shared personal experiences, there were many helpful suggestions on how to improve child protection practices. These include:

- Provide a policy document with a breakdown in bullet points or a flowchart to make it easier to understand.
- Send home a leaflet with child protection information that parents can keep handy, such as on the fridge.
- Organise information sessions for parents to explain child protection procedures and steps to take if an issue arises.
- Simplify information from agencies and present it from the child's or family's perspective, using clear guides with actionable steps.
- Create a centralised parental unit with authority to investigate concerns efficiently.
- Provide step-by-step guides for parents on how to report and resolve issues.
- Build stronger relationships between parents and teachers by organising social activities like sports days and quizzes.
- Introduce code words or sign language for children to discreetly ask for help from teachers.
- Establish an independent body to handle safeguarding issues within schools.
- Ensure children are taught about their rights within the school community to improve safeguarding.
- Encourage parents to join the PTA to build relationships with school staff.

Conclusion

This report highlights parents' experiences with child protection procedures in schools, revealing a mix of positive practices, significant challenges, and opportunities for meaningful improvement. The findings highlight the necessity of a clear, consistent, and inclusive safeguarding system that values and supports the voices of parents, children, and educators.

By addressing these challenges through better communication, collaboration, and accountability, schools can build stronger partnerships with families, enhance trust, and create safer, more inclusive environments. Prioritising the wellbeing and safety of children ensures a more supportive and effective approach to child protection for all.