Bridging the Inclusion Gap: How Schools Are Redefining Child Safeguarding for Children with Disabilities

(Best Practices from the Training Conducted by PKPA Indonesia for Educators in Medan City, Indonesia, in May 2026)

Child safeguarding is frequently envisioned as a universal shield designed to protect every young person from harm, abuse, and exploitation. Yet, traditional child protection frameworks have long overlooked those who exist at society's margins. In Medan City, Indonesia, a transformative initiative spearheaded by the Center for Child Study and Protection (*Pusat Kajian dan Perlindungan Anak*/PKPA Indonesia)[1] has brought this critical oversight into the spotlight. During advanced training sessions, educators, law enforcement officers, disability rights advocates, and community leaders confronted a sobering reality: conventional child protection systems remain largely inaccessible and unresponsive to children with disabilities. Grounded in international Child Safeguarding standards and core child rights principles, this movement underscores an urgent mandate for schools to reshape their policies and embrace true inclusivity.

Unraveling Multiple Discrimination and Intersecting Vulnerabilities

To build an effective protection framework, institutions must first understand the complex reality of multiple discrimination. Children with disabilities do not experience marginalization in a vacuum; their vulnerability is heavily compounded by intersecting factors such as gender, intellectual capacity, age, and socioeconomic background. In a discussion in Medan, Poniah from the Indonesian Association of Women with Disabilities (HWDI) emphasized that women and children with disabilities face multi-layered vulnerabilities. Although gender inequality often places girls in a subordinate position with limited freedom of movement, disability also creates severe physical, social, and institutional barriers.

Disability generally encompasses four main categories, namely physical, intellectual, mental, and sensory, and is legally defined in Indonesia as a long-term condition lasting for at least six months, not a temporary injury. Nevertheless, the greatest barriers actually stem from social attitudes and the environment, rather than medical factors. Public facilities, schools, and reporting centers often lack basic accommodation facilities. In addition, deep-rooted negative stigmas frequently label children with disabilities as incapable or burdensome, resulting in their voices being ignored in both family and community forums. In the digital realm, these children face a high risk of cybercrime, where perpetrators steal personal data, exploit social assistance disbursements, or entrap them in online grooming.

For children with intellectual disabilities, this risk becomes extremely acute. Psychologists participating in the training noted that child victims often struggle to understand personal boundary violations. When experiencing inappropriate touch, they sometimes feel temporary comfort or

[1] under the project *"Stopping Cybercrime Against Children: More Safety and Protection on the Internet"* supported by Kindernothilfe e.V.

confusion without realizing that it is a form of violence, subsequently complying with the perpetrator out of fear or misplaced trust. In addition, victims frequently experience a psychological freeze phase, a condition of temporary paralysis where the body and mind are locked, thereby hindering an immediate response of resistance or crying out.

The Crucial Role of Schools in Shaping Child Safeguarding Policies and Procedures

Risk management within institutions involving children, including schools, requires mapping the level of interaction or contact between staff and children into six working circles (contact levels). The first circle includes parties who interact directly and intensively with children, such as guidance and counseling teachers, psychologists, and social workers. The next circle includes educators working with groups of children, community workers, and personnel in the fourth circle who do not work directly in the field but have access to children's personal data and sensitive information. Meanwhile, the fifth and sixth circles involve policy decision-makers, funding, and supporting staff such as finance, administration, and security. This mapping ensures that every line within the school institution, not just classroom teachers, understands their ethical responsibility in maintaining a safe space for children.

Schools should function as sanctuaries for learning and safety. However, many educational institutions operate without formal and comprehensive Child Safeguarding Policies and Procedures (KPPA), relying instead only on reactive measures or unwritten rules. School institutions that do not have such policies and procedures will be far more vulnerable to operational negligence, behavioral boundary violations, and reputational damage. Schools educating children with disabilities must go beyond general safety guidelines by integrating specialized, proactive protocols. Special education practitioners in Medan highlighted the importance of comprehensive Adolescent Reproductive Health. Because physical and sensory functions in children with disabilities are biologically normal, their natural curiosity regarding relationships and body changes must be addressed through concrete and age-appropriate education. Teaching concepts of body autonomy, personal body parts, and private space from an early age can prevent confusion and exploitation.

Furthermore, educators must address the "world of silence" experienced by deaf students, where their online interactions and relationships often take place in unsupervised digital spaces. Yuli Yanika, a participant in the training who is also a principal at an Inclusive School in Medan City and an activist and professional sign language interpreter for the deaf, explained that this phenomenon is often driven by a cultural shift in values where they feel a sense of pride and receive high levels of social recognition from their peers upon successfully forming romantic relationships. On social media, they can upload their photos and text with strangers, without the barriers to communication access that they experience in the real world. Because social validation on social media holds high value for them, deaf students frequently share personal photos or relationship moments openly, making them easy targets for online predators. “Many of my deaf friends, as well as some of my students, particularly the girls, have experienced online grooming,” said Yuli.

Therefore, schools must integrate digital literacy and online safety directly into the special education curriculum, while simultaneously halting the publication of students' photos without explicit written permission from parents and children through informed consent. The implementation of a written agreement where students are asked for permission prior to documentation, while providing space for those who decline to comfortably opt out, lays an important foundation for digital privacy literacy.

Reflections Experienced by School Participants in the Training Session with PKPA

Putri, a teacher from a State Vocational High School in Medan City, shared how the training activity changed her perspective. "For the first time, we fully understand child protection online, and the challenges and obstacles still encountered in implementing child-friendly and inclusive service mechanisms in both schools and government agencies. An integrated system is needed to mitigate and respond to cases of violence against children, including children with disabilities," she stated.

Echoing similar views, Mariadi, a principal from a Special Needs School in Medan City, noted how crucial cross-sector collaboration is in bridging the gap between schools, law enforcement, and social institutions. This was also added by Yuli Yanika, who asserted that true inclusion means demanding equal legal accountability, not patronizing tolerance. "If we demand equal rights, then equal obligations and legal enforcement must also be absolute. There should be no legal justification for crimes committed against persons with disabilities simply because of misplaced pity. Equality means the law applies to everyone fairly and equally," she explained.

Toward an Inclusive Culture of Safety

Translating anti-discrimination theory and child safeguarding principles into daily practice in the educational landscape requires a firm commitment from schools, policymakers, and community networks. Every school is required to regularly design, review, and update Child Safeguarding Policy documents and internal Standard Operating Procedures tailored to their specific environment. Periodic capacity building and strict codes of conduct must govern interactions between adults and students both offline and online, while reporting mechanisms must be rendered barrier-free through accessible reporting channels and direct referral pathways to local child protection units or other child protection services.

In the end, child protection and anti-discrimination are two inseparable things. When the educational community builds an environment that protects the most vulnerable groups, especially children with disabilities facing double discrimination, they are nurturing a safer and more equal culture for all children. Through a systematic child safeguarding framework, child protection is proven to go far beyond merely fulfilling bureaucratic documents; it is an enduring moral and professional commitment to upholding human dignity and ensuring that every child is seen, heard, valued, and protected.

Attach. Documentation



Photo 1: Group photo with participants of the training on friendly and inclusive service in case management.



Photo 2: Photo of the presentation and discussion starter on protecting women and children with disabilities who face double discrimination.