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Beyond Reactive Protection: Building Child-Safe Systems for Hong Kong's Future

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Abstract

This paper argues that child safeguarding offers a more sustainable, proactive, and systemic framework for advancing children's well-being than traditional child protection models. While child protection services remain essential in responding to abuse, neglect, and exploitation, they primarily intervene after harm has occurred. Safeguarding shifts the focus toward prevention by embedding child rights principles within institutional structures, professional practices, and community cultures. This shift toward safeguarding strengthens children's developmental, emotional, educational, and psychosocial well-being by establishing preventive protections across educational, community, and institutional environments. It fosters safe and inclusive learning environments, nurturing and stabilizing relationships, and providing coordinated support systems that strengthen children's resilience, social competence, self-efficacy, and holistic development.

Using Hong Kong as a strategic case study, this paper examines how education, social services, healthcare, and community sectors can work collaboratively to reduce preventable harm and build protective capacity. Transitioning from a negligence-focused model to a preventive safeguarding framework represents not merely procedural reform but a reconfiguration of shared responsibility across families, professionals, and organizations. This discussion concludes with recommendations for strategic policymaking, cross-sectoral collaboration, research-informed practice. It also calls for strengthening societal parenting capacity enhancing families' knowledge, resources, and support networks to foster safe and nurturing environments alongside more strategic resource allocation. Together, these measures aim to consolidate a child-centered safeguarding system in Hong Kong and contribute to the global discourse on integrated, preventive approaches to children's rights and long-term social sustainability.

Keywords: child safeguarding, whole-child development, preventive systems, cross-sector collaboration, Hong Kong

The discourse on child welfare has long been dominated by the concept of *child protection*, a system of services designed to respond to abuse, neglect, or exploitation. While essential for ensuring children's immediate safety, protection-oriented systems often operate as emergency response mechanisms. Interventions are typically triggered after harm has occurred. This reactive orientation can limit sustained attention to children's broader developmental, educational, and psychosocial needs.

From a whole-child perspective, safeguarding is not solely about preventing abuse; rather, it is about ensuring that children grow within environments that provide stability, continuity, and supportive relationships. Stable caregiving, consistent school participation, and predictable institutional responses are central to healthy cognitive, emotional, and social development. When systems intervene only at crisis points, children may experience repeated disruptions that affect attachment security, learning progression, peer relationships, and identity formation. A preventive safeguarding framework seeks to reduce such instability by embedding protective conditions within everyday environments.

This paper therefore argues for a conceptual shift from child protection as reactive intervention to safeguarding as preventive infrastructure. Safeguarding embeds child rights principles within institutional structures, professional practice, and community culture. It aims to identify, mitigate, and prevent risks before harm occurs, supporting children's developmental trajectories rather than merely responding to breakdowns.

The care of children is widely recognized as a shared societal responsibility grounded in human rights, and civic duty. In practice, however, child protection is organized as a highly multidisciplinary field (Helland, et al., 2022). It encompasses social work, psychology, education, healthcare, policing, law, and family studies. Each discipline contributes distinct terminology, theoretical foundations, professional mandates, and intervention logics. These differences shape how core concepts such as 'child well-being,' 'maltreatment,' 'risk,' 'safety,' and the "best interests of the child" are understood and applied.

For instance, social work often draws on ecological and family-systems perspectives, prioritizing relational dynamics and strengths-based interventions. Psychological practice focuses on trauma assessment and developmental impact. Policing typically frames child protection in terms of criminal investigation and public safety.

Such disciplinary diversity enriches decision-making but also creates fragmentation. Practitioners may interpret the same case differently, leading to inconsistent thresholds for intervention and divergent recommendations. In order to mediate these different perspectives, many jurisdictions rely on multidisciplinary child protection teams. For example, Minnesota statute mandates teams are comprised of professionals from child welfare, law enforcement, healthcare, mental health, tribal agencies, and community organizations (Minnesota Children's Alliance, 2025). These teams aim to improve structured case consultation, reduce fragmentation, and balance professional perspectives.

Despite these mechanisms, fragmentation often persists. The notion of the child's "best interests" remains contested across disciplines. Psychologists and educators frequently emphasize stability, continuity of caregiving, and uninterrupted schooling, recognizing that placement changes and school mobility can disrupt attachment security, academic progress, and peer integration (Bowlby, 1988; Daniel et al., 2011). Child welfare practitioners, by contrast, may prioritize reunification with birth families or kinship placement, even when this involves relocation or multiple transitions (Berrick, 2017; Wulczyn, 2004).

Similarly, healthcare professionals may recommend immediate out-of-home placement for infants experiencing recurrent medical neglect, citing acute concerns about health and safety (Jenny, 2011). However, child welfare agencies may instead pursue in-home safety planning to preserve family unity, particularly when statutory thresholds for removal are debated (Munro, 2011). These conflicting interpretations and inconsistencies have direct implications for children's developmental stability. Repeated placement moves, delayed decisions, and disrupted schooling can undermine emotional regulation, weaken peer relationships, and interrupt educational attainment. Fragmented systems, therefore, do not merely create administrative inefficiencies; they shape children's lived, developmental experiences.

Although multidisciplinary collaboration brings valuable expertise, it also reinforces conceptual and operational fragmentation and inconsistency. As a result, system-level reform remains difficult, and child protection systems continue to function primarily as reactive mechanisms. A safeguarding paradigm offers an alternative: a more coherent, preventive framework designed to reduce fragmentation and promote stable, developmentally supportive environments for children.

Defining and Redefining Child Safeguarding

Child safeguarding represents a comprehensive framework for preventing child maltreatment that extends beyond the traditional boundaries of child protection. As Gilbert (2012) observes, safeguarding reframes child maltreatment not simply as the result of individual deviance or abusive caregivers, but as a broader social phenomenon requiring systemic and preventive responses. Rather than focusing only on children already at risk of significant harm, safeguarding seeks to reduce risk across all environments in which children live, learn, and participate. In doing so, it supports children's holistic well-being by promoting stable, protective contexts that foster healthy development, learning, and psychosocial security.

The concept of child safeguarding has its roots in the United Kingdom, emerging from concerns about institutional failures to protect children. Its prominence in international discourse grew sharply following the 2002 "sex-for-food" scandal in West Africa. This incident, documented in a joint report by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR, 2007) and Save the Children, exposed cases of sexual exploitation of refugee children by humanitarian personnel. In response, several UK-based non-governmental organizations (NGOs) established the Keeping Children Safe coalition and subsequently developed a set of Child Safeguarding Standards aimed at strengthening institutional accountability and protective practices.

Recent scholarship has examined the relationship between *child protection* and *child safeguarding*. Kaviani Johnson (2025) argues that child safeguarding should be regarded as a "distinct subset within child protection" (p.4), noting that the scope of "child protection" has expanded under Article 19 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child to include prevention, reporting, referral, investigation, and response mechanisms. While this reflects prevailing international policy discourse, defining safeguarding solely as a subset of child protection risks obscures important conceptual and operational differences.

A clearer approach is to view child protection and child safeguarding as parallel and complementary systems. Child protection responds to identified harm, whereas safeguarding establishes preventive structures designed to reduce risk and promote children's safety and overall well-being across institutional and community settings.

The Shift from Protection to Prevention

The concepts of child protection and child safeguarding are grounded in different risk logics and conceptual foundations. Child protection has traditionally centered on child-focused risk, emphasizing the identification, investigation, and mitigation of harm arising from abuse, neglect, exploitation, or violence typically commonly within the family and perpetrated by caregivers or close relations (Munro, 2011; Spratt et al., 2015; Waldfogel, 1998). This orientation reflects a longstanding policy assumption that the domestic environment constitutes the primary site of serious maltreatment.

Contemporary developmental research shows that harm is seldom isolated; adverse experiences accumulate over time and interact across relationships and environments to shape children's cognitive, emotional, social, and physical development. Emerging research and policy further recognize that vulnerability extends beyond the family to organizational and community settings, including schools, residential care, sports clubs, online spaces, and humanitarian programs (Munro, 2011; Parton, 2014). From a whole-child perspective, these contexts are integral to children's developmental ecosystems, and risks encountered across them can compound to produce cumulative developmental harm.

Child safeguarding responds to *organizationally generated risks* those arising from an organization's personnel, culture, governance practices, or physical environment (Kaviani Johnson, 2025; Palmer & Feldman, 2017). These risks stem from structural factors such as inadequate supervision, hierarchical authority dynamics, and institutional cultures that normalize silence or concealment. Although these harms may not originate within the family, their developmental consequences can be equally profound, particularly where exposure is repeated, normalized, or embedded within trusted institutional settings. Thus, safeguarding emphasizes proactive, organization-wide measures designed to identify, mitigate, and manage risks embedded within these environments.

The distinction between safeguarding and protection is therefore not merely semantic; each addresses different pathways of harm. Child protection concerns maltreatment that occurs independently of organizational context, whereas safeguarding arises when the organization itself generates risk. The two fields rest on distinct conceptual foundations and are best understood as parallel rather than nested domains. Both, however, aim to prevent cumulative developmental harm across the interacting contexts that shape children's lives. This distinction reflects a broader shift from reactive responses to preventative, system-level approaches grounded in a whole-child framework.

From Organizational Duty to Systemic Accountability

Child safeguarding and child protection also diverge significantly in their temporal and operational logics, reflecting different forms of institutional responsibility. Child safeguarding is proactive and prevention-oriented. It requires organizations to anticipate, identify, and mitigate risks before harm occurs through measures such as safer recruitment, training, internal reporting mechanisms, codes of conduct, accountability structures, and organizational culture reform (Keeping Children Safe, 2014; Mathews et al., 2017). Whereas, child protection systems, although broader today than in the past, remain primarily reactive, intervening once abuse is suspected or identified through statutory investigative and judicial processes. This proactive–reactive distinction is so foundational that safeguarding cannot be meaningfully conceptualized as a subset of protection without obscuring the different phases and types of risk each domain targets.

At its core, child safeguarding imposes systematic obligations on organizations to prevent harm arising from their structures, operations, programs, or personnel. These obligations encompass the establishment of preventative procedures, timely and appropriate responses to concerns or incidents, and mandatory reporting of suspected abuse to statutory authorities ensuring both organizational accountability and the protection of children's rights (Kaviani Johnson, 2025). Safeguarding therefore recognizes organizations not only as potential sites where children receive services, but also as potential sources of risk requiring specific governance measures.

Moving from Negligence to the Post-Negligence Model in Child Safeguarding

Every child abuse case is a tragedy. Traditional approaches targeting child abuse often emphasize describing faults, identifying responsible persons, assigning blame, and enforcing procedural compliance. While accountability remains important, a narrow compliance culture can unintentionally foster fear, rigidity, and defensive practices, potentially undermining child-centered decision-making. A relational shift reframes how responsibility, risk, and care are understood across families, communities, professional practice, and organizational systems.

A post-negligence model reframes safeguarding as a shared societal and relational responsibility. At the level of individuals and families, this model acknowledges the social, economic, and emotional conditions that shape caregiving capacity. Instead of locating failure solely within the family unit, it emphasizes supportive networks, early intervention, and resilience-building supports. Children experience safer and more stable developmental outcomes when caregivers are embedded in environments that reduce stress, strengthen protective factors, and foster trust.

Within workplaces and child protection organizations, the post-negligence approach aims to cultivate cultures where practitioners feel supported, rather than scrutinized. This includes environments in which professionals can discuss uncertainty, raise concerns, and learn from mistakes without fear of disproportionate sanctions. Rather than relying on procedural box-ticking, organizations prioritize reflective practice, professional judgement, interdisciplinary learning, and adaptive responses to complexity. Such cultures enhance practitioner confidence and relational engagement with families, which, in turn, improve the quality and timeliness of decisions affecting children.

At the system level, moving to a post-negligence culture involves designing structures that prioritize compassion, curiosity, and collective responsibility. A compassionate system recognize complexity rather than simplifying it into linear cause-and-effect narratives. It understands that tragedies rarely arise from one individual's error but from interacting pressures across families, services, and socio-economic conditions. By strengthening relational trust, service coordination, and early support, a compassionate system directly contributes to improved child safety, well-being, and long-term developmental trajectories.

In this context, the goal becomes building a "compassionate city", where a community in which child well-being is embedded in public policy, accessible support services, and social norms that value care over blame.

The 'Do-No-Harm' Principle

At the core of every child safeguarding policy lies the '*do-no-harm*' principle (Keeping Children Safe, 2014). This ethical and operational standard requires all entities engaging with children to take reasonable and proactive steps to minimize intentional and unintentional risks to children's well-being. An organization's responsibilities go beyond responding to individual incidents; they include building the everyday conditions, through leadership, culture, and supportive practice, in which children are kept safe, and families are engaged respectfully and effectively. When concerns arise, staff should response in a timely, appropriate way that is in line with its safeguarding processes and that prioritizes relationship-based, humane decision-making rather than narrow procedural compliance (Featherstone et al., 2018). Framed this way, safeguarding is not only a technical duty but also a social and ethical practice, with serious consequences when preventable harms are not anticipated and addressed through competent organizational action (Featherstone et al., 2018).

Importantly, the 'do-no-harm' principle cannot be realized through policies or checklists alone. It requires a shift in organizational culture and leadership practice. Safeguarding must move beyond compliance-driven, reactive responses and become a core institutional value. This involves leadership that places child well-being above reputational protection, models transparency, and ensures staff can raise concerns without fear of reprisal. Rather than relying on hierarchical control, management should promote open communication, shared accountability, and continuous learning. Such change is critical because organizational harm often stems not from missing policies, but from cultures of silence or defensiveness. By embedding the 'do-no-harm' principle in everyday leadership and governance practices, organizations strengthen their capacity to anticipate, prevent, and respond to risk—creating environments where children are meaningfully and consistently protected.

Core Components of a Child Safeguarding Policy

An effective Child Safeguarding Policy accomplishes three interrelated objectives:

- Behavioral Governance: It regulates the conduct of all staff, volunteers, and affiliates to prevent the misuse of trust and power associated with organizational affiliation.

- Risk Assessment and Reduction: It obliges the organization to systematically identify, assess, and mitigate potential risks to children in every area of its operations, programs, projects, and partnerships including in humanitarian or emergency contexts.

- Reporting and Response Mechanisms: It mandates that all employees and associates report any concern related to a child's welfare and ensures that the organization has clear, confidential, and rights-based procedures for response and remediation.

Through these mechanisms, safeguarding transforms the ethos of child welfare from one rooted in reaction and remediation to one grounded in prevention and accountability. It positions every organization that interacts with children not merely as a service provider, but as an active participant in the collective responsibility to uphold children's rights and dignity. For children, the presence of effective safeguarding mechanisms shapes their daily lived experience determining whether they feel safe, cared for, listened to, and respected, and enabling them to develop confidence, agency, and the capacity to advocate for their own and their peers' well-being as part of their holistic development.

Hong Kong as a Strategic Case for Understanding Child Safeguarding

Hong Kong provides a powerful and useful setting for studying child safeguarding. Its unique mix of social, economic, and political conditions creates a complex environment in which the role and responsibilities of organizations toward children's safety can be scrutinized. Insights drawn from this context have relevance not only for Hong Kong, but for many other jurisdictions facing similar challenges.

Hong Kong's colonial past and its post-1997 relationship with mainland China, operating under the *"one country, two systems"* arrangement, have created a distinctive socio-legal setting. While Hong Kong retains a common-law system, its child-protection system and regulatory practices operate within a wider political context influenced by mainland governance. This configuration provides an opportunity to examine how child-safeguarding functions where

Western-informed welfare models interact with locally rooted cultural expectations regarding childhood, family roles, service provisions, as well as community and government involvement. These institutional and cultural intersections directly shape how children experience authority, protection, and participation in their everyday lives. The tensions and adaptations that arise in this context echo challenges faced in many post-colonial or rapidly changing societies, making Hong Kong a valuable point of comparison for international safeguarding debates.

Hong Kong also exemplifies an intensely market-driven society, characterized by exceptionally high housing costs, long working hours, and demanding labor conditions. These structural pressures significantly affect family life and caregiving arrangements. For children, such pressures influence daily supervision, the emotional availability of caregivers, and the stability of attachment relationships. These are all core elements of whole-child development.

One defining feature is the widespread reliance on foreign domestic helpers. According to the *Thematic Household Survey Report No. 72*, 32.5% of households with children aged 12 or below employed domestic helpers in 2019–20, the majority of whom were foreign domestic workers (Census and Statistics Department, 2021). Their contribution extends beyond practical childcare support; it significantly shapes women's labor force participation. A 2025 Legislative Council Secretariat report notes that foreign domestic helpers effectively "unlock" mothers' employment capacity (Research Office, Legislative Council Secretariat, 2025). In 2023, labor participation among married women with young children was 45.6% without a live-in foreign domestic helper, compared with 82.3% among those who employed one.

This caregiving configuration means that many children's daily care is mediated through non-parental adults operating within private households, thereby extending safeguarding considerations beyond formal organizations into domestic and community spheres. It underscores the need for a whole-child safeguarding lens that recognizes the multiple caregiving environments shaping children's safety and development.

Official data sets indicate that child abuse remains a persistent concern. The Hong Kong Social Welfare Department reported 1,831 newly registered child abuse cases in 2024, reflecting an ongoing upward trend largely involving physical abuse, neglect, and exposure to domestic violence (Social Welfare Department, 2024). Beyond immediate harm, such patterns carry cumulative developmental consequences for children's emotional security, mental health, and long-term well-being.

Medical research further highlights the gravity of extreme cases. A review in the Hong Kong Medical Journal reports several *filicide* (a parent deliberating murdering his or her own child) cases annually, most involving children under 12, with psychosocial stress, parental mental illness, and postnatal depression identified as major contributing factors (Hon et al., 2025).

The study also found that mothers are often involved in filicides during a child's infancy, whereas fathers are more often responsible for the murders of children aged eight years or above (Tang & Siu, 2018). Parents account for 61% of child homicides involving children under five years (Friedman et al., 2005). These findings underscore how safeguarding must address not only discrete incidents, but the broader familial, social, and mental-health conditions that shape children's developmental vulnerability.

Child abuse and filicide are not discrete phenomena, but interconnected expressions of familial distress and caregiver impairment. While child abuse encompasses a spectrum of harmful behaviors, filicide represents its most extreme and irreversible manifestation. Recognizing this continuum shifts the focus from isolated incidents to patterns of escalating vulnerability across a child's developmental trajectory. Understanding their interrelationship underscores the importance of early detection, comprehensive risk assessment, and multi-tiered safeguarding systems capable of interrupting harm before it becomes fatal.

Hong Kong's dense population, high-stress living conditions, limited access to mental health and social support services, and increasingly fragmented urban neighborhood networks create structural pressures that intensify familial strain. These factors heighten the risk of child abuse and filicide and may contribute to the rising number of reported cases in recent years.

Examining how the Hong Kong government, civil society, and organizations safeguard children in an economy characterized by limited social protection and high parental work burdens offers insights into how safeguarding systems operate under sustained structural stress. Several local organizations advocate for the need to establish safeguarding measures beyond formal organizational settings into community and household environments (Mother's Choice, n.d.; South China Morning Post [SCMP], 2020). High-profile abuse scandals have further exposed weaknesses in institutional safeguarding. In one case, the arrests of more than 30 workers from a Hong Kong children's home followed the discovery of surveillance footage showing infants and toddlers being "slapped, hit in the head, pulled by the hair and tossed onto the floor," raising serious concerns about oversight and accountability within residential care settings (SCMP, 2022). The case prompted calls from children's rights advocates for systemic reforms to ensure stronger monitoring and protection mechanisms.

A whole-child safeguarding approach, therefore, requires coordinated vigilance across sectors, organizational, community, and domestic spheres, recognizing that children's safety and development are shaped by the interaction of these overlapping systems.

Existing Child Safeguarding Measures in Hong Kong

Despite the recent introduction of new policies, child safeguarding measures in Hong Kong remain fragmented, reactive, and insufficient to establish a comprehensive system for preventing child maltreatment. Existing mechanisms, such as the Sexual Conviction Record Check Scheme and the codes of conduct regulating certain child-related professions, have provided limited and piecemeal protection. Although these instruments play an important role in maintaining minimum professional standards and screening specific risks, they do not constitute an integrated safeguarding framework ensuring the safety and well-being of all children across institutional contexts.

The Restrictive Scope of the Sexual Conviction Record Check Scheme

Introduced by the Hong Kong Police Force in 2011, the Sexual Conviction Record Check (SCRC) Scheme allows employers of prospective employees who have frequent contact with children or mentally incapacitated persons to request access voluntarily to the individuals' sexual offense conviction records. The measure represents a commendable initiative in reducing opportunities for *known* sexual offenders to re-enter child-focused professions. However, in practice, its impact remains narrowly preventative and secondary in nature.

First, because participation in the SCRC Scheme is voluntary, its implementation depends heavily on the discretion of employers, leaving substantial gaps where screening is absent or inconsistent. Second, the SCRC focuses exclusively on individuals with prior convictions, thereby failing to address broader institutional and contextual factors that enable abuse, such as unchecked power dynamics, inadequate supervision, and the absence of organizational mechanisms for early risk detection. Consequently, the measure does little to prevent *first-time* offenders or to mitigate structural vulnerabilities that can foster abuse within organizations. In effect, the SCRC constitutes a reactive strategy concerned with individual culpability, rather than a proactive safeguarding framework concerned with organizational responsibility and systemic prevention.

Professional Codes of Conduct in Education and Social Services

The education and social service sectors, which collectively maintain regular and significant contact with children, are governed by professional codes of conduct that specify obligations concerning the protection and ethical treatment of minors. The Code for the Education Profession, promulgated by the Council on Professional Conduct in Education, outlines behavioral standards prohibiting forms of misconduct that compromise student welfare, including sexual abuse and exploitation. Similarly, the Code of Practice of the Social Workers Registration Board delineates moral and professional parameters, designating serious breaches such as acts of physical or emotional abuse as grounds for disciplinary action.

While these regulatory frameworks reinforce a professional ethos of accountability, they operate primarily at the *individual* level, emphasizing personal morality and compliance rather than institutional responsibility. Such codes, though important, are reactive instruments. They address misconduct after it occurs, through disciplinary sanctions, rather than preventing unsafe organizational environments in the first instance. They typically lack enforceable mechanisms to ensure ongoing organizational risk assessment, workforce capacity-building, or safeguarding culture development.

The Severity of Child Abuse in Hong Kong

Child abuse remains an alarming social problem in Hong Kong, as recent data from the Against Child Abuse (ACA, 2025) hotline illustrates. In the 2024–25 reporting year, ACA received 1,144 hotline reports and inquiries, of which 207 (18%) were classified as suspected child abuse cases involving 241 children. The largest group of affected children was ages 6 through 8 years (24%), followed by those ages 3 through 5 years (22%), indicating that even very young children are at substantial risk. Nearly 70% of alleged perpetrators were family members, with mothers and fathers each accounting for more than one-fifth of suspected abusers, underscoring the centrality of intra-familial harm in the local abuse landscape (Against Child Abuse, 2025).

The pattern of maltreatment reported further reflects both the visibility and the hidden nature of abuse. Physical abuse constituted 56% of suspected cases, followed by neglect and psychological abuse, while nine cases of sexual abuse were recorded. ACA attributes the relatively high proportion of physical abuse to the comparative ease of detecting visible injuries, whereas neglect, sexual abuse, and psychological maltreatment are believed to be substantially under-reported because they are more difficult to recognize or their seriousness is underestimated. Psychological abuse, including persistent denigration, rejection and exposure to violence, was explicitly highlighted as having profound and long-term effects on children's sense of self-worth and relational expectations, with potential intergenerational consequences as children may replicate violent disciplinary patterns in adulthood (Mathews et al., 2015).

Emerging digital risks further intensify the seriousness of the situation. ACA reports an increase in cases where perpetrators use the internet to groom children, gradually building trust online before introducing sexualized conversations, soliciting intimate images or coercing children into inappropriate acts. While online risks are a global issue rather than confined to any single context, policy responses vary across jurisdictions. In response to such threats, Australia's recent social media ban for users under the age of 16 stands as a prominent example of proactive safeguarding legislation aimed at protecting children before harm occurs. This policy mandates that platforms implement measures to prevent underage access, reducing opportunities for online exploitation and abuse (BBC News, 2025). The government study revealed that 96% of Australian children aged 10 to 15 were active users of social media, additionally, seven in ten had encountered harmful online content or behaviors.

This 'social media ban' policy demonstrates a proactive and pioneering safeguarding measure aimed at proactively protecting children from harms. Instead of relying on parental guidance, this unprecedented policy requires social media platforms to implement reasonable measures to prevent underage access, reflecting a growing recognition that safeguarding must extend beyond reactive case responses and to anticipatory regulatory interventions. While the ban's effectiveness and enforcement remain subjects of debate, it exemplifies an innovative approach that complements traditional child protection strategies by targeting risks in digital environments where abuse increasingly occurs.

These developments point to an urgent need to reconceptualize child protection as a responsibility that extends beyond formal organizational settings into everyday community life. While legislative reform and professional reporting duties are essential, they are insufficient on their own in a context where much abuse occurs within families and where non-physical forms of harm remain largely hidden. Effective child safeguarding therefore requires cultivating community-based and neighborhood vigilance, in which neighbors, extended kin, peers, and local organizations are supported and encouraged to notice early warning signs, to seek advice, and to report concerns without fear of stigma or reprisal. Embedding child protection awareness into community infrastructures such as resident groups, mutual-aid committees, faith communities, and parent networks can create additional layers of informal surveillance and support that complement formal child protection systems, enhance early detection, and reduce the likelihood that severe abuse will go unnoticed.

Fragmentation and Accountability Deficits in Child Protection

Taken together, the Sexual Conviction Record Check Scheme and the professional codes of conduct constitute a minimal layer of preventive control. Yet, these existing measures inadequately address the complex ecological dimensions of child maltreatment, which, as contemporary safeguarding frameworks emphasize, arise not only from individual pathology, but also from broader environmental, organizational, and systemic conditions (Munro, 2011; Parton, 2014).

Since 2016, there has been an alarming increasing trend of newly registered cases of child abuse (from 892 in 2016 to 1,367 in 2021), which draws public attention.

Case 1: In January 2018, the death of five-year-old Chan Sui-lam in Tuen Mun became one of the most widely discussed child abuse cases. The child had previously attended Tuen Mun Lutheran Day Nursery (路德會富泰幼兒園) until October 2017. After her death, the principal was reported as having stated publicly that no injuries had been observed during the child's enrolment and that the school therefore did not report the matter to the Education Bureau or the Social Welfare Department. However, photographs later published by Hong Kong 01 (HK01 reported as having been taken by teachers at the nursery on September 5 and September 25, 2017 showed visible injuries to the child's hands, feet, and face. The report further stated that a teacher had filed an internal report regarding Chan's condition, but the document was not forwarded to the Education Bureau (HK01, 2018/2025). The apparent breakdown in reporting procedures raised concerns about institutional accountability and the effectiveness of existing monitoring and escalation mechanisms in suspected abuse cases.

Case 2: In a separate case, according to a report from SCMP that ten former childcare workers were sentenced to prison terms of up to 64 months for offences involving the abuse of toddlers at a residential home operated by the Hong Kong Society for the Protection of Children in Mong Kok (Wong, 2024). The offences, which occurred in 2021, prompted public scrutiny of safeguarding standards within institutional childcare settings. The organization's chairperson stated that corrective measures had been introduced to strengthen internal safeguards. However, children's rights advocates argued that more comprehensive structural reforms were required to ensure sustained protection (SCMP, 2022).

These cases illustrate how safeguarding failures are rarely isolated incidents attributable to a single lapse. Rather, they often reflect cumulative institutional blind spots gaps in reporting culture, supervisory oversight, and risk detection systems that weaken preventive safeguards over time.

Since then, Hong Kong has moved toward legislative reform through the passage of the Mandatory Reporting of Child Abuse Bill in 2024 (Hong Kong Information Services Department, 2024), with the implementation of the Mandatory Reporting of Child Abuse Scheme expected thereafter. The Ordinance subsequently came into effect on 20 January 2026.

This legislative reform, administered under the Social Welfare Department, requires designated professionals including teachers, social workers, medical practitioners, and childcare personnel to report any reasonable suspicion of child abuse to the authorities (Labour and Welfare Bureau, 2024). The measure addresses chronic under-reporting and aims to enhance the early detection of abuse cases, establishing a baseline of legal accountability among frontline professionals.

With the Mandatory Reporting of Child Abuse Ordinance scheduled to take effect in January 2026, calls from professionals to ACA's hotline rose from 80 cases in 2022–23 to 183 and 211 in the subsequent two years (Against Child Abuse, 2025). This increase suggests that practitioners are both more alert to potential abuse while also seeking guidance on their new legal obligations. The trend highlights the need not only for reporting compliance but for sustained preventive infrastructure, including professional training, emergency placement capacity, and clear operational protocols. ACA has therefore urged the government to strengthen ancillary support alongside the implementation of mandatory reporting, including enhanced training, emergency residential arrangements, public education, and clearer legal definitions of psychological abuse and "failure to protect."

While the enactment of mandatory reporting marks significant legislative progress, its design centers on the identification and escalation of suspected harm rather than on structural risk prevention. Reporting duties though essential are triggered only when indicators of abuse become visible, leaving upstream environmental risks largely unaddressed (Mathews et al., 2017). The Ordinance does not impose a parallel statutory obligation on child-serving organizations to embed preventive safeguarding systems, such as routine risk assessments, internal protection protocols, or culture-based safety governance.

This structural gap reflects the continued absence of a legally enforceable organizational safeguarding duty in Hong Kong. Mandatory reporting strengthens the individual once suspicion arises, but it does not require institutions to design inherently safe environments that reduce the likelihood of harm occurring in the first place.

By contrast, jurisdictions such as the United Kingdom and Australia situate mandatory reporting within broader child-safe regulatory frameworks. These frameworks articulate nationally recognized child-safe standards, require organizations to implement risk-governance and information-sharing systems, mandate proactive staff training, and designate safeguarding leads (Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse, 2017b; HM Government, 2023). In these systems, prevention is embedded into organizational design rather than activated only at the point of crisis. Children's safety and best interests are treated as the foundational purpose and operational priority of all child-related institutions.

Hong Kong's safeguarding landscape, therefore, stands at an inflection point: it is moving beyond a fragmented compliance model toward a more consolidated protective regimen. However, without the concurrent development of statutory organizational safeguarding duties, the reform may strengthen reporting without transforming prevention. Embedding legally mandated safeguarding systems across all child-serving institutions would shift the framework from incident-driven intervention to proactive risk governance, ensuring that legislative momentum translates into durable, system-wide child safety.

Policy Recommendations on Child Safeguarding in Hong Kong

Establishing an Enabling Environment for Institutional Safeguarding

To promote proactive and effective child safeguarding practices, the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region (HKSAR) government is advised to play a central role in designing and sustaining an enabling regulatory and policy environment for all child-related institutions. This requires a coordinated framework that translates the principle of child safety and well-being first into enforceable institutional obligations.

A key component of such a framework is the establishment and enforcement of a minimum set of principle-based child safeguarding standards applicable across all organizations that engage with or provide services to children. These standards should serve as the foundational benchmark for the design, delivery, and monitoring of child-related programs and activities. Importantly, the scope of application should extend to a wide range of institutions, including:

- Non-governmental organizations and social enterprises;
- Sports clubs and associations;
- Schools, colleges, and other educational providers;
- Early childhood education and childcare centers;
- Children's homes and residential care facilities;
- Youth offending service agencies;
- Health centers and hospitals; and
- Faith-based organizations and community groups.

To ensure compliance and accountability, the Commission on Children should be endowed with statutory authority to (1) request and obtain information relevant to safeguarding practices; (2) intervene in cases where institutional abuse or neglect is suspected; and (3) issue binding orders requiring corrective actions and institutional compliance. Additionally, the Commission should have the power to delegate enforcement responsibilities to relevant professional or sectoral regulatory bodies, ensuring sector-specific oversight and alignment with existing governance structures.

The proposed standards should not operate in isolation but should instead be integrated into existing regulatory, licensing, and funding mechanisms to ensure cross-sectoral coherence. For instance, child safeguarding requirements should be explicitly embedded within the Service Quality Standards applied to all subsidized social welfare services. This integration would link organizational funding and accreditation with demonstrable safeguarding competence, creating a system in which adherence to safeguarding principles becomes a precondition for operational legitimacy and state support.

In sum, embedding mandatory, principle-based safeguarding standards within the broader regulatory and funding frameworks represents a necessary shift from reliance on professional discretion to a systemic, governance-driven model of child protection. Such an approach would institutionalize prevention, accountability, and transparency as the normative foundations of all services involving children.

Operationalizing the Oversight Role of the Commission on Children

Drawing on the experience of New South Wales, Australia, the effectiveness of a principle-based safeguarding framework depends on a competent, independent authority empowered to coordinate, regulate, and monitor its implementation. In Hong Kong, the Commission on Children is well-positioned to assume this pivotal governance role, provided it is granted clear statutory authority, enforcement powers, and adequate resources. To establish a proactive and sustainable safeguarding regimen, the Commission's oversight should be operationalized across four domains: compliance monitoring, cross-sector coordination, accountability mechanisms, and capacity-building.

Compliance Monitoring and Risk Governance. Effective safeguarding requires a structured and evidence-based compliance framework to ensure accountability across child-serving institutions. The Commission on Children should conduct systematic, risk-based audits and inspections in order to assess adherence to safeguarding standards, the effectiveness of internal reporting systems, and the adequacy of staff training and supervision. Rather than functioning solely as enforcement tools, these oversight processes should operate as mechanisms for continuous institutional improvement and culture change.

Drawing on international models such as the UK's Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills (Ofsted) and Australia's Child Safe Organizations Framework (Australian Huan Rights Commission, 2019), Hong Kong could adopt a tiered risk-assessment approach. Institutions would be categorized according to relative risk exposure, considering factors such as population vulnerability, operational complexity, and prior compliance history. Higher-risk settings including residential care facilities and schools would therefore undergo more frequent and detailed review. Such a calibrated approach reduces regulatory duplication while directing oversight resources where children face the greatest potential harm.

These reviews should extend beyond procedural compliance to examine organizational culture, staff conduct, and governance structures. Crucially, safeguarding audits should also assess whether children are meaningfully informed about their rights, consulted in policy development, and provided with safe channels to express concerns. Embedding child participation within oversight processes recognizes children not merely as beneficiaries of protection, but as active contributors to safer institutional environments.

While governance should prioritize developmental support over coercion, regulatory intervention becomes necessary when training and institutional guidance cannot secure child safety. In such instances, targeted operational reviews provide proportionate accountability without entrenching a punitive regulatory climate.

Therefore, all child-related institutions should be required to establish accessible, child-friendly complaint mechanisms that are child-developmentally appropriate and clearly communicated. These mechanisms must form part of routine governance rather than exceptional response procedures. To sustain safeguarding integrity, risk management should be embedded within existing quality-assurance systems through clearly articulated operational standards. These standards should define benchmarks for identifying institutional risk, monitoring policy implementation, and mandating periodic reviews. Integrating safeguarding into routine governance processes consolidates prevention as an organizational norm as contrasted with merely a crisis-driven intervention.

Coordination Across Regulatory and Sectoral Bodies. Given the multi-sectoral nature of child safeguarding, the Commission should function not only as a regulator, but also as a coordinating authority, promoting policy coherence across government departments and professional sectors. This may be operationalized through formal memoranda of understanding with regulatory bodies in education, health, social welfare, sports, and faith sectors, clarifying safeguarding responsibilities and referral pathways. A central safeguarding database could further facilitate information-sharing among authorized agencies while maintaining data protection and confidentiality standards.

Reporting, Transparency, and Accountability. An effective safeguarding system depends upon transparent governance and institutional accountability. Importantly, the Commission on Children should operate within a structured reporting framework that promotes public scrutiny while supporting organizational learning.

Central to this framework is the publication of annual safeguarding reports documenting compliance patterns, incident trends, enforcement measures, and emerging systemic risks across sectors. Regular publication of aggregated safeguarding data strengthens public trust while enabling evidence-based policy refinement.

At the institutional level, child-serving organizations must establish structured internal reporting mechanisms for incidents, including allegations involving staff or associates. This includes appointing trained safeguarding leads responsible for monitoring protocols, conducting risk assessments for activities and events, and implementing preventive measures where necessary. Designating clear safeguarding leadership within institutions reduces ambiguity in responsibility and strengthens early risk identification.

The Procedural Guide for Handling Child Abuse Cases, issued by the Social Welfare Department, should be revised to include explicit guidance on institutional abuse, providing step-by-step instructions for coordination with law enforcement, social welfare officers, and oversight bodies.

Institutions should also implement comprehensive whistleblowing policies that protect staff, volunteers, and service users who disclose safeguarding concerns. Ensuring anonymity, procedural fairness, and protection from retaliation is essential for the early detection of systemic failures. These internal mechanisms should be reinforced by an independent Whistle-blower Protection Mechanism under the Commission on Children, enabling direct reporting beyond organizational hierarchies.

To translate transparency into systemic improvement, the Commission should conduct an annual cross-sector safeguarding review analyzing data from institutional reports and oversight activities. These findings should inform targeted preventive strategies, professional training priorities, and regulatory refinements aimed at reducing recurrence. By institutionalizing evidence-based review, oversight strengthens from case management toward forward-looking risk prevention.

Collectively, these measures embed transparency as an operational condition for accountability. They reposition safeguarding governance from episodic response to structured, anticipatory oversight grounded in children's rights.

Building a Culture of Prevention and Shared Responsibility. Ultimately, the Commission's mandate must extend beyond administrative oversight to fostering a culture of prevention and shared responsibility across child-serving institutions. Safeguarding governance requires embedding child-rights principles, respect, and accountability at every organizational level. International experience demonstrates that safeguarding is most effective when it shifts from procedural compliance to sustained cultural commitment, where children's safety and dignity are treated as non-negotiable standards of practice (Mathews & Kenny, 2021; Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse, 2017a, 2017b, 2017c).

By equipping the Commission on Children with both regulatory authority and developmental functions, Hong Kong can transition from a compliance-oriented framework toward a proactive, learning-centered, and rights-based safeguarding system. In such a system, prevention, participation, and accountability operate as mutually reinforcing pillars of institutional responsibility.

From Compliance to Competence: Capacity Building and Workforce Development

Effective safeguarding cannot rest solely on compliance enforcement; it also requires sustained institutional learning and capacity building. It is suggested that the HKSAR Commission should spearhead a comprehensive training and accreditation framework to ensure that all professionals working with children share a common foundation of safeguarding knowledge and ethical competence. This could be operationalized through mandatory induction programs, continuous professional development modules, and integrated cross-disciplinary training platforms bringing together educators, social workers, healthcare practitioners, and law enforcement personnel. Such interdisciplinary training strengthens shared risk language, clarifies referral pathways, and reduces fragmentation across sectors.

While International frameworks, such as the UK's "Working Together to Safeguard Children" (HM Government, 2023) and the UNICEF's *Child Safeguarding Toolkit for Business* (United Nations Children's Fund, 2026), demonstrate the value of coordinated training standards. Hong Kong's model should prioritize context-specific integration across its own professional systems rather than replicate external templates.

To achieve durable transformation, child-serving institutions must embed structured and continuous safeguarding education within organizational development strategies. Critically, training should move beyond episodic or compliance-driven exercises and instead cultivate professional competence, ethical literacy, and collective accountability. Institutionalizing safeguarding education within recruitment, induction, supervision, and promotion pathways ensures that preventive responsibility is reinforced throughout the professional lifecycle rather than concentrated at entry points.

Advancing this agenda requires collaboration between institutions, higher education operators, and professional bodies to develop accredited, credit-bearing curricula aligned with recognized qualification frameworks. These programs should integrate theoretical knowledge and applied skills across core domains, including child development, legal and policy frameworks, risk identification, trauma-informed intervention strategies, and mandated reporting obligations. Rather than relying on isolated postgraduate exemplars, Hong Kong could develop modular safeguarding credentials embedded across disciplines, enabling practitioners from different sectors to train under shared competency standards.

Such accreditation would standardize safeguarding capability while creating professional incentives for ongoing development. Embedding accredited safeguarding modules across academic and vocational pathways including education, social work, healthcare, and youth services positions safeguarding as a core professional competency rather than an ancillary specialization. This interdisciplinary alignment consolidates safeguarding as a recognized field of professional practice grounded in evidence, ethics, and collaborative governance. It also promotes equitable access to structured professional development for all practitioners working with children and young people.

Building a Village of Child Safeguarding Supports

While often expressed as a proverb, the idea that communities collectively shape children's wellbeing reflects core, evidence-informed principles of child safeguarding science. The notion that "it takes a village to raise a child" is more than a cultural expression; it captures a central insight of contemporary child-protection research. Preventing child abuse and neglect requires shared responsibility, with families, communities, and institutions working together to create a safe and supportive environment for children (Munro, 2011; WHO, 2020). Supporting parents through parenting education, emotional-literacy programs, and community-based interventions is widely recognized as one of the most effective strategies for strengthening child-protection systems and reducing the risk of maltreatment (Barlow et al., 2016).

Parenting education equips caregivers with practical strategies grounded in child development, positive discipline, and responsive caregiving. Evidence shows that such programs reduce harsh parenting practices and improve parent–child relationships, thereby lowering the risk of physical and emotional abuse (Sanders et al., 2014). Emotional-literacy interventions complement these outcomes by helping parents recognize, regulate, and express their emotions appropriately. Since parental stress, frustration, and unresolved trauma are significant predictors of maltreatment, strengthening caregivers' emotional regulation capacities directly contributes to safer caregiving (WHO, 2020).

Community-based interventions provide an additional protective layer for families. Access to neighborhood support groups, family resource centers, peer networks, and culturally responsive services can reduce the isolation and chronic stress that often contribute to neglect (Prinz et al., 2009). These networks offer practical assistance, such as parenting guidance, respite care, and peer mentoring, as well as social affirmation that reduces stigma and promotes help-seeking behaviors.

Strong community ties can also function as an early-warning system. When neighbors, extended family, and community members feel empowered to notice and report signs of distress, concerns may be addressed before they escalate into serious harm. Past high-profile cases in Hong Kong illustrate how missed warning signs across social networks can compound institutional blind spots, underscoring the importance of strengthening community awareness alongside formal reporting systems to ensure that no child falls through the cracks.

Together, parenting education, emotional-literacy support, and community-level initiatives create a "village" of safeguarding supports. By enhancing parental capacities, reducing stressors, and fostering social connectedness, these measures strengthen family resilience and reduce the likelihood of child abuse or neglect. In this sense, supporting parents is not simply an adjunct to child protection, but a core preventive strategy in safeguarding systems.

Although this analysis centers on Hong Kong, the challenges described here reflect broader global trends. The emphasis on community-embedded prevention resonates across jurisdictions facing similar pressures. Integrating parental support, community engagement, and statutory oversight reflects an adaptable model able to calibrate to diverse legal and cultural settings.

In this sense, the safeguarding framework outlined here has relevance beyond Hong Kong. It contributes to broader international efforts to transition from reactive child-protection responses toward integrated, whole-child preventive governance systems grounded in shared responsibility.

Conclusion

The long-term well-being of any society is closely linked to its capacity to safeguard and support children. Preventing avoidable harm should, therefore, be understood not only as a moral concern, but as a matter of sound social policy and sustainable governance. This paper has argued that Hong Kong stands at an important juncture: it may continue to rely predominantly on reactive, incident-driven child-protection responses, or it may consolidate a forward-looking safeguarding framework designed to mitigate risks before harm materializes. Rather than concentrating resources primarily on remedial interventions after serious abuse has occurred, Hong Kong can reallocate strategic attention toward systematic risk assessment, early intervention, and preventive infrastructures that strengthen families, institutions, and professional practice. Such an approach reflects a shift from crisis management to anticipatory governance grounded in long-term child well-being.

Moving from a blame-driven, negligence-focused mindset to a post-negligence model requires transformational innovation across the entire child-serving ecosystem. This shift is not simply procedural; it is cultural and systemic. It calls for public governance that prioritizes children's well-being, primarily safety, as a shared responsibility. Additionally important is that leadership across government departments, organizations, and disciplines champion compassion, complexity-aware practice, and learning rather than fear. By placing children at the heart of policy design, service development, and community initiatives, smart governance can transform safeguarding from a siloed service into an integrated, cross-societal function.

Building a child-safe Hong Kong therefore entails institutionalizing systems that anticipate and mitigate risk, reinforce families and communities as protective environments, and align governance, professional capability, and social norms around children's rights and safety. The objective is not only to respond effectively when harm occurs, but to reduce its likelihood through sustained preventive investment ensuring every child grows up protected, supported, and able to flourish.

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