

# Safeguarding Young People: Responding to young people aged 11 to 17 who are maltreated

## Key findings

- There are differences in response between and within different Children's Social Care Services to young people aged 11-17 who have been maltreated.
- The child protection system was not always seen by staff in Children's Social Care Services as the most effective way to meet the needs of young people. This was due to them having different maltreatment experiences, being exposed to a wider range of risks outside the home and having typically different competencies and needs to younger children.
- As young people get older they are less likely to receive a child protection response from Children's Social Care Services. A variety of other responses were being used to meet young people's needs, such as Child in Need or the Common Assessment Framework. Little is known about which approach works best for young people.
- Young people are often perceived by professionals as more resilient, more able to cope with the effects of abuse, more able to remove themselves from abusive situations and more likely to disclose abuse than younger children. This perception was not supported by young people who participated in this research or by previous research on the long term impact of maltreatment.
- Whilst age does not affect professionals' decisions to make referrals of young people aged 11-17 when they believe them to be at risk of significant harm, it does seem likely to affect their perceptions of risk.
- Resource and system constraints affect social workers' ability to build and maintain a consistent relationship with young people who have been maltreated. This affects whether young people disclose maltreatment or feel safe after they disclose.
- A key barrier to professionals making a referral of young people who have been maltreated to Children's Social Care Services was the perception that thresholds and resource constraints would mean they were unable to respond.
- There is a lack of services to meet the needs of young people (especially those aged 14-17) who have been maltreated.

The **Safeguarding Young People** research study focuses on the under-researched issue of the maltreatment – the neglect, emotional abuse, physical abuse and sexual abuse – of young people aged 11 to 17 in England.

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Research Unit

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# Background



A large number of young people aged 11-17 are affected by abuse and neglect. Research in other countries has highlighted the importance of acknowledging the different maltreatment experiences and needs of young people, as compared with younger children. Yet, in the UK, the issue has received very little attention.

The research project has been undertaken at a time when the issue of safeguarding children and young people is high on the political and professional agenda and there is substantial change in the way that services are structured and delivered. Whilst much attention has previously been paid to the maltreatment experiences of children under the age of 11, recent research has drawn attention to the risks faced by 11-17 year olds. For example

studies of Serious Case Reviews – which are held when a child or young person dies or is seriously injured – have shown that over a fifth of such cases related to young people aged 11 and over<sup>1</sup>. Additionally, research on long term outcomes for children in cases of neglect has highlighted that as children get older outcomes are poorer and that work with young people needs to be more proactive<sup>2</sup>.

Finally, the same partnership, the University of York, The Children's Society and the NSPCC, highlighted the 'neglect of adolescent neglect' in recent research funded by the DCSF (now DfE) and the DH, under the Safeguarding Children Research Initiative. This included a guide for young people and a guide for multi agency teams<sup>3</sup>.

## Aims

The research aimed to promote improved safeguarding responses for young people aged 11-17. It explored access to, and initial responses of, services for young people with potential maltreatment issues in order to inform future policy, practice and research.

## Methods

The research consisted of four linked components:

- A comprehensive international literature review;
- A study of policy and guidance, including telephone interviews and consultation with key informants;
- A comparative study of risk assessment and decision-making about maltreatment amongst a sample of over 160 professionals in Children's Social Care Services and potential referring agencies (statutory and voluntary sectors) in 12 areas of England;
- A study of practice in four Children's Social Care Services, including data analysis of child protection referrals and subsequent actions, interviews with 24 young people, 22 social care professionals and 34 referring professionals.

1. Brandon, M. Bailey, S. Belderson, P. Gardner, R. Sidebotham, P. Dodsworth, J. Warren, C. and Black, J. (2009) Understanding serious case reviews and their impact: a biennial analysis of serious case reviews 2005-2007. DCSF Research Report, RR129. [London], Department for Children, Schools and Families (DCSF).  
2. Farmer, E. and Lutman, E. (2010) Case management and outcomes for neglected children returned to their parents: a five year follow-up study. Research Briefing, RB214. [London], Department for Children, Schools and Families (DCSF).  
3. Stein, M, Rees, G. and Hicks, L. (2009) Neglected adolescents – literature review Research Brief, London, DCSF Neglect Matters – a guide for young people about neglect; [www.nspcc.org.uk/neglectmatters](http://www.nspcc.org.uk/neglectmatters) Hicks, L. and Stein, M (2010) Neglect Matters – a multi-agency guide for professionals working together on behalf of teenagers.

# Findings

## The nature of maltreatment of young people

### *The scale of the problem*

Official statistics for England in 2008–9 show that 8,700 young people aged 10 to 15, and 430 young people aged 16 to 17, became the subject of a child protection plan. Almost a quarter of children and young people who became subject to a child protection plan were in the 10–15 age group. Actual prevalence of maltreatment of young people is not known but is likely to be much higher.

### *Definitions*

Definitions of maltreatment need to take into account young people's age and development. Parental behaviours which might be deemed abusive or neglectful for a very young child would be considered appropriate for many young people. Additionally, young people aged 11–17 may face a wider range of risks due to their social networks, lifestyles and increasing independence.

### *Context*

Much is known about the background to child maltreatment in general, but far less is known specifically about these issues for young people aged 11 to 17. There is reason to believe that contextual factors might vary with age. For example, young people are more likely to have experienced family change and some may be more likely to take on caring roles within the family.

In addition, professionals during this research raised issues related to the behaviour of young people themselves. These included: two-way violence and conflict between parents and young people, and factors related to choices that young people make – in particular risk-taking behaviours, such as drinking alcohol and taking drugs.



### *Consequences*

Recent research in the US<sup>4</sup> concluded that compared to maltreatment experienced only at a younger age, the effects of maltreatment experienced during adolescence 'had a stronger and more pervasive effect on later adjustment'. These wider effects include criminal behaviour, substance misuse and health-risking behaviours. Other research on the impact of neglectful parenting styles during adolescence also points to a range of negative outcomes in terms of education, mental health and well-being.

## Assessing risk

### *Age-related patterns*

Our survey to professionals used hypothetical scenarios to explore how the age of children and young people affected their risk assessments and likely actions. Where the child or young person was older there was the perception that the risk of long-term negative outcomes was lower, although the influence of age was not that large. This perception was supported by interviews with professionals. The effect of age was strongest

for scenarios involving supervisory neglect by parents, and emotional abuse involving isolation from peers.

### *Age-related factors*

The research provides insight into how the age of young people affects professionals' perceptions of risk:

- **First, there were indications that young people aged 11–17 were seen as more competent to deal with maltreatment, including being able to escape the situation and seek help.**
- **Second, they were perceived by some professionals as more 'resilient' – i.e. more able to cope with experiences of maltreatment.**
- **Third, they were more likely to be seen as contributing to and exacerbating the situation through their own behaviour.**
- **Fourth, young people were sometimes perceived as 'putting themselves at risk' – e.g. risk-taking behaviours and experiences within the local area.**

### *Young people's perceptions of risk*

Research with neglected teenagers has shown that young people may define maltreatment more broadly than professionals – deeming poor parenting as maltreatment, but also under-estimating the severity of parental neglect<sup>5</sup>. Research from the US also suggests that young people's own assessments of maltreatment and its severity are linked with later outcomes. This evidence underscores the importance of involving and incorporating young people's views into assessment and planning processes.

## **Responding to maltreatment of young people**

### *Making a referral*

Our research suggests that after carrying out an assessment of risk professionals are as likely to refer young people to Children's Social Care Services as younger children. However, initial perceptions of risk were found to be affected by age.

In general, the relationships between referring professionals and Children's Social Care Services staff were positive and there were some good practice examples in which social care professionals provided support to professionals who were unclear about whether a case met child protection thresholds. However, the research highlighted certain obstacles to professionals making a referral, some of which are particularly relevant to older young people.

- **First, there were issues about perceptions of the thresholds operated by Children's Social Care Services. Some professionals saw these thresholds as being dictated by resource considerations and were deterred from making a referral as they did not feel it would be acted on. For professionals who worked**

**across a number of local authorities, the task was much harder because of the variation in thresholds.**

- **Second, there were perceived to be complexities and uncertainties regarding making referrals relating to sexual relationships between young people and older men. Professionals also experienced complex ethical and professional dilemmas when young people did not want to be referred or did not want parents to know about abuse. In some cases professionals feared raising young people's expectations or putting them at further risk of harm if services were not provided.**
- **Third, across all age groups, there appeared to be more uncertainty regarding thresholds for emotional abuse and neglect; there was a lack of clarity regarding when it was appropriate to make referrals in these instances.**
- **Fourth, some professionals were concerned about the potential negative impact on their working relationship with young people and families of making a child protection referral; and this was exacerbated when it was felt that the situation may not meet the threshold requirements.**
- **Finally, resource issues involved in assessing cases and making referrals were cited within the Police – an agency which appears to make a high volume of referrals. Concerns regarding resources were also raised by professionals working in education, particularly in relation to the time implications for them of undertaking the Common Assessment Framework.**

### *Young people seeking help*

This study has also identified barriers to young people successfully seeking help, which support previous similar research:

- **First, the ability to trust and build a relationship with a consistent professional was and is, a key factor affecting disclosure of maltreatment. Young people were most likely initially to talk to a friend or family member or, in some cases, a professional who they already knew and trusted, such as a teacher.**
- **Second, young people were acutely aware of the potential impact of a disclosure of maltreatment, both for themselves and their families. This challenges the assumptions of many professionals that it is easier for young people to disclose abuse than children. Whilst young people may possess better communication skills, there are still a range of different barriers that young people need to overcome.**
- **Third, young people did not have sufficient information or knowledge about agencies in their local area. They often lacked an understanding of the roles of different professionals and therefore did not know who to approach or how to access support. Once young people had been referred to Children's Social Care Services both they and professionals reported difficulty contacting social workers. This is likely to be the result of high workloads and resource constraints.**

### *Initial responses to referrals*

Whilst there was evidence from the attitudes survey of strong links between assessments of risk and likely immediate actions, including strategy discussions and Section 47 enquiries, this was not an entirely uniform picture. In cases of emotional abuse and neglect there tended

to be a weaker link between risk assessment and actions which could lead to a lower level of response.

The research provides some evidence of age-related factors affecting Children's Social Care Services professionals' assessment and responses. There were several factors here:

- **A young person's perceived competence and resilience.**
- **Resource issues were a major factor in decision-making about initial response and could lead to cases involving young people having a lower priority and/or a slower response time.**
- **Young people, in comparison with younger children, were seen as a greater challenge to engage and work with.**

#### *Ongoing responses*

A key issue of concern for Children's Social Care Services staff was how to formulate the most effective response to referrals of young people who may be experiencing maltreatment. There was a fairly common view that the child protection process was often not the best way of responding to these young people. There were a number of reasons for this:

- **First, the process was seen as being aimed at younger children who were being hurt by someone within the family, and perceived as being less relevant in circumstances where young people were 'putting themselves at risk' or were maltreated by someone outside the family.**
- **Second, some professionals felt that it was difficult to engage young people effectively in the process for a range of reasons such as young people not wanting to be involved in child protection conferences.**



- **Third, some social work practitioners felt that the child protection process did not always allow young people sufficient opportunity to control processes, which was especially important for this age group.**
- **Finally it was not clear how effective a child protection plan could be in cases in which parents may not be committed to keeping young people in the family home – and, in some cases, were actively seeking their removal.**

Hence, many of the Children’s Social Care Services professionals felt that alternative responses to cases of maltreatment of older young people would be more effective, for example:

- **Dealing with the case through the ‘child in need’ route**
- **Pursuing multi-agency approaches including use of the Common Assessment Framework, other forms of multi-agency risk assessment or a ‘Team Around the Child’.**

This was because social work practitioners believed these alternative ways of working allowed young people more autonomy, input and control over the processes involved than child protection proceedings. In addition, lead professionals could be identified who had an existing relationship with the young person and who were therefore in a better position to engage the young person in safeguarding processes.

Our analysis of statistics from participating local authorities confirms the above findings:

Generally, across all the areas sampled, as young people get older, a referral is less likely to receive child protection and related responses.

### **Broader policy issues**

The surveys and interviews with practitioners, policy makers and others have highlighted a number of key broader issues which form an important backdrop to the practice-based issues highlighted in the study:

- **Resources and capacity are key overarching issues both within Children’s Social Care Services and also within key referring agencies. This study has thrown light on some of the difficult decisions which professionals face in attempting to prioritise their work to balance out the diverse issues and needs faced by children and young people at different ages. Our research suggests, in particular, a lack of services for young people over 14 which may deter professionals from making referrals.**
- **The need for ongoing training and professional awareness of the issues. This study highlights key differences between professionals’ perceptions of risk related to the age of children and young people and the research evidence on this issue.**

- **Issues of multi-agency working. There are signs of positive developments but the research has also suggested areas where professional collaboration could still be strengthened and an important role for Local Safeguarding Children Boards in continuing to facilitate this.**
- **Transitions of young people across services. The study has highlighted some areas where there may be gaps in the network of service provision for older young people.**
- **The research has highlighted areas where professionals do not feel clear about the legal position of young people, particularly 16- and 17-year-olds. There appear to be a number of grey areas here in terms of these young people’s status as children and as adults.**

# Implications for policy, practice and research

## Young people

- Young people often turn to their friends as the first source of advice and support when they are experiencing abuse. A young person's guide on 'what to do if a friend is being abused' needs to be developed to support young people in advising their friends and provide information about how young people can access help.
- Most of the young people we spoke to were confused about what had happened to them at different stages of the safeguarding process and why and what different professionals' roles are. Simple and clear information about the safeguarding process needs to be made available to young people who come into contact with Children's Social Care Services.
- Peers and schools are an important source of support to young people. Models such as safeguarding forums in schools, or the use of safeguarding mentors in secondary schools may help young people to identify who to speak to and support them to disclose abuse. These could work alongside the child protection leads in schools and feed their views into Local Safeguarding Children Boards.
- Young people who have been maltreated need a consistent professional with whom they can build a relationship with and contact when they need to. This requires Children's Social Care Services and others to consider the most effective way of providing this.

- A system of young people's advocates should be considered.
- Young people and their families need to be more actively involved in the child protection process and young people need to have more control over the process and information sharing. New ways of working with young people, families and the wider network around the young person may need to be developed to allow this.

## Practitioners and practice managers

- There appears to be a common professional view that the effects of maltreatment are less severe for older young people than for younger children.

This view is not, however, well supported by the limited research evidence that exists on this topic. It is important that the evidence on this issue is more effectively disseminated to practitioners and commissioners and its implications for training, practice and service provision fully considered.

- Referral routes are a key issue in relation to older young people accessing protective services. All agencies working with young people should consider the most effective means of facilitating self-referral by young people, and also of publicising services to the general population of young people and adults.



## Senior managers and policy makers

- This research has highlighted considerable diversity of approaches to the issue of young people experiencing maltreatment across different local areas. This appears to be linked to a perception that the current child protection system is not well suited to meeting the needs of older young people. Policy makers should consider a review of current alternative approaches to determine what works best for young people and attempt to bring more consistency to service provision.
- Current statistical collation and reporting on child protection cases does not facilitate a full exploration of age-related issues. More detailed age breakdowns would be helpful.
- The research suggests there needs to be more service provision for young people, particularly in the 14–17 age group that can engage them and meet their needs.

## Researchers

- More research needs to be done that follows young people through different routes of the safeguarding system in order to establish what works for young people. This would follow some young people through child protection, and explore the use of the Common Assessment Framework, the Child in Need process and Team Around the Child to establish the appropriateness of these processes for the older age group. A useful output from this would be a best practice guide on working with 11–17 year olds.
- Age and development related issues are still relatively under-explored in child maltreatment research, especially in the UK. In particular, there is a lack of UK research which seeks to understand the different contexts and outcomes of maltreatment of children and young people at different ages and stages of development.

## Further information

This three-and-a-half year study was undertaken by The Children's Society, the NSPCC and the University of York with funding from the Big Lottery Research Grants Programme.

*The summary was written by Rees, G. Gorin, S. Jobe, A. Stein, M. Medforth, R. Goswami, H.*

*The full report is available at [www.childrenssociety.org.uk/research/safeguarding](http://www.childrenssociety.org.uk/research/safeguarding)*

*Further copies of the Executive Summary can be requested by emailing [research@childsoc.org.uk](mailto:research@childsoc.org.uk)*

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