

Maltreatment and allegations of maltreatment in foster care: a review of the research

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The abuse of looked after children has been a matter of public concern for over 30 years. However, although there has been considerable attention to maltreatment in residential settings, less is known about maltreatment, including both abuse and neglect, in foster care.

Allegations of maltreatment in foster care are profoundly upsetting for the foster carers concerned and often lead to the removal of children from their care. Unfounded allegations therefore create immense stress for both carers and children. They also have serious consequences for services, as they may lead some carers to give up fostering, thus reducing the already limited supply of foster carers. In cases where such allegations are substantiated, the implications are even more serious. This review of the research was undertaken in partnership with The Fostering Network and funded by the Nuffield Foundation. It discusses the available evidence on:

- allegations of abuse and neglect by foster carers *and*
- confirmed maltreatment in foster care.



Key findings

- The evidence on the incidence and prevalence both of allegations and substantiated maltreatment is limited and sometimes conflicting. Much of the evidence comes from the different welfare context of the USA, so research findings cannot be directly extrapolated to the UK.
- Surveys of foster carers have described the devastating impact of allegations of abuse on foster carers and children. Even if unfounded, these allegations may lead to acute distress for foster carers and to placement disruption for children.

- Only two UK studies have reported on the annual incidence of allegations and confirmed maltreatment. These found that 3.5-4 per cent of foster carers were the subject of allegations in a single year and that the proportion of foster families with *substantiated* reports of maltreatment during that year was less than one per cent.
- Just three studies have provided reliable evidence on the prevalence of confirmed maltreatment. An English study reported that three per cent of a sample of fostered children had ever experienced maltreatment in foster care, but studies from the USA and Australia reported that this was the case for 18.5-19 per cent of fostered children.
- Abuse *in* foster care should be distinguished from abuse *by* foster carers. Although studies have found that foster carers were the perpetrators of abuse or neglect in some cases, in others fostered children were abused by their own families during contact visits or by other children in the foster placement. However, the proportion of incidents which involve each type of perpetrator is unclear.
- Thresholds for defining behaviours as abusive appear to be lower for foster carers than for parents. Some studies suggest that maltreatment in foster care is often a question of poor standards of care rather than gross abuse or neglect, but in relation to milder incidents the boundary between the two is often unclear. No evidence is available on the proportion of cases involving more, or less, serious maltreatment.

Background

Since the 1980s the Fostering Network and its predecessor, the National Foster Care Association, have expressed concern about the sensitive issue of allegations of abuse against foster carers. More recently this concern has been shared by government. Both unfounded allegations of maltreatment by foster carers and the related issue of actual maltreatment of children in foster care may have serious consequences for children, carers and services. Yet despite the importance of these issues, there is little awareness in the policy, practice and academic communities of the research evidence available.

This review, conducted in partnership with The Fostering Network, draws together the research evidence that exists both on allegations of abuse and confirmed maltreatment. It considers the implications of this rather limited body of evidence, focusing on studies and official reports published in the UK, North America and Australia.

Findings

The impact of allegations of maltreatment

Surveys of foster carers in the UK and USA have documented the shock, disbelief, distress, anger and isolation experienced by foster carers accused of maltreatment. These studies have drawn attention to the difficulties faced by foster carers who are the subject of unfounded allegations, the nature of the ensuing investigations and the consequences of these allegations for them and the children they foster. They reported that foster carers accused of abuse were rarely informed of the reason for the investigation, that information was not shared with them and that support was rarely provided to them during the investigation. Children who were the subject of the allegations were often removed once an allegation had been made and sometimes all other children were removed as well. Once removed, they were rarely returned to the placement, even if the allegations were subsequently deemed to be unfounded.

Assessing the extent of the problem

Variations in study design make it hard to compare the findings of different studies. It is therefore difficult to come to clear conclusions about the extent of the problem.

- Some studies take *foster carers* as the unit of analysis, reporting the total number who experience allegations and, in some cases, the number for whom allegations are substantiated. Others report on the number of *children* found to have experienced maltreatment. In a few other studies, the unit of analysis is incidents of maltreatment, but these studies do not specify how many repeat incidents occur which involve the same children or foster carers.

- Some studies consider the *prevalence* of allegations or maltreatment, reporting the total number of children or carers who have ever experienced these events, regardless of how long ago they occurred. Other studies examine the *incidence* of these events, reporting the number of cases during a specified time period, usually one year.

The incidence of allegations and of confirmed maltreatment

Estimates of the *incidence* of allegations in the UK and America indicate that the proportion of foster carers who experience allegations in any one year ranges from 2–15 per cent, which is clearly a very wide range. The only two UK studies which reported on the annual incidence of allegations, both of which were based on agency data on very large samples of foster carers in the mid- to late 1990s, suggest that the rate may be around 3.5–4 per cent.

These two studies indicated that confirmed maltreatment may be a low frequency event, reporting that the proportion of foster families with *substantiated* reports of maltreatment in a single year may be less than one per cent. Estimates of the incidence of substantiated maltreatment from American studies are generally slightly higher, ranging from 0.27–4.4 per cent of foster families, with evidence that these rates vary from year to year, as might be expected. No studies of the incidence of confirmed maltreatment were identified which used children as the unit of analysis.

The prevalence of allegations and of confirmed maltreatment

The evidence on the *prevalence* of allegations is for the most part unreliable, as most surveys of allegations had low response rates and non-representative samples of foster carers. However, a more broadly-based survey of a sample of 950 English foster carers reported that the 16 per cent of foster carers had experienced allegations at some point during their fostering careers. A study of case records on all 347 children in foster care in one Australian state, which used children as the unit of analysis, found that allegations of maltreatment had been made in relation to 32 per cent of fostered children during the course of their care careers.

The above Australian study reported that maltreatment had been substantiated in relation to 19 per cent of all children in foster care in that state, a rate which is close to the finding of an American study that 18.5 per cent of children in (non-relative) foster care had confirmed reports of maltreatment. As this evidence comes from Australia and the USA, it may not be directly comparable to patterns in the UK. Data collected from social workers in an English study suggested that the prevalence of confirmed maltreatment was much lower, at only three per cent.

Perpetrators of maltreatment

It is important to distinguish maltreatment in foster care from maltreatment by foster carers. Studies have reported that the perpetrator of abuse or neglect was the foster carer in 44–78 per cent of confirmed cases. In other cases, the children were abused by their own parents (during contact), or by other children in the placement, including their own siblings, other fostered children and older children of foster carers.

The severity of maltreatment

A number of studies have reported that, in many cases, confirmed maltreatment involves poor standards of care or one-off minor incidents, for example a carer smacking a child, rather than gross maltreatment. They suggest that the majority of cases of maltreatment in foster care may be the result of carers under stress coping poorly with children's emotional and behavioural disturbance. Nevertheless, a minority of cases have been found to concern severe abuse and neglect not associated with poor coping under stress, perpetrated by carers who are clearly unsuited to fostering. However, no studies specify the proportion of more, and less, serious cases.

Thresholds for defining poor standards of care as abusive

Several studies suggest that many behaviours defined as abusive in foster care would be unlikely to trigger investigations in the children's own families. Agency thresholds for defining inappropriate behaviour as abusive appear to be lower for foster carers than for the children's parents. However, none of these studies indicate the proportion of incidents which involve poor standards of care rather than gross maltreatment. Furthermore, in studies which report confirmed maltreatment definitions of the maltreatment/poor care are rarely provided so it is difficult to know whether different researchers, and agencies, are using the same definitions.

Implications for further research

Estimates of the incidence and prevalence of allegations vary considerably. The same is true for substantiated maltreatment. Furthermore, much of the evidence comes from abroad and we cannot be sure that fostering services operate in precisely the same ways in different welfare contexts.

- There is therefore an urgent need for an up-to-date, UK study to assess the extent of the related problems of unfounded allegations of maltreatment and of substantiated maltreatment in foster care.
- At present we do not know how many cases of confirmed maltreatment involve poor standards of care rather than gross abuse or neglect. Research is needed to examine the nature and severity of maltreatment/poor standards of care. It needs to explore where, in less serious cases, the threshold between defining behaviours either as abusive or as poor standards of care, is set by different agencies.
- There is no clear evidence on the factors associated with allegations of maltreatment in foster care. It would therefore be fruitful to explore whether children with particular histories are more likely to make allegations and the circumstances in which children, parents and others make allegations of maltreatment.
- It would also be important to investigate which factors are associated with increased risk of maltreatment. For example, does maltreatment occur more commonly where children are younger, or disabled, or where services have placed children outside a foster carer's approval range (that is, the number of children or the age range for which they have been approved as foster carers).
- Although a number of studies have investigated the views of foster carers subject to allegations, there has been relatively little attention to the views of children and social workers. Qualitative research is needed to explore the views of these two groups, both in relation to allegations of maltreatment and to actual maltreatment, including their views on poor standards of care as well as gross maltreatment.

Method of review

Searches for relevant studies were conducted by York Health Economics Consortium. Relevant databases were searched, including Caredata, Social Work Abstracts, IBSS, PsychInfo and SIGLE. The search strategies were designed to identify English language studies of allegations or confirmed maltreatment in foster care as well as more broadly-based studies of foster care which touched on these issues. Titles and abstracts identified were assessed for eligibility by the authors. Only peer-reviewed studies and official reports were included in the review. Essays and grey literature were excluded. Forward searching from bibliographies in identified journal articles was also undertaken. The studies identified were assessed against a set of quality criteria pre-defined in a review protocol. Narrative synthesis was used to assess and present the research findings.

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