Research Brief

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Safeguarding Children Across Services: Messages from research on identifying and responding to child maltreatment

Messages for professionals working in the Family Justice system

The tragic deaths of Victoria Climbié in 2000 and Peter Connelly in 2007 brought the difficulties of identifying and dealing with severe neglect and abuse sharply into public focus. These children died, following weeks and months of appalling abuse, at the hands of those responsible for caring for them. The public outcries that followed asked how the many different professionals who had seen these children in the weeks before their deaths could have failed to recognise the extent of their maltreatment.

What lessons have we learned from these and other child abuse tragedies and the subsequent programme of government-funded research designed to understand the complex and difficult challenges surrounding the effective safeguarding of children from neglect and abuse?

HEADLINE MESSAGES: the big picture

- Emotional abuse and neglect (like all forms of child maltreatment) have an extremely damaging and corrosive impact on children's long-term life chances, but only sometimes come to light through a "crisis" incident or injury.
- The impact of maltreatment on babies in utero and in the first two years of life is particularly damaging.
- *Co-existing* parental problems such as poor mental health, alcohol and substance misuse, domestic abuse (intimate partner violence) and learning disability increase the likelihood of children suffering from harm.
- "Witnessing" domestic abuse is a damaging form of emotional abuse and harms babies as young as 9 months. Pregnancy is a high risk period for the onset of domestic abuse.
- The delay in court decision-making processes is at odds with the developmental timescales and needs of young children to form healthy, loving and secure attachments to parents or carers.
- Early evidence suggests that if parents of very young or unborn babies identified as likely to suffer harm are to make the often radical changes needed to offer a nurturing home, they will have done so by the time the child is six months old.
- Adolescent neglect is the most common form of abuse in 10-15 year olds but is difficult to identify and often goes unnoticed.
- Maltreated children placed away from home, through adoption, special guardianship or long-term foster care do better than those who remain with abusive or neglectful parents and continue to suffer harm.

HEADLINE MESSAGES: calls to action

- Professionals need to ensure that children's rights to a safe and nurturing family are not overridden by parental rights to family life.
- Rapid and decisive action is needed when permanent separation is being considered particularly in the cases of very young children.
- The thresholds for initiating proceedings in the family courts need to be clearly articulated through formal discussions between directors of children's services, heads of legal departments and the Judiciary.
- Professionals making the very difficult decisions to remove children from their birth families should not always do so as a decision of last resort.
- Professionals need to avoid repeated expert assessments of parenting capacity which create further delay in decision-making and compromise children's health and development.
- Children are better safeguarded when the courts have been involved but professionals need to ensure that court decisions and/or directions are carried out.
- Professionals need to be aware of the research evidence that shows often care plans made by the court are either not fully implemented or not fully carried out, for a variety of reasons, to the detriment of children's interests;. that a significant proportion of supervision orders fail; and that a very high proportion of court mandated placements with a child's own parents break down..
- Robust monitoring, review and feedback procedures are needed to ensure that the courts are aware of the outcomes of their decisions and the impact on children's welfare.

How well do current legal processes match children's developmental timeframes?

Professionals working within the Family Justice system need to be aware of the urgency of children's developmental timeframes. Very young children are more likely to develop secure attachments to permanent carers before the age of one. If they are left too long in abusive or neglectful families whilst the decision-making process runs its course, they may suffer a double jeopardy. Their long-term wellbeing may be compromised by the far-reaching consequences of maltreatment and they may suffer from the rupturing and loss of secure attachments made with temporary carers. They will also become more difficult to place in permanent placements as they grow older. Early and decisive action is needed and acceptable timescales need to be agreed and widely disseminated.

The early evidence shows that parents who make the often radical changes needed to offer a nurturing home will have done so by the time the child is six months old. Parents who do not change within the first six months are unlikely to change within the timescale of the child concerned although they may change enough at a later date to care for their future children. Sometimes the birth of a new baby is a catalyst for change and positive changes will generally have been seen *before* that baby is born.

Evidence on key developmental periods:

- The quality and sensitivity of mother-child interaction at 6-15 weeks correlates with the future attachment relationship seen at eighteen months.
- A baby's stress response system stabilises by about the age of six months. Where babies continue to experience great stress beyond this time, elevated levels of stress hormones and accompanying hypervigilant behaviours are seen well into childhood and hamper development.
- Where children are grossly neglected (up to the age of three), the development of the social brain is impaired and social ability is undermined.
- Babies placed for adoption before their first birthdays are more likely to become securely attached to adoptive carers than those placed at a later age.

How can delays in decision-making be reduced?

The current thresholds for referral to children's social care and the family courts need to be much clearer and agreed at the most senior managerial level. Local authority legal departments are reluctant to act in neglect cases, even where there is growing evidence, without a "trigger" incident. Professionals in the Family Justice system need to have a more confident understanding of the consequences of not acting. Formal discussions are needed between directors of children's services, heads of legal departments and the Judiciary concerning appropriate thresholds for taking legal action. Where local authorities have written agreements with parents, these need to be strictly time-limited and outline clear consequences for non-compliance including the potential removal of the child from the family. Parents welcome clear guidance on what they need to do, by when, from professionals who are both "straight-talking" and sensitive.

Whilst the Children Act 1989 and human rights legislation make it clear that children are best looked after by their birth families wherever possible, this is not in the best interests of every child. Difficult decisions to remove children from their families will need to be made and not as the last resort. The evidence shows that maltreated children who are removed from their families (especially those who have suffered neglect and/or emotional abuse) do better in terms of wellbeing and stability than those who remain with or return to abusive families, and that the earlier separation occurs, the better their life chances.

It is vital that the desire to protect parents' rights does not automatically result in a fresh start or "start again" syndrome that ignores evidence of previous maltreatment and overrides the current child's rights and ongoing welfare. Early and decisive action is needed which fully takes into account the previous history of the parents concerned.

Where expert assessments of parenting capacity are carried out, they need to include how parenting problems are impacting on children's health and development. However, guidance needs to be developed for repeated expert assessments. Both courts and local authorities think that too many are being undertaken and in particular for kinship carers. Waiting lists for assessments are long and the research evidence shows that this causes further delay in the decision-making process and compromises children's welfare.

Parents who are likely to change sufficiently in order to offer a nurturing home for a child are:

- Less likely to have experienced abuse themselves (particularly sexual abuse in childhood)
- More likely to have come to terms with the removal of older children and developed sufficient insight to realize that their behaviour influenced these decisions
- More likely to have made good use of and responded well to social work and more specialist services (not simply attended or complied)
- More likely to have overcome *external* factors such as ending a relationship with a partner who abused them and/or their children
- Less likely to have had to overcome *internal* factors such as their own addiction to drugs or alcohol
- More likely to have had a defining moment of realization or "wake-up call" that they needed to make drastic changes to their behaviour to keep their child
- More likely to have changed during pregnancy or before the new baby was six months old
- More likely to have a supportive network or extended family around them

How can the court's decisions be more effectively implemented?

Children are better safeguarded when the courts have been involved, however there is evidence that their directions are not always carried out or achieved for a variety of reasons. Court decisions need to be more robust. For example, supervision orders are made rather than care orders in the hope that a less intrusive intervention will adequately safeguard children. However there is evidence that supervision orders may not provide adequate protection for children or sufficient motivation for parents to change: the findings of one study of neglected children showed that amongst 34 children supervision orders failed in over three fifths of cases. Where care orders are made, children are placed with parents as soon as possible: in fact, some children never leave home. However returns often break down: the same study found 28 of 32 children placed with their own parents broke down as the home situation deteriorated. Where care orders are made these do not always work. The same small study found that taken together, plans made during care proceedings were found not to work out in 62% of cases.

Courts need to be *routinely* made aware of the outcomes of their decisions through a robust performance monitoring procedure. This should include how often supervision orders or returns home to birth parents break down and the impact of the delay on children's welfare.

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Few of the key messages and practice implications for professionals working in the Family Justice system outlined in this guide are new. We can, however, be assured of their importance given the high quality of the research evidence. The real and very difficult challenge is how best to implement these messages to improve services and adequately safeguard children and young people.

Further details on all of the research studies in the Safeguarding Children Research Initiative and the subsequent publication, Safeguarding Children Across Services: Messages from research on identifying and responding to child maltreatment, can be found at:

http://www.education.gov.uk/researchandstatistics/research/scri

This brief was written by Debi Maskell-Graham, Research Associate, Centre for Child and Family Research, Loughborough University, with Dr Carolyn Davies, Thomas Corum Research Unit, Institute of Education, in consultation with Professor Harriet Ward, members of the Safeguarding Children Research Initiative Advisory Group and key professional and academic advisors. It is one of four briefs written for different professional groups working with children and families; the Family Justice system, health professionals working with children, adult services working with parents and children's social care.

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Safeguarding Children Across Services: Messages from research on identifying and responding to child maltreatment

Messages for health professionals working with children

Available here: https://www.education.gov.uk/publications/eOrderingDownload/DFE-RR164b.pdf

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Messages for professionals working in children's social care

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Safeguarding Children Across Services: Messages from research on identifying and responding to child maltreatment

Messages for adult services professionals working with parents:

Adult mental health, drug and alcohol misuse and domestic abuse (intimate partner violence) services

Available here: https://www.education.gov.uk/publications/eOrderingDownload/DFE-RR164d.pdf

Additional Information

The full report can be accessed at http://www.education.gov.uk/publications/

Further information about this research can be obtained from

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