

How can schools combat child neglect?

The latest research from Action for Children reports that child neglect is still a huge issue in the UK. Studies show that up to 10% of children experience neglect at some point in their lives.

Action for Children in partnership with the University of Stirling gathered evidence during 2011 from the public and professionals in a range of ways. The key findings are extremely worrying:

- 51% of responding social workers and 36% of police officers reported feeling 'powerless' to intervene in suspected cases of child neglect.
- 52% of members of the public (an increase of 8% since 2009) said they have been worried about the welfare or safety of a child they know or who is living in their area, but a third (38%) of those didn't feel worried enough to tell anyone. 94% said that people should become involved if they had concerns. One of the issues acting as a barrier to action was a concern about a lack of evidence or uncertainty about whether neglect is actually occurring. Of those who had spoken to someone, they tended to speak to partners or family, with 26% turning to social services and 19% to the police.
- Of 47 local authorities surveyed only 21 collect data about the prevalence of neglect other than required data on child protection plans.

Frontline practitioners reported that there are not enough services for neglected children and 80% of social workers think that cuts to services will make it more difficult to intervene in cases of child neglect.

In most areas information about parental mental health and/or substance misuse was not shared adequately between adult and children's services.

81% of staff in universal services (primary school teachers, pre-school and nursery staff and health professionals) have come across children they suspect have been neglected and most agree that early intervention is key to successful outcomes for children.

How professionals feel about child protection issues

Social workers and police officers were represented in the focus groups and reported feeling powerless to intervene. The main reasons given were:

- the point at which they could intervene (threshold) was too high (42% for social workers, 23% for police officers)
- the child's needs met the threshold but there were 'insufficient services' or 'insufficient resources' to act (43% and 52% respectively for social workers, 28% and 30% for police officers)

- Teachers and health visitors reported that they find it difficult to get a response to their concerns and social workers can become caught up in procedural issues.

Action for Children state that: 'The twin pressures of needing to meet a definition of seriousness and of scarce resources can result in professionals in universal services feeling that there is little point in referring families if their need is not perceived to be very high. Thus we have created a situation of greater understanding about the effects of neglect, and greater willingness to report concerns, but have constructed frustrating structural barriers to providing that help.'

The researchers heard from teachers who reported having sleepless nights worrying about children and wondering what they should do and health visitors who reported their frustration in trying to make referrals to children's social care. Children and families are described as 'bouncing' in and out of services which are only in place for a short time. Munro talks about the need to build relationships with families and the importance of early intervention but this report suggests we are still dealing with the legacy of the 1989 Children Act that made more demands on social workers for hard evidence of abuse before taking action.

Lack of resources

"Action for Children report that there are simply not enough services to deliver the early help much talked about in the Munro report and respondents expressed concerns about the present government cut backs in public services and funds suggesting that the situation is getting worse not better.

Recommendations

The report's recommendations include a call for the DfE to amend the Working Together statutory guidance to give professionals more space and time for full and proper assessments to tackle chronic child neglect. It says that as a part of the advice all new parents receive from maternity they also should be given information about the local parenting support services available to them. In line with the Munro Review it calls on the government to clarify duties for local authorities and statutory partners to provide sufficient local early help services, which it says should be funded for the long term.

So where do schools stand on the issue of neglect?

Schools stand right in the flipping middle! Education staff along with health staff are the people most likely to recognise the need for early intervention into family life. School staff and health staff make more referrals than any other agency and because they are the key universal services in children's lives they are the constant factor, the staff who are still there on the frontline when all other agencies have withdrawn.

It is essential then that school based-staff have a good solid grounding in issues relating to neglect and the effect on child development.

Schools are the only agencies in the whole of the child protection process who always have a comparable group of children. They have the same children for a considerable length of time and the intake of children for any particular school (especially in the primary years) are likely to come from about the same socio-economic group. This means that school-based staff are ideally and to a large extent uniquely placed to recognise when a child is neglected.

How can schools influence decision-making?

The child's journey through the child protection system has a number of stopping places where agencies come together to decide on action that will help to both protect the child and progress the case, the first point is referral:

- Make sure that you have all the information together when making referrals. If the referral is a second or third referral make sure that this is said at the point of referral.
- Use the words, 'In my professional judgement this constitutes neglect.'
- Be prepared for the argument that what you are seeing falls into the category of 'child in need'. There is nothing wrong with children's social care questioning your opinion, after all if we make a child protection referral we are asking children's social care to make a statutory intervention into family life, rather than asking them to offer a service that can be turned down by the family.
- Think through what you are hoping that children's social care will do. If you think an assessment is needed say so.

Make sure you have already considered whether a UNOCINI should be carried out before asking for a statutory intervention.

Case conference

Schools are expected to contribute to case conferences, both by putting in a report and by having the named person attend. Remember that the aim of putting in written reports before the conference is so that the social worker can go through all reports with parents before the conference. Knowing that parents will see your report can be daunting but it is important that the report addresses all the issues. If we skate over issues in our reports it allows the parents to think that their situation isn't serious. Reports should comment on the child's progress, attendance, strengths, and the concerns school has about the family situation.

Make sure the right person attends the conference. It should be someone from the management team, ideally the designated teacher for child protection. It must not be a person who can not commit resources to avoid delays in decision-making and

action planning. It is also a very uncomfortable position for the member of staff if they have to say, 'I will have to go back to school to check if our school can agree to that.'

If you disagree with the decision-making speak up and make sure your disagreement is recorded. The action plan drawn up at the conference is a list of agreements about who will do what and when. If you do not make your disagreement with an action plan known the conference will presume that you agree.

If you really cannot attend the conference make sure that the social worker still gets your report.

If you have information to share about one parent that is confidential to that parent and the other parent is going to be present, get in touch with the person chairing the conference and tell them about it.

If you feel fearful of the parents and are worried about your safety, get in touch with the chair and explain your concerns.

Always check the minutes, especially if you haven't attended and challenge any actions given to school that you do not agree with or if you can not commit the appropriate staff to carry out the action.

All the recommendations coming out of case conferences are just that, recommendations, the chair of the conference cannot decide the action of another agency, so it is essential that you correct any mistakes in the minutes. The only corporate decision that is made at a conference is about whether the child should be made the subject of a child protection plan.

Core groups

Core groups are set up once a child is made the subject of a child protection plan. It is essential that school reps attend core group meetings. Multi-agency working through the core group is essential in cases of neglect. Be prepared to challenge if you feel that another agency is beginning to accept lower and lower standards of care. Remember that schools are the only agency that always have a comparable group of 'like' children.

Ongoing vigilance

As this research shows that many families 'bounce' in and out of services it is essential that schools play the ongoing monitoring role. Don't be frightened to re-refer if a case is closed and problems start to resurface. Re-referral builds a picture of an ongoing issue and offers children's social care opportunity to re-assess. Keep going!

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