

Child sexual abuse: learning from case reviews

Summary of risk factors and learning for improved practice around child sexual abuse

January 2020

Introduction

Published case reviews suggest professionals are sometimes slow to identify sexual abuse as an explanation for a child's behaviour or medical presentations– particularly when other explanations are offered.

The learning from these case reviews highlights that professionals must be able to recognise and respond to sexual abuse. Professionals need to be able to work effectively within multi-agency frameworks to ensure all information is shared and acted upon via suitable processes and in a timely manner. Professional curiosity should be displayed in interactions with families, carers and other practitioners to ensure that the child's safety remain the focus and are appropriately addressed.

Reasons case reviews were commissioned

This briefing is based on case reviews published since 2017 where children were victims of sexual abuse. It summarises and highlights the learning contained in the published reports.

The children in these case reviews became the subject of reviews following:

- serious harm resulting from sexual abuse
- concerns about how agencies had acted to safeguard the child.

Key Issues

Identifying potential signs of sexual abuse

Professionals are not always equipped to identify potential signs of sexual abuse. They may overlook physical and behavioural indicators due to a focus on alternative explanations from parents and carers or health professionals, or a lack of knowledge of the child's history.

Incidents, behaviours and physical indicators may be viewed as 'one-offs' because of an incomplete understanding of the child's history. This can lead to delays in putting child protection measures in place.

High staff turnover and low staffing can mean professionals are less able to build a strong relationship with the child and carry out full assessments of parents, carers and the child's environment. This can lead to the child feeling unable to disclose, decreasing the likelihood of identifying sexual abuse.

Multi-agency working

Inefficient or ineffective multi-agency working can result in missed opportunities to safeguard children, particularly if multi-agency processes are not well embedded in local and national systems.

The processes that facilitate good multi-agency interaction are sometimes unclear or unknown to professionals and practitioners.

If information isn't shared effectively between agencies, practitioners may view events in isolation, which may delay the identification and assessment of risks and therefore the instigation of appropriate child protection actions.

Professional curiosity

Parents and carers may give explanations for behaviours, physical indicators and incidents which professionals accept without effective challenge. If professionals are not continually challenging and curious about the source of children's distress, this can lead to missed opportunities to recognise and stop sexual abuse. It may also mean that child protection arrangements are ended prematurely.

Professionals may assume that children in care are already sufficiently safeguarded, and this can lead to them not investigating concerns thoroughly.

As well as grooming children, perpetrators of sexual abuse can groom professionals into trusting or believing them. This can lead to a delay in detecting sexual abuse.

Children at higher risk of abuse

Professionals are not always aware that some children are at an increased risk of abuse or do not understand how to protect them.

Some perpetrators target vulnerable children because they perceive those children to be less able to protect themselves.

Professionals may assume a child's behaviour is due to learning difficulties or previous trauma instead of recognising the behaviour as an indicator of sexual abuse. As a result, concerns may not be fully investigated and, in some cases, disclosures may not be believed.

Professionals do not always conduct regular and thorough reviews of foster carers who may be unable to protect children or who may commit abuse themselves.

Learning for improved practice

Identify potential signs of sexual abuse

Practitioners and professionals should receive regular training to be able to identify and report signs of sexual abuse. Practitioners' confidence in recognising and naming sexual abuse should be developed across agencies.

Practitioners need to remain alert that potential of signs of sexual abuse may 'hide' behind other factors, such as neglect or domestic abuse.

Practitioners should be confident in identifying and responding to adult behaviour that might indicate a risk to children, including grooming or a reluctance or refusal to allow a child to be interviewed.

When signs of potential sexual abuse are identified, practitioners must always investigate thoroughly, even if other explanations are offered.

A child-centred approach

Practitioners should view all possible indicators of abuse together rather in isolation. This helps build a holistic picture of the child's environment and experiences.

Practitioners should take the time to build a consistent, stable and long-term relationship with the child. Practitioners should talk to the child away from parents and carers, ask pertinent questions and foster an environment where children feel safe to talk about what's happening to them.

Professionals need to be aware that children may disclose their experiences in various ways, including indirectly, behaviourally and non-verbally – such as through ambiguous statements, attention seeking or in drawings, respectively.

Professionals should investigate, record and respond to all disclosures of sexual abuse fully and accurately, to ensure the focus on sexual abuse is not lost. Actions to safeguard the child should be taken as appropriate. Safeguarding measures should not automatically be removed solely because disclosures are not corroborated by parents, carers or medical examiners.

Practitioners should not wait for a child to make a disclosure before investigating concerns about sexual abuse. Practitioners should not take a lack of disclosure from a child to mean that abuse has not occurred.

Professionals should receive support and feel confident when working with families and carers who resist outside involvement or with children and families who may have additional needs, such as learning disabilities. Practitioners must be able to maintain critical thinking in these circumstances and remain focused on the child's welfare.

Professional curiosity and challenge

Professionals need to maintain a healthy scepticism and curiosity at all times to guard against accepting alternative explanations for sexual abuse. This can particularly apply to more vulnerable children.

Professionals should challenge one another through positive, robust questioning of child protection decisions, practices and actions.

Professionals need to remain curious about the source of children's distress, behaviour or physical indicators of abuse, even if other agencies' assessments are inconclusive and agencies such as the police and health services cannot evidence sexual abuse.

Multi-agency working

Practitioners and professionals must work together to ensure that sexual abuse is identified and responded to appropriately. Children may be victims of different types of abuse simultaneously; agencies need to work together to discover sexual abuse, which may 'hide' behind other kinds of abuse, and put in place the appropriate level of support at the right time.

Where multi-agency working breaks down, professionals should use protocols for resolving professional differences.

➤ **Find out more about multi-agency working**

Foster carers

Practitioners should carry out full assessments of foster carers' ability and suitability to look after children before and throughout the placement of the child in their care, continually monitoring the care the child is receiving.

Special measures should be put in place to supervise foster carers if there are concerns about their ability to meet the needs of and protect the child.

Support for children and practitioners

The impact of sexual abuse and of any investigations on the child and on practitioners should be continuously reviewed. Long- and short-term support services tailored to individual therapeutic needs should be available for children who have experienced sexual abuse as well as practitioners working with victims of sexual abuse.

References

A list of the case reviews analysed for this briefing is available on the **NSPCC Library catalogue**.

The national case review repository makes it easier to access and share learning from published case reviews at a local, regional and national level. You can access the repository via the **NSPCC Library**.

+ More ways to help you protect children



See our **advanced child protection training courses**.



Sign up for our weekly current awareness email newsletter
nspcc.org.uk/caspar



Read more **learning from case review briefings**.

