

Protecting young children at risk of abuse and neglect

Summary

Aims

All children need protection and nurture to be able to develop and thrive, but those under five require particular support. The love and care provided by parents and caregivers lays the foundations for all future emotional, cognitive, and physical development. Sadly, many children do not receive adequate care and support. Abuse and neglect in the earliest years of a child's life have been shown to have severe detrimental impacts on a child's immediate well-being and development, as well as their life chances and outcomes well into adulthood (Wilkinson and Bowyer 2017).

This summary presents the key learning and points for discussion arising from the second review in our *Changing face of early childhood* series. The review explores **changing patterns of abuse and**

neglect in early childhood over the last two decades. Our aims are to:

- Highlight key insights from work the Nuffield Foundation has funded in order to increase understanding of how outcomes for children at risk of abuse and neglect can be improved through changes to policy and practice.
- Explore the implications of current changes, including the impact of COVID-19, on young children's lives now and in the future.
- Set these new insights in the context of existing evidence—we do this by synthesising and critically appraising a large and complex body of evidence, highlighting connections and tensions as well as gaps and uncertainties.



Key learning

We know more about outcomes for young children at risk of abuse and neglect than we did 20 years ago, but much is still unknown.

Outcomes for children in the child welfare system are generally less favourable than for other children. These outcomes are often shaped by a combination of structural and societal factors (such as exposure to poverty and changing welfare systems) as well as child and family-related issues.

However, we still know very little about the early outcomes of **children under five** in these systems, including early educational progress, and even less about their early social emotional development compared to the wider child population. National data is still not collected on attendance at early years settings by looked-after children. To many, this may seem like an administrative or technical issue. However, until information is collected on who is (and importantly, who is not) attending early years settings, it is difficult to identify the true scale of the issue and design effective policy to help address this ([Mathers et al. 2016](#)).

Changing expectations and practice.

A larger and growing proportion of families are being referred to services because of emotional abuse and neglect compared to 20 years ago. This raises important questions as to whether we are seeing increased awareness and more/better reporting and recording, risk-averse social work practice, or whether there has been an actual increase in emotional abuse and

neglect owing to, for example, increased financial pressures on families, or reduced and fragmented preventative services—or, more likely, a mixture of all of these factors ([Trowler and Leigh 2018](#); [Care Crisis Review 2018](#); [Hood et al. 2020](#); [Curtis et al. 2019](#)).

It remains unclear whether different or compounded risks are being identified, or if the same behaviours are regarded as riskier to children than they would have been previously.

Reduction in preventative services.

As budgets have tightened, services designed to support families have been cut ([Britton, Farquharson, and Sibieta 2019](#); [Kelly et al. 2018](#); [Social Care Wales 2020](#)). Statutory and acute services (such as provision for children in care) have been protected at the expense of targeted preventative services ([National Audit Office \(NAO\) 2019](#)). Overall, we see statutory services and acute services for children at risk largely protected and a hollowing out of the middle—the services that help identify and support families and young children who are under pressure and struggling. While acute services are also taking up larger proportions of children's social care funding in Wales, cuts to spending on preventative services have been much less severe.

We have also seen a shift to 'late intervention' in the child welfare system—that is, a greater tendency to use child protection procedures and care for a greater proportion of referrals ([Hood et al. 2020](#)).

More young children and newborns are in some form of state protection.

We now know that the rate of children ‘born into care proceedings’ more than doubled in England and Wales between 2008 and 2017 ([Broadhurst et al. 2018](#); [Alrouh et al. 2019](#)).¹

In 2016/17, some 2,500 newborn babies were in care proceedings at birth in England because they were thought to be at risk of significant harm. We know this an intergenerational issue; around half of these babies are born to mothers who were themselves a teenager when they first became a mother, and around half of the mothers will have had a child taken into care before.

Variation and disproportionality in the child welfare system.

The chance of experiencing a child welfare intervention (becoming looked-after, or a child in need, or being on a protection plan) is not experienced equally by all families. Socio-economic circumstances, local area deprivation and ethnicity intersect to influence the likelihood of a child coming into state protection ([Bywaters et al. 2020](#)). Children are more likely to be considered ‘at risk’ if they live in poorer areas. This relationship appears stronger for younger children.

However, we know that there are large and significant differences in rates of intervention by ethnic groups—urgent attention needs to be paid by policy makers and researchers to understand key issues (e.g. what can we learn from communities that have lower rates than others) and to identify areas requiring action ([Bywaters et al. 2019](#)).

There are also significant variations in the way different local authorities and

courts apply the law relating to abuse and neglect ([Harwin et al. 2019](#); [Bilson 2018](#)). While each local authority is unique, analysis has shown that more deprived local authorities have higher levels of demand, and therefore tend to do more screening and rationing. Less deprived local authorities tend to have more resources relative to demand, and therefore use statutory interventions more readily ([Hood et al. 2020](#)).

Fragmented wider support for young children and their families.

Research suggests that evidence-informed interventions at the right time in early childhood can protect children and support their families to help them thrive ([Allen 2011](#); [Molloy, Barton, and Simms 2017](#)). When offered as a holistic, ongoing package of support across agencies (e.g. across children’s social care and adult support services), early help has the power to prevent abuse and neglect, or ameliorate its impact ([Wilkinson and Bowyer 2017](#)). However, the diversification of early help funding and provision around children’s centres has meant that there is significant variation in local offers. The Family Hub initiative represents the latest attempt to coordinate local family, health, and education support for children and their families. There is however limited national data on the effectiveness of existing family hubs, the services that they provide, how they are organised, and how families use them ([Lewing, Stanford, and Redmond 2020](#)).

We have also seen evidence that universal and targeted support services often do not work together in a coherent way to ensure both offers are reaching the children and parents who need them

1 Infants subject to care proceedings at less than one week old.

the most (Children's Commissioner for England 2020a). In an ideal system these services—health, social care, wider social supports (e.g. the Troubled Families Programme), and early childhood education and care—would be integrated. In reality, however, the siloed approach to service provision means that these services are treated as independent bodies, and as a result many families continue to fall through the gaps.

To truly support children at risk a holistic cross-governmental framework is needed—social work and family justice are only one part of the solution. Recent programmes, such as the Big Lottery Fund's Better Start initiatives, have attempted to coordinate services to better support families with young children and are being delivered

in a number of trial areas across England (National Lottery Community Fund 2020).

Increased pressures on children at risk and services during the first (March 2020) lockdown.

Usual pathways for referring children to services were significantly disrupted during the first UK lockdown, meaning children at risk of abuse and neglect may have been missed. These issues appear to be even more acute for infants and babies born in the pandemic, with children's centres closing and health and GP check-ups coming via video link or telephone. Family court hearings and child protection conferences moved to a remote or hybrid format, with professionals and parents reporting concerns about fairness and the ability to practice humanely.

Points for discussion

A large and growing number of young children and newborns are known to services and taken into care. Meanwhile, a significant number of under-fives in vulnerable households are not known to the child welfare system. **There is ongoing debate as to whether too many children are being taken into state protection, or whether too many are being missed.**

Before any semblance of consensus can be reached on this issue, individual-level data must be improved on child need and maltreatment. Currently, estimates of abuse and neglect are taken from retrospective surveys or extrapolated from small-scale studies,

while administrative data relies on broad categories of abuse and neglect, and holds very little information about a child's wider circumstances (Nuffield FJO 2020). Without more granular data, it is difficult to confidently estimate whether too many or too few children are known to these systems, let alone whether the *right* children are known to them. To truly understand who the children at risk are, we need more research on maltreated children in population-representative cohort studies, rather than solely relying on reports about officially registered cases, which are often a highly biased subset, and often only the tip of the iceberg.²

2 The Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) has recently outlined plans for a new early life cohort study, which will focus on 'sub-groups, including those which are traditionally underrepresented in studies of this kind and/or are harder to reach' (ESRC 2020).

A natural consequence of blunt data, and variable practice and thresholds, is that two children can have similar levels of need, but one will be in care and the other will not. Conversely, two children in care who appear to be similar from the data can actually have very different lives and needs.

As a society we are still stuck trying to answer the following question: when it comes to abuse and neglect, is the state intervening too little or too much? The answer may be ultimately that it is doing both. Different state agencies appear to not be doing enough for some children at risk, and too much for others—largely because of weaknesses in data, missed signals of risk, systematic risk aversion, and blunt measures of overcompensation.

Is this even the right question to be posing? Should society and services instead be focusing on whether different state agencies are intervening in the right way? Is the current model of protection the best way of preventing harm and promoting

children and family outcomes? In addition to needing more data on child need and maltreatment, we also need better information on how children and families experience these services—do they help solve the underlying problems? This raises more fundamental questions about whether we are right as a society to focus on social work interventions as the main or only way to address the increasing challenges to early childhood.

When we consider the outcomes for children who have experienced maltreatment it is difficult not to conclude that the current system of child protection and support may need to be reevaluated.

Does the child welfare system focus too much on keeping a small cohort of children alive, and not enough on helping them (and a wider group of vulnerable children who do not reach the same thresholds) to be happy, do well in life, and make the transitions to succeeding in adulthood?

The review's authors are Jordan Rehill and Carey Oppenheim. The full review is available to download from: www.nuffieldfoundation.org/publications/protecting-young-children-at-risk-abuse-neglect

Inline references underlined in green are those funded by the Nuffield Foundation. A complete list of references can be found in the full review.

We value input and feedback on the series as it progresses and the responses we receive will inform the concluding review. You can provide feedback via our website: www.nuffieldfoundation.org/contact/feedback-changing-face-of-early-childhood-series

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