

# Information Sheet - Abuse of Children

## Children

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Many children, especially some of the most vulnerable children and those at greatest risk of social exclusion, will need early co-ordinated help services from health agencies such as GPs and health visiting, educational establishments such as schools and colleges, Children's Centres, local authority children's social care, the private, voluntary, community and independent sectors, including youth justice services. Some services will be provided as universal services whilst others may be more targeted to meet specific needs, whatever the circumstances of the child:

All agencies and professionals should:

- Be alert to potential indicators of abuse or neglect;
- Be alert to the risks which individual abusers, or potential abusers, may pose to children;
- Share and help to analyse information so that an assessment can be made of the child's needs and circumstances;
- Contribute to whatever actions are needed to safeguard and promote the child's welfare;
- Take part in regularly reviewing the outcomes for the child against specific plans;
- Work co-operatively with parents, unless this is inconsistent with ensuring the child's safety.

These procedures are based on the [Working Together to Safeguard Children Guidance](#) which sets out what should happen in any local area when a child or young person is believed to be in need of support. Effective safeguarding arrangements should aim to meet the following two key principles:

- Safeguarding is everyone's responsibility: for services to be effective, each individual and organisation should play their full part; and
- A child-centred approach: for services to be effective, they should be based on a clear understanding of the needs and views of children.

Working Together to Safeguard Children defines Safeguarding as:

- Protecting children from maltreatment;

- Preventing impairment of children's health or development;
- Ensuring that children grow up in circumstances consistent with the provision of safe and effective care; and
- Taking action to enable all children to have the best outcomes.

## **The Concept of Significant Harm**

Some children are in need because they are suffering, or likely to suffer, significant harm. The **Children Act 1989** introduced the concept of significant harm as the threshold that justifies compulsory intervention in family life in the best interests of children, and gives local authorities a duty to make enquiries (Section 47) to decide whether they should take action to safeguard or promote the welfare of a child who is suffering, or likely to suffer, significant harm.

Additionally, a Court may only make a Care Order or Supervision Order in respect of a child if it is satisfied that:

- The child is suffering, or is likely to suffer, significant harm; and
- The harm, or likelihood of harm, is attributable to a lack of adequate parental care or control (Section 31).

In addition, 'harm' is defined as the ill treatment or impairment of health and development. This definition was clarified in section 120 of the Adoption and Children Act 2002 (implemented on 31 January 2005) so that it may include 'impairment suffered from seeing or hearing the ill treatment of another' for example, where there are concerns of domestic violence and abuse.

There are no absolute criteria on which to rely when judging what constitutes significant harm. Consideration of the severity of ill-treatment may include the degree and the extent of physical harm, the duration and frequency of abuse and neglect, the extent of premeditation, and the presence or degree of threat, coercion, sadism and bizarre or unusual elements.

Each of these elements has been associated with more severe effects on the child, and/or relatively greater difficulty in helping the child overcome the adverse impact of the maltreatment.

Sometimes, a single traumatic event may constitute significant harm (e.g. a violent assault, suffocation or poisoning). More often, significant harm is a compilation of significant events, both acute and longstanding, which interrupt, change or damage the child's physical and psychological development.

Some children live in family and social circumstances where their health and development are neglected. For them, it is the corrosiveness of long-term neglect, emotional, physical or sexual abuse that causes impairment to the extent of constituting significant harm.

Sometimes 'significant harm' refers to harm caused by one child to another (which may be a single event or a range of ill treatment), which is generally referred to as 'peer on peer abuse.'

## **Definitions of Child Abuse and Neglect**

The following definitions are based on those identified in Working Together to Safeguard Children and Keeping Children Safe in Education:

### **Abuse**

A form of maltreatment of a child. Somebody may abuse or neglect a child by inflicting harm or by failing to act to prevent harm. Children may be abused in a family or in an institutional or community setting by those known to them or, more rarely, by others (e.g. via the internet). They may be abused by an adult or adults or another child or children.

### **Physical Abuse**

Physical abuse may involve hitting, shaking, throwing, poisoning, burning or scalding, drowning, suffocating, or otherwise causing physical harm to a child.

Physical harm may also be caused when a parent fabricates the symptoms of, or deliberately induces illness in a child;

### **Emotional Abuse**

Emotional abuse is the persistent emotional maltreatment of a child such as to cause severe and persistent effects on the child's emotional development, and may involve:

- Conveying to children that they are worthless or unloved, inadequate, or valued only insofar as they meet the needs of another person;
- Imposing age or developmentally inappropriate expectations on children. These may include interactions that are beyond the child's developmental capability, as well as overprotection and limitation of exploration and learning, or preventing the child participating in normal social interaction;
- Seeing or hearing the ill-treatment of another e.g. where there is domestic violence and abuse;
- Serious bullying, causing children frequently to feel frightened or in danger;

- Exploiting and corrupting children.

Some level of emotional abuse is involved in all types of maltreatment of a child, though it may occur alone.

## **Sexual Abuse**

Sexual abuse involves forcing or enticing a child or young person to take part in sexual activities, not necessarily involving a high level of violence, whether or not the child is aware of what is happening. The activities may involve physical contact, including assault by penetration (e.g. rape or oral sex) or non-penetrative acts such as masturbation, kissing, rubbing and touching outside of clothing.

Sexual abuse includes non-contact activities, such as involving children in looking at, including online and with mobile phones, or in the production of, pornographic materials, watching sexual activities or encouraging children to behave in sexually inappropriate ways or grooming a child in preparation for abuse (including via the internet). Sexual abuse is not solely perpetrated by adult males. Women can also commit acts of sexual abuse, as can other children.

In addition; Sexual abuse includes abuse of children through sexual exploitation. Penetrative sex where one of the partners is under the age of 16 is illegal, although prosecution of similar age, consenting partners is not usual. However, where a child is under the age of 13 it is classified as rape under s5 **Sexual Offences Act 2003**.

## **Neglect**

Neglect is the persistent failure to meet a child's basic physical and/or psychological needs, likely to result in the serious impairment of the child's health or development.

Neglect may occur during pregnancy as a result of maternal substance misuse, maternal mental ill health or learning difficulties or a cluster of such issues. Where there is domestic abuse and violence towards a carer, the needs of the child may be neglected.

Once a child is born, neglect may involve a parent failing to:

- Provide adequate food, clothing and shelter (including exclusion from home or abandonment);
- Protect a child from physical and emotional harm or danger;
- Ensure adequate supervision (including the use of inadequate care-givers);
- Ensure access to appropriate medical care or treatment.

It may also include neglect of, or unresponsiveness to, a child's basic emotional, social and educational needs.

These definitions are used when determining significant harm and children can be affected by combinations of maltreatment and abuse, which can be impacted on by for example domestic violence and abuse in the household or a cluster of problems faced by the adults.

In addition, research analysing Serious Case Reviews has demonstrated a significant prevalence of domestic abuse in the history of families with children who are subject of Child Protection Plans. Children can be affected by seeing, hearing and living with domestic violence and abuse as well as being caught up in any incidents directly, whether to protect someone or as a target. It should also be noted that the age group of 16 and 17 year olds have been found in recent studies to be increasingly affected by domestic violence in their peer relationships.

It should therefore be considered in responding to concerns that the Home Office definition of domestic violence and abuse (2013) is as follows:

"Any incident or pattern of incidents of controlling, coercive or threatening behaviour, violence and abuse between those aged 16 or over, who are or have been intimate partners or family members regardless of gender and sexuality.

This can encompass, but is not limited to, the following types of abuse:

- Psychological;
- Physical;
- Sexual;
- Financial;
- Emotional.

**Controlling behaviour is:** a range of acts designed to make a person subordinate and/or dependent by isolating them from sources of support, exploiting their resources and capacities for personal gain, depriving them of the means needed for independence, resistance and escape and regulating their everyday behaviour.

**Coercive behaviour is:** an act or a pattern of acts of assault, threats, humiliation and intimidation or other abuse that is used to harm, punish, or frighten their victim."

## **Potential Risk of Harm to an Unborn Child**

In some circumstances, agencies or individuals are able to anticipate the likelihood of significant harm with regard to an expected baby (e.g. where there is information known about domestic violence, parental substance misuse or mental ill health).

These concerns should be addressed as early as possible before the birth, so that a full assessment can be undertaken and support offered to enable the parent/s (wherever possible) to provide safe care to the baby.