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Young children suffering, or likely to suffer significant harm: Experiences on entering education

Young Children Suffering, or Likely to Suffer Significant Harm: Experiences on Entering Education

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INTRODUCTION

This is the second report from a prospective, longitudinal study that is tracing the decision-making processes that have influenced the life pathways of a cohort of very young children who were identified as suffering, or likely to suffer, significant harm before their first birthdays. Their experiences from birth to age three have been charted elsewhere (Ward, Brown and Westlake, 2012); this report explores their progress between the ages of three and five, with particular emphasis on their experiences on entering education.

KEY FINDINGS

- At identification, almost all the 37 children (91%) appeared to be at severe, high or medium risk of suffering future harm. By the time they were three, almost three quarters (25:71%) of them had appeared to be adequately safeguarded.

- By the time the children were five:

    - ten (27%) were permanently separated from birth parents, but four were in fragile or poor quality placements;
    - thirteen (35%) were adequately safeguarded and living with birth parents who had apparently succeeded in sustaining positive changes for five years;
    - fourteen (38%) were inadequately safeguarded and living with birth parents[1].

- Four (4/37:11%) children had never been adequately safeguarded and had lived at home at severe or high risk of future harm throughout the first five years of their lives.

[1] Ten of these 14 cases were open to children's social care at around the children's fifth birthdays.

- Six children, who were considered to be adequately safeguarded and living at home by the time of their third birthday, were no longer safeguarded at home by their fifth birthday. The mothers of all of these children had either returned to violent partners or formed a new abusive relationship.

- Ten (10/31:32%) children were showing evidence of emotional and behavioural difficulties of sufficient severity to warrant referral for clinical support. This is three times the prevalence found in normative populations, and was expected to have a major impact on children's experiences at school.

- Although there was evidence of the growing impact of abuse and neglect on the children's life chances, no children were separated from birth parents between the ages of three and five and no new legal orders were made.

- Most nurseries and schools adopted a *child and family welfare* approach, regarding it as their role to safeguard children from harm both at home and at school. Those that adopted an *educational attainment* approach focused more on achieving high academic standards and safeguarding children within the school.

- In the face of a perceived failure of social care to respond adequately to their referrals, many schools had used their budgets imaginatively to nurture very vulnerable children. Sample children at high or severe risk of future harm often received exceptional levels of support from individual teachers.

- Although children were likely to benefit from these temporary and informal support programmes in school, when delivered in isolation from inter-agency planning processes for the child these risked masking deteriorating home circumstances and making appropriate and timely social work decisions less likely.

BACKGROUND

The overall objective of the study is to collect evidence which supports decisions concerning which children require permanent out of home placements (such as adoption) and which can safely remain with birth parents. The focus on education is a response to the widespread expectation that, from about the time the children were three, social workers would be able to withdraw their support on the grounds that their welfare would be monitored by staff in nurseries and schools.

AIMS

The aims of this stage of the study were:

- to explore schools' and early years providers' perceptions of their role in safeguarding children and consider those factors most likely to facilitate inter-agency working between education and children's social care staff;

- to monitor the children's progress through the Foundation Stage to facilitate further exploration of the long-term impact of professional decisions made in the early years on children's subsequent life chances;

- to explore the need for, and the availability of, enrichment programmes, designed to help children overcome the consequences of abuse and neglect at this early stage in their school careers.

METHODOLOGY

The study took place in ten local authorities and focused on a subset of 37 of the original sample of 57 infants identified before their first birthdays as suffering or likely to suffer significant harm and now aged five. The study used a mixed methods design: quantitative data concerning referrals, decision-making, assessments, risk and protective factors within the household, services and court involvement were collected from social work case files. Data concerning children's emotional and behavioural difficulties were collected from both parents and teachers, using the Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire (Goodman 1997). Qualitative data concerning parents' changing circumstances and children's progress were collected from in-depth interviews held with birth parents as near as possible to the children's fourth and fifth birthdays.

FINDINGS

The small number of children in the fifth year follow-up sample and the uneven way in which attrition affected families with certain characteristics rather than others, indicate that the findings should be approached with caution. They should be tested out with a larger, less biased, group of children and parents to assess their reliability and generalisability to a wider population.

The children's position at birth and at age three

At the time at which these children were identified as suffering, or being likely to suffer significant harm, almost all the 37 (91%)[2] appeared to be at severe, high or medium risk of suffering future harm because of a combination of factors, largely relating to parents' problems with alcohol and substance misuse, domestic violence and poor mental health. By the time they were three, almost three quarters (25:71%) had appeared to be adequately safeguarded, either because they were permanently separated (seven children) or because they were living with parents who had successfully overcome their difficulties and were now able to offer a nurturing home (18 children). Nevertheless, just under a quarter of the children (8: 23%) had remained with parents who appeared unable or unwilling to address their children's needs: these children were considered to be inadequately safeguarded[3].

The children's position at age five

By the time the children were five, the picture was not so positive. There was still a substantial group of 12 children (12/37: 35%) who were living with parents who had been able to make significant changes to adverse behaviour patterns and had sustained them now for five years. These children were considered to have been adequately safeguarded throughout all, or almost all, of their lives: their parents had all made substantial changes before their children were six months old. However, it was no longer possible to assume that those children who had been permanently separated were adequately safeguarded: four of the

[2] These figures differ from those in the earlier report because of attrition from the sample (see Chapter One of the main report for further details).
[3] Five of these cases were open to children's social care at around the time of these children's third birthdays.

seven kinship placements were showing signs of increasing difficulties, either because relatives were unable to provide an adequate standard of care, or because they were struggling to manage children's considerable behavioural problems with insufficient (or sometimes non-existent) support from children's social care, CAMHS, or other agencies. Moreover, over a third of the sample (14: 38%) were now living at home and considered at medium, high or severe risk of suffering future harm; these children had either never been fully safeguarded (eight children, including four who had lived at home at severe or high risk of future harm throughout the first five years of their lives) or were no longer safeguarded while living with birth parents (six children). This latter group of six children were considered to have been adequately safeguarded by the time of their third birthdays but were all living with mothers who had since either returned to violent partners, or had moved on from one abusive relationship to another one[4].

Circumstances had either not improved or had deteriorated for thirteen children living with birth parents at the age of five, by which time eight were classified as at high or severe risk of suffering future harm[5]. Given that attrition disproportionately affected children in this group, the incidence of such cases may well be higher in a less biased sample.

Children's social care involvement

Ten of the sample children who were living at home at around the time of their fifth birthdays had their cases open to children's social care. These open cases included: three children who were the subjects of children in need plans; six who were the subjects of child protection plans; and one child who was the subject of a care order under placement with parent regulations. However, only three of these children's cases had remained open throughout the period between their third and fifth birthdays; the cases of seven children had been closed when they were three and had since been re-opened. A referral had been made for one additional child between his third and fourth birthday, but had, however, resulted in no further action. No new legal orders were made for any of the sample children between ages three and five and only one child remained the subject of a care order throughout this period.

Evidence of emotional and behavioural difficulties at age five

Scores on the parent-completed Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire indicated that, at the age of five, almost half of the children (15/31: 48%)[6] were showing evidence of emotional and behavioural difficulties, ten (10/31:32%) of them of sufficient severity to warrant referral for clinical support. The prevalence is three times that which one would expect in a normative population, and is closely related to these children's experience of abuse and neglect. Emotional and behavioural problems included extremely aggressive behaviour towards adults and other children, a constant need for reassurance and self- harming behaviours.

Although there was evidence of deteriorating home circumstances in a number of cases and of the growing impact of abuse and neglect on children's life chances, there was little evidence of corresponding, proactive social work intervention. Ten of the 14 children living at home and inadequately safeguarded had open social care case files on their fifth birthdays, but the majority had been closed when they were three. No

[4] Ten of these 14 cases were open to children's social care.
[5] These eight cases were all open to children's social care.
[6] It was not possible to collect parent-completed SDQ data for six children because the interviews were sensitive or difficult to conduct, or undertaken with a non-resident parent.

children were permanently separated during this period, and no new legal orders were made. While some families benefited through accessing Sure Start children's centre services when their needs were less intensive, there was no evidence of attempts to provide planned programmes that co-ordinated the efforts of a range of agencies.

The role of the school in responding to abuse and neglect

From about the time the sample children were three, social workers had expressed the view that they would be able to withdraw their support once children entered nursery and primary school. Given the evidence of ongoing abuse and neglect, it was particularly important to explore the role that schools and teachers played in safeguarding these children and promoting their welfare.

The majority of nurseries and primary schools participating in this study adopted a *child and family welfare* approach and recognised that they had an important role to play in safeguarding children from harm both at school and also at home. A smaller number had adopted an *educational attainment* approach, focusing greater attention on achieving high academic standards and safeguarding children *within* the school. Schools which had adopted the *child and family welfare* approach were more likely to have developed ways of working with children and families with additional needs, including those where there were concerns relating to abuse and neglect. Teachers in these schools were also passionate about doing so. Consequently, school had often become a place of sanctuary for the children in the sample, and for many of their peers in similar circumstances. However interviews with teachers indicate that a lack of support and collaboration with other agencies, especially children's social care, made it difficult for them to sustain this role. Concerns focused on: insufficient acknowledgement of the role they play in safeguarding children; insufficient weight given to teachers' concerns by children's social care; unreasonably high thresholds for social care intervention, particularly in neglect and emotional abuse cases; inadequate feedback and advice about referrals; insufficient, timely information about individual families, particularly when children were looked after away from home.

Such concerns had led some schools to mistrust children's social care and they influenced referral practices. Because schools anticipated that services and support would not be forthcoming, particularly for emotional abuse and neglect cases, many schools had developed their own ways of working with children and families with additional needs. In these schools budgets were used imaginatively to make school a welcoming place for very vulnerable children; in numerous instances children who had been identified as at high or severe risk of suffering significant harm according to the research criteria received exceptional levels of support from individual teachers. Undoubtedly these arrangements served to safeguard these children, and were likely to have lasting benefit for their future wellbeing.

However, intensive support provided by a school or individual teacher was rarely part of a multi-agency plan for the child that could be sustained once a child moved to another school, or indeed another class within a school. The study also raises concerns that, in the absence of effective channels of communication between schools and other agencies and without the support of a coherent strategic plan at a local authority level, the nurturing environment provided at the Foundation Stage may not be sustained when children enter Key Stage One. A wealth of research evidence indicates that delays in decisions to remove children from abusive families can compromise their welfare and result in costly care experiences with very poor outcomes (see Ward, Holmes and Soper 2008; Wade *et al.* 2011). However nurturing they may be, when undertaken in isolation from the work of other agencies, temporary and informal support programmes in schools may also mask a deterioration in children's home circumstances and therefore delay decisions concerning removal to the point at which children are increasingly unlikely to benefit from placement in local authority care and are no longer likely to find an adoptive home.

IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICY AND PRACTICE

Planning, delivery and co-ordination of interventions

The findings provide further evidence of the importance of early, decisive and effective interventions when children are identified as suffering, or being likely to suffer, significant harm. The children in this study were all identified as being harmed before their first birthdays. Four of them (4/37: 11%) have now suffered substantial, ongoing abuse and neglect throughout the first five years of their lives. Their development may well have been compromised by early decisions to leave them in very damaging circumstances in the unrealistic hope that parents would be able to overcome adverse behaviour patterns sufficiently to provide a nurturing home.

However, although permanent separation might have been the most appropriate course of action for a small number of children, in other families the risk of children suffering harm might have been substantially reduced had appropriate, effective interventions been available for both parents and children. Appropriate evidence based programmes, such as Parents Under Pressure and the Enhanced Triple P-Positive Parenting Programme, are both currently being trialled in the UK (see Davies and Ward, 2012). Where families have entrenched and complex needs, the findings emphasise the importance of providing long-term packages of support, with clear arrangements for stepping up to intensive levels of intervention from social workers and other professionals in areas such as mental health and substance misuse at certain periods, and stepping down to less intensive, targeted or universal interventions when problems are less evident. Such packages of support need to be well co-ordinated and planned on an inter-agency basis, and parents need to be carefully introduced to them.

Increasing demands on children's social care, greater numbers of children entering the care system and an intense shortage of foster and adoptive placements, will inevitably result in increasing pressures to keep children within their birth families or return them from care. However, neglected and abused children will not be adequately safeguarded at home unless more effective services are provided and better co-ordinated between agencies.

Poverty is not a cause of maltreatment, but exposure can exacerbate the risk factors that render abuse and neglect more likely. A number of parents were struggling with the consequences of living on a long-term basis on inadequate incomes in impoverished and often dangerous neighbourhoods. As the current challenging economic situation continues, policy makers need to be mindful that these factors are likely to increase the pressures on safeguarding services.

A third of those parents who appeared to have adequately safeguarded their children for the first three years were no longer doing so two years later. Some children's circumstances had substantially deteriorated before they were re-referred and/or their social care case files were re-opened. These findings emphasise the importance of following up and evaluating progress to check it is being sustained and where necessary providing low levels of support for parents who have apparently overcome entrenched problems.

Such support is particularly necessary for women who have extricated themselves from violent and abusive relationships. Poor self- esteem and loneliness made them vulnerable to re-establishing a relationship with a perpetrator or moving on to another, equally abusive partner. The adverse impact that exposure to domestic violence has on the development of children needs to be better understood and acknowledged.

There is an urgent need to develop evidence based programmes to address the needs of both victims and perpetrators.

Exposure to abuse and neglect had an adverse impact on the emotional and behavioural development of at least half the children from a very early age. Yet both parents and carers found it extremely difficult to access appropriate specialist support from CAMHS and other agencies. The lack of accessible, effective support for children in such circumstances needs to be urgently addressed, as delays are likely to further compromise their development.

The role of schools

The role of schools in the safeguarding agenda needs to be better acknowledged. Children's social care should give more weight to their concerns, particularly in cases of neglect and emotional abuse where social workers can become inured to its signs. This evidence should be used when children's social care is deciding whether referrals should proceed to further action and setting the level of intervention where services are provided.

Nursery and primary schools can and do provide very valuable, intensive nurturing to extremely vulnerable children. However, at present these initiatives can often be short-term and informal. There is a danger of them ending abruptly when a child or staff member moves on. Moreover, poor communication and co-ordination with the work of other agencies, including children's social care, at both individual and strategic levels can undermine the value of such programmes. There is a danger that they will temporarily mask the level of abuse and neglect present in a family so that parents' needs are not fully addressed and opportunities for children's social care to intervene (including through timely separation) are lost.

Better co-ordination between education and children's social care might be achieved by embedding social workers within the services offered by schools to vulnerable children and families and by ensuring that schools have a qualified social worker as their named point of contact from whom to seek advice about safeguarding issues. This is particularly relevant for children who do not have an allocated social worker but where their school identify that they have additional support needs. Where children have a social worker, it is crucial that they and the school work closely together according to the agreed plan in order to improve the child's outcomes. Initiatives by the police to alert primary schools to incidents of domestic violence could also be valuable, although protocols concerning confidentiality need to be clarified and observed.

Wider discussion needs to be held concerning the most appropriate role for schools in safeguarding children. At present the *Educational Attainment* approach and the *Child and Family Welfare* approach appear to be mutually exclusive alternatives, whereas optimal results might be achieved if they were brought more closely together and were seen to overlap comprehensively.

Looked after children

Primary schools and nurseries need up to date information about their children in order to respond appropriately to their needs. Failure on the part of children's social care to notify a school that a child has become looked after makes it harder for teachers to understand and respond appropriately to their needs.

More rigorous assessment of kinship carers is necessary, as was also evident in our earlier report from this study (Ward *et al.* 2012) and from our previous study of babies and very young children in care (Ward, Munro and Dearden, 2006). However, where kinship carers can meet children's needs, they may well provide the best option for children who cannot live at home (Farmer and Moyers, 2008; Hunt, Waterhouse and Lutman, 2008) but inadequate levels of both financial and emotional support, and insufficient help in addressing children's often extensive emotional and behavioural difficulties risk damaging the stability of these placements. This is an issue that needs to be urgently addressed.

CONCLUSION

Most of the sample children are now approaching their sixth birthdays. They are not babies any longer; nor are they any more the youngest and most vulnerable members of their families, for thirteen now have younger siblings. They are no longer the youngest children in school, for they have left the Foundation Years and moved on to Key Stage One. They are becoming more independent and monitored less at home and at school. There is already some evidence of less intensive social work activity (see also Holmes and McDermid, 2012); it would be valuable to explore whether, as they grow older, the intensive interventions provided by some schools shifts to other, younger children and if so, what compensatory support is then offered to those in middle childhood.

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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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