

Report summary

Ages of concern: learning lessons from serious case reviews

A thematic report of Ofsted's evaluation of serious case reviews from 1 April 2007 to 31 March 2011

This thematic report covers evaluations of 482 serious case reviews carried out between April 2007 and the end of March 2011. The main focus of this report is on the reviews that concerned children in two age groups: babies less than one year old and young people aged 14 or above. Previous Ofsted reports have identified that a large proportion of cases concerned babies less than one year old and older children. We have focused on young people aged 14 or above to illustrate the wide diversity of reasons for the serious case reviews and explore their different vulnerabilities. This report does not focus on the Ofsted evaluation of these reviews or the data behind the reviews; instead it provides an opportunity to explore the lessons learnt in relation to specific age groups of children in more depth, drawing out practice implications for practitioners and Local Safeguarding Children Boards.

Key findings

The report has identified recurring messages from the reviews that concerned babies less than one year old. In too many cases:

- there were shortcomings in the timeliness and quality of pre-birth assessments
- the risks resulting from the parents' own needs were underestimated, particularly given the vulnerability of babies
- there had been insufficient support for young parents
- the role of the fathers had been marginalised
- there was a need for improved assessment of, and support for, parenting capacity
- there were particular lessons for both commissioning and provider health agencies, whose practitioners are often the main, or the only, agencies involved with the family in the early months
- practitioners underestimated the fragility of the baby.

A notable feature of the cases about young people over the age of 14 is the wide diversity of incidents that resulted in serious case reviews. Although the lessons learnt tend to be quite specific to the particular cases, the reviews found that too often:

- agencies had focused on the young person's challenging behaviour, seeing them as hard to reach or rebellious, rather than trying to understand the causes of the behaviour and the need for sustained support
- young people were treated as adults rather than being considered as children, because of confusion about the young person's age and legal status or a lack of age-appropriate facilities
- a coordinated approach to the young people's needs was lacking and practitioners had not always recognised the important contribution of their agency in making this happen.

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