

To: Oxfordshire Practitioners
Oxfordshire Safeguarding Children Board

Re: A Local Child Safeguarding Practice Review Letter



Moving from ‘what is wrong with you’ to ‘what has happened to you’?

Dear Colleagues

I am writing to you to tell you that Oxfordshire Safeguarding Children Board asked me¹ to carry out a review of the professional response to meeting the needs of a young person for support and safeguarding (called a Local Child Safeguarding Practice Review).

I have tried to capture what the young person told me about their life, as well as the perspectives of those practitioners that provided her with services. The young person experienced a complex life, with periods of instability, traumatic experiences of emotional and sexual abuse and a lack of certainty about who was there to look after her or care for her.

I recognise it is a long letter so please take some time to sit down and read it.

In her teenage years this manifested in feelings of low self-esteem, problems with mental health, self-harm, running away, struggling to manage her emotions at home and at school and some drug and alcohol misuse. This led to her becoming care experienced and subject to sexual exploitation and harm in the community. It is not necessary to tell you about the detail of this because it is private to her.

This letter is to tell you about what I found, what the key messages are and the recommendations; there is also some recommended follow up reading. I talked to the young person, family members, practitioners, and looked at records. I have used this information to write this letter to you from this young person’s perspective.

I have set out my five findings one by one. I want to explain what had happened to lead me to each finding and whether I think there is a recommendation for you in your local safeguarding partnership.

*My first finding is about **'The importance of relationships which are kind and caring'**.*

The young person wanted to thank you for all the care and attention you gave. I can see that you spoke positively about her and although there were difficulties, you saw the good in this young person. The young person remembers that positivity and how this made them feel; valued and cared for.

There is no recommendation for this finding, except for you and other practitioners to do more of it.

The reading associated with this finding is as follows:

Ruch G, Turney D and Ward A (2010) Relationship based social work: getting to the heart of practice. London: Jessica Kingsley Publishers

Trevithick, P. (2003). Effective relationship-based practice: A theoretical exploration, Journal of Social Work Practice, 17:2, 163-1

*My second finding is about **'Recognition of emotional abuse and emotional neglect and the role that child blame plays within this'**.*

When she was young, this young person did not always have the necessary secure attachment relationships that she needed to grow into a happy and confident young person who was able to cope with the challenges of the teenage years. This lack of a reliable attachment figure destabilised her developmental progress and meant that she sometimes struggled at school, at home, with friends, and as she got older, with boyfriends and girlfriends. She showed distress in many ways. Many practitioners could see her pain, but sometimes they saw a "stroppy teenager" and she was offered services which made her feel she was the problem, and the root cause of the distress was not established or addressed.

This young person's parents were perceived as having problems dealing with teenage behaviour and support to rebuild family relationships was provided. The reality was that the adults in her life often behaved in emotionally abusive ways in response to her distress and practitioners did not always recognise this, or fully challenge the way in which the adults responsible for looking after her talked negatively, punitively, and unkindly.

This child-blame made her feel she was responsible for all the difficult things that happened. This blame has stayed with her and has become internalised. Sadly she has

started to believe it is true. This is why blame is so harmful; it can travel with a child into their adulthood. It is important to imagine what it is like not to get the love, care attention that you need and then to be told it is your fault.

Why is this important?

Emotional abuse is defined as “the persistent emotional maltreatment of a child such as to cause severe and persistent adverse effects on the child’s emotional development. It may involve conveying to a child that they are worthless or unloved, inadequate”. Emotional abuse includes humiliating or constantly criticising a child, threatening, shouting at a child or calling them names, making the child the subject of jokes, or using sarcasm to hurt a child, blaming, scapegoating, not recognising a child’s own individuality, trying to control their lives, never saying anything kind, never expressing positive feelings or congratulating a child on successes and not showing any emotions in interactions with a child, also known as emotional neglect. In essence this represents poor attachment relationships. Emotional abuse has a significant long term negative impact on children and young people’s development and wellbeing.

Bronfenbrenner found that for a child to develop “intellectually emotionally, socially and morally “a child requires participation in progressively more complex reciprocal activity on a regular basis over an extended period in the child’s life, with one or more persons with whom the child develops a strong, mutual, irrational, emotional attachment and who is committed to the child’s well-being and development, preferably for life.”. He translated this principle into simple, powerful terms: “Every child needs at least one adult who is irrationally crazy about him or her.”

This review has found that this young person did not have a close adult who was “irrationally crazy about her”; she did have many practitioners who developed supportive relationships, but there is a lack of evidence that any one professional took an advocacy role for her to counter in an authoritative way the negativity of emotional abuse.

I made four recommendations that were associated with this finding and the events which were taking place in the young person’s life at this point:

Recommendation 1

Agencies should ensure that practitioners are equipped to identify the emotional abuse of adolescents, recognise the impact of fractured attachments on children and adolescents and have appropriate tools and frameworks to help them in this work. This needs to be in the context of a trauma informed approach.

Recommendation 2

Consideration to permanently exclude a pupil who is subject to a child in need plan or child protection plan should be discussed with the multi-agency team around the child prior to making a decision, with the aim of developing solutions which do not exacerbate existing harm to those children or young people.

Recommendation 3

Those agencies who are providing support to young people, but are outside health organisations, should raise awareness for their staff of dissociative -seizures and that they are a well - recognised unconscious response or coping mechanism to emotional trauma.

Recommendation 4

Agencies should be encouraged to recognise the importance of a young person's relationship with one or two trusted professionals, particularly in circumstances where they have fractured attachments and poor parental-child relationships, and to prioritise continuity of such relationships wherever possible.

The reading associated with this finding is as follows:

Doyle, C and Timms, C. (2014) [Child Neglect and Emotional Abuse: Understanding, Assessment and Response.](#)

<https://www.nspcc.org.uk/what-is-child-abuse/types-of-abuse/emotional-abuse/>

Bronfenbrenner, U (1979) [The Ecology of Human Development: Experiments by Nature and Design.](#)

Betsy de Thierry (2019) [The Simple Guide to Attachment Difficulties in Children: What They Are and How to Help \(Simple Guides\)](#)

My third finding is about 'The importance of challenging and addressing victim blaming language in professional practice'.

Practitioners from many different agencies (though not all practitioners involved) used victim blaming language about this young person. When she reported sexual exploitation and peer sexual exploitation, inappropriate, misogynistic and victim blaming language was used. She was described as "putting herself at risk" and "not recognising danger" and being "promiscuous".

She was offered education about appropriate relationships, spotting the signs of harmful and exploitative relationships, and understanding consent. Although this work is important for all young people as part of growing up, it does not prevent young people from being sexually exploited and abused. It is not a lack of understanding of relationships or consent that causes sexual abuse and exploitation, it is the behaviour of those that

abuse. Implying that this young person could be educated to stop the abuse happening gave her the message that it was her fault. Relationship education in the context of a child or young person having already been sexually abused needs to be provided with extreme caution for these reasons. It can be triggering of the previous sexual harm and give a false sense of safety.

Another aspect of victim blaming approaches and language was when the trauma she experienced led to health concerns which were described as “psychosomatic” or “pseudo”. Health professionals helped by being clear that the symptoms were real, but the cause was not organic. Other practitioners implied that she was “making things up” or “seeking attention”, rather than this being an impact of trauma and the symptoms were real. Practitioners need to understand this and help young people make those connections between distress and all its manifestations and abuse and trauma.

Why is this important?

Victim blaming language is terminology that implies the child is complicit or responsible for their abuse. Appropriate language must always be used to ensure that the child is referred to in a way which does not place blame on them for the crimes and abuse that have happened to them.

Victim blaming causes children, young people and adults to blame themselves for being harmed and abused by others, exacerbating trauma and causing loss of confidence and a sense of wellbeing. The focus moves to the child or young person being responsible for their own safety, because this is implied in victim blaming, and takes the responsibility away from those who sexually harm; it also undermines strategies to keep children and young people safe.

It is imperative that appropriate terminology is used when discussing children and young people who have been exploited or are at risk of exploitation. Language should reflect the presence of coercion and control, the constrained control young people have in abusive or exploitative situations and must recognise the severity of the impact that exploitation has on the child or young person.

I made one recommendation that was associated with this finding and the events which were taking place in the young person’s life at this point:

Recommendation 5

Agencies should raise awareness in their staff of the damaging effect of victim blaming and pathologising language; a work environment needs to be engendered whereby victim blaming is always challenged, and records and reports changed to reflect this. This includes a reflection on the use of language in records held about a child or young person.

Work is currently underway within Oxfordshire children's services to ensure that the relevant reports and recording in the context of Early Help, Child in Need and Child Protection work are addressed to the young person, with an understanding that they will read their records one day.

The reading associated with this finding is as follows:

Appropriate language: child sexual and/or criminal exploitation guidance for professionals.

[Guidance App Language Toolkit.pdf \(csepoliceandprevention.org.uk\)](#)

Language Matters 'Changing language, changing policy and practice': Use of language in child abuse & exploitation work. Barnardo's

[PowerPoint Presentation \(plymouthonlinedirectory.com\)](#)

My fourth finding is about 'Promoting help seeking behaviour in children and young people'.

This young person told many practitioners about her feelings of hurt and pain caused by the critical and often humiliating responses to her from those adults who were supposed to care for her, the physical abuse she was subject to and the sexual exploitation she experienced from peers and adults outside of her home environment. She spoke about this because she wanted help. She did not always know what that help looked like, and no one ever asked. Practitioners did take action, but she often did not know what that action was, what it meant for her or what the outcome was.

It seemed to her that when she told people she was being harmed this did not lead to any adult being held to account and it felt to her like she had not been heard. It undermined her ability to feel confident to seek help from practitioners and to believe that something would happen.

Why is this important?

It is the central ambition of the child safeguarding and support system that children and young people will ask practitioners for help when they have worries and are being harmed. Research, Serious Case Reviews, and the work of the Office for the Children's Commissioner suggest that there are many barriers to children talking to practitioners about their worries, concerns, and experiences of abuse. As such, more needs to be done to develop children and young people's help seeking behaviour by professionals.

Research and reviews of safeguarding systems and processes also highlight that children and young people often receive little feedback about the action taken when they raise concerns about abuse with professionals. This can leave them feeling that their concerns

were not heard, valued, or responded to. It can undermine their trust and confidence and prevent further help seeking behaviour. Children and young people need feedback and debriefing, particularly when their help seeking behaviour appears to end in no formal action being taken. They need reassurance that practitioners have understood their worries, heard their concerns and are prepared to take impactful action to address them.

There is often too much focus on what cannot be achieved because of procedural and evidential barriers, as opposed to what could be done to acknowledge harm, and action that could be taken to increase safety and address wellbeing.

I made one recommendation that was associated with this finding and the events which were taking place in the young person's life at this point:

Recommendation 6

Agencies, including schools, need to consider what their staff can do to support help seeking behaviour in children and young people. This needs to be a routine part of planning and a focus on feedback and debrief when children and young people tell us about harm and abuse. There also needs to be a focus on what can be done to address children and young people's concerns, as opposed to what cannot be done because of procedural limitations.

The reading associated with this finding is as follows:

Warrington, C., Beckett, H., Ackerley, E., Walker, M. & Allnock, D. (2017). Making Noise: Children's voices for positive change after sexual abuse. Children's experiences of help-seeking and support after sexual abuse in the family environment. University of Bedfordshire, in Partnership with NSPCC.

Cossar J, Brandon M, Bailey S, Belderson P and Biggart L (2013) 'It takes a lot to build trust'. Recognition and Telling: Developing earlier routes to help for children and young people. Available online: www.childrenscommissioner.gov.uk/wp-content/uploads/2017/07/It_Takes_a_lot_to_build_trust_EXECUTIVE_SUMMARY.pdf

My fifth finding is about 'Taking physical harm to children and young people seriously'.

This young person was subject to physical abuse from her parents, and she told practitioners about this. The explanation from the parents was that the physical abuse was in response to the young person's bad behaviour and sometimes her anger and aggression; the message was she deserved it. This explanation was accepted by practitioners as legitimate. It seemed to her that the message was that it is OK to hit children and young people. This young person did find it hard to manage emotionally and contain her feelings (emotional regulation) leading to anger, aggression and at times

physical aggression. Practitioners did not sufficiently discuss or consider the impact of physical abuse on her development, sense of self or wellbeing or the messages that violence is an inevitable way to deal with problems.

“Quite simply, it (physical punishment) doesn’t work and it’s wrong. It doesn’t teach children why their behaviour was wrong or what they should do instead, and it tells them that it is OK to use physical force and aggression against other people”

Why is this important?

Physical punishment compromises children’s developmental outcomes leading to poor mental health, behaviour problems and increased violence and anti-social behaviour across childhood and into adulthood; physical abuse demonstrates to children that violent behaviour is a means of problem solving in childhood and adulthood.

There should also be no automatic assumption made that a parent is using physical punishment as a response to a child’s behaviour or that it is part of the cultural context of the family. Each incident must be assessed and analysed from a child-centred perspective. Some physical punishment by parents is a loss of control, which can escalate to greater levels of violence, some is caused by a parent’s use of violence to control and humiliate, and some by their negative feelings towards the child. That was the central issue for this young person.

Although the law suggests it is acceptable to physically punish children, safeguarding partnerships should have a child-centred view about its appropriateness and provide advice and guidance, and challenge where necessary.

I made one recommendation that was associated with this finding and the events which were taking place in the young person’s life at this point:

Recommendation 7

Oxfordshire Safeguarding Children Board should review current definitions and guidance that relate to physical abuse and ensure that there is a clear outline of the unacceptability of children being physically ‘chastised’ and a challenge to parents who suggest this is an appropriate disciplinary approach.

The reading associated with this finding is as follows:

It’s time to end physical punishment of children, say international experts:

[It’s time to end physical punishment of children, say international experts \(pat.nhs.uk\)](https://pat.nhs.uk)

[Children Are Unbeatable! | Home](#)

Protecting children from physical abuse and understanding the impact: NSPCC

[Protecting children from physical abuse | NSPCC Learning](#)

Thank you for taking the time to read this. I hope that the five findings are clear and that the seven recommendations are something that your local safeguarding partnership can take forward with your help.

*Jane Wiffin
BSc Psychology, MSc Social Policy, CQSW
Independent Reviewer
December 2022*