

## Discussion item for staff/team meetings

### People who abuse children -NSPCC factsheet 7

This research briefing describes the characteristics of child abusers based on research findings and statistical evidence.

It covers the relationship between abusers and their victims; the gender, sexual orientation and age of abusers; how many people abuse children; and risk factors associated with child abuse.

---

#### **People who abuse children**

- We do not know exactly how many people abuse children because many cases of abuse are never reported to the police or social services.
  - In most reported cases of abuse, children are abused by parents, carers and other family members who live with the child.
  - In a study of male sexual abusers of all ages, 75% identified as heterosexual, 14% as bisexual and 11% as homosexual (Pritchard, 2004).
  - An NSPCC study found that a sizeable proportion of contact sexual abuse reported by under-18s was carried out by other under-18s (Radford et al, 2011).
  - Parenting risk factors which may increase a child's vulnerability to abuse or neglect include substance misuse, domestic violence, poverty and social exclusion, and mental health difficulties.
- 

#### **What is child abuse?**

Child abuse happens when an adult's actions harm, or threaten to harm, a child under the age of 18, even if the harm is not deliberate (Gilbert et al, 2009).

Child abuse falls in to the following categories:

- physical abuse and witnessing or experiencing domestic violence
- neglect
- emotional abuse
- and sexual abuse.

Children and young people can also be sexually abused by their peers..

---

#### **How many people abuse children?**

- We do not know how many people abuse children. This is because many cases of abuse are never reported to the police or social services. Victims are often too young, too frightened or too ashamed to tell anybody. Sometimes the adults they do tell do not pass the information on.

#### **Number of adults convicted of child abuse offences every year**

- Official statistics relate to the number of individuals who commit offences against children. Statistics for offenders underrepresent the scale of child abuse because not all cases come to the attention of the police and, even if they do, they may decide it is not in the best interests of the child to investigate an incident as a criminal offence, so it won't be recorded as such.

- A Freedom of Information request submitted by the NSPCC to the National Police Improvement Agency in November 2012 found that 29,837 offenders are on the Sex Offenders Register in the UK for committing offences against children. 941 of those on the Register for offences against children had reoffended (NSPCC, 2012).
- According to Ministry of Justice statistics, 3,785 people were found guilty or cautioned for child abuse offences in England and Wales in 2012. Of these, 2,179 were found guilty or cautioned for cruelty to or neglect of children; 351 were found guilty or cautioned for sexual activity with a child under 13 years; 1,167 were found guilty or cautioned for sexual activity with a child under 16; and 88 were found guilty or cautioned for gross indecency with a child (Ministry of Justice, 2013).

### **Number of adults barred from working with children**

- In England, Wales and Northern Ireland, 46,557 people have been placed on the barred list for working with children since October 2009. All of these people were still on the list as of 31 March 2012. Figures are not available for the number of adults barred from working with children in Scotland (Independent Safeguarding Authority, 2012).
- Not all adults on the barred list have abused children; some are barred for other reasons.

### **What is the relationship between child abusers and their victims?**

In most cases, children are abused by parents, carers and other family members who live with the child. An NSPCC prevalence study of child abuse and neglect found that 7.8% of 11-17-year-olds had been abused at some point during childhood by an adult who did not live with them (Radford et al, 2011).

#### **Physical abuse**

Researchers in the United States have argued that biological parents are less likely than step-parents to physically abuse their children (Daly and Wilson, 1999).

A study of fatal child abuse cases in Florida found that step-parents were 17 times more likely to kill their children than biological parents (Yampolskaya et al, 2009).

Although physical abuse is most likely to happen in families, older children are at increased risk of physical abuse from adults who do not live with them (Radford et al, 2011).

#### **Neglect**

Neglect happens when a child does not receive the level of care necessary for his or her well-being, so by its very nature, neglect is usually a parental issue. Far less commonly, other adults with caring responsibilities can neglect children including foster carers, teachers or child care providers (Lamont, 2011).

#### **Emotional abuse**

A US study on child abuse and neglect found that in 73% of cases of emotional abuse the abuser was a biological parent, in 20% of cases the abuser was a step-parent or carer, and in 7% of cases the abuser was an adult who did not live with the child (Sedlak et al, 2010).

## Sexual abuse

Finkelhor et al (2005) observed that most sexual assaults are committed by someone the child knows. Their research found that 3% of sexual assaults were committed by family members, 12% were committed by strangers and 85% were committed by friends and acquaintances, the vast majority of whom were also under the age of 18.

Sexual abuse by a parent or carer towards a child or young person is relatively rare. The NSPCC found that parents or guardians were the abusers in just 1.7% of sexual abuse cases (Radford et al, 2011). In a 1986 study, Parker and Parker found that biological fathers only made up 1% of male caregivers who sexually abused their children. They also found that the tiny proportion of biological fathers who sexually abused their children were significantly more likely to have been absent during the child's early years. They argued that when men are involved in caring for babies, a special kind of attachment forms which acts as a natural deterrent to sexual interest in the child.

---

## What do we know about the gender of abusers?

### Physical abuse

- According to some research, male and female parents or carers are equally responsible for child physical abuse (Radford et al, 2011). One study has shown that female carers are more likely to physically abuse their children with 49% of incidents involving women compared to 40% involving men (May-Chahal and Cawson, 2005). This is partly due to the fact that women spend more time caring for children.
- When it comes to severe physical abuse some research suggests children are far more likely to suffer at the hands of male parents or carers. The NSPCC prevalence study found that men were responsible for severe physical abuse in 72.9 per cent of cases involving 11–17-year olds (Radford et al, 2011). A US study found that male carers were 3 times more likely to kill their children than female carers (Yampolskaya et al, 2009).
- 66.4% of 11-17-year olds who reported being physically abused by someone who did not live with them, said their abuser was male and 22.2% said their abuser was female (Radford et al, 2011).
- The vast majority of domestic violence cases between intimate partners with children involve a male perpetrator and a female victim. A NSPCC study of childhood experiences found that 93.8% of perpetrators of domestic violence were male (Radford et al, 2011).

### Neglect

- Women are more likely than men to neglect their children. This is partly because even in two-parent families they usually spend more time caring for children. In an American study examining the characteristics of people who abuse children, 66% of those charged with neglect were women, compared with 36% who were men (US DHSS, 2005).

### Emotional abuse

- In a study analysing cases of emotional abuse, 60% of cases involved a male abuser and 50% a female abuser. The figures exceed 100% as in some cases both parents or carers were involved in the abuse (Sedlak et al, 2010).

### Sexual abuse

- The majority of people who sexually abuse children are male. 91.8% of children and young people who reported being sexually abused by an adult who did not live with them said their abuser was male (Radford et al, 2011). According to Bunting's review of the research literature,

women are responsible for up to 5% of sexual offences committed against children (2005). It is believed that figures for female child sex abusers may be higher than those recorded, due to inadequate assessment and intervention with both female abusers and their victims (Findlater and Fyson, 2007).

---

### What do we know about the sexual orientation of abusers?

- There is a lack of research on sexual orientation and child sexual abuse despite the media stereotype that gay men are most likely to sexually abuse children. In a study of male sex abusers of all ages, 75% identified as heterosexual, 14% as bisexual and 11% as homosexual (Pritchard, 2004). This is supported by the fact that a higher proportion of girls are sexually abused (Radford et al, 2011).
- 

### What do we know about the age of abusers?

#### Physical abuse

- Buchholz and Korn-Bursztyn (1993) found that younger mothers physically abuse their children more frequently than older mothers. The mother's younger age has also been linked to other contributing factors such as lower economic status, lack of social support and higher stress levels.

#### Neglect

- Some studies have been able to establish a link between neglect and younger caregivers, particularly mothers (Gillham et al, 1998; Lipman et al, 2001), however, overall, the research has been inconclusive.

#### Sexual abuse

- The NSPCC found that a sizeable proportion of contact sexual abuse reported by children up to the age of 18 years was perpetrated by other children and young people under the age of 18 rather than by adults (Radford et al, 2011). Cawson et al (2000) have argued that the most typical child sexual abuser is likely to be close in age to the victim, for example a boyfriend, friend, fellow student or someone they meet whilst socialising. Freedom of Information data obtained by the NSPCC from 34 of the 43 police forces across England and Wales has shown that between 2009 and 2012, 5,028 child sexual abuse offences were reported where the perpetrator was under-18, some perpetrators were as young as five-years-old.
  - Nearly 98% of 4,562 abusers were boys, and where the relationship was recorded, at least three out of five victims knew the abuser, with one in five being family members (NSPCC, 2013).
  - Sexual bullying, which often occurs via mobile or online media, is becoming more widespread amongst young people. Lenhart (2009) has defined 'sexting' as 'creating, sharing and forwarding of sexually suggestive nude, or nearly nude, images' through mobile phones and/or the internet. According to an NSPCC study, between 15 and 40% of young people have been involved in sexting. The same study found that sexting is often coercive and linked to harassment, bullying and, in extreme cases, violence, and this threat to young people comes primarily from their peers (Ringrose et al, 2012).
-

## What are the parenting risk factors associated with abuse?

Most child abuse cases happen within the immediate family and abusers are usually the child's parents or carers. While there are no direct causes of child abuse and neglect, research has outlined a number of risk factors affecting the ability of parents to meet their children's needs and keep them safe from harm.

### Substance misuse

The Advisory Council on the Misuse of Drugs (2003) found that parental substance misuse was a factor in around one quarter of child protection cases. An analysis of serious case reviews found that 33% of children were living with a parent who had past or current drug or alcohol problems. In some of these cases alcohol or drug misuse was closely linked to the child's death or serious injury (Brandon et al, 2009). A review by the Priory Group (2006) found 66% of children raised in alcoholic families reported physical abuse and 26% of these children had also experienced sexual abuse.

Physical and sexual abuse tends to co-occur more often when the father is a problem drinker. Parental substance misuse is a factor in more than half of neglect cases (Dunn et al, 2002). According to Kroll (2004), the all-consuming nature of substance addiction is a factor in emotional neglect and abuse because it impairs the parent's ability to be emotionally available for the child and make him or her feel valued and loved.

### Domestic abuse

Domestic abuse puts children at increased risk of harm. A study of 26 cases of fatal child abuse perpetrated by fathers found that in three-quarters of cases the man had also been violent towards the child's mother (Cavanagh et al, 2007).

There is also evidence that mothers who have experienced domestic violence may be a risk to their children. In a sample of 1,236 families entering the US child welfare system, 44% of mothers who were reported for alleged child abuse had experienced physical violence by their partner (Casanueva et al, 2009).

There is a link between domestic violence and sexual abuse. Hester et al (2007) found over half the children who had been sexually abused and attending an NSPCC centre had been living with domestic violence.

### Adults who were abused as children

There is much debate over whether adults who were abused as children are more likely to abuse their own children. Some argue that parenting skills are first learned in childhood, and that abusers' own negative childhood experiences make it more difficult for them to be good parents to their own children (Pritchard, 2004).

A US study (Kim, 2009) found that parents who reported physical abuse in childhood were five times more likely to physically abuse their children than those who had not been physically abused. The same study also found that parents who had been neglected were 2.6 times more likely to be neglectful parents than those who had not been neglected. Whilst evidence suggests most child abusers had a traumatic childhood and/or experienced poor parenting, it is true to say that most abused children do not become child abusers in later life.

## **Socioeconomic factors**

Research has also identified socioeconomic factors related to child abuse. Issues in the community consistently linked to child abuse include a lack of social support and neighbourhood poverty (Coulton et al, 2007; Molnar et al, 2003). Societal factors, such as beliefs about using physical punishment to discipline children and the portrayal of violence and sex in the media may also be linked to child abuse (Belsky, 1993; Straus and Mathur, 1996).

## **Mental health problems**

Most parents with mental health problems do not neglect or harm their children as a direct consequence of their illness. However, children become more vulnerable to abuse when their parents suffer from mental illness alongside other problems such as substance misuse, domestic violence and childhood experiences of abuse (Cleaver, Unell and Aldgate, 2011).

Mental illness has been noted as an issue in 43% of care proceedings (Brophy et al, 2003). In studies analysing cases of fatal child abuse, psychiatric disorders were identified as an issue in between 28 and 63% of cases (Falkov, 1996; Ofsted et al, 2008; Brandon et al, 2009). Glaser and Prior (1997) found that in a sample of cases of emotional abuse, nearly one third recorded parental mental illness as an issue. In families in which sexual abuse was suspected, 71% were in a 'poor psychological state' using the General Health Questionnaire (Goldberg and Williams, 1988).

## **Learning disabilities**

There is no association between parental learning disabilities and abuse or wilful neglect (Cleaver, Unell and Aldgate, 2011), however there is evidence children can suffer from neglect by omission due to a lack of parenting skills and poor levels of support and resources (McGaw and Newman 2005).

Cleaver and Freeman (1995) have warned that some mothers with learning disabilities are particularly vulnerable to the financial and emotional support offered by men who are predatory sexual abusers and whose primary concern is gaining access to their children.

---

## **What are the risk factors associated with child sexual abuse?**

### **Characteristics of sexually abusive adults**

Numerous research studies have tried to establish factors linked to adults sexually abusing children.

A commonly held belief is that males who sexually abuse children were themselves victims of sexual abuse in childhood. This is known as the 'victim to offender cycle' (Irenyi et al, 2006). However some researchers see this theory as problematic. As Liz Kelly points out, if the 'cycle' explanation were true, women would commit the majority of sexual abuse, because girls are more likely to be sexually abused than boys (1996). In addition to this, the majority of male victims of sexual abuse do not go on to sexually abuse in later life.

Biological explanations for sexual offending suggest that brain abnormalities or an unusually strong libido account for sexual aggression. Noted characteristics of child sexual abusers include:

- a lack of empathy for their victims
- low self-esteem

- poor social skills
- social isolation and a preference for the company of children
- prior experiences of abuse
- educational underachievement and/or learning disabilities
- problems relating to others (Findlater and Fyson, 2007).

Langevin and Watson's review of literature about child sex abusers found that 52% of them were heavy drinkers who used alcohol to feel less inhibited and cope with the subsequent remorse arising from their actions (1996).

Despite these common features, there are no factors which can predict whether or not someone will sexually abuse children.

In 1984, David Finkelhor described the barriers which a potential abuser will overcome in order to abuse a child. There are four stages:

- feelings of sexual attraction towards the child
- easing his own conscience by making excuses to himself to justify the abuse
- creating situations in which the abuse can take place and overcoming the disapproval of other adults by manipulating them into trusting him

and overcoming the child's resistance by using bribes, threats, and force (Finkelhor, 1984).

Research suggests that some sexual abusers are skilled at cultivating trusting relationships with both children and their families. This is because they are charming and able to win the esteem and respect of those around them (Van Dam, 2001). By doing this they make it more difficult for the child to disclose abuse, or for adults to accept that the allegations may be true (Child Protection in Sport Unit, 2010). This practice is known as grooming.

## **What are the characteristics of children and young people engaging in sexually harmful behaviour?**

There is no 'typical' profile for young people who engage in sexually harmful behaviour.

Teenage boys are responsible for the majority of sexual offences (Vizard et al, 2007). Rich (2011) noted psychological traits common in sexually abusive children, for example, they:

- have trouble controlling their emotions
- have poor coping skills
- have poor social skills and experience social anxiety
- are insecure
- have little insight in to their own and other people's emotional needs and feelings.

Children who sexually abuse other children are likely to have been abused themselves. Jones and Ramchandani (1999) found that around 50% of children with harmful sexual behaviours had experienced sexual abuse. Yates (2012) found all the children in his study of children with harmful sexual behaviour had experienced physical, emotional or sexual abuse.

Girls are much less likely to be referred for treatment for sexually harmful behaviour. The girls that are referred tend to have suffered very high levels of sexual and physical abuse; family dysfunction and separation; and problems at school and with peers (Lane with Lobanov-Rostovsky, 1997).

O'Callaghan (2001) noted that many teenage sex offenders had learning difficulties. The research observed that young people with learning difficulties were very vulnerable to abuse; they were isolated, and did not receive appropriate sex education.

---