

What to do if you're worried a child is being abused

Advice for practitioners

March 2015

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Guiding principles

1. No matter where you work, you are likely to encounter children during the course of your normal working activities. You are in a unique position to be able to observe signs of abuse or neglect, or changes in behaviour which may indicate a child may be being abused or neglected.

2. You should make sure that you are **alert** to the signs of abuse and neglect, that you **question the behaviour** of children and parents/carers and don't necessarily take what you are told at face value. You should make sure you know where to turn to if you need to **ask for help**, and that you **refer** to children's social care or to the police, if you suspect that a child is at risk of harm or is in immediate danger (see the section on [Taking action](#) for further information).

3. You should make sure that you understand and work within the local multi-agency safeguarding arrangements that are in place in your area. In doing so, you should be guided by the following key principles:

- children have a right to be safe and should be protected from all forms of abuse and neglect;
- safeguarding children is everyone's responsibility;
- it is better to help children as early as possible, before issues escalate and become more damaging; and
- children and families are best supported and protected when there is a co-ordinated response from all relevant agencies.

4. You should not let other considerations, like the fear of damaging relationships with adults, get in the way of protecting children from abuse and neglect. If you think that referral to children's social care is necessary, you should view it as the beginning of a process of inquiry, not as an accusation.

Understanding and identifying abuse and neglect

5. Abuse and neglect are forms of maltreatment – a person may abuse or neglect a child by inflicting harm, or by failing to act to prevent harm.

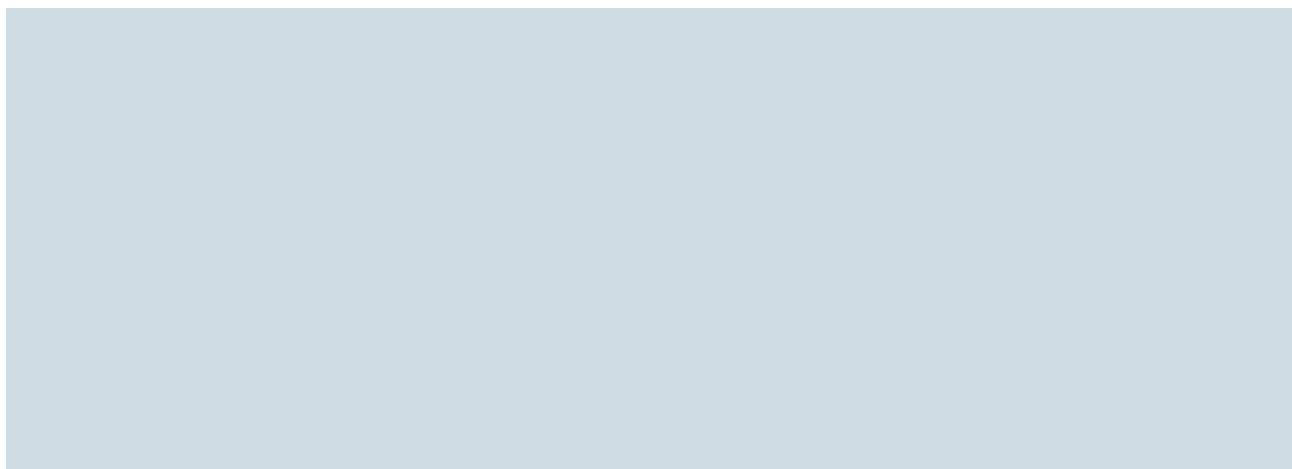
6. Child welfare concerns may arise in many different contexts, and can vary greatly in terms of their nature and seriousness. Children may be abused in a family or in an institutional or community setting, by those known to them or by a stranger, including, via the internet. In the case of female genital mutilation, children may be taken out of the country to be abused. They may be abused by an adult or adults, or another child or children. An abused child will often experience more than one type of abuse, as well as other difficulties in their lives. Abuse and neglect can happen over a period of time, but can also be a one-off event.

Some of the following signs might be indicators of abuse or neglect:

- Children whose behaviour changes – they may become aggressive, challenging, disruptive, withdrawn or clingy, or they might have difficulty sleeping or start wetting the bed;
- Children with clothes which are ill-fitting and/or dirty;
- Children with consistently poor hygiene;
- Children who make strong efforts to avoid specific family members or friends, without an obvious reason;
- Children who don't want to change clothes in front of others or participate in physical activities;
- Children who are having problems at school, for example, a sudden lack of concentration and learning or they appear to be tired and hungry;
- Children who talk about being left home alone, with inappropriate carers or with strangers;
- Children who reach developmental milestones, such as learning to speak or

to express their views, deliberately silencing them or 'making fun' of what they say or how they communicate.

15. Emotional abuse may involve serious bullying – including online bullying through social networks, online games or mobile phones – by a child's peers.



18. **Child sexual exploitation** is a form of sexual abuse where children are sexually exploited for money, power or status. It can involve violent, humiliating and degrading sexual assaults. In some cases, young people are persuaded or forced into exchanging sexual activity for money, drugs, gifts, affection or status. Consent cannot be given, even where a child may believe they are voluntarily engaging in sexual activity with the person who is exploiting them. Child sexual exploitation doesn't always involve physical contact and can happen online. A significant number of children who are victims of sexual exploitation go missing from home, care and education at some point.

Some of the following signs may be indicators of sexual exploitation:

- Children who appear with unexplained gifts or new possessions;
- Children who associate with other young people involved in exploitation;
- Children who have older boyfriends or girlfriends;
- Children who suffer from sexually transmitted infections or become pregnant;
- Children who suffer from changes in emotional well-being;
- Children who misuse drugs and alcohol;
- Children who go missing for periods of time or regularly come home late; and
- Children who regularly miss school or education or don't take part in education.

ability to keep a child safe or result in them prioritising buying drugs, or alcohol, over food, clothing or warmth for the child. Neglect may occur during pregnancy as a result of maternal drug or alcohol abuse.

Some of the following signs may be indicators of neglect:

- Children who are living in a home that is indisputably dirty or unsafe;
- Children who are left hungry or dirty;
- Children who are left without adequate clothing, e.g. not having a winter coat;
- Children who are living in dangerous conditions, i.e. around drugs, alcohol or violence;
- Children who are often angry, aggressive or self-harm;
- Children who fail to receive basic health care⁴; and
- Parents who fail to seek medical treatment when their children are ill or are injured.⁵

⁴ Powell, C. (2003) *Early Indicators of Child Abuse and Neglect: A Multi-Professional Delphi Study*, *Child Abuse Review*, 12,1, pp. 25-41

⁵ Ibid

24. There are four key steps to follow to help you to identify and respond appropriately to possible abuse and/or neglect.

25. It may not always be appropriate to go through all four steps to identify and respond appropriately.

29. If a child reports, following a conversation you have initiated or otherwise, that they are being abused and neglected, you should listen to them, take their allegation seriously, and reassure them that you will take action to keep them safe. You will need to decide the most appropriate action to take, depending on the circumstances of the case, the seriousness of the child's allegation and the local multi-agency safeguarding arrangements in place. You might refer directly to children's social care and/or the police, or discuss your concerns with others and ask for help. At all times, you should explain to the child the action that you are taking. It is important to maintain confidentiality, but you should not promise that you won't tell anyone, as you may need to do so in order to protect the child.

Asking for help

30. Concerns about a child's welfare can vary greatly in terms of their nature and seriousness, how they have been identified and over what duration they have arisen. If you have concerns about a child, you should ask for help.

31. You should discuss your concerns with your manager, a named or designated professional or a designated member of staff. For example:

- for **schools' staff** (both teaching and non-teaching), concerns should be reported via the schools' or colleges' designated safeguarding lead. The safeguarding lead will usually decide whether to make a referral to children's social care;
- for **early years practitioners**, see: NEE@3u981A.NEa

You can also seek advice at any time from the NSPCC helpline – help@nspcc.org.uk or [0808 800 5000](tel:08088005000). Next steps might involve undertaking an early help assessment or making a referral directly to children’s social care/the police.

32. If you have concerns about the safety or welfare of a child and feel they are not being acted upon by your manager or named/designated safeguarding lead, it is your responsibility to take action.

Early help assessment

Early help means providing support as soon as a problem emerges. As part of your area’s local multi-agency safeguarding arrangements there will be processes in place around the assessment of children who may benefit from early help.

[REDACTED] could provide support to the child and family, act as an advocate on their behalf and coordinate the delivery of support services. Any frontline practitioner from any agency working with children, young people and families

Information sharing

It is important to remember that throughout the four stages, sharing information is an intrinsic part of any practitioner's role. The decisions about how much information to share, with whom and when can have a profound impact on people's lives. You should weigh up what might happen if the information is shared against the consequences of not sharing the information. Early sharing of information is key to providing effective early help where there are emerging problems. At the other end of the continuum, sharing information can be essential to put in place effective child protection services. For more information on sharing information which includes a myth-busting guide see *Information Sharing: Advice for practitioners providing safeguarding services to children, young people, parents and carers*.

Further information

Useful resources and external organisations

- [When to suspect child maltreatment \(National Institute for Health and Care Excellence, 2009\)](#)

Other relevant departmental advice and statutory guidance

- [Working Together to Safeguard Children \(2015\)](#)
- [Keeping Children Safe in Education \(2015\)](#)
- [Information Sharing – Advice for practitioners providing safeguarding services to vulnerable children, young people, parents and carers \(2015\)](#)
- [Multi-Agency Practice Guidelines: Female Genital Mutilation \(2014\)](#)
- [Statutory framework for the early years foundation stage \(2014\)](#)



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