

SAFEGUARDING TEENAGERS

Safeguarding older children

Safeguarding issues around protecting older children are often neglected. Results from a report explain why, as **Suzanne O'Connell** has found.

Suzanne has more than 25 years' teaching experience, 11 years of which were as a junior school headteacher. She has a particular interest in special needs, child protection and extended services.

When we think of child protection, it is perhaps younger children who first come to mind. However, Ofsted suggests that two particularly vulnerable groups are:

- babies under one year old
- older children aged 14 and upwards.

A report from the House of Commons Education Committee (which monitors the policy, administration and spending of the Department for Education) defines older children as those between 14 and about 19 years of age.

The committee's report, *Children First: The Child Protection System in England* (October 2012), is the fourth in a series of in-depth investigative reports into the child protection system in England.

Risk factors

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The committee suggests that the vulnerability of older children is partly due to the number of different additional factors that can put a young person at risk. These could include:

- alienation from families
- school difficulties



- accommodation problems
- unemployment
- drug and alcohol misuse
- risks linked to misuse of the internet.

Young people may have been living with abuse or neglect for much of their lives and this can become increasingly evident through their behaviour. For example, we are seeing an increase in incidents of self-harm and suicide that can be tracked back to difficulties at home.

For these young people, their experiences are the norm, with the obvious danger that they will bring them to their own understanding of how relationships and parenting should be conducted in the future.

Differences in referral practices for older children

The NSPCC raised concerns with the committee that the child protection system is geared towards meeting the needs of younger children, and that those who refer children are less likely to do so for young people aged 15 and over. Compared with younger children, older children can be considered to be more resilient and able to cope with situations – and therefore not needing the same level of intervention. This belief can lead to referrals of older children being less likely or taking longer.

There are also other factors that can mean a delay in, or absence of, a referral, including:

- reluctance to take on a young person approaching their 16th birthday, as this leaves an obligation until they are 21
- gaps between adult and children's services for the 16-18 age group
- poor behaviour diverting attention and blame onto the young person, rather than there being a focus on the real source of the problem
- children found in criminal contexts being treated as criminals first and as victims of abuse second.

Behaviour in later life often has its routes in underlying histories of abuse and neglect. Older children who run away, truant or self-harm may have underlying problems that need investigating.



Voluntary care orders

Parents themselves can sometimes seek the removal of children with behavioural problems, with a greater percentage of older pupils being subject to voluntary care orders.

Underlying these difficulties there can be a history of emotional abuse – and perhaps domestic violence that has not been recognised previously.

‘Specialised’ forms of abuse

Older children can be more prone to ‘specialised’ forms of abuse. Examples referred to by the committee include:

- **trafficking** – where child victims are brought to the UK for sexual exploitation, domestic servitude, cannabis farming, theft or shoplifting
- **unaccompanied asylum-seeking children** – often involving disputes about age that detract from the needs of the child
- **abuse between teenagers** – young partner violence can see individuals as both the victim and the perpetrator
- **child sexual exploitation (CSE)** – the trading of sexual activities (including online) for accommodation, drugs, gifts or affection
- **forced marriage** – which became a criminal offence in March 2014
- **ritual abuse, witchcraft and female genital mutilation** – which might often be linked with a faith setting and might include a form of deliverance or exorcism.

The main concern for the committee is the extent to which specialised forms of abuse are dealt with more as issues of integration, community or immigration, rather than as child protection issues.



Difficulties in seeking help

Evidence from older children suggests that they may find it harder to report abuse than younger siblings.

For example, they can:

- be fearful about losing family and friends
- be fearful about what is going to happen
- mistrust authorities
- feel embarrassment or shame
- have lived with the abuse for a long time and fear what might happen if they lose control of the situation.

Sometimes they simply do not recognise that they are being abused, or are worried that they won't be believed.

Peer-led safeguarding

Where older children do not feel able to talk to an adult, they may be prepared to talk to a peer. The use of peer-led safeguarding can be particularly important, and young people should be helped to understand where and who they can go to if they need support.

Lack of training and information for professionals

There is generally a lack of training and information available about these types of abuse, and professionals can have difficulty in identifying young people at risk.

As not everyone can be a specialist in all aspects of child abuse, it is important that those responsible know where and who to go to for more information.



Considerations for your school

It is beneficial if you can spend some time considering the needs and experiences of older vulnerable pupils in your school.

You could think about the following questions.

- What is the difference in the proportion of younger and older children you refer?
- Are there assumptions about the ability of older children to cope that you might not have for younger children?
- Do you tend to assume that older pupils will be able to remove themselves from a situation if they are at risk?
- Do you spend time considering the additional pressures that older children might be under and their reactions to these?
- How deeply do you consider the background of children who are behaving badly or who are truanting at your school? Are there possibilities that abuse or neglect within the home have impacted on their behaviour?
- What kind of support do you offer older children where behaviour and attendance difficulties might be caused by other factors?
- Is there opportunity in your curriculum for young people to consider what is (and what is not) acceptable in a relationship?
- Does your training of staff ensure that they have some understanding of the 'specialised' forms of abuse that older children might be victim to?
- Do you know where you can access information about more specialised forms of abuse and who might be able to help you in the local authority?
- Are there opportunities in your school for peer-led support?
- Do you help to signpost young people to agencies and groups that can help with different types of abuse?
- Do young people in your school know how to self-refer?