Conflicting Timeframes in Safeguarding Babies and Very Young Children from Neglect and Abuse

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Safeguarding Children Research Initiative (Davies and Ward 2012)

- Post Victoria Climbié; informed by Peter Connelly
- Focus on neglect and emotional abuse
- Overview covers 15 DFE/DH funded studies
  - Identifying and responding to maltreatment
  - Universal and targeted services to prevent maltreatment
  - Social work interventions to keep children safe
  - Specific interventions for children and families with complex needs
  - Providing a context for effective interagency and inter-disciplinary practice
Safeguarding Babies and Very Young Children from Abuse and Neglect:

Prospective longitudinal study of 57 babies identified as suffering or likely to suffer significant harm followed from birth to five
Decision-making within a child’s timeframe  
(Brown and Ward, 2012)

- Overview of research evidence for family justice professionals concerning child development and the impact of maltreatment
- Research evidence on timeframes for early childhood development
- Research evidence on impact of abuse and neglect on development
- Research evidence on timeframes for decisions by local authorities and courts pre-proceedings; during proceedings and post proceedings
Questions

- To what extent is there a mismatch between child development timeframes in the early years and timeframes for decision making in children’s services?
- How does this mismatch arise?
- How might it be addressed?
Child Protection: the English context

- In England:
  - No mandatory reporting of abuse and neglect
- At 31 March 2011:
  - 382,400 (3.5%) children supported by statutory children’s services
  - 49,000 (13%) subjects of child protection plans
  - 40,410 (11%) looked after by local authorities in response to maltreatment (62% of care population)
- Between 1.4.2010 and 31.3.2011: 3,050 English children placed for adoption; 60 under one
Children under the age of one

- Nearly three times as likely as others to be subjects of child protection plans due to physical abuse
- More than twice as likely to be subjects of child protection plans due to neglect
- Subjects of 45% of serious case reviews (into child death or serious injury)
- Eight times the average risk of child homicide
Key aspects of early development

Very young children are dependent on parents for survival. In the first three years their interactions with caregivers play a major role in shaping the development of the brain and central nervous system and consequently:

- children’s cognitive development
- children’s ability to negotiate the key developmental tasks of impulse control, trust and attachment – the basis of emotional, behavioural and social development
Child development timescales

- Brain develops particularly rapidly in first two years but majority of neurons formed pre-birth
- Relationships are key features of environment and process of attachment begins at least at birth
- Quality and sensitivity of mother-child interaction at 6-15 weeks correlates with attachment relationship at eighteen months (Lewis et al, 1984)
- Babies placed for adoption before first birthdays are more likely to become securely attached to adoptive carers than those placed later (Van den Dries et al, 2009)
Child development timescales

- Babies regulate emotions through attachment
- Stress response system begins to stabilise around six months
- Foundations for language comprehension, reasoning and impulse control develop within first two years
- Dramatic development of executive function between three and five: working memory, inhibitory control and cognitive and mental flexibility
Impact of abuse and neglect on early childhood development

- Severe global neglect in the first three years stunts the growth of the brain
- Brain adapts as readily to a negative as a positive environment
- Persistent maltreatment may lead to poor emotional regulation and a maladaptive response to stress
- Frightened or frightening parental behaviour associated with disorganised attachment at 12-18 months
- Up to 80% neglected/abused children develop disorganised attachments
Impact of abuse and neglect in the early years (including pre-birth)

- Attachment and ability to trust
- Ability to empathise
- Ability to regulate emotions
- Educational outcomes
- Delinquency
- Mental and physical health
- Promiscuity
- Eating disorders
- Addictive behaviours
- Parenting capacity
Safeguarding Babies and Very Young Children from Abuse and Neglect:

- Prospective longitudinal study of 57 babies identified as suffering or likely to suffer significant harm
- All identified before first birthdays; almost two thirds (65%) before birth
- 43 followed until age three; 37 until age five so far
- Data from case papers; annual interviews with birth parents/carers; Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaires
Classifying Families by Risk of Harm

- Based on systematic review of evidence concerning risk and protective factors and the likelihood of maltreatment or its recurrence (Hindley, Ramchandani and Jones, 2006)
- Each child classified according to the level of risk of maltreatment or its recurrence
- Classification used data at identification by children’s social care (Time One), at age three (Time Two) and at age five (Time Three)
- Particular weight given to evidence of parents’ capacity for change
The Children at Entry

- Severe risk (12;28%): Risk factors, no protective factors and no capacity for change.
- High risk (7;16%): Risk factors, protective factors and no capacity for change.
- Medium risk (21;49%): Risk factors, protective factors, capacity for change.
- Low risk (3;7%): No risk factors (or previous risk factors addressed, protective factors and capacity for change. Includes two outliers.
At age three

- 37% (16) adequately safeguarded, living with birth parents who had sustained positive changes
- 35% (15) permanently separated
- 28% (12) inadequately safeguarded with birth parents who had not shown capacity to change
- 53% (23) had experienced abuse or neglect
- 37% (16) maltreated while open cases
- 57% displayed emotional problems or substantial behavioural difficulties
At age five

- Over a third at continuing risk of harm
- Half the sample displaying abnormal/borderline abnormal emotional and behavioural patterns
- One in three sufficient to warrant referral for clinical support - three times expected prevalence
- Behavioural issues: extreme aggression; self-harming; constant need for reassurance
- Almost all emotional and behavioural difficulties at age five had been evident from at least age three
- Emotional and behavioural problems more prevalent amongst late separated children and those living with birth parents but inadequately safeguarded
Effective services and interventions

- Straight talking social workers
- Close bond with at least one professional
- Therapeutic one to one (not group) counselling
- Gradual withdrawal of services

BUT:
- Evidence based interventions unavailable
- CAMHS inaccessible
- Schools services not integrated
Timeframes for decision making

- On average it took:
  - Fourteen months for a definitive decision resulting in a viable permanence plan
  - Six more months for this to be completed
  - Five months minimum to find suitable adoptive home
- No new permanence decisions between ages three and five
Timeframes for decision-making (family justice system)

- Pre care proceedings:
  - 81% of children known for at least one year;
  - 45% for at least five years

- Care proceedings:
  - average length 52 weeks (31-75 weeks)

- Adoption proceedings:
  - 21 months from removal to placement; 31 months to Adoption Order
Why are there delays in recognition?

- Workforce is insufficiently trained in child development
- Long-term impact of abuse and neglect not always understood
- Start again syndrome
- Practitioners in specialist services can become desensitised to evidence of maltreatment
- Neglect and emotional abuse rarely produce a crisis
- Poor recognition means that interventions are indecisive, delayed and cases frequently opened and closed
Why are there delays in taking action?

Referrals to children’s social care delayed because:

- Adult services tend to focus on parents rather than on impact of adverse behaviours on children
- Differences in perceived thresholds for services
- Concerns about inappropriate or inadequate responses
- Poor/non-existent feedback
- Tensions between services
- Yet universal services (schools, health service, police) most likely to see first evidence of abuse
Delays in involving the family justice system

- Least intrusive action preferred throughout the process
- Written agreements with parents rarely have time limits or incur consequences
- Local authority legal departments reluctant to act in neglect and emotional abuse cases
Delays within the family justice system

- Practical issues
- Repeated assessments of parenting capacity
- Assessments of kinship carers
Underlying issues

- Preservation of the family
- Partnership principle
- Empowerment, fairness and their limitations
- Parents’ rights
- Focus of attention shifts as children grow older
Evidence that might inform decisions: timeframes

- Proactive social work case management may start to diminish when children are as young as **six**
- Very young children left too long in abusive or neglected families may experience double jeopardy – maltreatment followed by disrupted attachments
- Parents who overcome difficulties may be more likely to do so during pregnancy or within six months of birth
More evidence

• Maltreated children placed away from home through adoption, special guardianship or long-term foster care do better than those who remain with abusive or neglectful parents

• The majority of maltreated children in care do better in terms of stability and wellbeing than those who are returned home

• Delayed decisions are intricately related to instability – 54% of moves are initiated by local authority
Implications for policy and practice

- Training concerning urgency of children’s timeframes as part of ongoing professional development
- More understanding of parental capacity to change needed
- Formal clarification of thresholds for taking action
- More feedback to courts and to expert assessors concerning outcomes of decisions
Possible ways forward: Speeding up adoption process

- Faster decision-making
- More children placed for adoption
- New targets and benchmarking

BUT:
- May lead to more children being unnecessarily separated
- Only suitable for very small number of children
Possible ways forward: more effective and more timely services

- Better, more timely assessment (pre-birth assessment is rare)
- More use of evidence based programmes (e.g. Parents Under Pressure; Family Nurse Partnerships; MST-CAN)
- Better development and integration of school based interventions
- Better development of processes for stepping down (and stepping up)
Possible ways forward: addressing the underlying factors

- Primary risk factors for maltreatment include: substance misuse, domestic and community violence; mental health problems; experience of abuse in childhood, especially in combination

- Secondary stressors include: poverty, unemployment, poor housing; social exclusion; inequality

- Addressing the factors that underlie maltreatment is a necessary step towards reducing the prevalence
References


Safeguarding Children Research Initiative:
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