

RESEARCH BRIEFING

RECOGNITION AND TELLING: DEVELOPING EARLIER ROUTES TO HELP FOR CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE



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PROJECT TEAM Dr Jeanette Cossar, Professor Marian Brandon, Sue Bailey, Dr Pippa Belderson, Dr Laura Biggart, Dr Darren Sharpe (Anglia Ruskin University) and a team of young researchers

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WHY IS THIS STUDY IMPORTANT?

Improving access to protection and support for children and young people at risk of harm is of widespread and longstanding concern. The Munro Review of Child Protection (2011) argued that a child's journey from experiencing problems to getting effective help should be central to the child protection system. The review stressed the importance of offering families early help to prevent problems escalating and stop maltreatment before it happens. Early help can reach out to maltreated children not known to services, and also those that fall below the threshold of statutory intervention. There is little research about how children and young people themselves conceptualise abuse and how this impacts on their willingness to tell someone. Understanding children and young people's views about recognition and telling is important in making improvements in services to protect them.

AIM OF THE STUDY

The research aimed to examine young people's perceptions of abuse and neglect, to explore their experiences of telling and getting help from professionals, friends, and family, and to make suggestions for practice that would improve children and young people's access to effective support.

The key research questions were:

- How do children and young people think about and classify experiences of abuse and neglect and how do they tell people about the problems they are facing?
- What are children and young people's and their families' views about support services?
- How do professionals feel that access to those support services could be improved?

HOW WAS THE STUDY DONE?

- The study used participative research methods conducted in collaboration with a team of 6 young researchers, aged 16-26, with experience or knowledge of the topic. The young researchers helped design materials and research tools, and were involved in data collection and analysis.
- A content analysis was carried out using data from 261 threads, on an online peer support site, where young people post about problems involving abuse and neglect.
- An interview study of thirty vulnerable young people, aged 11-20, explored the complex interaction between recognising abuse, telling people about it, and receiving help over the course of their childhood and adolescence.
- 2 focus groups were conducted with children and young people not known to be vulnerable to provide a broader view of how abuse and neglect

is conceptualised. 4 focus groups with parents and professionals provided the perspective, from relevant adults, of how children and young people get help with abuse and neglect.

KEY FINDINGS

- Children and young people were more likely to recognise sexual and physical abuse than neglect or emotional abuse.
- Recognition that their experiences were abusive or neglectful was hindered by:
 - Feeling that they deserved it
 - Not being able to accept that a parent could be abusive
 - Abuse interspersed with times when the relationship was good
 - Confusion between what is normal discipline and physical abuse
 - Confusion around boundaries relating to touching with family members
- Recognition of abuse was linked with age. At around eleven or twelve the children were increasingly able to compare themselves with other families. This gave them more of a sense that their family situation was not 'normal'.
- Children and young people most often came to be known to services because of their behaviour, not because they had discussed abuse or neglect.
- Children and young people often needed to talk about their experiences over a long period of time before they recognised that what was happening to them was abuse.
- Sometimes the emotional impact of abuse, for example shame, embarrassment, and fear, overrode the rational process that might prompt a young person to tell someone.
- There were many barriers to telling including loyalty to family, minimising the problem, 'closing off' from what was happening as a way to cope, negative experiences of past support and threats from the abuser.
- Reasons for telling included wanting to stop the abuse, wanting emotional support and seeking practical strategies to minimise harm.
- In the online peer support forum analysis, disclosure was more often made to professionals than friends or family. This is in contrast to previous research on the disclosure of sexual abuse which suggests that children and young people rarely tell professionals.

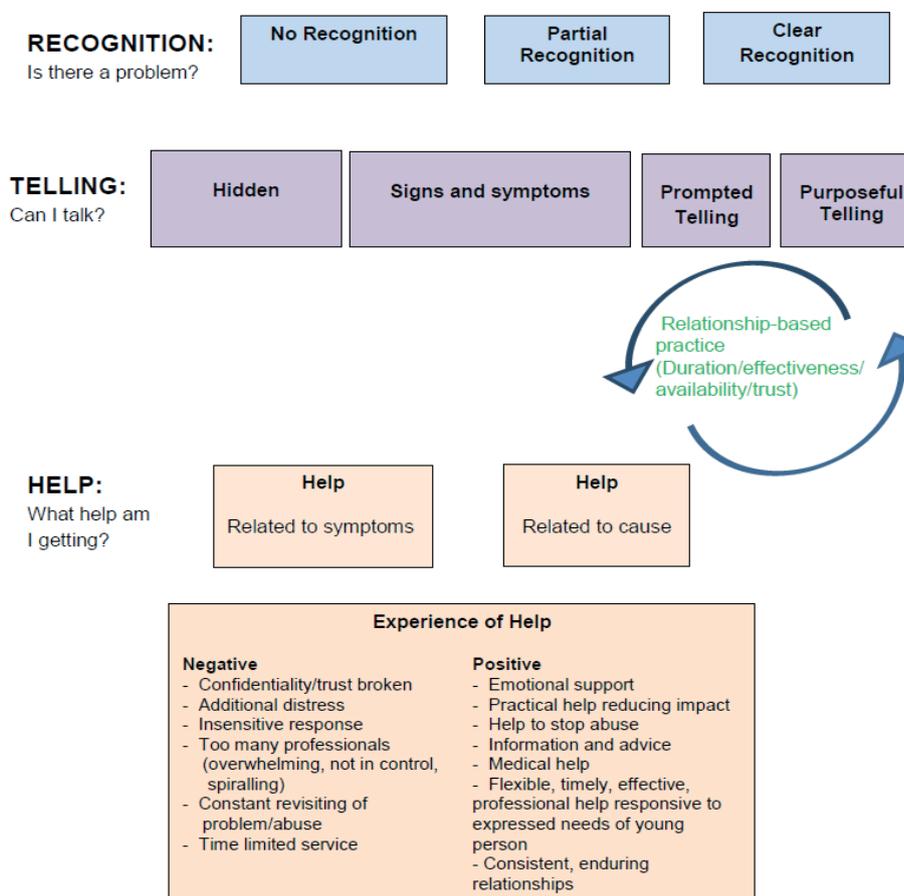
- Children and young people said that trust in professionals can be built through being believed, not being judged, closeness, and longer-term relationships.
- Concerns about breaches of confidentiality may be a barrier to telling. However, children and young people said that, if it was done sensitively and discussed openly, it could show that the worker cared enough about them to take action, and this could lead to a more trusting relationship.

The findings were used to design the 'Framework for Understanding Recognition, Telling and Help' to make sense of children's and young people's experiences. The interview study showed a spectrum of recognition ranging from lack of recognition, partial recognition and clear recognition. Several young people spoke in hindsight about abuse which they were not able to recognise at the time. Others had an emotional awareness that things were not right before they could make sense of the abuse. Young people talked of a gradual understanding rather than a sudden realisation.

Four themes around the process of telling emerged from the interview study. Remaining hidden might mean actively not telling by hiding the situation or passively because they did not recognise their experiences as abuse. Signs and symptoms of abuse, such as violence or self-harm, may bring the young person to the attention of others. Prompted telling may come from an initial sensitive response from a professional to the young person's signs and symptoms. Purposeful telling involves the young person recognising their situation and approaching someone.

In terms of help, the interview study gives further support to existing research literature with trust emerging as a central issue. Positive and negative experiences of help, related to symptoms of abuse or addressing the abuse itself, can be seen in the framework. Children and young people experiencing abuse and neglect can follow various pathways through the framework. Importantly, recognition often happens because of conversations with others which means clear recognition does not always happen before telling or receiving help. Sometimes recognition can be a result of the help received.

FRAMEWORK FOR UNDERSTANDING RECOGNITION, TELLING AND HELP



KEY RECOMMENDATIONS FOR POLICY AND PRACTICE

- Practitioners need to be curious and concerned about young people who appear to be struggling and think about the meaning of their behaviour and demeanour. Workers should not rely too much on children telling verbally before providing help.
- Be aware of the barriers to telling and be ready to support young people through the process of prompted telling. Telling may be emotionally difficult, delayed and tentative as the young person weighs up the benefits and consequences of speaking out.
- Managers should ensure that professionals are supported in the skilled use of professional judgement about when and how to pass on information. Managers should make sure staff receive good quality supervision where these issues can be discussed and supported.
- Professionals need to include young people in discussions about when and how to pass on information.
- Schools, school nurses, youth work and art projects, for example, should encourage young people to be part of a cultural debate about healthy relationships, giving them the opportunity to discuss abuse.
- Professionals working with children and young people need to provide clear information for children and young people about who they can talk to and how to get help, as well as what might happen next when they tell about abuse and neglect.
- Managers should promote a culture of safeguarding so that child protection is seen as everyone's responsibility.
- Policy makers need to consider the impact of cuts to pastoral support and youth services on vulnerable young people in the community. This may take away an important route to support, encouragement to tell, and early help.
- Local authorities could consider having liaison social workers linked to specific schools.

- Service providers need to make young people's views on services a routine part of service evaluation.
- Professionals need to educate children and young people on how to support friends who disclose abuse and how to manage dilemmas arising for them if they think a friend is being abused.
- Authorities need to make information available to parents about what to do if they think their child's friend is being abused.

STRENGTHS AND LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

Strengths

Using young researchers with knowledge or experience of the issues gave the whole team a more vivid picture of the experiences of children and young people suffering abuse and neglect. They also provided excellent ethical oversight to the research process.

Limitations

The children and young people posting on the internet forum analysed for the study chose to use an internet forum to seek information and/or help. Many young people posting messages did not identify their gender, ethnicity or age. Therefore, the sample may not be representative of the wider population of young people experiencing abuse.



FIND OUT MORE

FULL REPORT [GOO.GL/ZQG4KR](https://goo.gl/ZQG4KR)

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY [GOO.GL/Q0Z051](https://goo.gl/Q0Z051)

Dr. Jeanette Cossar | jeanette.cossar@uea.ac.uk

CENTRE FOR RESEARCH ON CHILDREN AND FAMILIES

School of Social Work, Faculty of Social Sciences, Elizabeth Fry Building,
University of East Anglia, Norwich Research Park, Norwich NR4 7TJ

DIRECTOR Professor Marian Brandon