Identifying & Responding to Child Neglect in Schools:
messages for safeguarding children across services

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➢ Background
➢ Aim of study
➢ Methods
➢ Data collection
➢ Findings & reflections (i) & (ii)
➢ Recommendations for practice
➢ Q&A
Background

➢ Child neglect is the most common reason for a child to be placed on a child protection plan in England, and the second most common reason for a child to be placed upon the child protection register in Wales (NSPCC, 2020).

➢ Neglect is often chronic, rather than based on a specific incident, it can make it more difficult to identify whether the care a child is receiving is poor enough to be labelled neglect.

➢ This can make it more challenging to provide comprehensive and timely help, that will meet the child’s needs and improve their situation effectively.

➢ Staff in schools are the most vital partners in the safeguarding system, able to observe children’s interactions with their peers, and families over an extended period of time and development, and in a number of different settings.

➢ Joint working across disciplines is acknowledge as being one of the biggest challenges to working with child neglect (Pithouse & Crowley, 2016)

➢ This study brings understanding about the ways in which school staff support children and explores the nature and challenges of inter-professional relationships with children’s services.

➢ Findings are particularly relevant as children return to school after ‘lock-down’ where they have not been as visible to school staff or other services, and we see referrals to CSC continuing to rise
Aim of the study

The project aimed to provide insights by investigating in what way school staff identify and responding to child neglect.

The project has three key research questions which aimed to gather evidence to inform practice between school staff and social workers:

1. What is the extent of involvement of schools in identifying and responding to child neglect?
2. What is the nature of the relationship between schools and social services when they are concerned that a child is experiencing neglect?
3. What are the experiences of school staff from a range of different roles when they are worried a child is experiencing neglect?
Methods

**Phase 1**

- **Quantitative Case-file Analysis**
  - To understand the level of current involvement of schools in responding to chronic neglect in a multi-agency environment

**Phase 2**

- **Qualitative Semi-structured Interviews**
  - To explore the early identification of neglect in schools and the current informal preventative provision

- **Non-participant Observation**
  - To investigate decision-making processes in schools for informal and formal interventions

**Universal services** → **Children with additional needs** → **Children with multiple needs** → **Children at risk in need of protection**
Access

- Ethical approval for the study was given by the Research Ethics Committee at Cardiff University.
- Directors of Social Services in all 22 local authorities in Wales were approached, meetings had in 8 authorities over a 6-week period: all confirmed their wish to participate.
- Access negotiations were complex and developing process in which gatekeepers required ongoing consultation.
- Three authorities were selected, negotiations also began with each region’s Education Authority Officer to explore potential for phase 2.
- Confidentiality agreements were issued by each local authority and signed by the Head of Service and the researcher before data collection commenced.
- Once phase 1 was complete, individual schools in each of the three areas were approached to explore whether they wished to participate in the study.
Phase 1

Three Welsh Local Authorities were chosen in accordance with the study’s principles for selection:

1. Geographic - urban, rural and valley locations
2. Annual levels of low and high rates of neglect (per 10k) on the Child Protection Register
3. Low, average, and high levels of deprivation in Wales (at the 10% LSOA)

Each Authority provided a sample of up to 50 case files in accordance with the study’s sampling frame:

- The school was the referrer to Social Services
- The child was of school age
- The child was registered under the category of ‘neglect’ on the Child Protection Register at the first CPP
Case file analysis

Documents sampled:

1. School’s referral to statutory services
2. Initial statutory assessment
3. Strategy document/discussion & s.47 enquiry
4. Core assessment
5. Initial Child Protection Conference minutes & plan
6. Core Group meeting
7. Review Conference minutes & plan

Data from all three authorities was compiled onto a datasheet in IBM SPSS software.

The values for each variable were entered in numerical format. Binary variables were coded 0 (no) or 1 (yes). Nominal and ordinal variables were assigned consecutive values, whilst continuous data such as the child’s date of birth, were entered as scale variables.
More boys (58%) living with neglect than girls ($n=119$), more likely to be of primary school age (73%) ($M=9.1$ years $SD=3.1$), be from a White British background, and not have been on a child protection plan (CPP) before (58%).

All referrals cited at least two or more concerns that were held about a child:

- educational neglect (e.g. attendance/lateness/parental engagement)
- physical neglect (hygiene, clothing, home conditions)
- other forms of abuse (physical, sexual, emotional abuse)
- lack of supervision and guidance
- medical neglect
- nutritional neglect
- emotional neglect
The Multiple Types of Support Offered by Schools to Children and Their Families

In 42% of cases sampled a range of school-based support was offered to the child in response to concerns of child neglect (either prior to referral or during the child protection process).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of Support from School</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Financial Support</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Practical Care</td>
<td>42%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Referrals or signposting</td>
<td>38%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emotional support</td>
<td>20%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clothing</td>
<td>20%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Food</td>
<td>18%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

- It is important to note that this information was not systematically recorded in the same place within the case files sampled, but gathered where possible if it appeared within the sampled documents.
- The small percentage of cases where food was provided is likely to be countered by children’s attendance at breakfast or after school clubs, free school meals or opportunities where schools were providing food to children.
- Could be potentially ‘hidden’ within the ‘referrals and signposting’ category in terms of the increasing number of families accessing food banks and charities for support (Barnard, 2015).
When an initial child protection conference (ICPC) had been convened, the school representative attended in 89% of cases.

At the child protection review conference (CPRC) three months later, the school representative’s attendance had dropped to 73%.

In nearly all cases schools provided a report to the ICPC (97%), but there was evidence that this decreased by 10% by the time of the CPRC (87%).

In 76% of cases, the school took responsibility for action(s) on the child’s plan at ICPC, but this again decreased to by 7% by the CPRC (69%).
Reflections (i):

❖ Why are school staff less involved / less able to participate in the child protection process once a child is placed on a plan and the local authority is named as the lead agency?

❖ Once a referral to child protection services is made, do school staff feel less able or perhaps see less need to contribute to ongoing statutory provision and the sharing of new or ongoing concerns?

❖ Could school staff wish to avoid situations that may further damage relationships with parents they see daily? Such as sitting around a table at a child protection conference? (SCIE, 2016)

❖ Could it reflect heavy teaching/workloads/commitments in education and the inability for staff to attend meetings?

❖ Are school staff/new schools consistently invited and informed about Child Protection Conference meeting dates by statutory services? Do dates get listed outside of the school term?

Discuss for 10 minutes: similarities or differences?

1. In what ways are you able to provide school-based support to children you suspect are living with neglect?
2. What are your experiences of being involved in statutory child protection processes? Have there been any challenges?
Phase 2

The study consisted of a mixed method, two phase design:
The principal finding was the contrasting practices and approaches between school staff and social workers:

- Nearly all school staff reported the challenging nature of their inter-professional partnership with social workers in child protection teams and the impact this had upon their ability to respond to neglect effectively.

- School staff described social workers as ‘powerful agents’ or ‘experts’, and talked about a lack of professional confidence to identify neglect or challenge statutory assessments or decisions, despite often holding more information about a child than statutory services.
Many school staff said they relied upon visual indicators of neglect that could be seen during the school-day and had different understandings about what they felt was ‘neglectful’ parenting compared to others.

Staff said the use of professional language and statutory operational categories of neglect resulted in difficulties with communication and information sharing, particularly when school staff were completing safeguarding referrals.

"Maybe there are other concerns… they [social workers] get to see outside of the school that we wouldn’t know about… we only see, and we only deal with the ones we see in school.

Learning Support Assistant"

"The social worker sees things from a different aspect and perspective to the teacher.

Head Teacher, Child Protection Lead"

"We have a greater depth of knowledge about a family and then somebody from Social Services goes along once, who doesn’t know the area or the family, they make this judgment obviously on this one visit!

Assistant Head Teacher, Child Protection Lead"
Key Findings: within schools

There was significant variation in practice:

Although there were cultural and organisational differences between schools, good practice was demonstrated in schools which took:

- a proactive approach to neglect
- offered a positive learning environment for staff to develop ‘neglect-expertise’
- those where staff had established positive relationships with families which supported communication and challenge

An important finding from the study was that these factors were consistently evident in smaller-sized schools (rather than type of school) when staff said they contributed to helping them identify and respond to children living with neglect.
Recommendations for staff in schools

➢ Individual level:

All staff who have extensive knowledge about the local community (contextual issues, family functioning, histories) should be provided with regular opportunities to share insights (formally and informally) with colleagues responsible for referrals.

Referrals outcomes from statutory services should be fed back to staff those members involved in the referral, or if not received, followed up with Social Services by DSLs.

➢ Cultural level:

Head teachers/DSLs should be supported to establish effective learning communities (communities of practice?) within their school to enable staff to develop context-specific knowledge and expertise on how to respond to neglect within a school setting, and have regular opportunity to share and discuss approaches and decisions with more/less experienced colleagues.

Consider planning reflection discussions/child-focused discussion on supporting families/inviting social workers to join the group and application of Local Authority Threshold Documents as a framework to support conversations and decision making practice.

➢ Structural level:

Given wide prevalence, schools should recruit strategic staff who demonstrate commitment to developing expertise in child neglect to promote children’s welfare as well as wellbeing within the school.

Creating formal secondments/co-locations or informal visits to social work teams or inviting them to the school to build professional relationships.
Recommendations for inter-agency practice

➢ Strategic and managerial staff should cultivate understanding around the barriers which impede successful inter-agency collaboration.

➢ Training on child neglect should *(continue to)* be undertaken in a multi-disciplinary setting.

➢ All practitioners should build trusting working relationships with professionals in partner agencies.

➢ Time should be spent understanding the role and remits of colleagues in other services.

➢ Informal and formal opportunities should be made available to all staff to support knowledge development of partner agencies’ terms, roles, approaches and methods of working.

➢ *(Individual)* All staff should have the opportunity to spend time in partner agencies to develop expertise across services through informal day visits, or formal secondments/co-location of services (with counterparts in statutory or universal services).

➢ *(Cultural)* The local authority’s threshold guidance/matrix document should be used as a tool for reflective discussion across services, to inform decision making and foster a ‘shared language’, so that schools can articulate the concerns underpinning their referrals.

➢ *(Structural)* The role of the School Social Worker can respond to interprofessional barriers by providing a bridge between schools and child protection services and should be expanded to all authorities.
Reflections (ii):

Discuss for 10 minutes: similarities or differences?

❖ What are your experiences of working with children’s social workers/safeguarding teams?
❖ Can you think of an example where you have had a different professional perspective on a child living with neglect?
❖ How do you/ did you articulate your concerns? Was this effective?
❖ What challenges have you experienced when working with statutory services?
❖ Will any of the suggested recommendations be useful?
❖ If so, how could you apply them to your setting?
❖ If not, what things would support you to work more effectively:
  o with worries of neglect?
  o with social workers/statutory services?
  o with families?
Limitations & Future directions

➢ Interviews with Social Workers’ to investigate their experiences of working with school staff – are there similarities in the data?

➢ Implementation of the School Social Worker role WWCSC has recently announced a £9.9 million project to place social workers in schools in 21 local authorities in England to help reduce referral rates to children’s social care (this expands upon a 3 x LA pilot).

➢ Interviews with children and young people of school age about their thoughts, feelings and experiences of accessing support in a school context from staff when experiencing child neglect.

➢ Development of a Resource Pack with Safeguarding Network and British Association of Social Workers (BASW) to support the effective identification of neglect and articulation of concerns across services and professions.
Questions?

Further information:


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thank you

for more information visit
https://safeguarding.network/

References:

SCIE (2016) Incomplete Information Sharing by Schools in Child Protection Conferences