

Teenagers: learning from case reviews briefing

Summary of key issues and learning for improved practice around working with teenagers

February 2021

Introduction

Published case reviews highlight that practitioners sometimes struggle to work with teenagers who are experiencing complex issues. Interventions can focus on tackling challenging behaviour, rather than exploring the underlying causes and risk factors. This sometimes causes practitioners to lose sight of the fact that teenagers are children in need of protection.

The learning from these case reviews highlights that practitioners need to listen to teenagers, and balance each young person's wishes with their best interests.

Reasons case reviews were commissioned

This briefing is based on learning taken from 15 case reviews from the national repository that were published between 2018 and 2019, featuring children aged 13-18.

The teenagers in these case reviews faced a complex lived experience and wide range of risk factors. They became the subject of reviews following:

- suicide or attempted suicide
- physical injuries or death at the hands of another young person
- child sexual abuse and sexual exploitation
- neglect

- criminal exploitation.

➤ **Find out more about the National case reviews repository**

Key issues

The young person's voice

Sometimes practitioners perceived a young person to be independent and mature. This led them to be quick to act in accordance with the young person's expressed wishes, even when it was not necessarily in the young person's best interests.

In other instances, the young person's wishes and needs were overlooked because they displayed behaviour perceived as challenging or because practitioners took a parent or carer's word over their child's.

Some teenagers with disabilities and vulnerabilities are less able to advocate for themselves and rely on their parents or carers to do so for them. In some cases, parents and carers did not engage with practitioners on their child's behalf and this had life-threatening consequences.

Young people going missing

Young people who frequently go missing from home may be at a higher risk of sexual and criminal abuse and exploitation. This wasn't always recognised by practitioners, so plans for effective multi-agency support were not always put in place upon a young person's return.

Agencies sometimes overlooked the importance of who the young person was with when they were missing, and the potential risks these people posed.

Sometimes young people did not attend appointments and their case was closed because practitioners assumed the child didn't want to engage, rather than considering the wider reasons for this. This meant that nobody was checking on the child's welfare.

Mental health and wellbeing

Practitioners sometimes focussed on the 'young person as the problem' and treated mental health issues at face value, rather than recognising that mental health issues can be an indicator of abuse and neglect.

Practitioners were not always aware of the long-term impact that abuse and neglect experienced in earlier childhood can have on teenagers' mental health and behaviour.

Other factors that can have an impact on young people's wellbeing include parental mental health problems and cycles of children being rejected by and reconciled with their family. Practitioners did not always recognise or know how to respond appropriately to these factors.

Practitioners were not always aware that self-harm and suicidal thoughts are very serious risks to young people's safety, and they did not always take it seriously when young people spoke about self-harm or suicide.

Risk assessments for self-harm did not always include a multi-agency care plan or identification of a lead agency or professional. This meant it was unclear who had responsibility for co-ordinating the care plan and the action taken to respond to self-harm was not effective.

Practitioners didn't always have a full understanding of the online risks for young people with mental health problems.

Behaviour perceived to be challenging and risk-taking

Sometimes professionals labelled a young person's behaviour as "challenging" or "risk-taking", which led to them seeing the behaviour as the problem, rather than identifying what might be causing it, what risks the young person might be exposed to, and what support was needed.

Some practitioners lost sight of the fact that teenagers are still children and need to be protected as such.

If practitioners perceived that a young person was displaying risk-taking behaviour, for example being involved in criminal activity, this was sometimes seen as a deliberate choice by the child. This perception overshadowed the child's vulnerabilities and the mitigation of any risks they were exposed to. In some instances it led to professionals treating young people as perpetrators of crime and/or anti-social activity, rather than children in need of support.

Practitioners sometimes focused on tackling young people's substance misuse, rather than seeing substance misuse as a possible indicator of abuse and/or exploitation.

Young people who have low school attendance and/or display challenging behaviour in class are less able to participate in mainstream education and may be excluded either temporarily or permanently. In some cases, school staff were unable to notice and raise child protection concerns because a child was not attending school. School and Pupil Referral Unit (PRU) action plans sometimes focussed more on behavioural issues than looking for the root cause of why a young person was displaying challenging behaviour.

Child sexual exploitation

Underage sexual activity can be an indicator that a young person is at risk of or is experiencing sexual exploitation. Some young people had been groomed and/or coerced from an early age, but were not aware they were being abused.

The adults in a young person's life, and young people themselves, sometimes viewed sexual activity as a "lifestyle choice", rather than recognising it as a potential indicator of abuse. This meant there was a perception that the child was responsible for what had happened to them, and appropriate action was not taken to keep them safe.

Sometimes professionals assumed that young people were in a consensual relationship rather than understanding that they were a victim of grooming, coercion and/or exploitation. Teenage girls were sometimes treated as victims of domestic abuse rather than as victims of child abuse.

Early intervention and help

Early help assessments did not always take place as soon as there were signs of risk to a child, to ascertain the child's needs and co-ordinate support for them and their family. This meant that some young people were exposed to long-term, ongoing abuse and neglect and/or exploitation.

Some young people with emotional difficulties did not receive effective support when transitioning from primary to secondary school. If support is not put in place early enough in secondary school, it can affect the child's mental health and behaviour as they get older.

Multi-agency working

The teenagers in these case reviews had long-standing and complex problems and received a wide range of support from different agencies. If services work in silos, this can mean that there is no overall picture of the young person's situation and no overarching plan about how to support them in the best way.

Keeping up-to-date records of pertinent events in a young person's life and sharing information between agencies was difficult if a family frequently moved home and/or the young person frequently changed schools. In some cases, frequent changes of address were a sign that parents or carers felt professionals were getting too close to their family and wanted to create some distance.

Learning for improved practice

Listening to young people

Agencies need to ensure that the child's voice and views form a key element of the decision-making process. The child's opinions should be captured and recorded.

Practitioners should remember that anyone aged under 18 is legally a child and should be protected as such. The child's best interests should be a priority at all times.

A holistic multi-agency approach to mental health

Young people who are struggling with their mental health require a coordinated, multi-agency, holistic response which considers all the factors that might have caused their difficulties, including abuse and neglect and exploitation.

Practitioners need to be trained to understand the impact of adverse childhood experiences such as emotional, physical, or sexual abuse or neglect, and understand how a young person's experiences in early childhood can impact their mental health in the present day.

General Practitioners (GPs) and child and adolescent mental health services (CAMHS) should work holistically with schools and all other agencies involved in a child's life to make sure the child is getting all the support they need.

Hospital discharge letters and appointment confirmations regarding treatment for mental health issues should be copied to a young person's GP and the school nurse so they are aware of what is happening in a child's life and can provide support in a joined-up way.

Where multiple agencies are involved with a child, there should be a written agreement about who is taking the lead, and what each agency is accountable for.

Disclosures from young people about suicidal thoughts and concerns about self-harm should be taken seriously, and prompt an immediate multi-agency response. This should include taking practical steps to keep the child safe and listening to what the young person is saying about the support they need.

Risk assessments for self-harm and suicidal thoughts should include all the factors in a child's life that might be causing mental health problems, and be linked to a clear multi-agency support plan.

Schools should have a policy in place for supporting young people when transitioning from primary to secondary school if they are known to be vulnerable to abuse and neglect and/or have mental health issues.

All organisations that work with young people should have regular discussions with them about the opportunities and risks of the online world. This should include talking about harmful content on topics such as self-harm and suicide, how this might affect a young person's mental health, and what they should do if they are ever worried or upset by anything they see online

If a young person takes their own life their digital footprint should be reviewed immediately to identify if any other young people may be at risk of harm

Local suicide and self-harm prevention strategies should consider the impact of harmful internet and social media content on young people's mental health

Considering what lies behind a young person's behaviour

Professionals need to consider everything going on in a child's life that may be causing a young person to display challenging behaviour, rather than focusing solely on the behaviour itself.

If a young person is involved in sexual activity, this should be viewed as a possible indicator of sexual abuse and/or exploitation. When working with a young person who is at risk of sexual exploitation, practitioners should remember the young person may have been groomed and coerced into an exploitative relationship and may not realise they are being abused and controlled. This might include a relationship where there is an imbalance of power.

Practitioners should be trained to understand the links between children going missing and criminal and sexual exploitation. Agencies should regularly review their arrangements to identify, record, and share information about all instances where children go missing, to ensure they are effective.

Helping young people access services

If children are not brought to or do not attend appointments, practitioners should find out the reasons for this rather than assuming the young person chose not to attend. Cases should not be closed purely on the strength of non attendance.

Practitioners should persevere to ensure that they are able to engage with a young person and provide the services each child needs.

If a child isn't attending a service practitioners should share this information with multi-agency partners.

Further reading

Child Safeguarding Practice Review Panel (2020) **It was hard to escape safeguarding children at risk from criminal exploitation (PDF)**. London: HM Government.

<https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/870035/Safeguarding_children_at_risk_from_criminal_exploitation_review.pdf>

Croydon Safeguarding Children Board (2019) **Vulnerable adolescents thematic review (PDF)**. Croydon. Croydon Safeguarding Children Board.

<<http://croydonlcsb.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2019/02/CSCB-Vulnerable-Adolescent-Thematic-Review-PUBLISHED-Feb-2019.pdf>>

References

A list of the case reviews analysed for this briefing is available on the **NSPCC Library Catalogue**.

The national case review repository makes it easier to access and share learning from published case reviews at local, regional and national level. You can access the repository via the Library.

+ More ways to help you protect children



Take our child protection courses
nspcc.org.uk/training



Sign up to an NSPCC Learning newsletter
nspcc.org.uk/caspar



Find out more about our series of learning from case reviews briefings
nspcc.org.uk/casereviewlearning

