

‘We should have been helped from day one’:

key messages
about neglect and
early intervention for
elected members



**Evidence for
Excellence in
Education**



**research
in practice**

Findings from *We should have been helped from day one*: a unique perspective from children, families and practitioners¹

A group of councils across the midlands and south-east of England have been working together to explore an issue facing many councils:

How do we effectively support families who are experiencing neglect, and who have different levels of need across the early intervention spectrum, to engage with services?

Our messages provide elected representatives with valuable insights into the views of frontline practitioners, communities and families about how families who are experiencing neglect can be best helped early. The findings from this research provide some practical and low-cost solutions to helping families in need. The report also provides recommendations for more substantial changes for local and central government.

Child neglect has been a long-standing focus of many governments regardless of their political persuasion. A wealth of data, including Serious Case Reviews, highlights the prevalence of neglect among children. It is the primary reason or contributory factor for child protection plans or registrations in over half of all cases. In 2011, this related to over 18,509 children in England alone. And the official figures are thought to underestimate the true scale of the problem.

Chronic neglect is often addressed through child protection procedures, although this is not always the case, as highlighted by the recent Serious Case Review findings. Rather than exploring chronic or sustained neglect (or abuse), LARC² focused on identifying and supporting children experiencing 'lower-level' neglect, in acknowledgement that identifying children experiencing

neglect early and offering support soon after a problem arises can prevent needs from escalating and can reduce or eliminate longer-term problems.

The research identified several enablers and barriers to helping a family or child who is experiencing neglect. It is based on interviews with over 105 multi-agency practitioners and 40 parents, children and young people.

How do frontline practitioners identify children experiencing neglect?

Practitioners highlighted that identifying children experiencing neglect is not an exact science. Often described as a 'grey area', except in the cases of chronic neglect, we found that most councils involved in the study do not have a clear definition or policy to define 'child neglect'. This means that professionals must use their own judgement to a great extent, and are often required to be flexible and nuanced in their approach with families. Following their involvement in LARC, some councils are developing guidance/policies around child neglect to help their frontline workers to identify and respond appropriately to need.

What are the perceived gaps in provision?

Families and practitioners agreed that councils and their partner organisations could do more to support families. They identified the need for more parenting support and more accessible health, education and housing provision. Young people and families said they would like more activities and clubs offering help, advice and support for young people. These gaps were not thought to be specific to neglect.

What are the enablers and barriers to supporting children and families?

Parents and families made similar suggestions about what helps families engage, or conversely, disengage, with support including early intervention services. While the research focussed on children experiencing neglect, these messages are applicable to many services across councils and their partners.

¹ Easton, C., Lamont, L., Smith, R. and Aston, H. (2013). *We Should Have Been Helped from Day One*: a Unique Perspective From Children, Families and Practitioners. Findings from LARC5. Slough: NFER www.nfer.ac.uk/publications/LRCF01

² LARC stands for the Local Authorities Research Consortium. Further information about the LARC series of research on early intervention can be found at www.nfer.ac.uk/larc.

Figure 1 Some enablers to engaging with families



Families value having a consistent key worker (or lead professional) who provides dependable help in a trusting and supportive manner. As one parent explained:

They helped me to feel confident that I could be a good parent and take care of my children... Having workers support and talk to you in the right way was really important in getting my family involved with the help available. Workers explaining things clearly and carefully was important, like why it was important to interact with my children ... how I needed to be a role model to my children, and what could happen to my children's development if I did not take them to speech appointments.

They want to know what services are available to them and how to access them, at the time they need them. Commonly held misconceptions about the role of social care and its different functions are a big barrier. Parents fear asking for help because they worry that their children will be taken into care. Multi-agency working and a lack of timely and appropriate information sharing remains a challenge within some sectors and in some councils.

What can councils do to enhance early intervention and engagement with families?

Recommendations for council and service leaders include:

- promoting and advertising early help services in an accessible way
- simplifying processes, such as referral routes, and reducing waiting times to access services
- endorsing multi-agency working and information sharing
- offering holistic family support
- improving families' knowledge about the different functions of children's social care, (to alleviate concerns that services will seek to remove their children)
- encouraging peer to peer support and networking between community members and families (e.g. 'family champions')
- developing practitioners' skills, knowledge and confidence to assess need and work with families.

About LARC

NFER and RiP founded LARC to support councils, and their partners, to work together through sector-led collaborative research projects to improve outcomes for children and families. Each year, councils choose the focus for the next round of research. Supported by LARC researchers, councils do their own research to inform local practice. Commencing in April 2014, LARC will continue to explore early intervention and neglect, looking at challenging normalised behaviours and family norms. To find out more or to sign up to LARC, contact the team at LARC@nfer.ac.uk or 01753 637 182.

Working with and for the sector to improve the lives of children and families.

NFER provides evidence for excellence through its independence and insights, the breadth of its work, its connections, and a focus on outcomes.

Research in Practice brings together research and practitioner expertise – building the sector’s capacity for evidence-informed practice.

- independent
- insights
- breadth
- connections
- outcomes

© National Foundation for Educational Research 2014

**National Foundation for
Educational Research**
The Mere, Upton Park
Slough, Berks SL1 2DQ

T: 01753 574123
F: 01753 691632
E: enquiries@nfer.ac.uk
www.nfer.ac.uk

ISBN 978-1-910008-06-5