BRIEFING

Behaviour as communication: understanding the needs of neglected and abused adolescents

Dr Autumn Roesch-Marsh
October 2012

WithScotland
Behaviour as communication: understanding
the needs of neglected and abused adolescents

Key Messages

Children and young people of all ages have a right to be protected from abuse and neglect.

The abuse and neglect of young people (aged 11-17) is not always being recognised by child protection systems and addressing this abuse is complicated by the fact that older children may be actively placing themselves at risk through their behaviours.

It is important that these risk taking behaviours are understood as crucial communication from the young person about how they are feeling and their needs. These behaviours may be in response to past and ongoing experiences of neglect and abuse which the young person does not feel able to disclose. They may also provide important clues as to the young person's inner world and the impact of poor attachments.

In responding to the abuse and neglect of young people practitioners need to recognise their age and stage of development, seeking to involve, inform and empower young people as much as possible. Young people want to be listened to and to feel safe. When they disclose abuse they want practitioners who will take swift action, will be trustworthy and available, and will stick by them in the long term.

WithScotland
Behaviour as communication: understanding
the needs of neglected and abused adolescents

Introduction

Recent research evidence suggests that practitioners may not be recognising adolescent neglect and abuse[1].

There seem to be a number of reasons for this including: a focus on younger children in the child protection system; the reluctance on the part of young people to disclose abuse; differences in defining adolescent neglect and abuse; a lack of awareness among some practitioners about the signs and symptoms of adolescent neglect and abuse; beliefs and attitudes about the resilience of older young people; and a focus on managing and addressing behaviours in young people, sometimes without an understanding about what lies behind this behaviour.

This briefing explores what the research suggests about the link between behaviour and experiences of neglect and abuse. It explores how this behaviour can be better understood by adults and what strategies might support better interventions.

WithScotland
Behaviour as communication: understanding
the needs of neglected and abused adolescents

Why is this issue important?

The *Getting it Right for Every Child* agenda highlights Safety as one of the eight wellbeing indicators for all children in Scotland[2]. The *My World Triangle* assessment framework also identifies 'Keeping me safe' as one of the key tasks for anyone looking after a child or young person. Assessment of the child's needs and strengths are described in holistic terms and assessment is seen as a collaborative, ongoing process which should involve young people, their families, and all relevant agencies. The Children (Scotland) Act 1995 outlines that local authorities have a duty to investigate and report to the Children's Reporter when there is evidence a child may require compulsory measures of intervention. Under section 52 (2) there may be grounds for compulsory intervention where a child or young person: (a) is beyond the control of any relevant person; (b) is falling into bad associations or is exposed to moral danger; (c) is likely – (i) to suffer unnecessarily; or (ii) be impaired in his health or development due to a lack of parental care.

Although this legislation and policy applies to all children in Scotland, regardless of their age and stage of development, recent research does suggest that young people (aged 11-17) have different maltreatment experiences from those of younger children and professionals may find it more difficult to keep older children safe.

The research identifies that this is often because the abuse of young people is complicated by a range of issues that tend not to be present with younger children, including: substance misuse, homelessness, being thrown out of home, alcohol/drug misuse, risk taking behaviour, violence and conflict with parents[1, 3, 4]. Research also suggests that adolescent and persistent maltreatment have stronger and more consistent negative consequences during adolescence than does maltreatment experienced only in childhood[5 6].

While it may be more complex to promote the safety of young people, it is well recognised that adolescence is a crucial point for intervention[7]. If we fail to intervene and provide safety and timely support research suggests that a range of poor outcomes are more likely in later life, including: mental health problems, alcohol and substance misuse, impaired social and cognitive skills, and poorer educational outcomes[8]. We also know that maltreatment is a risk factor for offending and anti-social behaviour[9].

There is limited evidence from children and young people themselves about what they want from services when they are experiencing neglect and abuse. The evidence we do have suggests that young people find it difficult to disclose maltreatment. Barriers included being aware of the consequences of disclosure for themselves, their family and the abuser and not recognising that what they are experiencing is abuse[10].

WithScotland
Behaviour as communication: understanding
the needs of neglected and abused adolescents

When young people do tell someone they usually choose to speak to a peer first and are more likely to approach a professional they already know, like a teacher[1, 11]. Children and young people say that they want workers who are: approachable and look out for signs that they are suffering; really listen to them; get to know them; are trustworthy and reliable; help them feel safe and give them clear information about what is going to happen next and what choices they have; take action quickly; and see their work as more than just a job. Young people also want workers to know that they can make an important difference when they get it right.

A range of studies and some serious case reviews suggest that many young people engage in 'risk taking' behaviours in order to draw attention to the neglect and abuse they are experiencing[12, 13]. Going missing is one of the most common ways that young people signal that they are being mistreated at home[14]. However, other behaviours such as misusing drugs and alcohol, self-harming, sexual risk taking and offending may also be indicators that a young person is or has been maltreated[15, 16, 17].

It is crucial that practitioners understand how experiences of abuse, loss and trauma may shape how a young people sees themselves and others, the powerful negative feelings they might be carrying inside, and the behaviours they may adopt in an attempt to cope with or express these feelings[18, 19]. Many of these children lack secure attachments with caring adults and the behaviour they exhibit, particularly in adolescence, may seem to be 'out of control'[20]. It is important that assessments seek to understand what may be behind this behaviour, which could include an ongoing or previous experience of abuse. Practitioners must recognise that different patterns of abuse and neglect may have different consequences. Some young people have experienced long-term chronic abuse and neglect; in these circumstances behaviours may include long established maladaptive coping strategies aimed at finding a way to get their needs met. Other young people may have experienced a one off event that was never identified, addressed or resolved; in these case symptoms of post-traumatic stress may be present and particular situations and developmental changes may trigger particular behaviours[21].

WithScotland
Behaviour as communication: understanding
the needs of neglected and abused adolescents

What does the research tell us?

Research suggests that 'out of control' behaviour is in fact common and understandable in children who have an insecure attachment pattern. Where parenting is abusive and hostile, children and young people are often seen as 'out of control' and parents may see the child as a 'monster'. In these unpredictable, abusive and frightening home environments children may find it difficult to 'make sense of and predict parental behaviour' and children may feel 'helpless, bad, full of rage, dangerous, chronically anxious and uncertain'[20]. Without a secure base, the child or young person in this predicament has no-one to turn to for support and comfort and may not learn to internalise strategies to self soothe in times of stress. In the absence of strategies to manage their distress their behaviours can appear unpredictable and erratic as they express negative feelings and search for sources of comfort and relief[22].

Children and young people who have experienced abuse, trauma and insecurity are also more likely to have developed an external locus of control[23]. This is because an experience of abuse and neglect is likely to have increased his/her sense of powerlessness in the world[24]; a feeling that can be reinforced by multiple moves, uncertainty about care plans, and failures by professionals to provide sufficient information or include young people in decision making processes[25].

As a cognitive schema, locus of control is important in terms of a person's belief in his/her ability to effect change through choice and direct the course of his/her life and has been linked to the concept of self-efficacy and resilience. An overly externalised locus of control or a lack of self-efficacy may make a young person feel incapable of action, frustrated, angry and hopeless[26]. It may also make it more difficult for a young person to recognise and accept responsibility for their behaviour[27].

'Out of control' behaviours must be understood as a clear indication of the upset and deep distress that these young people have experienced in the past and continue to experience in the present. Inappropriate or unhappy care placements, further exploitation and abuse by adults and peers, and a lack of consistency in educational experiences are clearly likely to further unsettle young people who are already carrying a great deal of hurt and anger. These circumstances may also come to reinforce the negative cognitive schemas which have already developed within the young person, schemas which include beliefs about the self as bad and helpless and others as unavailable or hostile[22].

The young person's developmental trajectory and attachment experiences and the adequacy of current care provision must be understood during the assessment process in order to make sense of this 'out of control' behaviour.

WithScotland
Behaviour as communication: understanding
the needs of neglected and abused adolescents

This includes understanding how a young person's behaviour is an expression of their stage of development, which may not reflect their chronological age if abuse and neglect have disrupted development[28]. If this is recognised then the response to these behaviours can begin by considering: how might this young person, who is so clearly in distress, be best supported to feel safe and secure? As experts in working with survivors of trauma and abuse point out: 'Trauma robs the victim of a sense of power and control; the guiding principle of recovery is to restore power and control to the survivor. The first task of recovery is to establish safety'[29]. In order for a young person to develop a belief that the self is mostly good, that others can be relied upon for help in times of stress, and a belief in his/her own inner resources and judgement a long-term relationship based approach is required[30]. It is also crucial that adults listen to what young people tell them and work to understand the messages behind 'out of control' behaviour.

This behaviour is unlikely to be 'easy' to work with and it will take time and perseverance to develop the kind of trusting relationships that will make a difference[18]. Gains are most likely to be sustained where 'young people build their confidence and make changes they own and understand'[31]. Young people may also have developed a range of coping strategies to survive abusive and neglectful situations; practitioners should acknowledge the ways they have coped and survived while working with them to develop more effective strategies[32].

WithScotland
Behaviour as communication: understanding
the needs of neglected and abused adolescents

Implications for practice

Practitioners need to be curious about what young people are communicating through their behaviour and should not simply focus on 'managing' behaviours. Practitioners must remember that the young person may be communicating their distress in relation to an experience of ongoing neglect and abuse.

Practitioners need to understand how the behaviours young people exhibit may also be an expression of an internal world which has been shaped by trauma and abuse. Using relevant theory, practitioners need to work to understand the unique inner world of the child and the cognitive schemes that have shaped how these young people see and respond to the world around them.

Practitioners need to provide safety and continuity for young people and ensure that young people feel informed and included in decision making processes. This is crucial for young people who have experienced adults misusing power and abusing them, they need reparative experiences that help them begin to feel a sense of safety, self-efficacy and control.

WithScotland
Behaviour as communication: understanding
the needs of neglected and abused adolescents

6

WithScotland
Behaviour as communication: understanding
the needs of neglected and abused adolescents

Further resources and references

Further resources

Royal College of Psychiatrists (2012) *Fact sheet: Self-harm and young people.* Available at:
www.rcpsych.ac.uk/expertadvice/youthinfo/parentscarers/growingup/self-harm.aspx

Alcohol Concern (2008) *Alcohol & Young People: A Toolkit. Supporting Vulnerable Young People at Risk of Alcohol Related Harm.* Available at:
www.alcohollearningcentre.org.uk/_library/Alcohol_and_Young_Peeople_Toolkit.pdf

Guthrie, W. (2004) *Remodelling life in the aftermath of child sexual abuse: A study exploring the support needs of sexually abused children, young people and non abusing parents.* Glasgow: Women's Support Project. Available at:
www.womenssupportproject.co.uk/userfiles/file/uploads/Remodelling_Life.pdf

Hicks, L. and Stein, M. (2010) *Neglect Matters: A multi-agency guide for professionals working together on behalf of teenagers.* DCSF. Available at:
www.york.ac.uk/inst/spru/research/pdf/NeglectMatters.pdf

Shelter (2008) *Good Practice Guide: Safe and Well? Looked after children who run away.* Available at:
http://england.shelter.org.uk/__data/assets/pdf_file/0010/57763/Safe_and_well_Good_Practice_guide.pdf

Dalzell, R. and Chamberlain, C. (2006) *Communicating with Children: A two-way process.* National Children's Bureau. Available at:
www.ncb.org.uk/media/770393/cwct_training_pack.pdf

Child Trauma Academy. A range of research and resources available for carers and practitioners at:
http://childtrauma.org/index.php/home

Scottish Government (2010) *National Child Protection Guidance.* Available at:
www.scotland.gov.uk/Publications/2010/12/09134441/0

References

[1] Rees, G., Gorin, S., Jobe, A., Stein, M., Medforth, R., and Goswami, H. (2010) Safeguarding Young People: Responding to young people aged 11 to 17 who are maltreated. The Children's Society.

[2] www.scotland.gov.uk/Resource/0039/00394308.pdf

[3] Stein M., Rees G. and Hicks L. 2009. *Neglected adolescents – literature review.* Department of Children, Schools and Families: London. Available online at:
www.education.gov.uk/researchandstatistics/research/scri/b0076846/the-studies-in-the-safeguarding-research-initiative/neglected-adolescents-literature-review

WithScotland
Behaviour as communication: understanding
the needs of neglected and abused adolescents

[4] Hicks, L. and Stein, M. (2010) Neglect Matters: *A multi-agency guide for professionals working together on behalf of teenagers.* DCSF.
www.york.ac.uk/inst/spru/research/pdf/
NeglectMatters.pdf

[5] Thornberry, TP; Henry, KL; Ireland, TO; Smith, CA (2010) 'The Causal Impact of Childhood-Limited Maltreatment and Adolescent Maltreatment on Early Adult Adjustment' *Journal of Adolescent Health* 46(4), 359-365

[6] Thornberry, TP; Ireland, TO; Smith, CA (2001) 'The importance of timing: The varying impact of childhood and adolescent maltreatment on multiple problem outcomes' *Development and Psychopathology* 13(4), 957-979

[7] UNICEF (2011) Adolescence: An Age of Opportunity.
http://www.unicef.org/sowc2011/

[8] Radford L., Corral S., Bradley C., Fisher H., Bassett C., Howat N., and Collinshaw S. (2011) *Child abuse and neglect in the UK today.* NSPCC. Available online at: www.nspcc.org.uk/Inform/research/findings/
child_abuse_neglect_research_PDF_wdf84181.pdf
[Accessed 30 September 2011]

[9] Day, C., Hibbert, P. and Cadman, S. (2008) *A Literature Review into Children Abused and/ or Neglected Prior to Custody.* Youth Justice Board.
www.yjb.gov.uk/publications/Resources/Downloads/
Abused%20prior%20to%20custody.pdf

[10] Mudaly, N. and Goddard, C. (2006) *The Truth is Longer than a Lie: Children's Experiences of Abuse and Professional Interventions.* London: Jessica Kingsley.

[11] Woolfson, R.C., Heffernan, E., Paul, M. and Brown, M. (2010) Young People's Views of the Child Protection System in Scotland. *British Journal of Social Work*, 40, pp. 2069-2085.

[12] Galley, J. (2009) Derby Safeguarding Children Board Serious Case Review BD09: Executive Summary. Available at:
www.derbyscb.org.uk/docs/BD09SCRExecutive
Summary.pdf [Accessed 23 August 2012]

[13] Nelson, S. (2009) *Care and Support Needs of Men who Survived Childhood Sexual Abuse.* Edinburgh: CRFR. Available at:
www.crfr.ac.uk/reports/male%20survivors%20
report.pdf [Accessed 23 August 2012]

[14] Malloch, M and Burgess, C. (2007) *A Scoping Study of Services for Young Runaways.* Available at:
www.sccjr.ac.uk/pubs/A-Scoping-Study-of-Services-
for-Young-Runaways-for-1-in-9-Scottish-Coalition-for-
Young-Runaways/30 [Accessed 23 August 2012]

[15] Pearce, J.J. (2009) *Young People and Sexual Exploitation: 'It's not hidden, you just aren't looking'.* London: Routledge

[16] Perry, B. D. And Szalavitz, M. (2006) *The Boy Who Was Raised As A Dog: And other stories from a child psychiatrist's notebook.* Basic Books: New York.

[17] Brier, J.N. (1992) *Child Abuse Trauma: Theory and Treatment of the Lasting Effects.* London: Sage.

WithScotland
Behaviour as communication: understanding
the needs of neglected and abused adolescents

[18] Cairns, K. (2002) *Attachment, Trauma, and Resilience: Therapeutic Caring for children.* London: BAAF.

[19] Blaustein, M. E. and Kinniburg, K.M. (2010) *Treating Traumatic Stress in Children and Adolescents.* New York, NY: The Guilford Press.

[20] Howe, D., Brandon, M., Hinings, D. and Schofield, G. (1999) *Attachment Theory, Child Maltreatment and Family Support: A Practice and Assessment Model.* Basingstoke, Palgrave.

[21] Lazenbatt, A. (2010) *Research briefing: The impact of abuse and neglect on the health and mental health of children and young people.* NSPCC. Available online at: www.nspcc.org.uk/Inform/research/briefings/ impact_of_abuse_on_health_pdf_wdf73369.pdf [Accessed 22 August 2012]

[22] Taylor, C. (2010) *A practical guide to caring for children and teenagers with attachment difficulties,* London, Jessica Kingsley.

[23] Barahal, R.M., Waterman, J. And Martin, H.P. (1981) 'The Cognitive Development of Abused Children.' *Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology,* 49, 3, pp. 508-516.

[24] Everett, B. and Gallop, R. (2001) *The Link between Childhood Trauma and Mental Illness: Effective Interventions for Mental Health Professionals.* London: Sage.

[25] Cashmore, J. (2002) Promoting the participation of children and young people in care. *Child Abuse and Neglect,* 26 (8), pp. 837-847.

[26] Hand, M.P. (2008) *Psychological Resilience: The influence of positive and negative life events upon optimisim, hope and perceived locus of control.* VDM Verlag Dr. Muller Aktiengesellschaft & Co. KG.

[27] Slade, B.B., Steward, M.S., Morrison, L.M. and Abromowitz, S.I. (1984) 'Locus of Control, Persistence, and use of Contingency information in physically abused children.' *Child abuse and Neglect,* 8, pp. 447-457.

[28] Van Gulden, H. (1995) *Real Parents, Real Children: Parenting the Adopted Child.* CO, USA: Crossroads Publishing.

[29] Herman, J. (1992) *Trauma and Recovery: From Domestic Abuse to Political Terror.* New York: Basic Books, p. 159.

[30] Trotter, C. (2004) *Helping Abused Children and Their Families.* Sydney: Allen and Unwin.

[31] Pearce, J.J. (2007) Risk and resilience: a focus on sexually exploited young people. In: B. Thom, R Sales, and J.J. Pearce (eds.) *Growing Up With Risk.* Bristol: The Policy Press, p. 216.

[32] Daniel, B and Wassell, S. (2002) *Assessing and Promoting Resilience in Vulnerable Children: Adolescence, Vo. 3.* London: Jessica Kingsley.

About the Reflecting on Research Series

This briefing was written by Autumn Roesch-Marsh, in 2012. It is one in a series of three briefings produced as part of a seminar programme exploring issues relating to the abuse and neglect of young people aged 11 to 17 years old. The briefings draw on research studies published by contributors to the programme, together with other studies, to increase awareness of knowledge and information that can help to strengthen the responsiveness of practice and services to the needs of young people. The series and briefings were funded by the R S MacDonald Trust and undertaken in collaboration with the University of Edinburgh. All three are available at withscotland.org

For further information and to download the presentations from the series – visit **http://withscotland.org/about-us-national-conferences**

connecting · exchanging · protecting