

Children's experiences of emotional abuse

On 31st August 2015, 53 children had Child Protection plans to tackle emotional abuse out of 77 children in total on the Register.

The Register breaks down into areas of concern and in Falkirk, children who are emotionally abused are usually experiencing another type of abuse or neglect at the same time. At the top of the concerns ranking comes emotional abuse, then neglect, parental mental health problems, physical abuse, domestic abuse.

Here's what children have been telling us about their emotional abuse. You already know that it's diverse. Emotional abuse often appears as a persistent background which doesn't become noticeable until a striking event in the foreground alerts us to its importance. It's rarely single events.

Firstly let me tell you about Amy and Andrew. They are brother and sister aged 8 and 11. They live with their mum and have CP plans due to risks from domestic abuse. This is from the Case Conference minute.

Ms Smith (the lead professional) advised through observations Amy and Andrew are generally quite happy and comfortable in their home environment. The children completed an ecomap, which identified who was important to them. Both children want to be close to their mum. Andrew was unsure where to place his dad and decided to put him outwith his immediate circle, which would indicate how he is feeling about his dad at the moment. Amy did not want to include her dad in her ecomap. Andrew said that he was terrified of his dad and when asked to describe how that made him feel, Andrew said he had butterflies and felt shaky.

Amy told Ms Smith that she was worried about her dad stopping her in the street in case **she** upset him and he became angry. Ms Smith asked Amy what she felt had to change for her to feel safe about her dad. Amy said she wanted him to stop smashing windows and upsetting her mum but stated that she still wouldn't want to see him.

Ms Murphy, their mum advised Amy refused to get out of the car for contact last week when she knew her dad was present at the contact centre and she felt that she had deceived Amy and was letting her down. Ms Murphy stated she was in an impossible situation as she could be held in contempt of Court. Ms Murphy stated she had not been in a relationship with Mr Murphy for over 4 years.

It was noted that Mr Murphy also lives in the local community and it was difficult to police accidental contact. Ms Murphy advised Mr Murphy shouted to Andrew in the street when he was visiting a friend next to her parents and asked Andrew why he hadn't attended at the contact centre. Mr Murphy told Andrew that he had a toy crossbow for him and that Andrew had a football trial with Celtic and Hibs. Ms Murphy advised Andrew was really excited and she had to explain to him the reasons why this wasn't going to happen and felt that the children were on an emotional rollercoaster.

Domestic abuse is linked to emotional abuse. Amy and Andrew had things to say, using the ecomap really helped and asking 'How did it make you feel?' Some researchers categorise such emotional abuse as terrorising. It was cruel, verging on the sadistic to lie to Andrew about the football trial. Other research highlight that this is exposure to traumatic events and refer to this type of emotional abuse as a 'developmentally inappropriate interaction'

My second child is Emma who is 13 and has just started High School. She has a CP plan because of her dad's relapse with drugs. She has 3 younger siblings and there are worries about all 4 of them from their parents not knowing their whereabouts to doing what they please at home.

Emma attends Polmont High School and she goes to Nurture Base every morning. Emma always looks as though she is on the edge and about to cry but won't say what is wrong. Her time in Nurture Base has been increased to lunchtimes as although Emma doesn't demand a lot of attention, she needs it.

Emma was described as not trusting professionals, being easily led and needing her confidence built up. Emma's behaviours show that she is not coping at the moment. **She has said that she feels as though her head is going to explode** but is very quiet and vague about her experiences and home life.

We would probably refer to this as parents abusing drugs, perhaps adolescent neglect. A term I've come across is 'denying emotional responsiveness'. In my terms that's about her parents being completely detached from the reality of Emma's experiences, uninvolved due to their lack of capacity or motivation. Emma's teacher told all of us that she was the High school's most vulnerable 1st year pupil. It's known that children often don't recognise neglect as a form of abuse and Emma's reticence and the next accounts back this up.

Here's Claire's story. Police were contacted to attend the family home due to a disturbance. On arrival there was no evidence of a disturbance however Police were significantly concerned regarding the cleanliness of the property. They observed dirt and faeces all over the floor and couches, the walls were "caked" in thick mud and dirt and numerous domestic items were strewn throughout the household. There was also a pungent smell from the tenancy, which officers described as "disgusting". Several neighbours voiced their concerns to Police regarding the conditions of the household. School noted that the other children are starting to shun Claire and do not want to sit beside her or share with her. This was Claire's situation and she was taken into foster care.

At her next review the minute says- There has been marked improvement. Claire appears more confident in her presentation and this is evident on her body language and how she presents herself. Claire has made comments children in school believe I'm "a new pupil" due to her new clothes and how her hair is presented. Claire says this makes her feel "happy". Again it struck me that Claire didn't tell people what was going on. Her physical neglect was also emotional abuse.

Finally Teigan has a CP plan due to emotional abuse. Her parents were unhappy together then separated.

Teigan was seen being hit by another child in her class but when the teacher asked her what happened, she stated that her mum had dragged her upstairs and banged her head on the wall causing her to have a lump to the head. The teacher could not see any lump on her head. When Dr Taylor asked Teigan about this, she said that her father had asked her to say at school that it was her mother who had given her the bump. Mr Brown disputed this, saying Teigan had told him that she had been pushed against a wall and that was how the bump happened. Mr Brown stated that he had recordings of Teigan playing and her singing a song about how her mother was ruining her life. Mr Brown advised that he never told Teigan what to say and he had only ever told her to tell the truth. By the time of the Conference Teigan had been jointly interviewed three different times and medicalled.

In theory her parent's separation should have helped but in some cases the bitterness only continues or even increases. Teigan's need to see her absent parent regularly was being resisted. In Teigan's situation she's being manipulated into carrying messages. It's like a 'deliberate use of a child as a guided missile'.

So these are just some of the different children's experiences in Falkirk. We know that we have our work cut out for us. We need the ability to see things from the child's shoes. They're not going to step forward and say I'm being emotionally abused. We need to think critically.