



# **‘Teachers want to teach and not be social workers’:**

key messages  
about neglect and  
early intervention for  
schools



**Evidence for  
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Education**



**research  
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# Findings from *We should have been helped from day one*: a unique perspective from children, families and practitioners<sup>1</sup>

'We should have been helped from day one': a unique perspective from children, families and practitioners' is the latest publication from LARC<sup>2</sup>. The research explored:

## 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?

The messages from our research provide staff working in or with schools with valuable insights into how families who are experiencing neglect can be best helped early.

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. While chronic neglect is often addressed through child protection procedures, it can be difficult to identify and support children experiencing 'lower-level' neglect. This is where our research provides useful insights and some practical, low-cost solutions to helping families.

The research<sup>2</sup> identified several enablers and barriers to helping a pupil who is experiencing neglect. It is based on interviews with over 105 multi-agency practitioners (including headteachers, teachers, support staff, SENCOs and Education Welfare Officers from both primary and secondary phases) and 40 parents, children and young people.

<sup>1</sup> 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](http://www.nfer.ac.uk/publications/LRCF01)

<sup>2</sup> 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](http://www.nfer.ac.uk/larc).

## How do frontline practitioners identify children experiencing neglect?

Practitioners, including school staff, argued that identifying pupils experiencing neglect is not an exact science. This means that professionals must use their professional judgement to a great extent, and are often required to be flexible and nuanced in their approach with families. Identifying a child experiencing neglect was often described as a 'grey area' (except in the cases of chronic neglect). School staff said developing a relationship with a parent/carer and family is essential in being able to assess need and offer support early.

*Not all neglect signs are apparent in school, therefore home visits or onward referral will be necessary – the assessment process will elicit the necessity to direct further action.*

Education Welfare Officer

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

Practitioners and families gave similar reasons for what they think helps families engage, or conversely, disengage, with support provision including early intervention services. While our research focussed on children experiencing neglect, these messages are applicable across many other services.

*From reception to primary, being a familiar face all the time, everyday, I am the lady on the gate.... and knowing that they see you there, they haven't got to wait 'til next week or a three-month waiting list.*

Parent support worker

**Figure 1** Some enablers to engaging with families



Families want to know *what* support is available to them and *how* to access it, at the time they need it. Families value having a consistent lead practitioner who can provide dependable help in a trusting and supportive manner. School staff are in a good position to gain families' trust, co-ordinate support or signpost them to other sources of help as necessary.

*I think CAFs<sup>3</sup> are very good once you've got it started [sic]. I've seen them work quite well. You get the right people involved and something actually happens.*  
SENCO

Commonly held misconceptions about the role of children's 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 continue to be challenging. Some headteachers and teachers feel that they are being asked to assume the role of social workers or family support workers but acknowledge the importance of working with others to provide the best help for children and families.

### What can school staff do to better support and engage with families?

Our **recommendations** for school staff and those working with schools include:

Encourage colleagues within school and those from other sectors to undertake holistic family assessments to ensure that work is spread across already overstretched staff and services.

Ensure parents/carers have a consistent staff member to support them, especially when the family is working with a number of services.

During day to day conversations with parents/carers, address the negative stigma associated with children's social care by raising awareness of its different functions and what support is available to families.

Help colleagues to develop the key skills to engage families; these include openness, honesty, trust and being non-judgemental.

Take up training or CPD opportunities to enable staff to assess risk and offer support at the earliest opportunity.

*There are still headteachers who do not know the CAF and TAC process so we will advise who to invite.... and help tease out an action plan.*

LA early intervention practitioner

**3**

The Common Assessment Framework (or CAF) is a framework for front line services to use to assess, engage with and holistically support a child or family. For further information see:

[www.education.gov.uk/childrenandyoungpeople/strategy/integratedworking/caf](http://www.education.gov.uk/childrenandyoungpeople/strategy/integratedworking/caf)

For further information about the LARC series of research on early intervention, go to [www.nfer.ac.uk/larc](http://www.nfer.ac.uk/larc) or contact the team at [LARC@nfer.ac.uk](mailto:LARC@nfer.ac.uk)

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