

‘We should have been helped from day one’:

key messages about
neglect and early
intervention for LSCBs



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

The messages in this research summary should be of interest to all Local Safeguarding Children Boards (LSCBs) Chairs and partners. The research provides 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 provide some practical and low-cost solutions to helping families in need. The research also provides recommendations for local and central government to consider, and which LSCBs could influence.

A group of local authorities and their partner agencies explored an issue facing many professionals currently:

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?

As we know, earlier identification of children experiencing neglect, and offering support soon after a problem arises, can prevent needs from escalating and can reduce or eliminate longer-term problems. A wealth of data, including some recent Serious Case Review findings, 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.

This, the latest round of LARC² research, focused on identifying and supporting children experiencing 'lower-level' neglect, and found that there are several

enablers and barriers to helping a family or child who is experiencing neglect. Based on the views of over 105 multi-agency practitioners and 40 parents, children and young people, the research identified the perceived gaps in provision and what needs to be done to improve support services. Practitioners from a wide range of services were involved in the research, including police, GPs, health visitors, CAMHS, schools, social care, Youth Offending Service and local authority early intervention/multi-agency teams.

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 local authorities involved in the study did not have a clear definition or policy to define 'child neglect'. Following their involvement in LARC, some local authorities are developing guidance/policies around child neglect to help frontline workers and partners to identify and respond appropriately to need. This may be something LSCBs could advocate or include in their own training provision.

What are the perceived gaps in support provision?

Families and practitioners thought that local authorities and partner organisations could do more to support families. They noted the need for more parenting support and more accessible health, education and housing support. Young people and families said they would like more activities and clubs offering help, advice and support for young people.

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



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

Parents and practitioners gave similar reasons for 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 across many other services.

Families value having a consistent lead professional who provides dependable help in a trusting and supportive manner. They want to know what services are available to them and how to access them. Working with partners, LSCB Chairs may like to consider exploring how partners could better promote and advertise their services to families.

Commonly held misconceptions about the role of social care and its different functions are a big barrier to family engagement. 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, as illustrated by the quote from a GP.

Sometimes as a GP you do feel a bit out of the loop... I know it's difficult because you can't even attend case conferences because of the logistics but sometimes I feel that I'm not getting enough and timely feedback on what's happening... It just needs to be one letter with a summary.

Quote from a GP

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

Recommendations for LSCBs include:

Help develop practitioners' skills, knowledge and confidence to holistically assess need and offer coordinated support to families.

Encourage and provide peer to peer support and networking opportunities between community members and families (e.g. 'family champions').

Continue to actively endorse multi-agency working and effective information sharing among practitioners groups.

Encourage partners to:

- promote and advertise early help services and in an accessible way
- simplify processes, such as referral routes, and explore ways to reduce waiting times to access services
- offer holistic family support
- improve families' knowledge about the different functions of children's social care.

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.

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