



University of
Strathclyde
Education

Disabled Children and Child Protection

Kirsten Stalker, Katherine McArthur,
Pam Green Lister, Jennifer Lerpiniere



Study Aims

- to scope current knowledge about child protection and disabled children
- to review current social policy and practice in the field in the UK
- to identify the most appropriate research questions and methods for a larger study



Methods

- Lit review - social research, international, 1996>
- Policy analysis England/ Wales/ Scotland/ Northern Ireland
- 10 'key informant' interviews at national level - policy makers, inspectorates, police, voluntary organisations
- Piloting methods of seeking disabled children's views about child protection services



Prevalence of abuse of disabled children

Sullivan and Knutson (2000) –
examined data for 50,278 young people aged 0 – 21 in Nebraska;

- Prevalence of abuse of non-disabled children: 9%
of disabled children: 31%
- Disabled children 3.4 times more likely to be maltreated
- Neglect most often reported, followed by emotional abuse
- Most children experienced multiple forms of abuse

High incidence also found in New Zealand, Norway, Israel, UK.

Direction of causality not always clear.



Under reporting

Hershkowitz et al (2007) (Israel) disabled children less likely to disclose

Lightfoot and LaLiberte (2006) – US collects limited data on disabled children in CP system; not required to do so by law

Cooke and Standen (2002) - survey of 73 ACPCs in UK - only 10% able to give a figure but numbers were lower than expected

Kvam (2000) – Disabled children were 6.4% of 1293 children referred to Norwegian hospitals with CP concerns, yet 11% of the population

Kvam (2004) – many Deaf children had disclosed but were not believed

Morris (1999) – in 2 English local authorities, disabled children were 1% and 1.1% of those on CP register



Characteristics of maltreated disabled children

Age: Sullivan & Knutson - likely to start at younger age than non-disabled children. Others have found no age differences

Gender: complicated & inconsistent findings. Some evidence that, compared to non-disabled children, disabled boys over represented, including for sexual abuse. Reasons unclear

Type of impairment: Children with communication or sensory impairments at greater risk; also those with 'behavioural disorders', learning disabilities, multiple impairments.

Social factors: increased 'economic distress' linked to abuse. Lack of short breaks and support services



Vulnerability factors reported/ suggested

Many factors - yet increased vulnerability often unrecognised

Child-related factors

- may be seen as less aware/ knowledgeable
- communication difficulties
- mobility issues
- personal care needs

Family- related factors

- stress of caring for a disabled child
- disciplinary approaches
- nature of child/parent attachment



Vulnerability factors reported/ suggested

Services/ systems factors

- staff failure to understand and communicate with children
- residential settings
- multiple carers
- fear of losing support if they complain
- social isolation
- signs of abuse unrecognised in disabled children – children viewed through lens of impairment
- reluctance to believe disabled children are abused



The professional response

Little work on effectiveness of CP services for disabled children

Many professionals lack awareness of issues

Lack communication between children's disability and CP teams

Disability status often not recorded – UK and USA

In UK, 'conferenced' cases treated differently from non-disabled children

Disabled children may not be seen as credible witnesses

Few cases go to court – UK and Australia

In Sweden, needs of children with learning disabilities not taken into account in court



Key informant interviews - emerging themes

Range of conceptual models – often implicit

Mainstreaming debate

Myths and misinformation about disabled children and abuse

Perceived locus of responsibility

Failure to dovetail child protection and anti-discriminatory policies

Training needs