

## Introduction

Research shows that disabled children face an increased risk of abuse and neglect. Furthermore, support for disabled children is often focused on meeting needs relating to the child's disability rather than looking at the child's wider needs, including safeguarding.

Because of the barriers to disclosure and identification, there is still a lot we don't know about the extent of abuse against disabled children and the best ways to prevent such abuse occurring.

These pages aim to provide an introduction to what is known about the subject. It includes a guide to the policy, practice and research, as well as useful resources for anyone working with disabled children.

## What makes disabled children vulnerable to abuse?

There are a number of factors which can make disabled children more vulnerable to abuse:

- Professionals focus on needs arising from children's impairments at the expense of their safeguarding needs
- Disabled children's dependence on the people that look after them, can make it difficult for them to seek help from other adults if they need it
- Some disabled children are unable to understand that what is happening to them is wrong
- Disabled children may be less able to fend off or escape abuse
- Communication difficulties can mean it is more difficult for disabled children to let people know that something is wrong or to ask for help. Professionals do not always allow sufficient time for communicating with disabled children and understanding their needs.

## How much abuse against disabled children is there?

A review of data from research studies into prevalence and risk of violence against disabled children (Jones et al, 2012) found that disabled children are 3 to 4 times more likely to be victims of violence than their non-disabled peers.

A number of studies have also highlighted the high levels of bullying of deaf and disabled children. A survey by MENCAP in 2007 found that nearly eight out of ten young people with a learning disability had experienced bullying.

[Read more statistics about disabled children](#)

## What are the barriers to the protection of disabled children?

Disabled children aren't always able to access the support and protection they need. Barriers to disabled children receiving services include:

- Professionals unable to see past the child's impairment to recognise the signs of abuse
- Indicators of abuse viewed as being related to the child's impairment rather than as child protection concerns
- Reluctance to believe that disabled children are abused
- Higher thresholds before intervening in cases involving disabled children
- Focus on supporting parents to care for their children and reluctance to challenge them when their parenting is not good enough (using the difficulties of caring for a disabled child as an excuse for abusive or neglectful behaviour)

- Lack of time and specialised skills (non-verbal communication, sign language, understanding of deaf culture and development issues) in assessment teams to communicate effectively with disabled children and fully understand their needs
- Lack of strong expertise in child protection among people working with disabled children
- Lack of (accessible) support services for disabled children and their families, leaving them isolated and inadequately supported.

### **What can we do about abuse of disabled children?**

It is essential that assessments of the needs of disabled children are child-focused, and identify and include needs relating to safeguarding and protection.

**Reporting concerns** - if you think a child is in immediate danger, contact the police on 999, or call the NSPCC on 0808 800 5000, without delay.

**Child protection response** - once a child has been identified as a victim of abuse they need to be appropriately protected and supported. This may include: immediate emergency protection, assessment of needs, placement, therapeutic services, witness support, advocacy and developing self-protection skills.

[See our list of NSPCC practice resources for practitioners working with disabled children](#)

### **How can we prevent abuse of disabled children?**

The long term prevention of the abuse of disabled children requires a shift in social attitudes and assumptions. Discrimination impacts on all aspects of disabled children's lives including the failure of practitioners and others to focus on the child, seek their views, or understand and respond to their safeguarding needs.

**Empowering disabled children** - case reviews have highlighted concerns around disabled children's safeguarding needs being overlooked. Disabled children need to be given a voice, and professionals need to listen.

Children can be empowered by:

- Increasing awareness and understanding for disabled children about what is abuse and how to seek help
- Working with disabled children to help them to develop their personal safety skills
- Consulting disabled children on issues around their life and providing them with access to advocacy services
- Using creative therapies to provide children with opportunities to express themselves through indirect and non-verbal means
- Providing peer support to help reduce bullying and enable children to explore the issues they regard as important
- Developing accessible and safe services that disabled children and their families want, and are able, to use.

**Improving the system** - social care disability teams and assessment and children protection teams need to work closely together to ensure that meeting the child's needs is at the centre of all their work.

**Increasing the evidence base** - we need to develop the evidence base on the nature of abuse, how to decrease the risk and increase protection, develop, evaluate and disseminate findings about new services for disabled children, and collect data on the number of disabled children and the extent of abuse.

## References

Source of information - [http://www.nspcc.org.uk/Inform/resourcesforprofessionals/disabledchildren/disabled-children-introduction\\_wda98772.html](http://www.nspcc.org.uk/Inform/resourcesforprofessionals/disabledchildren/disabled-children-introduction_wda98772.html)

Mencap (2007) [Bullying wrecks lives: the experiences of children and young people with a learning disability](#). London: Mencap

Jones, L. et al (2012) Prevalence and risk of violence against children with disabilities: a systematic review and meta-analysis of observational studies. In Lancet 380 (9845), 12 July 2012: 899-907.

**Further reading** - visit the [NSPCC Library Online](#) to search for more information on this subject.

## Further help and information

### [Ann Craft Trust](#)

National organisation provides information, advice, support and training for professionals.

### [CHANGE](#)

National human rights organisation which produces easy read information and training resources co-produced by learning disabled people.

### [Respond](#)

Provides a range of services for victims and perpetrators of sexual abuse who are learning disabled and training and support for those working with them.

### [Triangle](#)

Provides training, consultancy and other services for disabled children and young people with particular focus on communication and children's rights.

[Contact the NSPCC's information service](#) for more information about disabled children or any child protection topic.