

# Supporting ‘off-radar’ children and young people who are at risk of violence/abuse in their household: Part 1 (interim report)

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## **Background**

At any given time, there are many children and young people who are at risk of and experiencing various forms of abuse (physical, psychological, sexual) in their household who never come to the attention of authorities. In March 2020, the UK government announced 'stay at home' rules as part of measures to respond to Covid-19. Schools were shut except to children of keyworkers and those children who are identified as vulnerable. Many children and young people will be trapped in abusive homes because of measures to ensure social distancing. Government guidance on responses to vulnerable children during Covid-19 identified only those children who have a social worker and those up to age 25 with education, health and care (EHC) plans<sup>1</sup>. Around one in seven<sup>2</sup> will be 'off-radar' and unknown to any statutory services. They will not be able to see friends, teachers, extended family members or other supportive/protective adults; some may lose contact with the outside world. Simultaneously, perpetrators of abuse may be experiencing higher stress. We foresee a toxic situation for many children and young people, placing them at increased risk of violence and abuse. This report is an initiative to address actions that may help in reaching such 'off-radar' children and young people at risk of abuse in their home environments. As statistics on disclosure and safeguarding indicate, this was a significant area of concern prior to Covid-19, the pandemic merely serving to magnify risk already present. In addition, there is likely to be significant fallout (safeguarding, social, psychological) from the increased exposure to risk of / actual abuse due to Covid-19, which will require urgent research and action. This report contains relevant possible actions to support this population during any 'lockdown' periods, post-pandemic related 'lockdown' fallout, and for pandemic preparedness given that there may be periods of resurgence of Covid-19.

In order to identify appropriate actions that can be taken by government, statutory and third sector services, media and communities, Survivors' Voices, the McPin Foundation and the UKRI Violence Abuse and Mental Health Network (VAMHN) collaborated to undertake a survivor-led and rapid-response survey. This was targeted at people who had experience of being abused as children whilst unknown to safeguarding or support services, in order to capture the wisdom of lived experience regarding what practical actions may help reach this population. This **Part 1 Report** is an initial collation and thematic analysis of the results of that survey which we are swiftly distributing to inform possible urgent actions; we have not evaluated the feasibility of the suggestions made and do not necessarily endorse all the recommendations made by respondents. Subject to funding, further analysis and discussion of these ideas and their application will take place with survivors of violence and abuse and relevant agencies. **Part 2** of the report will then be published. These reports will be of immediate interest to policy makers, statutory agencies, third sector and community organisations and media in responding to "off-radar" children and young people during this current pandemic and post-pandemic to address this ever-present issue, the impact of Covid-19 and future pandemic preparedness.

## **The Survey and Responses**

An anonymous online survey was hosted on the Survivors' Voices website. Given the urgency of the situation, this was conducted using a rapid-response method, for 36 hours (30<sup>th</sup> March 2020 – 1<sup>st</sup> April 2020) and the link shared widely via Twitter, by email and newsletters. See appendix for survey questions as presented on the website.

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1 See <https://www.gov.uk/government/collections/coronavirus-covid-19-guidance-for-schools-and-other-educational-settings>

2 Office of National Statistics ONS 2020

Forty-three responses were received.

## **1. Survivor status of respondents**

- Child/young person survivor no longer at risk of abuse = 1
- Non-survivor who knows/works with people at risk/with experience = 3
- Adults with lived experience of being a child or young person at risk of violence abuse from someone in the household = 39

## **2. What we can do to help children and young people at risk of household violence and abuse to flag themselves to agencies or members of their communities**

### **Schools, nurseries, childcare:**

- designate a teacher to contact every child or young person on the school register (at least weekly), using mobile phone, live chat, email, school online learning platforms methods
- consider weekly contact to be allocated as far as possible to teachers who have a good rapport with a pupil to maximize chances of a child or young person trusting a teacher with any abuse that may be happening at home
- teachers should be given training/guidance on how to ask the right questions, sensitively and so that children and young people can safely signal their need for help, and/or receive support and reassurance. This should be summarised in a short paragraph for schools to easily roll out
- schools should not communicate to children only via parents, especially when sending messages about safeguarding – communications should go directly to children in a variety of forms (see suggestions below)
- work with children and young people to develop safety plans, including where to go for help and for these to not just be phone / computer-based in case these are being controlled / monitored by a perpetrator
- send a stamped addressed envelope to children to put school-work in, so they can more easily include a confidential note to teachers. This could be a letter to return with tick boxes e.g. 'I have felt scared of one or both of my parents / a sibling or other household member recently' and some less direct questions.
- have a homework club or drop-in that children and young people can attend, invite children and young people to come and check-in weekly.
- provide an information pack with supportive resources and sources of help to every child, distributed via schools
- double check on those already known to school to be vulnerable but not already known to social care e.g. receiving school-based counselling
- teach children and young people how to quickly hide pages/apps
- encourage students (where age appropriate) to look out for friends and give them the resources to do so

### **Other statutory services**

- ensure front-line workers (social workers, police officers, health workers etc) have access to training to spot the signs, to ask the right questions and to respond sensitively to disclosures

- ensure sufficient resourcing during and post-lockdowns to respond to demand

### **Youth organisations and other voluntary agencies and services that work with young people** *(youth clubs, mental health and disability charities, sports clubs, Scouts, Guides etc...)*

- designate a worker/volunteer to contact all the young people they work with, especially those known or suspected to be vulnerable
- ensure front-line workers have resources to contact children and young people and offer them to help and support/refer them to safeguarding or specialist agencies
- provide continued access to workers and services online
- facilitate online peer support groups with simple guidance for young people on “what to do if your friend says they are at risk of violence / abuse at home”
- have telephone/social media/web-based/app-based drop-ins, where people can check in or signal they would like to be contacted

### **Government/national/inter-agency**

- run a public information campaign to raise awareness, to help children, young people, adults and professionals to recognise abuse, to advertise resources and sources of help (see communication section for more ideas of how to communicate this).
- ensure campaigns recognise the diversity of backgrounds children and young people will come from, and actively work to overcome the barriers for some to know about and access help and support
- promote (or develop and provide if not existing) apps/freephone helplines/website buttons/social media links that children and young people can contact if they or their friends need help, and that can be accessed free and easily hidden (from abuser or non-protective parent). This could include a single central helpline number, perhaps using existing services (e.g. NSPCC/Childline, advocacy agencies etc)
- provide training and guidance to key frontline workers about how to ask children and young people in ways that help them to disclose, how to spot the signs, how to support sensitively
- provide refuges for children and young people who need to find a place of safety
- provide children and young people with books and other positive resources, using a variety of media, that can support and encourage those who won't have the strength or courage or opportunity to tell

### **Communities and families**

- learn to spot the signs of abuse and how to ask children and young people if they are safe and OK. Give suggestions of what to do if you suspect they are not.
- check in with families in your network and neighbourhood
- train people still visiting houses e.g. community volunteers, postal workers, delivery workers, to recognise signs or code words/signals (promoted through public information campaign) and know how to respond
- support families (especially of vulnerable and at risk children) to develop strong kin networks (of non-abusing partners and kin) who can be helped to recognise and challenge abusive situations, and provide safety and support

### **3. What messages we should communicate to children and young people at risk to help sustain them and give them hope (see section 4 on communication for ideas about *how* to communicate).**

- you are not alone
- this (abuse) is not normal behaviour
- love should never hurt
- it's never ok for someone to behave in a way that leaves you hurt, trapped, controlled or abused
- you have a right to be safe
- you are cared about and important
- there are people ready to listen and we hear you
- we believe you and will help you
- there are places of safety (say where)
- there is help and support (say what and how to access)
- it's ok to tell and you won't get into trouble
- you haven't done anything wrong, it's not your fault
- your abuser needs help too
- you are strong, we can get through this, you will survive
- things will get better

One person suggested the following wording which encompasses a lot of the messages:

*"If someone at home is hurting you physically or hurting your feelings, or doing this to someone else you live with, there are lots of people you can ask for help. You could speak to a teacher, a friend, [list any other people they might be in touch with] - speak to whoever you feel comfortable talking to. The person causing hurt might be able to get support so they can stop hurting people, so everyone can feel safe in your home. If you don't want to tell anyone, that's okay too. You will know what the best thing to do is, and that might be keeping it to yourself for the moment. There are also places you can access information or support online if you would like to: [list some sources of info/support]."*

### **4. How to communicate with children and young people**

The overwhelming consensus was that we need a major awareness-raising and information campaign using TV/media and a variety of social and other media; and a range of ways that children and young people can communicate with those who can help, including apps, a freephone helpline and web-based links.

The aims would be:

- to help children and young people to know that what is happening to them is abuse, that they have a right to be safe, that there is help (and all the messages above)
- to inform what support is available and how to reach it
- to encourage children and young people at risk to reach out for help
- to raise awareness amongst front-line workers and local communities that there is a problem, how they might spot the signs and how they can help

- to support and encourage children and young people who may not be able to seek help right now

Communication methods suggested for the campaign:

- TV and radio (both live and online)
- social media & apps including Facebook, Snapchat, Instagram, Tumblr, Tik-Tok, YouTube
- web-based communication: web chats, buttons on websites, safe on-line forums, school on-line learning platforms, email links, popular gaming and virtual platforms
- discreet text messages via schools and WhatsApp
- posters (in local shops, park, school, anywhere children & young people still go)
- leaflets (distributed via schools)
- advertisements in children and young people's magazines
- information on food products e.g. milk cartons, cereal packets
- influencers within youth culture e.g. vloggers etc

Other ways children and young people could communicate with adults (often difficult without the abuser knowing)

- freephone number
- web page/button/link/chat/forum (with quick hide facility)
- a special app that allows you to text your mood, or a safety signal
- an advertised code word or phrase (like asking for Angela in pubs/bars)
- a symbol or colour or poster to put in the window
- a freepost card or envelope

## **5. Other suggestions**

People emphasised that not all children and young people would be able to seek help. They may not feel ready, their abuser may make it impossible or unsafe, they may not trust enough to disclose, they may be frightened of the consequences. This is likely to leave them trapped with increased risk of mental distress, self-harm and even suicidal ideation. It was felt important to be communicating with this group, sending messages of support, encouragement and hope; providing resources to support their survival/resilience/well-being that can be accessed without disclosing. A strengths-based approach that uses the creativity of young people, for example peer support and materials addressing mental health, anti-bullying etc, through Instagram, YouTube etc... (*see communication suggestions above*).

Some people expressed doubts that safeguarding services would always respond well to disclosures (based on their own negative experiences) and felt it was important to acknowledge this and recognise that things have gone wrong in the past. This concern should be addressed by trauma-informed training (ideally co-produced with survivors) for staff; developing a dialogue with communities that have less trust/relationship with front-line services; and ensuring there are a range of services and contacts available, including charities and community-based, local services. Several people mentioned the importance of encouraging and enabling peers who may be worried about a friend to seek help on their behalf.

Several people mentioned the importance of ensuring services were adequately resourced, both during and post-lockdown's to respond to the aftermath. Local, community-based services were felt to be best-placed to respond to certain aspects of impact and risk. This was also raised in reference to specialist services such as CAMHS and Childline, and of course safeguarding services, many of which are already overstretched.

## **6. Suggestions for further research**

Several recommendations were made for rapid-response research needed to inform responses during and post Covid-19. Comments were made that emphasised that these recommendations are important not just during such crises, but to help 'off-radar' children and young people all the time, given how few are able to disclose and get help. These topics are not exhaustive, given the rapid-response nature of this report. They will be further expanded for **Part 2** of the report which is forthcoming.

### **Covid-19 related research**

#### *Identifying and understanding risks*

- does social distancing increase the incidence of child abuse and domestic violence, including coercive control? What is the impact / prevalence?
- which children are most vulnerable to increased risk of violence and abuse and which services are they known to, if any? What are the barriers to becoming known?
- what is the impact of social distancing on mental health (including suicide and self-harm) for children and young people experiencing child abuse and domestic violence?
- what is the impact of Covid-19 risk and social distancing on people who have previously experienced trauma / abuse / mental health problems, including post-traumatic stress disorder?
- what will be the impact of increased risk of violence and abuse on demand for crisis services, mental health services, helplines, social services, and other services during and after the period of Covid-19 related social distancing?

#### *Identifying current responses and helpful resources*

- what safe ways are there for children and young people at risk of abuse to communicate with people?
- what support and resources are already available to help children and young people at increased risk of abuse due to social distancing?
- what urgent and important services, interventions, and resources are lacking and need to be put in place and/or increased? What resources are needed to do so?

#### *Supporting intervention*

- who are children and young people at risk of abuse speaking to, how and why?
- what warning signs and indicators might help teachers and others to identify and risk assess children and young people at risk?
- what can teachers and other professionals (e.g. school nurses, family workers) do to maintain contact with children who are kept at home?
- what strategies are effective in helping children, young people and adult survivors to cope?

- what are the views of children and young people at risk of abuse about what would help them (and what might put them at risk)?
- how can relational needs be supported in the context of social/physical distancing or lockdown?

## **Abuse related**

### *Systems and services*

- what information do survivors want and need to know about current services and responses, and what barriers prevent them from accessing this?
- what are common features of systems that work well in identifying and protecting children and young people from violence and abuse?
- how can we train professionals to develop trust with vulnerable children and young people at risk of abuse?

### *Victims and survivors of abuse*

- to what degree and with whom do children and young people at risk of /experiencing abuse have relationships of trust with adults outside the family they live with? How can these be best supported to enable abuse to come to light and be stopped?
- what are the long-term psychological, social, and behavioural effects of violence and abuse, for example disorganised attachment, complex Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (CPTSD)?

### *Perpetration of abuse*

- what is known about people who abuse children and young people in households and the patterns of perpetration (perpetrator relationships, types of abuse, frequency, triggers...)?
- how effective are programmes to prevent abuse of children and young people?

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## **Further correspondence**

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## **Appendix 1: Survey Questions**

### 1. Are you:

- an adult with lived experience of being a child or young person at risk of violence and abuse from someone who you lived with at the time (parent, step-parent, sibling or other member of your household)
- a child/young person survivor no longer at risk of abuse
- a non-survivor who knows/works with people at risk/with experience?

2. What ways can you think of that agencies / organisations / communities might help "off-radar" children & young people at risk of household violence and abuse during the Covid-19 lockdown to



safely flag themselves to agencies or members of their community? (e.g via schools, youth organisations, networks...)

3. How can we help children & young people to communicate their risk if they have no credit on their phone or their phone has been removed?

4. What messages can we send out to off-radar children & young people at risk, and in what ways, in order to help sustain them and give hope through this period of home isolation?

5. Do you have any other comments, ideas or suggestions of actions that we can strongly urge government agencies, charities, media and communities to take to try and protect children and young people at risk of domestic violence and abuse during the Covid-19 lockdown?

6. We are feeding into a rapid position paper about immediate and future research priorities in the context of COVID. What research do you think is important in relation to survivors and COVID?

7. If you would like to help us to get the report to those who can make a difference, or can help in any other way, please provide your email below.