

Catastrophic neglect behind child deaths often overlooked

March 12 2013

Neglect is not being taken seriously enough and should be treated with the same urgency as physical or sexual abuse, the NSPCC children's charity warned today following the publication of new research by the University of East Anglia.

The report shows that of children known to the authorities as being at risk, who died or were seriously injured, most (59 per cent) had been on a [child](#) protection plan for [neglect](#) at some point in their lives – more than for all other types of child protection plan combined (41 per cent).

The research - Neglect and Serious Case Reviews - was conducted by UEA's Centre for Research on the Child and Family for the NSPCC and involved an analysis of 645 serious case reviews carried out in England between 2005 and 2011 to understand what part neglect played in them. Of these, 175 involved children who were on a child protection plan either at the time or prior to their death or serious injury.

The study was led by Dr Marian Brandon, who has conducted previous studies on serious case reviews for the Government.

Dr Brandon said: "[Protecting children](#) is all about balancing risks. In very many similar [circumstances](#) the child would not have died or been seriously harmed. We are not saying that where neglect is found the child is always at risk of death, but rather that everyone should be aware of how easily neglect gets side lined.

"Professionals need to keep an open mind about the possibility of neglect having a fatal or very serious outcome for a child. But that must not stop them dealing with neglect in a confident and compassionate way – for the sake of both the child and their family.

"Some children died in an unsafe environment even though their [parents](#) were loving, for example through lack of [supervision](#) and in unsuitable sleeping conditions. Others could no longer look after their seriously disabled or chronically ill child and weren't getting the help they needed."

The concerns raised by the research echo an NSPCC survey last autumn which found only one in 20 social workers felt timely action was being taken on child neglect. And they were often under pressure to put neglect cases to the bottom of their workload.

Dr Ruth Gardner, the NSPCC's lead on neglect, said:

"This study is the first time anyone has looked behind the stark figures to try and understand the complex dangers of neglect. We now have clear evidence that neglect can lead to catastrophic harm as well as corrosive long term damage to children's wellbeing.

"Child neglect is just as serious as a child being physically or sexually abused but many neglected children are falling through the [child protection](#) net. There have been a series of high profile cases where the authorities have failed to step in early enough despite warning signs of neglect, including Baby Peter and Khyra Ishaq.

"Most worrying are the cases where protection plans had been discontinued when we know with hindsight that there was still a risk of death or injury to the child. So it is vital that neglect cases are not downgraded or closed too soon and vulnerable families continue to get

support to reduce the risks to children."

The NSPCC is now proposing an action plan that takes a strategic approach to cutting the unacceptable numbers of children dying from neglect. The [charity](#) wants to see:

- An expert social worker in every local authority to advise on child neglect cases.
- Improved tools and training to help professionals recognise, evidence and act decisively on child neglect.
- A public health campaign so everyone can spot the signs of neglect and help protect children.
- Targeted support for vulnerable families and better community support for vulnerable young people with a history of neglect, especially care leavers.

The NSPCC is also [testing new ways to help professionals](#) take firm action in hundreds of cases of neglect across the UK, and running a range of services for children and families, including the NSPCC's SafeCare programme.

More information: Paper: Brandon et al. (2012) [Neglect and Serious Case Reviews](#).

Provided by University of East Anglia

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