

Child protection investigations can silence children and offer impunity to abusers

September 26 2018, by Mandy Duncan



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The child protection investigation system in the UK is not fit for

purpose. Despite high profile child abuse cases in Rochdale, Rotherham and Telford, [lessons](#) are not being learned and the failings of those investigations are being repeated.

The [Interim Report](#) of the Independent Inquiry into Child Sexual Abuse found that two thirds of adults do not feel comfortable discussing [sexual abuse](#), even with those they know and trust. It is not surprising then that children have difficulties disclosing and talking about sexual [abuse](#) when they experience it.

[My research](#) – which examined a wide collection of children's experiences of [child protection](#) investigations – found that the system itself exacerbates this issue by creating overly formal situations (such as investigative interviews) which children find intimidating and difficult to understand.

Vulnerability and confusion

The majority of children do not know what to expect when [child protection](#) services begin to intervene in their lives. The first realisation that they are the subject of an investigation often comes when social workers and police officers arrive to conduct an initial [interview](#). This can be the most emotionally challenging period of the investigation. It is when children feel most vulnerable as they have no clear idea of what is going on or what might happen as a result of the interview.

They can also find the subsequent child protection process confusing and this is mainly due to a lack of information and a lack of control over it.

High profile child abuse enquiries such as those in [Rochdale](#) and [Rotherham](#) have emphasised the need to put children, rather than adults, at the centre of child protection work and for children to be actively included in the inquiry.

But the existing child protection system relies on components which can silence children by causing fear and intimidation during processes which are supposed to encourage participation. For example, police officers and social workers frequently turn up unannounced at school or home to conduct video interviews with sexually abused children for use in court.

Children feel particularly unprepared for this, as they may be asked to discuss events which they have previously found unmentionable and in breach of social taboos. They may not have the vocabulary to describe their abuse adequately and have difficulty recalling details that they do not attach the same significance to as their interviewers – such as precise dates and surroundings.

Grace's story

One of my research participants, "Grace" (not her real name), was 15 when she became the subject of a child protection investigation. "Grace", now aged in her early 20s, had been sexually abused by her stepfather and had been removed from the family home while the investigation took place. She found the police interview so distressing that she was unable to participate fully or provide the details required for a prosecution. She said:

It was intimidating ... she (the police officer) was asking for really specific times and dates so ... because it had been (over) like a long period of time, I couldn't specify exactly what had happened, exactly when. So I got really stressed out about that and I started panicking and getting really worried ... she was really pressing with the questions and it was a lot of pressure so I kept crying a lot and I wouldn't give proper answers...

As a result, the police dropped charges against "Grace's" abuser and she was later returned to live with him.

Another story

"Jayden" (not his real name) was 12 when he became the subject of a child protection investigation in relation to the sexual abuse of himself and his ten-year-old brother by a male babysitter. He had experienced learning and behavioural difficulties over many years and was attending a special school. My interviews with "Jayden" revealed that he had very little understanding of the child protection process.

For "Jayden", now in his late teens, the investigative interview represented a situation that he felt he had little control over as he did not understand the language used by the police officer and social worker. They did not adapt this to suit his developmental level and neither did they allow for his slower processing of information.

"Jayden" also voiced strong objections to the interview being recorded, which was possibly linked to his experiences of abuse. Despite this, he was not made aware of the purpose of the recording and he was not offered the choice to take part in the interview without it being recorded. The unintended result of this complex set of circumstances was that he felt restricted to the point of silence and withdrew from the process.

Enabling children to talk about their experiences of sexual abuse through meaningful participation in these investigations is essential if abusers are not to be granted impunity and children are to be protected from further abuse. This means ensuring that all children undergoing child protection interventions have access to independent advocacy from the outset of the investigation.

Trained advocates can help [children](#) to understand the questions that are asked of them, the process of the child protection investigation and the implications for their lives in ways that are appropriate to their age and development. Helping "Grace" and "Jayden" to participate in this way

may have resulted in very different outcomes for them and their abusers.

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