



Safeguarding Disabled Children

Disabled children are the same as non-disabled children in that they have the same human rights to be safe from abuse and neglect, and to be protected from harm.

Disabled children are, however, different from non-disabled children in that they have needs relating to physical and/or sensory impairment, and/or cognitive impairment. They also experience greater and created vulnerability because of negative attitudes about disabled children, and unequal access to services and resources.

Disabled children are more vulnerable to abuse and/or neglect than non-disabled children. Safeguarding strategies and activity should therefore acknowledge and address both disabled children's human right to be safe and protected from harm, and the additional action that has to be taken in order for disabled children to access this common human right. The specific needs and circumstances of disabled children should be addressed at all stages of the safeguarding process.

There are a number of reasons for disabled children being more vulnerable to abuse, including:

- They are likely to be in contact with a larger number of service providers than nondisabled children and are likely to receive intimate care from a larger number of people;
- They are more likely to spend time away from their families than non-disabled children, in short-break services, residential schools and so on;
- Disabled children and their families may experience inadequate and poorly coordinated support services. This can lead to isolation which is widely recognised as a risk factor for abuse;
- Abusive practices can sometimes go unrecognised. This happens in two ways: firstly, sometimes a practice is applied to a disabled child which if applied to a nondisabled child would be recognised as abusive (such as tying a child up or locking a child in a room in order to control his behaviour); secondly, for some disabled children a failure to provide a certain level of care can result in significant damage to their development, health and well-being, yet this is not always recognised;
- There is a lack of awareness among carers, professionals and the general public of what the indicators of abuse or neglect are for disabled children. These can of course be the same as for non-disabled children but there is much anecdotal evidence of indicators of abuse or neglect being misinterpreted as being related to impairment - the most common example being where a child's behaviour is put down to her impairment rather than as a possible indicator that she has been abused or neglected



- There is a common failure to consult with and listen to disabled children about their experiences. Underpinning all the many other factors which create a vulnerability to abuse are negative social attitudes towards disabled children - their lives and their experiences are commonly devalued.
- There is a commonly held belief that disabled children are not abused. This can lead to a denial of, or a failure to report, abuse or neglect;

Specific Risk Indicators of child abuse

The misuse of medication:

- to restrict liberty;
- to control emotion and behaviour; and
- to impair physical and emotional capacity to resist abuse.

The neglect of health needs:

- Poor, uncoordinated or non-existent assessment of need;
- Rough handling;
- Physical interventions not carried out in accordance with good practice guidelines;
- Poor equipment, adaptation and aids, which may result in harm. For example, a child who is constantly being made sore by an ill fitting back brace with no-one addressing this;
- Failure to meet the communication needs of a hearing impaired child to the point where his or her development is impaired;
- Tampering with equipment to restrict liberty. For example, removing batteries out of an electric wheelchair might equate to a non-disabled child being locked in a room or having their legs tied;
- Neglect of basic health care needs. For example, teeth cleaning, hair washing;
- Denying or restricting access to food and nourishment. For example, if a child cannot help themselves to a drink it is abusive to withhold drink as a punishment or for malicious reason;
- Force Feeding.

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