

Consultation on standards of proficiency  
for social workers in England  
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## **STANDARDS OF PROFICIENCY FOR SOCIAL WORKERS**

The National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children (NSPCC) is the UK's leading charity specialising in child protection and the prevention of cruelty to children. The NSPCC aims to end cruelty to children in the UK over future generations.

We welcome the opportunity to comment on the draft standards of proficiency for social workers in England. It is important that all social workers are able to keep children safe. In general we are concerned that the standards are not yet sufficient to protect children from harm. We have highlighted our main concerns in areas where we have particular expertise.

### **Focus on the child**

The Children Act 1989 states that the welfare of the child should be the paramount concern. While this has clear implications for social workers who work with children, it also impacts upon social workers who work with adults, particularly if these adults are also parents or caregivers. It should be emphasised under section 2 of the guidelines that, regardless of who the immediate service user or client happens to be, all social workers need to work in the child's best interests. All social workers should be able to identify the signs and indicators of abuse and take necessary action to protect the child. This should be made clear in the standards.

There is a wealth of evidence on the importance of child development and the impact of abuse<sup>1</sup>, particularly pre-birth and in the early years. Ofsted have raised concerns that practitioners are not identifying abuse, or the risk factors associated with abuse, early enough, and that late referrals and assessments may have resulted in the death or serious injury of children<sup>2</sup>. All social workers need to demonstrate a

<sup>1</sup> Cuthbert, C. and Rayns, G. and Stanley, K. (2011) *All babies count: prevention and protection for vulnerable babies*: <http://allbabiescount.nspcc.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2011/11/onlineScoping.pdf>; Centre for Excellence and Outcomes, *Grasping the nettle: Early intervention for Children, Families and Communities*: [http://www.c4eo.org.uk/themes/earlyintervention/files/early\\_intervention\\_grasping\\_the\\_nettle\\_full\\_report.pdf](http://www.c4eo.org.uk/themes/earlyintervention/files/early_intervention_grasping_the_nettle_full_report.pdf)

<sup>2</sup> OFSTED (2011) *Ages of concern: Learning lessons from serious case reviews*  
<http://www.ofsted.gov.uk/resources/ages-of-concern-learning-lessons-serious-case-reviews>

good understanding of child development, including pre-birth development, and how this impacts on the need to make prompt decisions, referrals and assessments. Sections 13 and 14 should be strengthened to reflect this.

### **Risks associated with vulnerable families**

Even social workers that do not work directly with children may, at some point, work with a service-user who is a parent or caregiver for a child. Ofsted reviews published in 2010 and 2011 highlighted issues when parents were themselves receiving support from agencies, including adult social care. The reviews found that information from these agencies was not shared widely enough and the risks to the child associated with the parent's needs were underestimated<sup>3</sup>.

Domestic abuse, alcohol and substance misuse and mental health problems are frequent factors in the backgrounds of families that are the subject of serious case reviews<sup>4</sup>, and the incidence of these factors is likely to be under recorded. Although this is relevant for all families, this is particularly crucial for families with a baby, as the baby is solely dependent upon the caregiver. Recent research<sup>5</sup> estimates that

- **19,500 babies** under 1 year old are living with a parent who has used Class A drugs in the last year
- **39,000 babies** under 1 year old live in households affected by domestic violence in the last year
- **93,500 babies** under 1 year old live with a parent who is a problem drinker
- **144,000 babies** under 1 year old live with a parent who has a common mental health problem

Social workers should demonstrate an understanding of how domestic abuse, alcohol and substance misuse and mental illness can affect children, and that they know the appropriate action to take. This should be embedded in the new standards, particularly section 1.

### **Disabled children**

International research relating to the abuse and safeguarding of deaf and disabled children since the 1980s has consistently shown that they are at significantly greater risk of all types of abuse compared with non-disabled children<sup>6</sup>. The NSPCC has noted the following recurring key issues:

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<sup>3</sup> OFSTED (2011) *Ages of concern: Learning lessons from serious case reviews* <http://www.ofsted.gov.uk/resources/ages-of-concern-learning-lessons-serious-case-reviews> ; OFSTED (2010) *Learning lessons from serious case review 2009-2010* <http://www.ofsted.gov.uk/resources/learning-lessons-serious-case-reviews-2009-2010>

<sup>4</sup> Brandon, M. and Bailey, S. and Belderson, P. (2010) *Building on the learning from serious case reviews: a two-year analysis of child protection database notifications 2007-2009*: <https://www.education.gov.uk/publications/eOrderingDownload/DFE-RR040.pdf>

<sup>5</sup> Manning, V. (2011) *Estimates of the numbers of infants (under the age of one year) living with substance misusing parents*, NSPCC

<sup>6</sup> Sullivan, P.M., Vernon, M. and Scanlan, J.M. (1987) *Sexual abuse of deaf youth* *American Annals of the Deaf*, 3, 256 – 262; Cross, S.B., Kaye, E. and Ratnofsky A.C.(1993) *A report on the maltreatment of children with disabilities* . National Centre on Child Abuse and Neglect. Washington DC; Fisher, M.H., Hodapp, R.M. and Dykens, E.M. *Child*

- A narrow focus on needs relating to impairment – support for disabled children will often fail to address their wider developmental needs<sup>7</sup>.
- Someone to turn to for the child – children face many barriers around lack of accessible information about sources of help and are often dependent on a single caregiver; if this caregiver is harming the child they are clearly in a very vulnerable position.
- A capabilities skills gap – inspection agencies and government departments have identified a gap between professionals who work with disabled children and child protection professionals<sup>8</sup>.
- Risks due to impairment – a number of risks relate specifically to a child's impairment. These include the disabled child's greater dependence on others e.g. support needs due to impaired cognitive ability, needs related to personal care, mobility, medical treatment, and communication and/or behaviour support. Dependency on others can give rise to particular safeguarding risks. On the one hand it can expose disabled children to a wide range of carers. On the other hand, disabled children may be very reliant on a small number of carers. They may then feel inhibited in seeking help especially if they are reliant on the abusive person for communication.

It is important that the particular needs of disabled children are recognised in conjunction with their wider developmental needs. Social workers need to be able to communicate with disabled service-users effectively, not only to ensure that services meet their needs, but also to ensure that any other concerns, including child protection concerns, are identified and followed up. We recommend that this be included in the standards. This could be considered under sections 5, 6 and 8.

### **Minority ethnic families**

Different communities have different factors that may protect children or put them at risk. It is essential that all social workers understand the way different communities work so that they can make use of the protective factors and mitigate against the risks.

An Ofsted review<sup>9</sup> found key lessons emerging in regard to culture and ethnicity: inconsistencies in recording and range of ethnicities; meagre consideration given to whether agencies had identified and addressed cultural, linguistic and religious needs of the child and the family; and practitioners in all agencies would benefit from help with assessment of the implications for practice of race, language, culture and religion. Out of 173 only 18 serious case reviews were thought to be exemplars in which there was sensitive and thorough analysis in regard to culture/religion and ethnicity.

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*abuse among children with disabilities: What we know and what we need to know* International Review of Research in Mental R Vol.35 pp 251 - 289

<sup>7</sup> National Working Group on Child Protection and Disability (2003) *It Doesn't Happen to Disabled Children: child protection and disabled children*. London: NSPCC.

<sup>8</sup> OFSTED (2009) *Learning lessons from serious case reviews: year 2*

<http://www.ofsted.gov.uk/resources/learning-lessons-serious-case-reviews-year-2>

<sup>9</sup> OFSTED (2009) *Learning lessons from serious case reviews: year 2*

<http://www.ofsted.gov.uk/resources/learning-lessons-serious-case-reviews-year-2>

The NSPCC Participation Unit undertook consultations with children from minority ethnic groups in May 2011, consulting a total of 44 young people between 11 and 19 years old. Children said to us that social workers need a better cultural understanding of different communities. In particular, children have fed back to us that professionals need show recognition of individual African communities, 'not just one group'.

There is a clear need for social workers to have an understanding of the cultures and communities of service users in their area. It is also important that these sensitivities enhance the role of the social worker, rather than diminish their impact. Working Together 2010 sets out a strong guiding principle '*Children from all cultures may be subject to abuse and neglect, and while professionals should be sensitive to differing family patterns and lifestyles, they must be clear that child abuse cannot be condoned for religious or cultural reasons*'<sup>10</sup>

The standards should be strengthened to ensure that social workers can demonstrate an understanding of the different cultures and religious traditions of the communities in their area, and how this affects their role in supporting the service-user and their family. This could be included in standards 5, 6 and 8.

#### **Additional resources**

In addition to the existing standards examined by the Professional Liaison Group, we recommend that the standards should be developed with reference to the 'common core of skills and knowledge for the children's workforce' developed by the Children's Workforce Development Council<sup>11</sup>. This provides a good outline of the essential skills and knowledge required for all those working with children and young people.

If we can be of further assistance, please contact Ruth Ball on 020 7825 2526 or [ruth.ball@nspcc.org.uk](mailto:ruth.ball@nspcc.org.uk).

Yours sincerely,



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<sup>10</sup> Department for Children, Schools and Families (DCSF) (2010) *Working together to safeguard children: a guide to inter-agency working to safeguard and promote the welfare of children*

<https://www.education.gov.uk/publications/standard/publicationdetail/page1/DCSF-00305-2010>

<sup>11</sup> CWDC (2010) *Common core of skills and knowledge*. Leeds: Child Workforce Development Council.