

Child protection and assessment

Referrals to Children's Social Care departments have increased by 311 per cent since the introduction of the Children Act 1989, and assessments by 302 per cent – either because child abuse is suspected, or because children and their families are in need of support services.

Assessment can cause significant stress for affected families and difficulties for social workers, in cases of wrong decisions and failure to uncover serious child abuse. Policies have tended towards over-referral and assessment, in an attempt to reduce the number of cases that are missed.

However, despite this rise in referral and assessment there is no corresponding increase in the detection of child abuse, according to research by Lauren Devine and Stephen Parker at the University of the West of England. They have examined referral and assessment data across England over the last 22 years. The data shows that the vast majority of families simply need support services - and many families do not even reach the support threshold.

There is increased pressure on agencies to refer children, but it's not properly recognised by professionals working with families or by policymakers that the consequences for families of the referral can be negative.

The trend towards increased assessments for early intervention needs to be balanced against the potentially adverse consequences. Few organisations working with children have adequate understanding of how referral and assessment affect families, and little support exists at this stressful period in their lives.

The assessment of need for early intervention should be a simplified, consensual and less intrusive process, unless there are clear grounds for suspecting child abuse.

Key findings

- There has been a large increase in the number of children referred to Children's Social Care departments over the last two decades.
- The length and cost of assessment has increased.
- The referrals have not led to a corresponding increase in detected child abuse.
- There is increased pressure on agencies working with children to refer children, but little recognition of how this affects the families. The experience of referral and assessment is stressful and traumatic for many families, with long-term adverse consequences.

Policy relevance and implications

- Many early intervention strategies could be made more widely available to avoid the need for over-assessment. More funding is needed to expand universal, non-assessed social services, to reduce the need for assessment in low-level support cases. This could be paid for by the reduction in cost of referral and assessment.
- The assessment of need for early intervention should be a simplified, consensual and less intrusive process, unless there are clear grounds for suspecting child abuse.
- The investigation of suspected child abuse should be redesigned as a separate, forensic process with robust safeguards and controls.
- Family support and advocacy should be extended across the community for families involved in consensual needs-based assessment, together with improved online information.
- Access to information and legal help should be made available at all stages of child abuse investigations, including during non-consensual assessments.



BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF THE PROJECT

Dr Lauren Devine and Mr Stephen Parker's ESRC-funded project 'Rethinking child protection strategy' is evaluating child protection and family intervention processes together with their social, welfare and economic cost, to consider whether current intervention strategy is justified.

Web: www1.uwe.ac.uk/bl/research/childprotectionstrategy.aspx

FOR MORE INFORMATION

Dr Lauren Devine, University of the West of England
Email: lauren.devine@uwe.ac.uk

Mr Stephen Parker, University of the West of England
Email: stephen3.parker@uwe.ac.uk

The Economic and Social Research Council is the UK's leading agency for research funding and training in economic and social sciences.

Web: www.esrc.ac.uk
ESRC communications team:
comms@esrc.ac.uk

The views expressed in this evidence briefing are those of the authors and not necessarily those of the ESRC.

There is increased pressure on agencies to refer children, but little recognition of how this affects the families. The experience of referral and assessment is stressful and traumatic for many families, with long-term adverse consequences.