



A report for the Office of the Children's Commissioner for England
commissioned by Jenny Clifton

'It takes a lot to build trust'

Recognition and Telling: Developing earlier
routes to help for children and young people

October 2013

Executive Summary

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Essential to the success of the project was the involvement of a team of young researchers and we would like to acknowledge them for their commitment and insights, and for being an integral part of the research team over the course of the two years. Their honesty, concern for participants' well-being, and passion about the research has enriched the research process and the analysis throughout.

Finally we would like to thank the children, young people, parents and practitioners who spoke to us so generously about their experiences. We hope that this report does justice to their views.

ABOUT THE OFFICE OF THE CHILDREN'S COMMISSIONER

The Office of the Children's Commissioner (OCC) is a national organisation led by the Children's Commissioner for England, Dr Maggie Atkinson. The post of Children's Commissioner for England was established by the Children Act 2004. The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) underpins and frames all of our work.

The Children's Commissioner has a duty to promote the views and interests of all children in England, in particular those whose voices are least likely to be heard, to the people who make decisions about their lives. She also has a duty to speak on behalf of all children in the UK on non-devolved issues which include immigration, for the whole of the UK, and youth justice, for England and Wales. One of the Children's Commissioner's key functions is encouraging organisations that provide services for children always to operate from the child's perspective.

Under the Children Act 2004 the Children's Commissioner is required both to publish what she finds from talking and listening to children and young people, and to draw national policymakers' and agencies' attention to the particular circumstances of a child or small group of children which should inform both policy and practice.

The Office of the Children's Commissioner has a statutory duty to highlight where we believe vulnerable children are not being treated appropriately in accordance with duties established under international and domestic legislation.

Our vision

A society where children and young people's rights are realised, where their views shape decisions made about their lives and they respect the rights of others.

Our mission

We will promote and protect the rights of children in England. We will do this by involving children and young people in our work and ensuring their voices are heard. We will use our statutory powers to undertake inquiries, and our position to engage, advise and influence those making decisions that affect children and young people.

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FOREWORD FROM DR MAGGIE ATKINSON, CHILDREN'S COMMISSIONER FOR ENGLAND

I am delighted to present this valuable and timely report, commissioned from researchers, including a group of young people, on the issues they can face in reaching help when they are in need, or at risk of any kind of abuse or neglect.

Children have rights to protection, support and a voice, under the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC.) The Articles most pertinent to this report are:

Article 3: in all actions concerning children, the best interests of the child shall be a primary consideration.

Article 12: every child has the right to express their views in all matters affecting them, and to have their views taken seriously.

Article 19: the right to protection from violence, abuse, neglect and mistreatment

Article 34: the right to protection from sexual abuse and exploitation

Article 39: the right to help with recovery from abuse

This research is particularly timely as we consider the importance of really seeing children and understanding their experience. The tragedy of several recently reported deaths of young children at the hands of their parents or carers is very much on my mind as I write this foreword. Names have been added to the nation's list of tragic child deaths: Daniel Pelka, Keanu Williams, and Hamzah Khan – all killed by the adults who should have been caring for them. All suffered plights that seem not to have been noticed, or if noticed were not acted on, by too many highly trained professionals. We have of course been here before. It makes it no less troubling that we are here again in 2013.

The common thread of so many such deaths was the absence of a focus on the children, an absence of a dogged determination really to see them. Children can all too easily become invisible. They must be seen and spoken with when there are concerns for their welfare; we know this and have known for a long time. But that is not all there is to say. If children do not talk about abuse, their silence is not a reason to do nothing further. The onus cannot be on them to come forward. Adults working for and with them must always be aware of how much importance children place on those adults' vigilance and understanding, their active and determined caring about what happens in a young life.

Too often we concentrate our child safety and protection efforts on the youngest children in society. They very obviously, and equally clearly, need adults to step between them and any threats in their lives, acting to protect them from danger, threat and difficulty whatever their sources in that child's life. It is all too easy, in this work with the youngest, to see older children and young people as 'sorted.' They may present themselves as street wise and already able to handle the adult world. We assure ourselves they are resilient, and need our help far less. In fact, real resilience is very different from just coping with what life throws at you. It is also a reality that some of our young people's coping strategies will be harmful to them.

Alternatively, young people are often seen as 'difficult' and 'hard to help'; with adolescents' sometimes awkward behaviour taken at face value. It is adult professionals' job to tune in to what is really happening in vulnerable children's lives; to make the space available, and create the trust and

support needed, to help a young person recognise the need, and then ask for help, advice, guidance, support and protection.

This research benefits greatly from the involvement of young people, with experience or knowledge of the topic, all of whom were trained and then worked as co-researchers with our colleagues from the UEA, commissioned by the OCC to lead this study. They also worked with Anglia Ruskin University to become confident young researchers.

The young people who contributed to this report tell us their peers are often not as 'sorted' as we think. Some young people will still be struggling with problems from their early childhoods, others with things that have created negative pressures in their adolescence. All of them, who are still children, remain our concern. They are not adults. They still need encouragement, role models, protection, nurture, and trusting relationships with people to help them to recognise and work through their problems.

The framework for understanding about recognition, telling and help presented in this report is informed not only by a rich body of literature and research evidence, but the active involvement of children and young people. The young researchers passed on their wisdom and contributed vitally to the report that follows. I want to thank them sincerely for their commitment, and for the trust and the reflective intelligence they gave to this work. The voices of all the children and young people who contributed to the research enrich this report throughout and add significantly to the strength of what you will read in the pages that follow and I thank them all.

I commend this research, and the very practical help it should afford to workers directly engaged with children, their trainers and leaders, and young people themselves. They are today's citizens and tomorrow's adults. The strength they bring, matched – as it is in all of us – by the vulnerability of being human and making our way in the world mean we have much work to do together.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Maggie Atkinson', with a long, sweeping flourish at the end.

Dr Maggie Atkinson
Children's Commissioner for England
October 2013

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

INTRODUCTION

The research was prompted by a concern to improve access to protection and support for children and young people at risk of harm. The Munro Review of Child Protection (2011), commissioned by the government, argued that a child's journey from experiencing problems to getting effective help should be at the heart of the child protection system. It stressed the importance of an offer of early help for children and their families.

The arguments for the value of early help stem from two lines of evidence. Firstly, there is longstanding and widespread international agreement that readily available early help for children and families can stop problems escalating and prevent maltreatment before it occurs. Secondly and compellingly, we know that harm from maltreatment is common but often hidden from view and that most children in need and their families cannot easily access services. These two arguments point to the importance of early help because it can reach out *both* to children whose maltreatment has not been brought to the attention of services, *and* to those whose situation does not meet the threshold for statutory intervention.

There are some tensions in contemporary policy and practice in England with regard to offering early help and working collaboratively with children, especially when they might already be experiencing abuse and neglect. Claims for maximum effectiveness for early intervention can emphasise providing services at the earliest stages of life rather than for older children but there are powerful arguments for meeting the needs of older children at an earlier stage. Austerity measures and cuts to local authority and health budgets bring these areas of debate into sharp focus. The on-going challenges of retrenchment and reconfiguration of services to make the best use of resources make this study very timely.

The research was based on the premise that children's and young people's perspectives on the recognition of abuse, neglect and family problems, and their perspectives on telling, would assist in the identification of improved services to protect them. The research aims were as follows:

- To examine young people's perceptions of abuse and neglect, and to explore their experiences of telling and getting help from both informal and formal sources.
- To use this knowledge to make suggestions for practice that would improve access to support.

KEY FINDINGS AND MESSAGES FROM THE RESEARCH

- The ability of young people to recognise abuse and neglect was linked with increasing age. Recognition often starts with an emotional awareness that things are not right, before the child is able to articulate the problem to themselves or others.
- Young people most often came to the attention of services through their behaviour and demeanour rather than through explicitly disclosing abuse.
- It is important for professionals to notice signs and symptoms of children's and young people's distress at any age and not to rely unduly upon the child or young person to talk about their abuse. A significant risk of reliance on verbal telling is that a child's silence or denial means that abuse is not pursued.
- However, if a trusted professional responds sensitively and shows concern for the child they may then begin to talk about underlying problems. Young people described how conversations prompted recognition and relationships of trust promoted telling and help.
- Young people were often actively weighing up the risks of telling, though sometimes the emotional impact of the abuse overrode the rational process. There are many barriers to telling for young people, including their past negative experiences of help, and the immediate supportive response of adults matters greatly for both immediate help and longer term benefit.
- Although friends were valued as sources of emotional support, young people were careful to whom they talked, fearing that friends would gossip about them, that it might be too much responsibility for a friend to shoulder, or wanting to visit friends to distract themselves, rather than to confide in them.
- Young people value professionals they can trust, who are effective, knowledgeable and available. Teachers and youth workers were found to be particularly important as people to tell and they and social workers were valued as being able to provide holistic support.
- Recognition may come as an end result of receiving help and talking things through over time with a trusted professional, rather than being a necessary precursor to telling.

The findings were used to develop a framework for understanding recognition, telling and help from a child's perspective. The framework could help practitioners to be mindful of what may be going on for a child or young person who comes to their attention because of their behaviour, to understand how young people weigh up the advantages and disadvantages of telling, and to keep in mind the emotional aspects of talking about abuse.

Of central importance is the fact that young people's past experiences of professionals, as well as their experiences within the family and in the community, will influence how comfortable they feel about talking and their willingness to trust and talk to practitioners. In addition to drawing attention to the needs of young people who may be on the edge of services, the framework also highlights the needs of young people who may be well known to services, who may be in care, or have been in care in the past, and who may still need help to recognise and talk about what has happened to them.

STUDY DESIGN

The study used innovative and participative research methods and was conducted by a team of adult and young researchers. All the young researchers were aged 16-24 years old with experience or knowledge of the topic. The young researchers came from the two main research sites which gave the whole team partial insider knowledge of the sociocultural environments in which the study was being undertaken. The young researchers helped to refine the design of the research tools and materials, and were involved in data collection, analysis and dissemination of findings. They provided excellent ethical oversight at all stages and their insights have made a significant contribution to the analysis and development of the framework presented in this report.

The research consisted of a number of interrelated strands:

- A **structured literature review** about children's and young people's recognition and disclosure of abuse and about children's and young people's views of services.
- A **content analysis of an online peer support site** where young people post and respond to problems involving abuse and neglect (261 threads). The content analysis of the internet forum offered an opportunity to examine how young people understand and conceptualise abuse and neglect since much of the discussion concerned questions of whether or not particular experiences counted as abuse. The findings give an interesting insight into barriers surrounding recognition and telling, who young people turn to, and the ways in which young people can support each other in an online environment.
- An **interview study** with thirty vulnerable young people, aged between eleven and twenty. These activity based interviews allowed exploration of the complexities and interactions between recognition, telling and help over the course of each participant's childhood and adolescence. They generated insight into how experiences of telling and getting help can lead to an increased or reduced likelihood of recognition and telling in future, depending on the experience both of the telling process, and of the support received.
- Six **focus groups** were conducted with children and young people, parents and practitioners involved in working in different tiers of services for young people. The focus groups complemented the research with vulnerable young people in the website analysis and the interview study, by seeking the views of children and young people not known to be vulnerable. They focused on how this broader sample of children and young people conceptualise abuse and neglect and how friends might support each other with such issues. In addition the focus groups explored the views of family members and practitioners on the process of getting help.

FINDINGS

Recognition

Most of the studies in the literature review were concerned with disclosure of sexual abuse, rather than how children think about abuse and neglect. The few studies that examined how children conceptualise abuse found that children were least likely to recognise neglect and that abuse within the family by a child was rated as less severe than abuse within the family by an adult. Some research on disclosure discussed issues of recognition including children thinking that what they were going through happened to everyone, and confusion around what was normal due to sexualised messages in the media.

In the analysis of the internet forum 23 problem types emerged from the young people's descriptions. They were more likely to recognise sexual abuse and physical abuse than neglect or emotional abuse and the discussion focused on what to do about it. In contrast, there was more discussion about whether the problem was abuse or not when young people were discussing emotional abuse or neglect.

A number of factors could impede the young person from recognising that their experiences were abusive or neglectful. These included:

- The young person feeling that they deserved it;
- A difficulty in acknowledging that a parent could be abusive;
- A parent's unpredictability when abuse was episodic, and the relationship was sometimes good;
- Confusion as to the boundaries between discipline and physical abuse;
- Confusion around boundaries relating to touching with family members.

In the interview study a spectrum of recognition was identified ranging from lack of recognition, partial recognition and clear recognition. Several young people spoke in hindsight about a situation which was abusive but which they were not able to recognise or articulate as such at the time. Lack of recognition was linked with age. Partial recognition sometimes involved an emotional awareness that things were not right, before a child was able to articulate it to themselves or to others. The young people talked of a gradual understanding rather than a sudden epiphany. However, this growing realisation could be accompanied by a lack of awareness about ways of changing the situation, so the child remained vulnerable.

There were suggestions that children would have more sense that their family situation was not 'normal' at the age of around eleven or twelve as they were increasingly able to compare themselves with other families. On the other hand such norms could have a negative impact, compounding the effects of earlier childhood, and normalising violent or abusive relationships.

In the focus groups, parents and practitioners likewise felt that a child might not recognise neglect or see it as harmful because it was part of everyday life.

A further issue which hindered recognition in the interview study was a sense of needing to be self-reliant or 'closing off' from what was happening. This was often mentioned as a barrier to telling but for several of the young people it had become so central to their way of coping that it seemed likely to act as a barrier to recognising that they were in a situation where they needed help, and to lead to minimisation of problems.

Young people's descriptions in the interview study often emphasised recognition as a product of talking with another person, whether this was family member, friend or professional. In this way, recognition was prompted through conversation rather than being a precursor to telling.

Telling

The literature review included a range of studies which examined disclosure rates, mostly concerning sexual abuse. Disclosure rates in the studies ranged from 11% - 42%. Disclosure rates increased with the child's age and girls were more likely to report abuse than boys. Younger children were more likely to tell a parent and older adolescents were more likely to tell friends or other family members. Disclosure was rarely made to professionals (less than 10% in any study). Barriers to disclosure in the literature review included failure to recognise abusive behaviour as unacceptable; feeling shame, blame or responsibility for the abuse; and fearing the consequences of telling for themselves, their family or the perpetrator, particularly if the perpetrator was a family member. Young people also feared loss of control over decisions if they disclosed.

Many of the same themes were found in the website analysis. The five main barriers to telling which the young people mentioned were, in order of their frequency:

- An emotional barrier, e.g. shame, embarrassment, not being able to face telling, finding it hard to find/say the words;
- Worry about the family knowing, loyalty to family and the impact on family members;
- Thinking their situation was not problematic enough to disclose to others;
- Threats from the abuser;
- Fear of not being believed if they were to tell.

In the website analysis, in marked contrast to previous research, professionals were more often mentioned amongst people the young person had told, followed by friends then family. Mothers were most often mentioned amongst family members.

Responses to the posts often recommended that the young person should tell someone. The main people whom it was suggested the young person told were: professionals (suggested 160

times), family (suggested 60 times) and friends (suggested 36 times). Teachers and school based support featured more than other professionals.

In the interview analysis young people discussed various motives for telling – these included stopping the abuse, getting information and advice, emotional support, medical help or acquiring practical strategies to minimise harm. Some sources of help were considered to have a single role, for instance the police to stop the abuse or a doctor to provide medical support. Teachers, social workers, and youth workers were viewed in a more holistic way, featuring more often across the various categories of support.

Four themes around the process of telling emerged from the interview study; remaining **hidden**, exhibiting **signs and symptoms**, **prompted telling** and **purposeful telling**. The first two of these possibilities involve the young person not speaking out verbally about abuse. Being **hidden** might involve actively avoiding telling (hiding a situation from others or denying there is anything wrong) or passively not telling because the young person did not recognize there was a problem, or because no one asked. Hence it is possible to be on the spectrum of telling whether or not the young person recognizes there is a problem.

A young person may come to the attention of others through **signs and symptoms**, often the young person's own behaviour which can lead to them being labelled as a problem rather than a young person with problems. Signs and symptoms could involve externalising behaviours, such as violence to others or to property, or internalising behaviours, such as self-harm. Sometimes an incident such as police being called to a scene of domestic violence brought the young person to the attention of services.

The third possibility moves from a young person not telling verbally, although they may show signs that they are struggling, to the young person themselves telling verbally. **Prompted telling** could happen due to an initial sensitive response from a professional to the young person's sign or symptom, or it could be a result of the young person having built sufficient trust in a professional over time to begin to talk. Sometimes young people hinted at their situation to test out a professional's response and only gradually let them know more about their situation.

The fourth possibility is **purposeful telling**: this involves the young person recognizing the situation and deliberately approaching someone to tell. Within this category young people had differing strategies about choosing who and how to tell. Some approached a service with a remit for stopping abuse directly, such as the police. Others approached a professional knowing that they would pass on the information to other services. Purposeful telling could be extremely difficult emotionally and some people rehearsed strategies with helplines or by writing things down for themselves. Face to face telling could be difficult even with a trusted person in mind. One alternative strategy talked about by young people in both the website analysis and the interview study was handing over a letter to a trusted professional for them to read when the young person was not there.

In the focus groups practitioners echoed this analysis. They said that it was important for professionals to notice children's distress through their behaviour (signs and symptoms) and not to put the responsibility on a child of any age to tell about abuse. They noted that if children are asked questions sensitively they may then tell (prompted telling). Practitioners felt that a young person's choice to tell a professional would depend on the availability of someone they trusted, often in school.

Help

Overall research in the literature review suggested that the personal qualities of professional helpers were central for young people who conferred trust on individuals, rather than on agencies. Personal attributes in the helper linked with the helper's way of working were valued, and included reliability, privacy, continuity and power to act and change the situation. The main message from many articles was the importance of a trusted and consistent worker and of a trusting relationship. Other aspects valued by young people included: confidentiality, clear information, explanations and advice, being listened to, kindness, sympathy and caring, competence/experience and not being patronised. Young people disliked feeling intruded upon, and being interrogated as a source of evidence. Young people were also dissatisfied when they lacked information, when they did not understand the child protection process they were involved in or felt that their views had been misrepresented by social workers. Young people sought to have an influence on the child protection process and the chance to make decisions themselves. Services' being accessible was important both in terms of location, opening hours, and being able to access the service for as long as it was needed.

The interview study lends further support to existing research literature with trust emerging as a central issue. Young people highlighted aspects of professional relationships which were felt to promote trust and these included duration of the relationship, being believed, not being judged and closeness. Other qualities of helping people that were important were being knowledgeable, able to offer effective support and working in accessible and available services.

The initial response to telling could result in a number of types of help. For example a young person who came to the attention of services because of criminal damage might receive anger management relating to that presenting behaviour. Alternatively there might be a more holistic response which picked up on underlying issues of abuse or neglect. There were positive experiences of help where young people experienced emotional support, information and advice, and were helped to stop the abuse and/or given strategies to minimize the harm. There were also responses from services that were experienced as less helpful, where telling resulted in additional distress for the young person, for example they felt overwhelmed and out of control with too many professionals getting involved, or they were referred to a time-limited service or put on a waiting list. For some of the young people age limits for services were an issue. They lost support because they aged out of a service rather than the service coming to an end because the young person no longer needed it.

The research team specifically examined whether confidentiality could be a barrier to telling. Confidentiality of services was a valued attribute of services and young people in the interview study acknowledged that the thought that a professional might pass on information could be a barrier to talking. This was particularly likely where young people had previous negative experiences of information about them being passed on. However, most young people thought that in some circumstances it was right for professionals to pass on information without the consent of the young person. It was essential that this was done in a transparent way, and discussed openly with the young person. The way in which that conversation was handled could make a real difference. Although breaching confidentiality could result in a loss of trust and a feeling of betrayal, there were equally cases where the sensitive handling of this issue led to a greater degree of trust in the relationship between the young person and professional because they appreciated that the worker cared enough about them to take action. Young people's views about breaching confidentiality were related both to how it was done and whether they had experienced positive help as a result.

Practitioners in the focus groups echoed young people's views in the interview study, arguing that it was essential to be open about the limitations of confidentiality with young people, and keep them informed and reassured about what would be happening. Practitioners thought that young people might talk to people in authority because they wanted responsibility taken out of their hands, even though they asked for confidentiality.

Risks to the practitioner were highlighted if information was not passed on to children's social care. There was a fear of being blamed if the professional had not passed on information and something terrible happened to the child. This fear meant that some practitioners felt they had limited discretion to exercise judgement about whether and when to pass on information.

The research explored how young people use friends and family as sources of support. The literature review suggested that young people are more likely to tell a friend or family member than a professional. By contrast our findings suggested considerable reticence about confiding in friends. The website analysis found that a large number of disclosures had been made by young people to professionals. Young people said that they were not always believed by friends and family when they did confide. In the interview analysis young people said they did confide in friends that they could trust but they were extremely careful about choosing who and what to tell. Many of the young people had no friends that they could confide in, and thought that peers were extremely likely to gossip. The young people in the school based focus group also suggested that the issue of telling friends was complex. Young people might want to distract themselves by visiting friends, rather than wanting to confide in them. Some young people (in both the interview study and focus group) did not want friends to worry about them and felt that it would be a big responsibility to place upon a friend's shoulders.

Friends are undoubtedly an important source of support for young people. Professionals in the community focus group noted that friends might first be alerted to a difficulty because the young person posted something on Facebook or other social media. In some cases friends were an important link in a chain of telling, which went from the young person to a friend to the friend's

parent to a professional. The parents in the focus group said that the school would be their first choice of service to approach to get support for friends of their children.

Several barriers to help were identified by practitioners. These included practitioners' doubting whether all school staff had the skill, confidence or training to speak with children about abuse. Other barriers included a case being closed at the point of contact because children backed up their parents' assertions that things had improved. High thresholds presented challenges in getting early help and meant that practitioners in universal services felt they had to wait for problems to mount up or get worse before a referral would be accepted by children's social care. Strategies to get referrals accepted included sending repeat referrals to children's social care, or using police or other referral routes. A child's age posed a barrier to getting help when they were deemed too young to get a service without parental agreement but too old to be considered at high risk of harm.

The findings from the study were used to generate a conceptual framework for understanding recognition, telling and help from the point of view of the child.

FRAMEWORK FOR UNDERSTANDING RECOGNITION, TELLING AND HELP

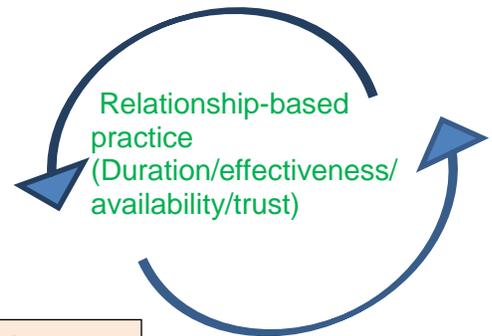
RECOGNITION:

Is there a problem?



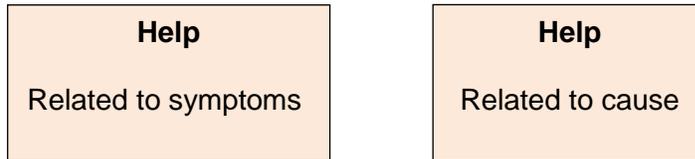
TELLING:

Can I talk?



HELP:

What help am I getting?



Experience of Help	
<p>Negative</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Confidentiality/trust broken - Additional distress - Insensitive response - Too many professionals (overwhelming, not in control, spiralling) - Constant revisiting of problem/abuse - Time limited service 	<p>Positive</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Emotional support - Practical help reducing impact - Help to stop abuse - Information and advice - Medical help - Flexible, timely, effective, professional help responsive to expressed needs of young person - Consistent, enduring relationships

'It takes a lot to build trust'. Recognition and Telling: Developing Earlier Routes to Help for Children and Young People

The framework contains three distinct components which can make sense of children's and young people's experiences. Importantly it is non-linear so that a child's progress is not solely from the top level (recognition) towards the bottom (receiving help). Individual young people experiencing problems of abuse and neglect can follow different pathways. Crucially recognition often occurs as a result of conversations with others. Thus clear recognition does not always happen before telling or receiving help, but can sometimes be a result of help received.

One logical pathway would be that a young person **recognizes** the abusive situation, **purposefully tells** someone about it and then receives **help**. However, in the interview study this was a rare occurrence. In fact most of the young people in the interview study followed a pathway beginning either with **not recognizing** or **partially recognizing** their situation and first came to the attention of services through the '**signs and symptoms**' route for telling. Their pathways were complex and positive and negative feedback loops were possible. A young person who tried to tell might receive help relating to the abuse, or they could conceivably find that their case was closed and no service was offered. They might get help with the presenting problem that did not get to the heart of the underlying abusive situation.

Where young people experience repeated dead ends over a period of years they may become less likely to tell and less likely to recognize that they need help. Negative experience of support, including professional intervention earlier in childhood, had an effect on subsequent recognition and telling – a vicious circle which could encourage extreme self-reliance and compound the effects of abuse. Alternatively, young people might receive a sensitive initial response to the **sign or symptom** which could lead to **prompted telling** and then to receiving **help** about the underlying abuse. Sometimes **recognition** came last, a significant time after receiving help. A positive experience of services encouraged a virtuous circle leading to the young person becoming more likely to tell in the future and also being more likely to recognize and understand harmful situations.

Given the complexity of the young people's histories a young person might experience several journeys through the framework over the course of time. Even where help is received and effective that young person may continue to need help or come to need help again at a different time.

APPLICATION OF THE FRAMEWORK OF RECOGNITION, TELLING AND HELP

The framework could be used to help to understand the complexities of recognition, telling and help.

- The framework could be used in training to help practitioners and managers to be mindful of what might be going on for a particular child or young person who comes to their attention because of their behaviour, and consider the possibility that there is an underlying problem; to understand why a young person might not tell, might actively

deny there is a problem, or might delay telling; to understand that their own responses may be crucial in allowing a child to recognise, tell and keep on talking.

- It could be used in working with young people, as a way to talk through what is going on and what might hinder them from getting help.
- The framework underlines the importance of understanding the child's past when making an assessment. This includes not just what is known about their experiences within the family, but the history of their involvement with services, what that has been like from the child's point of view, and how that will impact on their willingness to trust and talk to professionals.
- The framework draws attention to the needs of young people already getting help who may be well known to services, who may be in care, or have been in care in the past, and who may still need help to recognise and talk about what has happened to them.

IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICY AND PRACTICE

Practitioners and line managers working with children and young people:

- Be curious and concerned about young people who appear to be struggling, think about the meaning of their behaviour and demeanour, and provide help.
- Be aware of the reasons why children and young people might avoid telling or deny that there is a difficulty when directly asked. Practitioners should not rely unduly on children telling them verbally before providing help.
- Be aware of barriers to telling about abuse and be ready to support young people through the process of prompted telling. Practitioners should be mindful that telling may be emotionally difficult, delayed and tentative and that young people weigh up the advantages and disadvantages of speaking out.
- Young people may be encouraged by a sensitive but persistent response from a practitioner conveying care.
- Support practitioners to balance the following of procedures with the skilled use of professional judgement when making decisions about when and how to pass on information, and ensure they receive good quality supervision where these issues can be discussed and issues recorded.
- Include young people in discussions about when and how to pass on information. Practitioners may need support and training to develop confidence in discussing their concerns, and what might happen next, with young people and their families.
- Encourage young people to be part of a cultural debate about healthy relationships, so that they are empowered to discuss abuse (such as peer sexual abuse) which may not be high on the adult professional agenda, or which may be largely hidden. Schools, school nurses and sexual health provision, youth work and arts projects could engage young people in such discussion.

Schools and colleges:

- Value and promote a culture of safeguarding so that child protection is seen as everyone's responsibility.
- Include in the curriculum a range of ways to address relationship and sex education and encourage young people to debate healthy relationships, so that they feel more able to discuss abuse.
- Include discussion about abuse and neglect in the primary, secondary and further education curriculum. This could be taught as part of PSHE in secondary schools. Such teaching should involve discussion about the psychology of abuse and common feelings that children and young people might experience which act as barriers to recognition and telling.
- Provide clear information for children and young people about to whom they can talk and how they can get help.
- Provide clear information for children and young people about what might happen next if they tell about abuse and neglect.
- Provide information about how children and young people can support friends who disclose abuse, and how to manage the dilemmas that might arise for them if they think a friend is being abused.
- Make information available for parents about 'what to do if you think your child's friend is being abused'.

Children's and Youth Services:

- Consider the impact of cuts to pastoral support and youth services on the most vulnerable young people in the community, who may be thus denied an important avenue of support, encouragement to tell and early help.
- Provide information via websites and social media about how children and young people can get help for themselves, and/or support friends who disclose abuse.
- Consider ways in which children and young people could be encouraged to self-refer to children's social care and track the outcomes of these referrals.
- Consider having liaison social workers linked to specific schools.
- Support professionals to balance following procedures with the skilled use of professional judgement when making decisions about passing on information.
- Make young people's views of services a routine part of service evaluation, guided by their ideas as to how this can best be done.

Conclusion

The findings and the framework for understanding recognition, telling and help presented here have implications for a range of practice contexts. The study has provided an insight into young people's experiences of recognition and telling and highlighted the interplay of rational and emotional factors. Specific practice interventions are suggested by the findings and can be linked to specific areas of the framework, for example education to improve recognition, or providing services which facilitate trust to encourage prompted telling. Young people's experiences of the help provided are also of key importance since without an effective service response strategies to improve recognition and telling will ultimately prove of limited value.

The process of carrying out the study and its innovative design, involving young people as researchers, has helped us to understand more about why abuse and neglect can remain hidden. It has enabled us to challenge the current orthodoxy of young people preferring to tell friends rather than a professional about abuse. This should give practitioners a renewed sense of the value of building trusting relationships with children and young people and alert policy makers to the imperative of giving children access to adults they can trust at school, in the community and in specialist services.

RECOMMENDATIONS FROM THE CHILDREN'S COMMISSIONER

For Children's Services

1. Services should be structured to maximize the potential to build and sustain lasting trusting relationships between practitioners and young people.
2. The qualities which young people have identified and the good practice which will promote children and young people's access to help and support should be promoted and used in training and professional development for practitioners and managers.
3. Make young people's views of services a routine part of service evaluation, guided by their ideas as to how this can best be done.

For schools and colleges

1. Ensure all staff are trained and have continuing access to support, information and professional development, in the light of the significance of school staff for young people telling about abuse and the messages from this research.

2. Include in the curriculum a range of ways to address relationship and sex education and encourage young people to debate healthy relationships, so that they feel more able to discuss abuse.

For Health and Wellbeing boards

1. Identify and assess, as part of the Joint Strategic Needs Assessment, the level of need for children and young people to access advice and support to receive on-going support services to deal with the impact of abuse.

2. Ensure that effective services are commissioned as a matter of priority in the local area.

3. Insist upon good liaison between children's and adult's services so that there is effective management of the transition for young people beyond the age of 18 and in order for this cohort to be able to access post-abuse support and therapy.

For Local Children's Safeguarding Boards

1. Co-ordinate regular analysis about thresholds and referral practices and the implications of these for the safety and wellbeing of children and young people.

2. Address the implications for partner agencies of the messages from this research and incorporate these messages in local training programmes for practitioners, managers and supervisors.

3. Ensure consistent local provision of a) information to young people about what might happen if they tell about abuse and neglect; b) how young people can support friends who disclose abuse; c) information to parents via schools about 'what to do if you think your child's friend is being abused'.