

Safeguarding Children with SEND

Briefing

Recognising Abuse and Neglect for Children with SEND

Children with SEND are at an increased risk of abuse and neglect.

Professionals sometimes have difficulty identifying safeguarding concerns when working with disabled children. It is vital that everyone who works with disabled children understands how to protect them against people who would take advantage of their increased vulnerability. A child having a disability, being deaf or needing additional support should never stop someone acting on child protection concerns. Some children may not identify as being deaf or disabled and some may use different language to describe themselves and their needs. You should always ask what terms they would prefer and use these when talking to them.



Additional Risks and Vulnerabilities of Children with SEND

- Barriers to the provision of support services often increases family isolation
- Children more likely to spend time in the care of others, including dependency on others to provide personal and intimate care
- Children and young people with speech, language and communication needs (including those who are deaf or have a learning disability or physical disability) face extra barriers when it comes to sharing their worries and concerns.
- Adults may have difficulty understanding a child's speech so they may not realise when a child is trying to tell them about abuse.
- Adults may not have the knowledge and skills to communicate non-verbally with a child, which can make it harder for children to share their thoughts and feelings.
- Communicating solely with parents or carers may pose a risk if the child is being abused by their parent or carer.
- It can be difficult to teach messages about what abuse is or how to keep safe to children with communication needs. Without this knowledge children may not recognise that they are being abused or won't know



Misunderstanding the signs of abuse

It is not always easy to spot the signs of abuse. In some cases, adults may mistake the indicators of abuse for signs of a child's disability.

- A child experiencing abuse or attempting to disclose abuse may self-harm or display inappropriate sexual behaviour or other repetitive and challenging behaviours. If this is misinterpreted as part of a child's disability or health condition rather than an indicator of abuse, it can prevent adults from taking action.
- Injuries such as bruising may not raise the same level of concern as they would if seen on a non-disabled child. Adults may assume that bruising was self-inflicted or caused by disability equipment or problems with mobility.

Increased isolation

Disabled children may have less contact with other people than non-disabled children, because they have:

- fewer out of school opportunities than their peers
- fewer opportunities for spontaneous fun with friends
- less access to transport
- less provision for appropriate toilets and changing facilities

This means they have fewer people to turn to if they need help or support.

They may be further isolated if they:

- need carers to take them out
- have restricted independence because they use a wheelchair or require a sign language interpreter
- live away from home at a residential school.

Disabled children and their families may have limited access to support systems. Support may not be available due to lack of funding or it may not be appropriate for the child's physical, emotional or cultural needs. This can make it difficult for parents to provide the care their child needs and add to the pressure of caring for a disabled child.

Dependency on others

Children with disabilities may have regular contact with a wide network of carers and other adults for practical assistance in daily living including personal intimate care. This can increase the opportunity for an abusive adult to be alone with a child.

If a child is abused by a carer they rely on, they may be more reluctant to disclose abuse for fear that the support service will stop.

Caring for a child with little or no support can put families under stress. This can make it difficult for parents to provide the care their child needs and can lead to a child being abused or neglected.

Taking an intersectional approach

Disabled children, like all children, have diverse identities. As well as experiencing prejudice or bias related to their disability, they might experience challenges relating to other parts of their identity, such as:

- Ethnicity
- Sexuality
- Gender
- Mental health
- Having been in care
- Where they live, how much money they have and how much access they have to education.

The way these challenges interact is known as intersectionality.

It can be difficult for children to cope with this, and it can have a negative impact on their welfare.

Practice Tips and Guidance

Consider the cultural context for the family, be curious as to what having a child with SEND means to the family in their community.

All professionals must be aware that disabled children are more vulnerable to abuse and neglect, **don't be over-optimistic**.

An understanding of the underlying disability and how the child's development is affected is essential to understanding any abuse or neglect.

Professionals should have a shared understanding of the nature of a child's disability, the services their family are receiving and the risk of harm. This information should be used by all agencies to distinguish between disability and child protection issues.

Listening to the child

Every child with SEND can express their wishes and feelings. Professionals should always find ways to this.

- Make sure the child's voice is heard. Where there are safeguarding concerns, speak to children alone and don't use parents as interpreters.
- If a child's disability means verbal communication is difficult or impossible, make every attempt to communicate by other means.
- Consider how a child may communicate through their actions. Consider whether distressed or disruptive behaviour is due to the child's disability or if the child is upset for another reason.
- Tailor tools and resources to the child's needs. Check that the child has understood what you've told them and is able to apply it – don't make assumptions about what they have understood.

Further Reading

[NSPCC Safeguarding Deaf and disabled children and young people from abuse](#)

