



Fighting for the future

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of Cruelty to Children

Jon Brown, NSPCC lead on tackling sexual abuse, describes the biggest child protection challenge of this generation and talks about the Society's efforts to prevent abuse through successful campaigns



What are the long-term effects of abuse?

Abuse can affect children and young people in many ways and, if left unaddressed and untreated, the effects can endure in adulthood and become lifelong. The impacts can range from depression, anxiety, eating disorders, alcohol and substance misuse, self-harm and other related mental health problems and illnesses. Tragically, on occasions it can lead to someone taking their own life.

The impacts have been summarised by sociologist Professor David Finkelhor into four primary and interrelated categories – betrayal, powerlessness, stigmatisation and traumatic sexualisation. The effects of abuse can be ameliorated through therapeutic interventions, including cognitive behavioural therapy, art and play therapy.

In terms of its impact on society, if left unaddressed and unrecognised, abuse can be perpetuated and it can become tacitly accepted and seen as something that 'just happens' in some families or communities. There is growing evidence to suggest that seeing child abuse as a public health problem we can all work towards to prevent, and that intervening early with school, community and workplace based programmes with a zero tolerance approach to abuse, can be effective.

Last year, the NSPCC reported that the number of reported sexual offences against children in England and Wales in 2014 had increased by one-third since the previous year. Why is the amount of recorded offences on the rise?

We think the number of recorded offences may be increasing because of growing awareness of sexual abuse in recent years, due to high profile cases of historic abuse and media reporting of online abuse and child sexual exploitation.

There may also be some improved confidence in the way the police and the criminal justice system generally responds to and deals with sexual abuse cases and this is contributing to increased reporting. Additionally, the police are focusing more resources on the detection, investigation and disruption of sexual abuse.

Increased reporting may be a result of an overall real terms increase in child sexual abuse but because so much abuse is not reported it is not possible to say categorically that this is the case.

The NSPCC is increasingly focusing its efforts on preventing abuse. What action has it taken in recent years to improve child protection?

At the NSPCC we recognise that the causes, as well as the consequences, of child abuse need to be identified and addressed. Since 2009 we have had a specific focus on evidence based practice and have worked to answer key questions in child protection through a combination of service delivery, policy development and research.

Seeing and understanding the challenge of child abuse as a public health problem that can be prevented helps to organise thinking and services across the prevention continuum (primary – universal and before abuse has occurred; secondary – with higher risk individuals, families, areas and communities and tertiary – after the event interventions and programmes to address and mitigate the effects).

In our new strategy from 2016 onwards, prevention comes centre stage and we are focusing on five key goals; prevent child abuse in families facing adversity, prevent child sexual abuse, help children speak out and adults take action about abuse, help abused children get back on track and protect children from online abuse.

With children using technology more than ever before, is online abuse becoming an increasingly significant problem? How has the NSPCC adapted to deal with child abuse in a digital age?

The internet is an amazing resource which changed all of our lives – we now communicate with each other faster and more efficiently than ever before. However it has also sadly opened up a world full of dangers and risks for our children and new opportunities for those intent on exploiting them. We must all be alert to this threat before those that are vulnerable suffer in ways they need not.

Unfortunately, the progress made by the UK telecoms industry and social media companies to help to alleviate these dangers and protect young people has not kept pace. As a result, thousands of children are now seeking help about online issues such as sexual abuse and cyber bullying. This tells us one thing – that too many providers are still more interested in expanding their services than in taking seriously their responsibilities to keep children safe online.

We know that children do take risks online, sometimes without realising it. And we know some parents feel confused by the internet – out of their depth and out of control. Our Share Aware campaign gives parents straightforward, no-nonsense advice that will help them to untangle the web and feel confident talking to their children about online safety.

Keeping children safe online is the biggest child protection challenge of this generation. Parents have a vital role to play but we want social networking sites to respond to parental concerns about their children's

safety and privacy. The NSPCC will continue to challenge and work with internet companies and the Government to make the internet a safer place for children.

The NSPCC has run a number of campaigns – including Order in Court, Share Aware and the Underwear Rule – to help improve child safety. Could you reveal what progress has been made from these initiatives?

The Underwear Rule (UR) campaign aims to give parents the tools to talk to young children about staying safe from sexual abuse in an age-appropriate way that protects their innocence. We know that over 400,000 parents have taught their children the UR (figures are likely to be a lot higher than this. We will be updating the research to find out later this year), and in response to demand, teaching materials have now been developed for schools. We plan to continue to promote the campaign until it becomes as well known as the Green Cross Code and are currently developing new content for parents to use with their children.

Our Share Aware campaign aims to empower parents to keep their children safe online by increasing their confidence and knowledge about what their children are doing and what the risks might be. The campaign has prompted over 400,000 parents to talk to their children, and in response to demand we have developed teaching materials for schools. The success of the campaign also helped the NSPCC to secure a major corporate partnership with O2.

Working with O2 we will continue to encourage more parents to have frequent conversations with their children on how to keep their children safe online and provide support and advice in how to do that. We will provide expert advice to all parents through our O2 NSPCC online safety helpline, workshops around the country for parents, NSPCC trained O2 staff in all stores across the country as well as online support through our websites, promoted through ongoing marketing activity.

Order in Court is an influencing campaign that aims to improve the treatment of children in the criminal justice system. So far it has secured a commitment from Government that barristers who take part in sexual abuse cases receive compulsory training so that vulnerable witnesses are treated with the care they deserve. In addition, vulnerable young witnesses now have a greater opportunity to give evidence from a place where they feel comfortable, rather than having to go to court, with at least one such location available in each court region.

While these are significant developments, much further reform to the system is needed to ensure it is fit for children. Pressing for these reforms will continue to be part of a campaigning priority for the NSPCC over the next few years.

How do you envision the work you are carrying out today will help to further prevent child abuse in the future?

We believe abuse can be prevented and damaged lives repaired. But for that to happen it is crucial for every single one of us to work together; only then can we prevent abuse by protecting those who cannot protect themselves.

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To ensure parents can access the practical advice and support they need to help their children stay safe online, O2 and NSPCC have teamed up to launch a groundbreaking partnership that will provide free one-on-one expert technical advice to parents via a dedicated new helpline – +44 (0) 808 800 5002 – as well as interactive workshops delivered in workplaces and schools throughout the UK.