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The abuse of adolescents within the family

Summary of research and findings

Gwyther Rees and Mike Stein

Origins and purpose of the review

The report outlines the results of a literature review commissioned by the NSPCC on the subject of the abuse of adolescents in families. Very little has been written specifically on this topic in the UK. However, an international search identified a significant body of literature, especially from the US. The report begins by discussing the possible reasons for the neglect of adolescent abuse in UK writing on child abuse and child protection. The main body of the report is then divided into three sections:

Research evidence from North America and Australia

The first section presents a summary of the overseas literature. The main themes from this literature include:

- The fundamental importance of definitions in exploring the prevalence of abuse. Definitions which are drawn up with younger children in mind may ignore abusive experiences which are specific to adolescents.
- US research suggests that adolescents are as likely to experience abuse as children. Sexual and emotional abuse are relatively more prevalent for adolescents and physical abuse less prevalent. Adolescent abuse is more evenly distributed in the population in terms of family economic status.
- There are significant differences between adolescent abuse and child abuse which stem from:
 - new stresses that may appear within families at the onset of adolescence
 - adolescents being seen as more robust and able to retaliate than younger children
 - societal images which tend to portray adolescents as problematic.
- At least two different patterns of adolescent abuse have been identified, with different family dynamics. One pattern involves a continuation of abusive behaviour which started in childhood. In the other pattern the abuse begins in adolescence.

- The consequences of adolescent abuse appear to differ from those for children. Fatalities and serious injuries may be less prevalent in adolescence but adolescents tend more often to respond to abuse through running away, truancy, self-harm, drug misuse and offending.
- The link between adolescent abuse and running away appears to be a particularly important one for two reasons. First, because service provision for runaways has proved a useful way of engaging with abused adolescents in the US. Second, because running away can lead to further difficulties for young people including prostitution, risk of HIV infection, abuse on the streets, and detachment from school and other networks.
- Various practice models have been piloted in other countries. These include specialised adolescent maltreatment projects, family therapy programmes, and interagency networks which aim to provide a co-ordinated response to adolescent abuse and prevent young people falling through the gaps in the system.

The UK context

Although there is very little written on adolescent abuse in the UK, three sources of relevant information were identified:

- Official statistics. The age groups used for official published statistics are not particularly helpful. However, they indicate that there are almost as many new child protection registrations of young people aged 10 to 15 as for the other age groups from one-year-old upwards.
- The recent Department of Health funded studies in child protection contain hardly any information specifically relating to adolescents, although they do suggest that outcomes of child protection interventions are poorer for adolescents than for younger children, and that there is very little participation of adolescents in the child protection process.
- As in the US, research into running away provides some relevant information on adolescent abuse. This research indicates that abuse is often a trigger for running away, and that runaways often become involved in drug and alcohol misuse, criminal offending and prostitution.

Conclusions

The final section of the report draws conclusions based on the reviewed literature on adolescent abuse, and other relevant literature.

It is suggested that there is a need to develop a distinctive perspective on the issue of adolescent abuse in this country. This involves at least three aspects. First, there needs

to be a more general recognition that the abuse of adolescents exists and is probably at least as widespread as child abuse. Second, it should be recognised that adolescents have capacities and abilities to take independent action but are nevertheless powerless and vulnerable relative to adults. Third, it should be borne in mind that family dynamics may be of great significance in relation to adolescent abuse.

The report concludes with a set of suggested developments in order to deal more effectively with the issue of the abuse of adolescents. These include:

- Research to establish more accurately the prevalence of adolescent abuse and to evaluate the outcomes of current child protection work with adolescents.
- Awareness raising about adolescent abuse amongst social care professionals and the general public.
- Good inter-agency working in order to tackle adolescent abuse.
- The development of styles of working with adolescents which recognise both their abilities and their vulnerability.
- The consideration of alternative child protection approaches which may be more applicable to working with adolescents.
- The piloting and development of other relevant services including family therapy, peer support, runaway projects and advocacy schemes.

Rees, G. and Stein, M. (1999) **The abuse of adolescents within the family**. London: NSPCC. [NSPCC Policy Practice Research Series]. ISBN: 0902498959.

The full report is available to purchase from NSPCC Publications and Information Unit, Weston House, 42 Curtain Road, London, EC2A 3NH, tel: 020 7825 2775. It can also be ordered online from **NSPCC inform - www.nspcc.org.uk/inform**.