

Vulnerable children: needs and provision in the primary phase

Introduction and background

The Cambridge Primary Review Trust is a not-for-profit charity based at the University of York. It runs an independent programme of research and professional activity and it also works with Pearson to develop jointly branded support materials and services for schools.

This research report is the sixth in a new series of research reviews. It draws on existing research and policy to explore who vulnerable children actually are and how they can best be supported. It looks at the policies and practices which have been implemented by recent governments or within schools to support and protect vulnerable children.

The authors of the report argue that a focus on vulnerable children in the primary phase is important. Allen's (2011) report on early intervention emphasised that it can result in increased educational attainment and other associated positive outcomes. Conversely, the California Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACE) study found a strong relationship between vulnerability in childhood and levels of violence, and antisocial behaviour, mental health problems, school underperformance, economic underperformance and poor physical health in adulthood. This means that schools have a much broader role to play than increasing educational attainment for vulnerable children.

Key points

Defining vulnerability

- There is no commonly accepted definition of vulnerability. Some adopt a needs-based approach, seeing vulnerable children as those 'with developmental difficulties and those who live in deprived or damaging circumstances'. Other policy makers, including those in power from 2010 tend to see vulnerability as a deficit or weakness and individuals as 'architects of their own misfortune'. They perceive an implicit division between those who are autonomous individuals and those who need support and care.
- Different aspects of 'vulnerability' appear to a greater or lesser extent in other policy documents. *Working together to safeguard children* (2015) is the most child-focussed of the documents which was examined. It highlights seven areas of children's vulnerability. It is the only taxonomy of the documents studied which identifies SEN as a specific vulnerability. It is also the only document to refer to children as carers. It does not, however, address areas such as poverty, unemployment or housing. Ofsted's *Framework for children's centre inspection* (2013) has implications for primary schools although they fall outside its specific remit. The framework has the highest number of categories relating to vulnerability of the documents studied. It focusses on the family and addresses areas such as poverty, parents' criminality, and being a young or lone parent. It is also the only taxonomy which highlights the characteristic of belonging to a transient family. It also includes those with 'protected characteristics'. The *Families at Risk* taxonomy has influenced policy development in the Coalition Government's Troubled families programme and also in Scotland. It identifies seven 'disadvantages' which are: one parent's illness or disability; a mother's mental health problems (but not a father's); unemployment; having a low income; being

unable to afford key items; poor housing; and parents with no qualifications. Other areas such as criminality, domestic violence and substance abuse are not included.

- Research shows that rather than focussing on a particular definition of vulnerability, schools adopt a needs-based approach, recognising that a child may be affected by a range of vulnerabilities. Schools may benefit from more guidance in recognising potential indicators of vulnerability.
- The indicators outlined in this report can be separated into three needs-based categories. Child indicators are educational (e.g. low attendance, lateness); behavioural (aggressive behaviours, aggression, wariness of personal contact); health related (e.g. delayed physical or emotional development); and other (e.g. being a victim or perpetrator of bullying, poor hygiene or poor peer relationships). Parent indicators are behavioural (e.g. often late picking up the child, appearing to be under the influence of substances); health (e.g. learning or physical disability); or other indicators (e.g. different partners picking up the child, not attending school or parents meetings or responding to written communication). Environmental indicators may relate to socioeconomic status, housing or community (e.g. social isolation).

National policy

- Whereas, prior to 1997, children's policy had focussed on risk, subsequently the focus shifted to need, as in the 1999 version of *Working together to safeguard children*. A few years later the Every Child Matters programme (DfES, 2004) was a response to the death of Victoria Climbié. It set out a strategy for establishing integrated children's services.



- From 2010, the Coalition Government also claimed to place a greater emphasis on professional autonomy and localism with a small number of national initiatives designed to be complemented by local initiatives. Two key policies introduced in England are highlighted in the report. The first of these is the emphasis on the concept of 'early help', premised on the fact that children should be able to get help when they need it and that there is a need to move away from late reactive responses. Secondly, the introduction of the troubled families programme was introduced as a whole family intervention initially targeted at 120,000 families in England. The report's authors argue that the troubled families programme changed the discourse around vulnerable children, placing a greater emphasis on blame.
- In Scotland, the Getting it Right for Every Child (GIREFC) policy recognised the need for whole system change and focussed on addressing cultures, systems and practice simultaneously. In contrast to the troubled families programme, it adopted a more universal approach.

Policies focussed on schools

- There are 13 references to vulnerable pupils in the 2010 Schools White Paper, *The Importance of Teaching*. Vulnerable pupils are said to include; looked after children, those with Special Educational Needs and those outside mainstream education. The other references to vulnerable children relate more narrowly to bullying, alternative provision, exclusion and their overrepresentation in failing schools.
- The Pupil Premium was introduced in 2011 to raise achievement and improve outcomes for disadvantaged pupils, identified as those from low income families who were eligible for free school meals (FSM), looked after children and those from families with parents in the Armed Forces. Research to date has suggested that the Pupil Premium helps good schools with good leadership to do even better for their disadvantaged students, but that it is not enough to overcome the problems faced by weaker schools.
- Recent analysis by Lupson and Thomson (2015) concludes that the tackling of educational inequality cannot be achieved through flagship policies but that it must also include wider mainstream educational and social policy affecting the distribution of income and the circumstances of the children who are its focus.

In-school responses

- Although there is less evidence about the effectiveness of school-based interventions for vulnerable children than those based in pre-schools, there are examples of innovative approaches at primary level.
- Nurture groups have been part of early intervention for the prevention of social emotional and behavioural difficulties for decades and they have become key initiatives in Scotland and Wales in recent years. These groups provide a carefully routinised day within a home like environment. An Ofsted report based on visits to 29 schools found such groups to be effective, and that they made a considerable difference to the pupils who attended them in terms of behaviour and social skills.
- Another key in-school initiative is Families and Schools Together (FAST). FAST is an after school multi-family group programme which is offered to all children and their families in a school year group and is designed to support

hard to reach families. The course runs for eight weeks and participants are encouraged to take part in a peer support network, 'FASTWORKS' for at least two years after completing the course. An evaluation of the FAST model in Canada found that it provided 'a remarkably hopeful outlook for vulnerable families' by enabling them to build social capital and therefore protect against risks associated with low income, stress and isolation.

- FAST is just one of a number of initiatives which aims not only to provide support, but also to build resilience in children. Allen (2014) has identified a number of successful approaches for building resilience including: building engagement with areas such as music, sport and art; promoting healthy behaviours; and ensuring smooth transitions, e.g. from home to school and between schools.

Conclusions and recommendations

- There is a growing evidence base relating to the effectiveness of pre-school interventions for vulnerable children, but less is known about the effectiveness of interventions at primary level. However, many of the factors that have been identified as key to the success of early years interventions may be equally effective in the primary phase. A body of evidence suggests that early intervention across the age range and which is focussed on the whole family improves wellbeing, protects children and makes financial sense.
- Evidence also suggests that narrowly focussed programmes which address single issues and rely on short term engagement centered on behaviour are unlikely to deliver the desired outcomes.
- Research has highlighted the importance of listening to children and their families, and involving them in the design of interventions.
- There is evidence that national interventions are more effective if they are universal, easily accessible and respond to local need, as does the GIRFEC approach in Scotland.
- Rather than encouraging professionals to focus too narrowly on definitions of vulnerability or considerations of risk this report sets out some 'principles of practice' (see below) for schools to develop in partnership with other key agencies to better recognise the indicators of children's vulnerability and respond to their needs.
- A mix of universal, specialist and targeted services is needed, focussing on the multiple indicators of vulnerability outlined in the report.
- A strengths and solutions focussed approach may help to build children's and families' coping and resilience skills. Combined with ongoing peer support, this will help progress to be sustained.
- Support should be tailored to need, taking into account the consideration of multiple vulnerabilities; the Liverpool School Families Support Service is an example.
- More evidence is needed of successful initiatives to support vulnerable primary age children; school staff need to monitor and carefully evaluate the impact of any initiatives which are introduced
- In assessing the needs of children, school staff need to listen to and observe children carefully, understanding that vulnerability may be displayed in subtle ways.

The full document can be downloaded from :

<http://cprtrust.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2015/07/Jopling-and-Vincent-report-20160427.pdf>