

**The ‘Learning from the Experts’ project:
Participatory research on supporting young people’s mental
health and wellbeing following sexual abuse in adolescence**

FINDINGS FROM A REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Debbie Allnock and Joanne Walker, March 2019

Introducing the ‘Learning from the Experts’ project

Sexual abuse of adolescents may have particular impacts as it occurs while young people are in the middle of their transition from adolescence to early adulthood. We cannot assume that support that works for someone who experiences sexual abuse as a younger child will work for someone who experiences it at an older age. Young people are experts in their own experiences. Understanding their perspective on what helps or does not help at this time is critical. It is also a neglected topic, particularly for this age group.

The ‘Learning from the Experts’ project is part of a programme of research run by the National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children (NSPCC) and the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC). It will run from March 2017 to November 2019. The main research work will consist of a series of workshops, interviews and case studies with young people, carers, parents and professionals. Alongside this work, the team has been interrogating the existing evidence to see what has already been done that might shed light on the issue and help inform the project.

The Research Briefings series

As a result of a thorough review of relevant literature, four briefings have been produced.

Available at

<https://www.beds.ac.uk/ic/current-projects/learning-from-the-experts/briefings>

One summarises the methods used. Three topic-based briefings focus on:

- (i) concepts and frameworks for thinking about the mental health and wellbeing of young people following sexual abuse in adolescence
- (ii) what we know about the impacts of sexual abuse in adolescence
- (iii) evidence on the identification and assessment of, and support for those affected by, sexual abuse in adolescence.

Our conclusions from reviewing the literature

(i) Concepts and frameworks for thinking about the mental health and wellbeing of young people following sexual abuse in adolescence

The ways people think about terms such as 'mental health' or 'mental illness' are thought to shape their help-seeking behaviours. However, our search revealed that there are no studies exploring how these constructs are understood by young people who have experienced sexual abuse as adolescents.

However, the wider literature around these topics did suggest that it is important to think specifically about how young people understand these terms, rather than generalising from younger children or older adults. The literature also suggests that gender is likely to be an important lens; understanding gender might be important when considering how to reduce stigma and shape service responses to abused adolescents.

(ii) What we know about the impacts of sexual abuse in adolescence

There is plenty of evidence that sexual abuse (in childhood generally) affects young people's mental health, their behaviour, and their experience of revictimisation. The difference between effects on everyone and effects specifically on young people has not received as much attention. Evidence on whether these impacts are different if the abuse happens during adolescence specifically is even more sparse.

The research that we did find suggests that sexual abuse in adolescence is associated with higher depressive symptoms, suicide attempts and eating disorders. There is also some evidence for a cumulative effect of harm: young people with multiple experiences of trauma have been noted to have worse outcomes.

(iii) Evidence on the identification and assessment of, and support those affected by sexual abuse in adolescence

There are a number of barriers to identifying and assessing mental health problems arising from sexual abuse in young people, including their own feelings of stigma and shame, but also barriers arising from a lack of understanding from parents, professionals and the way the broader support system is organised. We know little about effective strategies for identification and assessment of possible mental health problems in this group, although general principles for good practice have been identified. These include building trust, consulting young people directly, and including multi-agency assessments.

The practice literature on child sexual exploitation points to six core elements of direct work with young people. However we do not know if these core elements are equally relevant for other forms of sexual abuse.

Overall, we were struck by the paucity of research, and the lack of understanding about the specific impact of sexual abuse in adolescence, both on immediate and longer-term outcomes. We hope our research will shed light on some of the potential issues and generate useful hypotheses, by listening to the perspective of the young people themselves.