**Chapter Two**

Children’s Experiences of Statutory Child Protection Interventions

Within this chapter, I discuss children’s experiences of participation in state child protection interventions in the UK from the perspectives of children. This discussion is based on the results of a systematic review of literature which I conducted in the early stages of the research. The rationale for conducting the review was primarily to locate and synthesise all the available evidence of children’s experiences of participation in state child protection interventions from the point of view of the children themselves. The aim was to gain insight into the topic and enable coherent discussion and commentary on a collection of otherwise disparate studies which had sought children’s experiences of participation in a range of different child protection contexts. The scope of the review was determined by my wish to prioritise children’s voices over those of the adults who work with them in the child protection system, and hence I included only those papers that directly consulted children and young people about their experiences of state child protection interventions or that prioritised children’s perspectives. These papers form the reference list at the end of this chapter. Each individual child who comes into contact with the child protection system is unique in terms of the ways in which their health, development and life outcomes are impacted by their experiences, and each will have a personal narrative, but there are also some distinguishing features of the experience which are familiar to many children undergoing child protection interventions. These features emerged from a thematic synthesis of the reviewed publications and the ensuing discussion is organised around them. They are important as they reveal some collective understandings of children’s participation in the child protection system as perceived by the children within it.

**Disclosing Abuse and Initial Contact with the System**

The most common reasons children cite for disclosing abuse are the wish to make it stop, the need for emotional support and the need to gain medical treatment (Cossar et al, 2013). Girls are more likely than boys to disclose abuse, but few children of either sex disclose to a professional first. Young children typically choose to confide in a family member with mothers being the most likely confidante. Adolescents more often choose to confide in a close friend, however, they often worry that friends will gossip about what they have said, and some young people find that family or friends do not believe them when they tell them about their situations (C4EO, 2010). Many children delay or never disclose their abuse at all, although the exact figure is unknown as these children commonly do not come into contact with the child protection system. Children who delay disclosure for many years typically say that this is because they feel they will not be believed, are embarrassed about their situation or fear retribution from their abuser (e.g. Miller & Brown, 2014). Those who experience a single incident of abuse are more likely to disclose than those who have experienced multiple incidents over many years. Children who are sexually abused over long periods of time have particular difficulties disclosing the abuse to others and this is linked to feelings of shame, embarrassment and self-blame. There is an even greater reluctance to report sexual exploitation as young people fear that the police and other professionals will blame or look down on them. Disclosing abuse to the authorities is not always a positive experience and young people frequently reported insensitive, inadequate or overwhelming responses from professionals which led to some children retracting their disclosure and others having to repeatedly discuss their situation with a range of professionals (e.g. Berelowitz et al, 2013; Eastman, 2014). Some young people said that they were ignored by police and health services or were made to feel that it was their fault. Others said that the authorities did not act to protect or support them and the police, in particular, were perceived as reluctant to get involved in cases of child sexual exploitation concerning Asian victims and offenders because of sensitivities around culture. In the longer term, children reported a range of more positive consequences of disclosing abuse to professionals including receiving medical and emotional support, cessation of the abusive situation or a reduction in its impact (Cossar et al, 2013).

For some young people, choosing not to disclose abuse or limiting the information they share with professionals, is a way that they can retain some control over the child protection process. However, building a trusting relationship with a sensitive adult over time can prompt a fuller disclosure of the situation when the time feels right. Disabled children are more likely to delay disclosure and also to lack information about what constitutes abuse and their right to protection from it. Some have communication impairments that make disclosure of abuse particularly difficult and this is further complicated by attitudinal barriers which include a reluctance to believe that disabled children are abused at all. When disclosure does takes place, disabled children often feel that their experiences are minimised (Miller & Brown, 2014). Generally speaking, rates of disclosure tend to increase with age and this appears to be linked to children’s developing perceptions of their situations as abusive rather than normal. Children who have been abused over many years from a young age may come to a gradual awareness that their situation is not normal as they approach adolescence and are more able to compare their family with others (Allnock & Miller, 2013). Children’s difficulties in accepting that a parent’s behaviour is abusive and confusion relating to appropriate boundaries for discipline and touching within families are issues that also impede recognition of abuse. Victims of sexual abuse and child sexual exploitation sometimes do not recognise they are being abused because they have formed attachment relationships with their abusers whom they think love and care for them (Gohir, 2013). Disclosure, when it happens, is not always verbal and children may reveal their distress through behavioural signs and indicators such as self-harm or being violent towards others (Lefevre, 2013). The sensitive intervention or support of a trusted professional such as a teacher sometimes prompts disclosure in these cases, however, some young people said that they had felt unable to initiate disclosure of their abuse but had wished that someone would notice and ask them about it (Cossar et al, 2013). Deciding to tell someone about what was happening was often a very difficult decision and children employed various strategies to help them to cope with this such as writing it down and passing the information to a trusted adult. Some attempted to ask for help several times over many years but did not receive appropriate support and services. This was distressing and resulted in a lack of trust and confidence in professionals making them less likely to ask for help again and more likely to normalise their experiences.

Young people emphasise that it is important that they know how to get help and suggest that there should be better advertising in relation to helplines and support organisations so that they know who to talk to. They also state that there should be greater prominence of support services in schools but point out that it is vital that these services are confidential otherwise young people are unlikely to trust them enough to speak openly (VAV, 2011; NSPCC, 2013). Some, particularly those with concerns about neglect and parental drug or alcohol misuse, said that they had been able to contact a helpline. However, those who were experiencing sexual exploitation said that they would not call a helpline as they could not be certain where the information would end up (Coffey, 2014). Other young people found that they could retain some autonomy when accessing helplines and web-based support services as they could control the length of the call and remain anonymous if they wished (Burgess et al, 2014). Web-based information and support is valued by many young people as it is easily accessible, non-stigmatising and helps them to understand their situation and the role that various professionals play in their lives.

Confiding in a professional person about personal or painful issues requires a trusting relationship. Young people greatly appreciate those who treat them with kindness and sympathy, treat the information confidentially and explain fully what will happen next (Munro, 2011). Children often find that talking about their abuse is helpful, but some feel it is a private matter and do not want to talk about it regardless of their relationship with professionals (Westcott & Davies, 1996). Some do want to talk but have conflicting loyalties and therefore find it difficult to verbalise their feelings. Some young people report feeling too ashamed and embarrassed to talk about their abuse and fear the stigma that they feel is attached to it. Asian girls face particular barriers to talking about sexual abuse and exploitation and they typically fear bringing shame and dishonour on themselves and their families. There may be serious consequences for those who do disclose, including violence, being blamed for the abuse and being forced to leave the family home or enter into marriage against their wishes (Gohir, 2013). Fear that the information will not be treated confidentially is a significant barrier to disclosure for other young people and particularly those who have had experiences of a professional sharing information about them without consent in the past. Although young people understand that certain information has to be shared to ensure that help is gained, they appreciate where this is done transparently and discussed with them first.

Initial investigative interviews conducted by police officers and social workers are overwhelmingly perceived as stressful and sometimes as traumatic by young people (e.g. Davidson et al, 2006; Westcott & Davies, 1996). This appears to be partly because interviewers are under pressure to obtain disclosures in formats that the courts find acceptable and attendant issues surrounding adult perceptions of the credibility and validity of children as witnesses. Questions about the abuse itself can be perceived as threatening by children because they are asked to discuss events that they have previously found unmentionable and in breach of social taboos. Some young people report finding the interview supportive, but most find it frightening and even coercive. Police uniforms are intimidating for some children and they recommend that police officers wear plain clothes. The gender of the interviewer can also be significant in how comfortable children are in talking about their abuse Kaplan et al, 1991). Sexually abused boys in particular, report that they feel more at ease with female interviewers, however, young people, male and female, overwhelmingly prefer female interviewers with the most commonly cited reason being the perception that women are more understanding. Some children said that they have difficulties trusting men which is associated with their experiences of abuse.

Initial investigative interviews seem rushed and sudden to many young people and interviewers often turn up without prior warning. There are generally high levels of anxiety associated with the initial interview and children frequently recount a highly pressurised and formidable process (Wattam et al, 1992). This is the case even when the process is started as a result of the child’s disclosure. Most young people are not given a choice of location for the interview and, although most do not see this as an issue, some feel they would have been able to speak more freely if the interview had been held elsewhere (C4EO, 2010). The most common reason for this is the fear of family members overhearing or walking in. Most young people had another person to accompany them when the interview took place, and this was usually a family member although they are not typically given a choice of chaperone. This produced mixed feelings with some children feeling reassured by the presence of a supporter but some feeling inhibited and needing more privacy to enable them to talk honestly and openly. Those who have experienced domestic violence point out that it is essential that all family members are interviewed individually in order for them to respond openly and honestly (VAV, 2011). The majority of children reported feeling nervous, anxious or upset at the beginning of the investigative interview and this usually continued throughout the process although a few began to feel more comfortable as the interview progressed (Woolfson et al, 2010; Westcott & Davies, 1996). Young people sometimes felt that they would be judged negatively or that the interviewers would not believe them although most felt they had been believed in the end. Some had difficulty recalling details to which they did not attach the same significance as the interviewers such as dates and surroundings and this increased anxiety. Some children felt isolated in the interview room, harassed by the interviewer and felt that the interviewer did not believe what they were saying. This undermined their self-confidence and reinforced feelings of guilt, self-blame and worthlessness. Most children felt relief when the interview was over although some continued to feel upset afterwards and this was usually because they were worried about the impact of what they had said on other family members (Davidson et al, 2006). Some, having undergone an investigative interview, said that they would never have participated if they had known the consequences beforehand. However, some had been involved in the process and had things fully explained to them and these young people were more likely to feel that the investigation was a positive experience even if they did not agree with the need for it.

**Relationships with Professionals**

The relationship between children and professionals within statutory child protection interventions is complex and children’s accounts of this often reveal deep seated feelings of powerlessness. Children who are subject to child protection proceedings are likely to be encouraged to talk to a range of professionals and, as a result, may experience serious and unexpected consequences for themselves and their families. Contact with social workers is often initiated by others such as a concerned parent or teacher and thus children may feel confused or be cautious in their initial dealings with them. Young people often distrust social workers and police officers and fear getting into trouble or being removed from their parents and this inhibits the formation of trusting relationships. Young people who have had brushes with authority frequently feel that if they report abuse they will not get help as they have been written off as trouble by professionals. Others fear that social workers will twist what they say and misrepresent them. Young people sometimes feel that police officers focus on the wrong things such as anti-social behaviour and miss the big issues behind these behaviours such as child sexual exploitation (Coffey, 2014). These types of actions are perceived as manipulative by children who feel powerless to challenge or rectify the distortion of information about themselves and their families. However, one of the biggest factors in determining how successful children perceive child protection outcomes is their relationship with their social worker and the extent to which they trust them (e.g. Morgan, 2014; Cossar et al, 2014). Young people state how important it is for them to feel that their social worker cares about them in order for them to talk openly. The formation of trusting relationships with professionals can help to develop resilience and self-esteem in children and young people, can help them to recognise and disclose abuse and identify opportunities that can improve their lives and aspirations (Hanson & Holmes, 2014). Many children do have trusting relationships with their social workers and this is important to them. On the whole, children state that factors such as gender and race are unimportant in forming relationships with social workers. More important is that the social worker is available, responsive, supportive, and prepared to act on the child’s concerns. They value social workers who are straight with them, advocate for them and keep promises (e.g. Cossar & Long, 2008; Oliver, 2010). A kind and caring nature and a good sense of humour are generally appreciated, however, some young people point out that it is patronising when professionals try to make friends with them when it is clear that they have a job to do and are just ticking boxes.

Some young people said that they had only been seen by social workers in the presence of their parents and this meant that they could not speak fully about their experiences and concerns. Many of them would have talked had they been given the opportunity to speak with a social worker alone. Many others had irregular or minimal contact with their social worker which made it difficult to form a relationship (Aubrey & Dahl, 2006). Young people frequently report that they had difficulty contacting their social worker or that their social worker did not turn up for meetings (Oliver, 2010). Changes of social worker means that new relationships have to be developed and this becomes progressively less likely when changes in worker are frequent. Young people do not like being visited unannounced by social workers either at home or school but particularly at school as this results in them having to come up with a story to explain to peers why they were taken out of class (Cossar & Long, 2008). Some children said that police officers and social workers had turned up unannounced to conduct video interviews for use in court. Children feel particularly unprepared for this and often find it difficult to describe their abuse adequately. Some fear the consequences of this process from their abuser which also makes it difficult to talk. Children find meetings with social workers particularly difficult if they feel that they are being interrogated and viewed as a source of evidence rather than a person with thoughts and feelings Cossar et al, 2014).

Many young people feel that they cannot be honest with their social worker because this might make things worse for them at home. One young person was caring for her mother at home but could not confide in her social worker for fear that her mother might be arrested (Cossar & Long, 2008). Another young person told how she had refused to speak to social workers as they had allowed her to stay with her abusive mother in the past resulting in a serious loss of trust and confidence (Eastman, 2014). Many young people who had experienced domestic violence stated that they could not discuss honestly what was going on for fear of being taken into care (VAV, 2011). Others disagreed with professionals’ views of their families and thought that concerns were mistaken or unfounded (e.g. Dillon et al, 2016). This sometimes resulted in oppositional relationships being formed with social workers and young people experiencing social work as social policing rather than as a source of help and support (Davidson et al, 2006). Some children have an impaired ability to trust adults as a result of their maltreatment and this can make engagement with social workers even more difficult. Young people often stated that social workers did not fully understand what the family’s problems were or had overlooked a cause for concern (Cossar et al, 2011). In some cases this was due to parents deliberately manipulating their children and social workers in order to hide the truth. Social workers often rely heavily on the views of parents and do not seek and listen seriously to the views of other adults and siblings who attempt to speak on the child’s behalf.

Some children are offered the opportunity to have an independent advocate to represent their views in child protection meetings. Children often perceive their relationship with their advocate as one that is confidential, helps them to speak or put their views forward, and provides both practical and emotional support (Horan & Dalrymple, 2003). Part of the advocate’s role is to negotiate at formal meetings in a way that is sensitive to the young person involved who may feel reluctant to say certain things for fear they may hurt or upset a family member who is present. It may take several meetings for the advocate to form a relationship with the young person that is both meaningful and helpful by the time the child protection conference arrives. The presence of a trained advocate at child protection case conferences can help ensure that children’s views are expressed clearly and accurately, that outcomes are meaningful to children and that children’s experiences of safeguarding are improved (Lagaay & Courtney, 2013; La Valle et al, 2012). Children may be offered the chance to nominate a person from their immediate family or professional network to advocate for them, but they more often chose to appoint an independent advocate. Advocacy is a particularly useful service for ensuring that the rights of babies and very young children are upheld in the child protection process (Gribble & Gallagher, 2014). Despite this, children do not have rights to independent advocacy in child protection conferences in the UK and very few children are given opportunities to access this support.

**Children’s Understanding of the System**

Children and young people who have undergone child protection investigations often find the process confusing and have varied experiences of how well this was explained to them. Many children initially feared that the involvement of social workers meant that they would automatically be taken into care, although for some young people this was a relief bringing the possibility of help and an end to their worries (Morgan, 2014; Woolfson et al, 2010). Children did not tend to view professionals as having integrated support roles to play in terms of child protection and understood them as having a specific role to perform, for example, the doctor’s role is simply to administer medical treatment. Disabled children were particularly likely to experience a lack of adequate information about the system leaving some feeling isolated and excluded (Miller & Brown, 2014). Children who have a minimal understanding of the child protection system are likely to be aged under ten years old and will typically understand that they have a social worker who visits and possibly that the social workers job is to keep children safe, but will not be aware of the wider role of the social worker. Some children may have a detailed knowledge of one part of the system such as the court proceedings but have difficulty piecing together the whole picture. These children pointed out that they found the child protection system confusing and called for more information and greater transparency amongst those purporting to help them (Mainey et al, 2009). Some young people stated that professionals signposted them to other support services and they found this helpful. Others expressed that adequate information was not forthcoming from professionals and they had to try to access it elsewhere, mainly by talking to family members Lagaay & Courtney, 2013). Young people aged fourteen and over had the clearest understanding of the system including the roles of the various professionals involved, case conferences, core group meetings and the details of social work reports and child protection plans (Cossar et al, 2014).

The vast majority of children did not know what to expect when child protection services began to intervene in their lives (McKenna, 2013). Many first became aware that they were the subject of a child protection concern when social workers and/or police officers arrived, often unannounced, to conduct an initial investigative interview. This was likely to be the most emotionally challenging period of the investigation and young people spoke of it as a time when they felt most vulnerable as they had no clear idea of what was going on (Woolfson et al, 2010). Most children, even the youngest, understood the purpose of the investigative interview but they often did not understand the process fully, were unprepared for it and found it confusing (Westcott & Davies, 1996). This was mainly due to a lack of information about the process and a lack of control over it. Some young people felt that they were peripheral to discussions with the family or other professionals which did not really include them. Most children had little understanding of what might happen as a result of the investigative interview and found it difficult to follow the subsequent child protection process and make links between the various interventions in their lives. Some said that what had actually happened following a meeting did not match with their prior understanding and expectations of what would happen, and this resulted in feelings of distrust and abandonment (Woolfson et al, 2010). Children often experience discontinuity and confusion within the child protection system due to changes in placement and the large number of professionals that they come into contact with for assessment, therapeutic or legal purposes. Feelings of powerlessness are common because the professional understands the system and the child does not.

Access to information is integral to the full understanding and participation of children in child protection processes but children frequently point out that this is not forthcoming (e.g. Murray & Hallett, 2000; Thoburn et al, 1995). Most local authorities produce leaflets for young people to explain the process of the child protection conference but despite this, many never see one. Some young people had been given the opportunity to attend the case conference, however, they had not always been able to make an informed choice about this because they did not understand what the conference was for (Elsley, 2013; Cossar & Long, 2008). Understanding of the case conference process is linked to attendance at one rather than age and young people who had attended cited parents as the main source of information prior to the event. Some young people felt that their views were misrepresented by their social worker at the case conference and their opinions ignored (Woolfson et al, 2010). Others felt that the truth had been distorted at meetings and perceptions of successful outcomes were dependent on whether they had been given the chance to correct any misinterpretations (Davidson et al, 2006). Contrary to the popular professional view that too many questions will result in re-traumatisation, many young people appreciated extended questioning as it indicated that professionals took their point of view seriously and provided validation of their experiences and an increased sense of security. Young people pointed out that they did not understand some of the jargon used by professionals at meetings and also that they sometimes did not have the relevant vocabulary to discuss their experiences, particularly in relation to sexual abuse, and sometimes needed questions to be rephrased before they were able to answer (Murray & Hallett, 2006). Use of professional jargon can make information inaccessible to children exasperating the power imbalance further. Receiving and reading the minutes of the case conference was particularly difficult for some young people as they felt that words had been twisted and the minutes were not an accurate representation of events with many feeling powerless to do anything about it (Cossar & Long, 2008). Social workers are perceived to be powerful gatekeepers to resources and information and denying access to these things disempowers and marginalises children in the child protection process.

Most young people had heard of the child protection register and were aware that it was there to help protect children, but they did not always know whether they were on it (Woolfson et al, 2010). Many children are not aware that they are on the child protection register at all and there is some confusion about what the child protection register is for, with a few thinking that it is a list of badly behaved children (Cossar & Long, 2008). Young people tended to have very limited knowledge of what was in their child protection plans with under twelves being unlikely to even have heard of it. Very few children had a good understanding of their child protection plan (Dillon et al, 2016; Cossar et al, 2011). There is a stigma attached to being on a child protection plan and some children were reluctant to tell peers as they thought this might lead to them being bullied. Most young people did not associate positive outcomes with being on the child protection register or felt it had made no difference. A minority felt that it had made things worse due to the increased stress experienced by their parents.

**Participation in the System**

The child protection arena provides a difficult context for the genuine participation of children because there is an imbalance of power between children and the professionals who have the right to intervene in their lives and impose restrictions that they believe are in their best interests. Participation is further complicated by the complex emotional bonds that exist between children and their parents. It can also be complicated by professional misconceptions about their agency in the abuse itself and young victims of sexual exploitation report that professionals sometimes mistakenly conclude that they have made informed lifestyle choices (Alnock & Miller, 2013; Hanson & Holmes, 2014). Lack of understanding or misrepresentation by professionals can leave young people vulnerable to continuing harm and results in limited engagement and agency in the child protection process. The existing child protection system appears somewhat inadequate in addressing the particular and coalescing risks of adolescents as it relies on components that can alienate them by causing stigma, fear and intimidation during processes that are supposed to be participatory such as investigative interviews and case conferences. Participation can even be harmful for some children such as those exposed to aggression and hostility between parents and professionals during child protection conferences (Cossar et al, 2014). Far from the well-meaning goal of protecting young people from harm, inappropriate interventions and failure to take account of young people’s views can lead to an increased exposure to harm such as running away from an unsuitable care placement. However, protection and participation are not necessarily incompatible ideals as participation can lead to the development of protective qualities such as increased confidence and self-esteem. Children undergoing child protection investigations might be consulted in a number of ways including being given opportunities to have their wishes and feelings heard in relation to their individual case and being included in consultation groups to help practitioners learn from children’s experiences and identify good practice. Some local authorities seek children’s views during inspection or when developing services. However, children’s views are more often not heard at all or are not represented adequately in the child protection system. Young people point out that when they are consulted this is usually by filling in a questionnaire for inspection purposes which does not ask about the things that they feel are important (Morgan, 2014). Children and young people want their views to be genuinely considered by those who work with them, however, consultation is often perceived to be tokenistic and children’s interest wanes when they become aware that their views have little impact on decisions taken. The problem seems to be that emphasis is placed on asking children for their views rather than making use of these views to feed into professional planning and decision making (Kirby & Laws, 2010).

There is an irony in the general absence of children’s voices in the child protection process at a time when their participation is emphasised in both national and international law. High profile safeguarding enquiries such as those in Rochdale and Edlington have emphasised the need to put children rather than adults at the centre of child protection work and for children to be actively included in the child protection system. However, the current emphasis on working in partnership with parents and supporting families to keep their children at home rather than taking them into care means that social workers sometimes focus more on the needs of parents than the needs of children. Although looked after children are increasingly consulted in the research process, the voices of those children who remain at home during child protection interventions are rarely heard (O’Quigley, 2000). Few children who ultimately became subject to care orders felt that they had much of a say in what was happening to them (Morgan, 2014). They felt that their opinions were likely to be taken into account at home and by teachers at school, but few recalled having been consulted by the court. The full participation of disabled children is seen as particularly problematic, as social workers and other professionals may be unfamiliar with alternative methods of communication such as sign language (Oliver, 2010). Young people expressed the opinion that court and social workers should try to make it easier for them to take part and to discuss personal things that worried them or that they found embarrassing. The court process is a very difficult experience for most children and there are frequent barriers to full participation. One young person described her questioning by a barrister stating that he made one attack after another and shouted at her to the point where the judge had to ask him to stop (Coffey, 2014). Young people who have been prosecution witnesses and had to give evidence in court, sometimes against their parents, unanimously agree that this is a very distressing process. In 2009 a governmental decision was taken to allow reporters to attend family court hearings. Although this decision was taken to allow greater transparency in the court system, most young people are strongly against it as it means that details of their family circumstances or maltreatment can be published in various media. Even though safeguards remain in place to protect children’s identity and that of their families, young people said that they could still be identified by those who know them through details such as geographical area, school attended, ethnicity and religion. Without exception, they thought that children should be consulted and informed consent obtained before reporters were allowed at the hearing (Brophey, 2014).

Many young people who participated in investigative interviews felt that they had been given the opportunity to speak and have their views listened to although this was usually an upsetting process (Woolfson et al, 2010). Having a parent present at the interview against the child’s wishes, however, was prohibitive to active participation (Westcott & Davies, 1996). The complicated language used by social workers and police officers during investigative interviews was cited as an issue by several children who indicated that the vocabulary and grammar used by interviewers was not always appropriate to their age and understanding. Having an overly long interview and being asked too many questions was also seen as unhelpful. Many young people who attended a children’s hearing in Scotland found that this had been helpful, and they had been well supported in the process (McKenna, 2013). Some processes make it easier for young people to participate. For example, some children were encouraged to write their views down to be read out at meetings which they found helpful. The Scottish hearings system issues children with a ‘Having Your Say’ form to complete prior to their hearing and although this enabled some young people to contribute their views, most of those who received a form did not complete it indicating that this is not the most appropriate mode of communication, particularly for young children (Whitehead et al, 2009). In Scotland, most children and young people undergoing child protection investigations attend their hearing, which is in stark contrast to the minority of children who attend their child protection case conferences in England and Wales (Murray & Hallett, 2000; Thoburn et al, 1995). However, of those who attended their hearing, very few contributed more than a one-line response and many more contributed only monosyllabic responses or non-verbal cues. The extent to which this can be deemed fully participatory is debatable. Many children could not exercise their rights, including the right to dispute the grounds for referral and the right to appeal the decision of the panel, because they were not aware of them (Whitehead et al, 2009). Children have very limited opportunities to influence the child protection process despite the child-centred rhetoric which dominates child protection policy and literature. This is evident in the accounts of young people who state that professionals ignore what they say, do not share information with them and do not consult them regarding any action that is taken (Holland & Scourfield, 2004; Leeson, 2007). Significant numbers of children are not offered the opportunity to see or discuss their social worker’s report and have no control over what is put in it (Munro, 2011). Children want opportunities to participate and negotiate in important decisions about their lives, but decisions are almost always made by professionals.

Many young people are not given the opportunity to attend their initial case conference despite this being recommended in the national guidance (Cossar & Long, 2008). Few of those who did attend had been given the opportunity to view and discuss the social worker’s report before the meeting. Most of those who attended did so as a way to find out what was happening or because they thought things would be worse if they did not (Cossar et al, 2014). At the conference some children were asked for their views and felt happy with their contribution, but most were dissatisfied with their level of participation feeling that they were not able to ask all the questions they wanted and that their views had been marginalised. Most children were not involved to a significant extent in the conference and, although those that contributed to the meeting felt that this was a positive experience, many others were too anxious to speak, were ignored or were not given the opportunity to contribute (McGee & Westcott, 1996; Cossar et al, 2011). Many young people found it difficult to listen to information that was discussed about their parents. Some felt that professionals were inaccurate in the information they held and that they were being personally attacked, to the point that a few young people reported walking out of the case conference or losing their temper in frustration (Cossar & Long, 2008). Some young people pointed out that they were unable to fully participate in the meeting because they were uncomfortable speaking in front of some or all of the adults present (Scottish Executive, 2002). The independent chair was often viewed in a positive light with the feeling that he or she had been informative, had helped to ensure that the meeting was conducted in a fair manner and that they were invited to give their views. However, most young people felt that they had little influence over the decisions that were made and were not given any choice in the subsequent course of action. Young people raised the issue of meetings being dominated by adults and suggested that meetings would be easier if there were fewer professionals present and they were less formal.

Young people are more likely to participate in family group conferences than child protection case conferences (Oliver, 2010). Family group conferences have increasingly been promoted in order to encourage families to be active in the child protection process and involved in making safeguarding decisions. These meetings are usually held when there are concerns about parenting capacity and involve extended family members coming together to discuss and plan the future care of a child with professional support. Children who attend family group conferences sometimes have access to an advocate to allow them to participate more fully in decision making and ensure that their views are given the same weight as those of adults. Other children are helped to participate by family support workers. In these circumstances, most children, even very young children, are able to influence minor decisions made about their care and some children felt they were able to influence major decisions. This was a liberating experience for some children who felt that they had been listened to in the child protection process. However, family group conferences are essentially adult decision-making forums similar to case conferences and many other children felt disempowered by the process. Most children found the meetings boring and some said that they attended only because the meeting enabled them to see an otherwise absent parent indicating that their priorities may be very different to those of adults (Holland & Scourfield, 2004; Oliver, 2010). A minority of children were distressed or humiliated by the process due to witnessing family conflict about their care or being fearful of repercussions from particular family members and one girl was present whilst all members of her extended family said that they were no longer able to care for her (Kirby & Laws, 2010; Oliver, 2010). Deciding the extent to which children should participate in decisions and be involved in agreeing the child protection plan can be problematic and there have been cases where young people within the context of family group conferences wielded disproportionate levels of power and control over their parents who did not impose sufficient boundaries. In these cases, the professional emphasis on children’s wishes and feelings can contribute to the young person’s ability to dominate within their families and might therefore be detrimental to finding acceptable solutions.

**The Impact of the System on Children**

Young people who undergo child protection investigations may run away from home or abscond from children’s homes, sometimes repeatedly. Running away is often a cry for help and young people usually run because of serious problems at home including abuse and neglect, issues at school, involvement in criminal activity or sexual exploitation (Williams, 2012). Girls who are being sexually exploited are often encouraged to run away from home by their abusers in order to encourage dependency upon them. Some young people run away to allow them to engage more easily in activities that might compromise their safety such as drug or alcohol abuse, prostitution or crime. Although running away is preceded by exposure to harm for many young people, they will also be at a high risk of harm once they have left home or the placement as they may sleep rough or at the house of somebody they have only just met, or they may need to steal or beg to survive. Despite this, some young people said that they had to take deliberate action to make their situation worse by running away in order to be listened to or taken seriously.

There is a sense of difference felt by many young people in the child protection system which can lead to a negative sense of self. Feeling that you are different or unloved can result in a downward slope to high risk activities. However, adaptive coping strategies such as the ability to reflect on bad experiences and being able to think forward to the possible consequences of behaviours and plan accordingly, are displayed by many young people. This capacity can be strengthened by the support of others but is often dependent on feelings of inner self worth and young people sometimes feel that it is pointless changing maladaptive behaviours and coping strategies such as drug abuse or prostitution. This is because they feel that others will continue to label them negatively rather than respect their capacity to change and this can lead to further vulnerability and isolation. Feeling different can have the opposite effect in some young people however, and one young woman recited how it had made her stop shop lifting initially, and later she stopped selling sex and went on to become an outreach support worker (Dodsworth, 2014). Although many children do not demonstrate improvements in levels of self-esteem following intervention, they sometimes have more confidence in talking to others about their families’ problems which suggests an increased sense of optimism for the future and belief that things could change for the better (Cass & Fernandes, 2014).

Understanding the process of adaptation to trauma and stress is important in recognising why some children have better outcomes than others. The characteristics of the adverse experience, the personal attributes of the young person and the environment he or she lives in all interact in complex ways to develop resilience. Those that handle adverse experiences successfully often have increased confidence to face the next challenge that comes along. However, if stressful experiences are not handled well, the next bad experience will often feel overwhelming and the young person may feel helpless, despairing and victimised. This is particularly likely when trauma is experienced as extreme and ongoing. Labels given by others at this stage in children’s lives may be integrated into their own concepts of self-identity and the sense that children and young people make of their own adverse experiences has a profound effect on their levels of resilience and how they perceive themselves. Young people who have been rejected and sexually exploited can find it particularly difficult to form healthy relationships in later life. They may normalise abusive experiences and continue the search for affection and approval that deep down they do not think they deserve. Those who do not disclose their abuse or who have suffered sexual abuse over protracted periods of time are more likely to experience serious psychological issues in adult life. For some young people negative feelings can take a downward spiral and they may develop suicidal thoughts. Those who had experienced suicidal feelings described a developing situation which often grew alongside the abuse with accompanying feelings of loneliness. They also commonly felt that they were a burden and that others would be better off without them (Public Health Wales, 2014).

Fear of separation from their parents or carers is the most common worry experienced by children subject to child protection investigations (e.g. Woofson et al, 2010; Coffey, 2014). This can be exasperated by the high levels of insecure attachment behaviours displayed by children entering the child protection system which are usually caused by disorganised or dysfunctional parenting. Young people typically expressed that they were aware that there were problems with family functioning, but they wanted this to be addressed without changing the current family structure. Many worried about siblings and felt responsible for them and a particular worry when undergoing the child protection investigation is that they will be separated from their siblings if they are taken into care (Cossar et al, 2011). Children and young people often feel responsible for the circumstances in their families and may blame themselves and their behaviours for causing the problems they are experiencing. Some children blame themselves for not disclosing abuse sooner in order to prevent it happening to others and a significant worry for some was that their abuser had not been prosecuted as a result of their disclosure or had been found not guilty by the court leaving them free to abuse others and effect retaliation on the young person concerned (Cossar et al, 2013).

Entry into the state care system may be a planned event that allows children some say in the choice of placement. However, in many cases, the news that a child is to be taken into care is unanticipated and is experienced as a shock even when the family have had years of involvement with social care (e.g. Winter, 2014; Burgess et al, 2014). Although the decision to be taken into care may come as a relief to some, many children experience grief and anxiety at being separated from their parents and this is likely to impact on their emotional wellbeing once the transition has taken place. Many children who enter the care system expect to return to their parents when their situation improves, however, regardless of this, children who are taken into state care are more likely to have negative feelings regarding the outcomes of the child protection investigation than those who were able to remain at home. Children who were taken into care often felt that they had not had enough information about the foster carers and other children in the household before they moved in (Morgan, 2014). They said that they would like to spend more time with their social worker immediately prior to and after being taken to their placement. One young person who was six years old when he was taken into care described the complete frustration of not knowing the reason why and not being allowed to contribute to the decision-making process (Leeson, 2007). Some children felt that they did not belong in their foster placement, found the new rules and punishments difficult to get used to and remembered this as a very difficult time when they missed their birth families and past friends and felt a lack of choices, security and control. The experiences of children undergoing the transition into state care often go unnoticed with issues unresolved and suppressed. For example, many children who have entered the care system because of physical and emotional abuse and neglect will have adopted the roles of carer, provider and protector for younger siblings or vulnerable parents, sometimes for many years. Adults may assume that removal of these roles will bring relief for children when they are brought into care, but children often find this stressful and experience a loss of identity. This can be compounded by the feeling that they have no control over what is happening to themselves and their siblings, for example, the foster carer may now decide what the children eat and wear, how many times they brush their teeth, when they go out to play/see friends and what time they go to bed; choices that they may have made independently when at home. Children can feel confused in the face of seemingly endless new rules and routines and may find it difficult to adjust. Children frequently express that transitions into care would be made much easier if they were not separated from their siblings in the process (e.g. Munro, 2011). Those who have cared for siblings for many years are not usually consulted in their ongoing care and may feel critical of it; this may add to their worries and stress. In the long term, many children eventually felt that their foster carers treated them like their own children and that foster care had provided them with much support and opportunities, helping them to feel safe, become more independent, do well at school and generally feel well looked after. Having a good social worker and the right foster placement were seen as significant factors in making this happen.

Children’s experiences of the child protection system influence their development, wellbeing and long-term outcomes (e.g. NSPCC, 2013, Scottish Executive, 2002). Timely intervention can prevent further risk from behaviours and coping strategies that are the result of abuse such as running away, becoming pregnant, self-harming or committing suicide. The earlier children receive help in terms of both age and the onset of abuse or neglect, the better their short and long-term outcomes. Outcomes for looked after children are good for very young children where intervention has happened early but more erratic for older children who may already have suffered significant damage (Ofsted, 2013; CAADA, 2014). Timeliness of support and intervention is particularly significant for babies because of the possible impact on brain development and the importance of forming attachment relationships in the earliest weeks and months of life. The formation of a secure attachment relationship is also a key factor in positive long-term outcomes for older children. Self-esteem, self-confidence and self-worth result from the availability of a secure emotional base to which children and young people can retreat.

Young people had mixed feelings about whether they thought the system had protected them with some feeling less safe after the child protection investigation (Scottish Executive, 2002). This was often because the perpetrator of their abuse had not been prosecuted or convicted. In some cases children were returned home from care against their wishes and in one case this was to a household where a convicted paedophile was living. Young people are often very anxious about the prospect of future contact with an abusive family member and some felt they had no say in the decision to allow contact to go ahead which they found very distressing. However, the majority of young people felt that the support they had received after the child protection investigation had a positive impact in terms of improved care and family relationships and/or the end of contact with an abusive individual in their lives (Woolfson et al, 2010). Many children were placed with extended family members rather than taken into the care system and this allowed them to receive support whilst remaining within the family unit. When young people were asked to state the things that made them feel safer, they said that living with someone who made them feel safe was very important. They also cited better policing and harsher sentences for abusers, carrying a weapon and talking about the dangers with others as key factors in staying safe (Morgan, 2014).

Some young people felt that they had been abused by the child protection system itself and described the deep and ongoing emotional trauma experienced particularly as a result of the investigative interview, the court case or, in cases of sexual abuse, the medical examination (e.g. C4EO, 2010; McGee & Westcott, 1996). Bullying at school is a common problem for children on child protection plans who may feel stigmatised although this may also be related to their neglect, for example, being smelly or having ill-fitting clothes (Munro, 2011). Some children experienced bullying simply for being in foster care. Some children had their privacy invaded after being identified within their communities as a result of media reporting on their family court hearing or of court documents being released to the press. This can cause young people to experience anxiety problems or other psychological ill health, their school work may suffer through worry and stigmatisation and this may have implications for future employment opportunities which are already less favourable for those who have been in care. Although many children feel that their involvement with the child protection system eventually made things better for them, they also stated that they had no control in what happened to them and this had implications for their later lives. Looked after children who have had all the important decisions in their lives made for them by professionals often leave care with an impaired ability and confidence to make decisions for themselves (Leeson, 2007).

**Conclusions**

There are large numbers of children in the UK who are subject to abuse and are not in receipt of state protection. This is for a number of reasons, not least because many children do not recognise or accept that they are being abused. There are many barriers to disclosing abuse, some of which are related to children’s maturity or ability to communicate, but for many, feelings of shame, embarrassment and self-blame prohibit them from talking about their circumstances. Nevertheless, many children do attempt disclosure in a variety of ways but professionals do not always hear or act upon this information. Children articulate strongly that they want adults to notice the signs that they are struggling and ask them about their problems. However, there is a widespread distrust of social workers amongst young people who fear that they will not be believed or will be taken into care. Contact with social workers and police officers can be fraught with worries and many young people have genuine concerns that what they have said will be misunderstood, misrepresented or not treated confidentially. Investigative interviews are particularly difficult for children who feel unprepared, anxious and may worry about the impact of what they have said on other family members. Children recount that they are fearful of and feel powerless in their relationships with professionals, particularly social workers and police officers. Power in the relationships between children and professionals is a recurrent theme in children’s accounts of their experiences and this cannot be ignored. Despite all of this, many children do form trusting relationships with social workers and they particularly appreciate those who are available, supportive and act on their concerns. Children would like more information and support from their social worker at key points in the system such as the child protection case conference or the transition to state care. Entry into the care system is often experienced as a shock for children even if their family has been involved with social care for many years and they may feel grief and anxiety about being separated from their parents and siblings. Many children eventually have positive experiences of child protection services particularly where the abuse has ceased as a result, but some have lost faith in a system which has failed to protect them particularly where perpetrators have not been prosecuted or convicted or where young people have been returned home to abusive situations.

A clear message seems to be that young people do not want adults to relinquish their power completely within the child protection process, but that they appreciate when adults reflect on the power imbalance and acknowledge that children have valid insight and expertise on their own lives and that adults do not always know best. Although the age and mental capacity of the child is inevitably taken into account when determining an appropriate level of participation in decision-making this is by no means the only condition that children have for active participation. Withholding information and resources from children is a form of coercive power that keeps children in a subordinate position to adults and impacts on their capacity to effect change in ways that will help them to achieve their goals. Adequate and honest information from professionals, transparent practices and the provision of an advocate or social worker with whom the child can form a trusting relationship and develop a deeper understanding of the child protection process can determine the extent to which a child is able to genuinely participate in it and the extent to which the system is effectively able to protect the child. Although attendance at case conferences and children’s hearings is often seen as an important step in enabling young people to contribute to decisions, physical attendance at meetings should not be confused with genuine participation particularly where children’s views are not subsequently fed into care plans. An organisation’s stated commitment to children’s participation should not be taken as evidence that it will happen. The provision of advocates can ensure that children’s views are represented without them having to attend meetings that could be potentially distressing. Children appreciate being given space and time to contribute the information that they feel is important rather than being simply required to provide responses to the questions of professionals. Coming into contact with the child protection system can remove children from their identities as individuals who are capable of making choices and can stigmatise them in their communities. Children may become dehumanised by those who work with them resulting in a lack of compassion and thought for children’s cognitive and emotional states, leading them to suffer feelings of powerlessness, helplessness or anger as a result. However, it is possible for children to feel empowered within the child protection system if they are given some say in it, are enabled to genuinely participate in the terms of their care, are treated with respect, listened to, and have their views taken seriously.

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