



SAFEGUARDING UPDATE

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Supporting our pupils: What schools need to know from the latest Office for National Statistics (ONS) report on childhood abuse

A recent statistical bulletin from the ONS, titled "Abuse during childhood in England and Wales: March 2024" provides important findings that school staff and safeguarding leads should be aware of when planning policy, practice and support for children. Below is a summary of key points and implications for your school community.

Key findings

- **Around 13.6 million adults (29.0%)** reported having experienced one or more of emotional abuse, physical abuse, sexual abuse or neglect before the age of 18.
- **Emotional abuse was the most commonly experienced form** (22.7%, 10.6 m people), followed by physical abuse (16.5%, 7.7 m), sexual abuse (9.1%, 4.3 m) and neglect (7.6%, 3.6 m).
- **Women reported higher prevalence for most abuse types** (other than physical abuse, where no statistically significant sex difference was found).
- **Vulnerability markers:** Higher prevalence of abuse was found among people who:
 - Were living with someone with a long-term mental health condition (72.2% of those who experienced abuse) versus those who were not.
 - Lived with someone who misused alcohol or drugs (77.7%).
 - Had disabilities at the time of interview (42.0% experienced any abuse) compared with those without (26.4%).
 - Were in lone-parent households (35.0% experienced any abuse) compared with other households with children (29.2%).
- **Outcomes:** Adults who had been abused as children showed significantly higher levels of poor wellbeing, for example, low life satisfaction (8.4% vs 4.0%), low worthwhileness (6.2% vs 2.9%), low happiness (9.4% vs 4.3%) and high anxiety (32.1% vs 21.0%).
- **Disclosure:** Among those who experienced sexual abuse, only 45.1% disclosed at the time, and common reasons for non-disclosure included shame/embarrassment (49.1%), believing they would not be believed (27.1%), or believing it was their fault (25.9%).

Implications for schools

Given these findings, here are some things your school community should emphasise and act on:

- **Raising awareness and culture of disclosure:** The low rate of immediate disclosure underlines the need to create a school culture where pupils feel safe, believed, and supported to speak out, especially if they feel ashamed or fear blame. Pupils should know exactly how to access help from trusted adults, safeguarding leads, or external helplines. Staff also need regular training to recognise the less visible signs of emotional abuse or neglect and to respond sensitively, reinforcing that these forms of harm are just as serious as physical abuse.
- **Targeted vigilance for high-risk indicators:** The data highlights that pupils with disabilities, or those living with parental mental illness, substance misuse, or in lone-parent households, may be more vulnerable to abuse. Staff should be particularly alert to changes in behaviour, attendance, friendships, or emotional wellbeing in these pupils, ensuring close monitoring and timely support. Risk assessments and safeguarding strategies should clearly reflect these specific vulnerabilities.
- **Whole-school approach to emotional abuse and neglect:** The report highlights that emotional abuse and neglect are widespread yet often overlooked forms of harm. School policies on safeguarding, behaviour, and attendance should explicitly address these, ensuring all staff, including non-teaching, are trained to recognise the signs and respond appropriately. In EYFS and primary settings especially, fostering emotional safety, nurturing relationships, and a strong sense of security must remain central to daily practice.
- **Support for long-term outcomes:** The survey shows a clear link between childhood abuse and poorer adult wellbeing, highlighting the need to build resilience and recovery into our work with children. Schools should prioritise pupil wellbeing, social-emotional learning, and trauma-informed practice, while maintaining strong partnerships with external agencies such as CAMHS and specialist services. Staff must also recognise that the effects of abuse can be long-term and require ongoing support, not just an immediate response.
- **Data-driven policy review:** The updated ONS data, now capturing abuse up to age 18, reinforces the widespread and often multi-type nature of childhood abuse, though trends should be interpreted with care. Your safeguarding review should reflect this new national baseline and use it to assess whether current training, policies, and risk assessments adequately address the scale of the issue. It also provides an opportunity to strengthen how we record, monitor, and track the wellbeing and progress of pupils who may have experienced abuse or neglect.

Read:

<https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/crimeandjustice/bulletins/abuseduringchildhoodinenglandandwales/march2024>

What schools need to know about Operation Beaconport

A major national review led by the National Crime Agency (NCA) is re-examining hundreds of previously closed investigations into group-based child sexual exploitation and abuse, under the banner of Operation Beaconport. The review covers cases from 1st January 2010 to 31st March 2025, involving two or more suspects and more than one victim, where a decision of "no further action" was previously taken. Its aim is not only to revisit potential criminal

investigations but crucially to centre the voices of victims and survivors, recognising that being heard and believed is itself an important form of justice.

What this means for your school

- **This operation reinforces the reality that children and young people may have been harmed** and not feel they were listened to or supported at the time. Schools must therefore remain vigilant, patient and supportive when disclosures emerge whether historic or recent.
- **You should reaffirm your safeguarding culture:** ensuring all staff understand the potential for non-recent abuse, and that any concern, even if raised late or indirectly, deserves respectful, timely response.
- **Your recording systems, risk assessments and referral pathways should reflect that abuse may not come to light quickly**, and that pupils may carry long-term emotional impacts even if the incident occurs outside school hours or years earlier.
- **You must collaborate proactively with external agencies** (social care, police, specialist services) and keep clear, current referral pathways, since this national effort signals greater scrutiny and improved mechanisms of investigation and support for victims.
- Finally, you should **use this moment as a prompt to review your safeguarding policies**, training (especially on historic and complex abuse scenarios), and your messaging to pupils: emphasising that they will be heard, believed and supported whenever they choose to speak up.

By embedding this understanding into your practice, you ensure your school environment is responsive to the full spectrum of safeguarding issues, including the historically hidden ones and remains aligned with national developments in protecting children and young people.

Read:

<https://www.nationalcrimeagency.gov.uk/news/operation-beaconport-hundreds-of-child-abuse-cases-under-review-to-prioritise-victim-and-survivor-voices>

What schools need to know from the Latest "Children in Need" figures

A recent release of the Department for Education's "Children in Need: Reporting Year 2024" statistics provides important implications for school safeguarding, wellbeing and monitoring practices.

Here are the key findings and what they mean for us:

- As of 31st March 2024, there were around 399,460 children in need in England approximately 1 in every 30 children. This figure is a slight decline (-0.9 %) from 2023 but remains higher than the 2020 pre-pandemic baseline.
- The cohort of children in need is changing: 59 % were aged 10 or over (up from 48 % in 2015) and 31 % were from minority ethnic backgrounds (up from 25 % in 2015).
- For pupils in state-funded schools in 2023/24 who had been "in need" in the last six years (about 1 in 10 pupils):
 - 61.6 % were eligible for free school meals, over 2.5 times the rate of the general pupil population (24.6 %)
 - Around 40 % of these were persistently absent (compared to 20 % overall)
 - Academic outcomes were significantly lower: only 17.5 % achieved a grade 5 or above in GCSE English and Maths vs 45.9 % overall.

What this means for our school

- **Having 1 in 30 pupils currently designated "children in need" means safeguarding monitoring remains critical.** We should ensure our systems keep visibility of these pupils, especially as many may not be formally on child-in-need (CIN) plans but still require support.
- **The shift in age and the over-representation of minority ethnic pupils highlight the need for culturally responsive and age-appropriate support.** We should review whether our interventions reflect the older age-group predominance and diversity of the group.
- **The strong links with free school meals eligibility, poor attendance and low attainment emphasise that "children in need" status often intersects with disadvantage and educational risk.** Monitoring attendance, attainment and engagement for these pupils is vital.
- **Our safeguarding, attendance, behaviour and pupil-wellbeing policies should explicitly reference children in need (CIN) as a vulnerable group.** Staff training should cover the indicators and risk factors associated with this cohort (persistent absence, disengagement, minority-ethnic background, older children, etc).
- **Tracking and outcome monitoring:** Given the substantially lower academic outcomes and higher absence rates for children in need, our school should maintain robust internal data-tracking so that any child in need is highlighted not just in welfare terms but also in academic progress, attendance and wellbeing.
- **Liaison with external agencies remains key.** Children in need often receive or require support from children's social care, and you must ensure your referral pathways, and multi-agency communication, are well-understood and up-to-date.

Read:

<https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/children-in-need/2025>

Forthcoming free safeguarding webinars for Autumn term 2 2025

- Radicalisation - Tuesday 11th November**
- Child-on-child sexual abuse - Tuesday 18th November**
- Sexism and sexual harassment - Tuesday 25th November**
- Child sexual exploitation (CSE) - Tuesday 2nd December**
- County lines - Tuesday 9th December**
- Trauma - Tuesday 16th December**

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