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Summary

In England there are approximately 1.3 million children with special educational needs and disabilities and increasing numbers with complex needs (DfE, 2020). Studies consistently show disabled children are 3-4 times more likely to experience violence and abuse than their non-disabled peers (Jones, et al, 2012). Despite their increased risk of experiencing abuse, disabled children's access to safeguarding and support at all stages of the child protection system is at best inconsistent (Ofsted, 2012; Taylor et al, 2016).

The underlying reasons for disabled children's increased risk of abuse and neglect are complex, but are not well understood (Jones et al, 2012; Leeb et al, 2012). These factors make effective safeguarding of disabled children and young people an urgent sector priority. This qualitative systematic review will address this significant shortfall in our understanding. It will build the evidence-base on the specific safeguarding needs of disabled children and young people, and the quality and tailoring of effective social work responses. This review will support:

- Evidence-informed planning and development of more appropriate, targeted, and cost-effective interventions for disabled children and their families.
- Better understanding of the complexity and nuances of safeguarding concerns and responses with this high-risk group of children and young people supporting the

development of improved early help and reducing the need for crisis-driven, and costly, residential placements.

- Improved understanding of how and why many key issues facing the sector disproportionately affect disabled children (such as poor mental health, poorer outcomes, disabled children and their families lack of involvement in care-planning and the need for whole-family support) and identify possible solutions.

Our objective is to address the relative invisibility of disabled children within generic child protection practice evidence (Stalker et al, 2010) by synthesising existing evidence on the known safeguarding risks and poorer outcomes for this group.

Specific aims of the systematic review:

- 1) To synthesise the existing evidence as to:
 - a. The identification of harms of disabled children and young people under the age of 25 years
 - b. Referral and assessment processes for this group
 - c. Responses within social care, and other agencies to safeguarding disabled children
 - d. Outcomes (in the short and longer-term) for disabled children who have experienced abuse
 - e. Specific training and skills development for the workforce to effectively support disabled children.
- 2) To identify gaps and areas requiring research to further the development of an evidence-base for this group.

The review will be completed by May 2021.

We will be working with the following definitions:

- a) The Equality Act (2010) definition of disability which states that a person has a disability if they have a physical or mental impairment, and the impairment has a substantial and long-term adverse effect on their ability to carry out normal day-to-day activities.
- b) The Children and Families Act (2014) definition of Special Educational Needs and Disability as contained within the Special Educational Needs and Disability Code of Practice: 0 to 25 Years Statutory Guidance for organisations which work with and support children and young people who have special educational needs or disabilities. This states: A child or young person has SEN if they have a learning difficulty or disability which calls for special educational provision to be made for him or her. A child of compulsory school age or a young person who has a learning difficulty or disability if he or she has a significantly greater difficulty in learning than the majority of others of the same age, or has a disability which prevents or hinders him or her from making use of facilities of a kind generally provided for others of the same age in mainstream schools or mainstream post-16 institutions.
- c) The definition of safeguarding and promoting the welfare of children as defined under Working Together to Safeguard Children (2018) which states protecting children from maltreatment, preventing impairment of children's health or development, ensuring that children grow up in circumstances consistent with the provision of safe and effective care, taking action to enable all children to have the best outcomes. Specifically that children may be vulnerable to neglect and abuse or exploitation from within their family and from individuals they come across in their day-to-day lives. These threats can take a variety of different forms, including: sexual, physical and emotional abuse; neglect; exploitation by criminal gangs and organised crime groups; trafficking; online abuse; sexual exploitation and the influences of extremism leading to radicalisation.
- d) All forms of harm including intra and extra-familial abuse, and abuse within residential settings.

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Part 1) Rationale and question formulation

Rationale

Overview: In England there are approximately 1.3 million children with special educational needs and disabilities, and increasing numbers with complex needs (DfE, 2020). Disabled children represent a significant minority of users of children’s social care, making up 16.4% of children in need (DfE, 2011), around a quarter of children in care (Baker, 2011) and a high proportion of children placed in residential schools and secure settings (Pinney, 2017). Research indicates disabled children are at heightened risk of violence and abuse (Jones et al, 2012), including “emerging harms” (Working Together, 2018) such as child sexual exploitation (Berlowitz, et al, 2013). These factors make effective safeguarding of disabled children and young people an urgent sector priority. This is especially important given evidence that disabled children are proportionally *under*-represented among children subject to child protection plans (3.8% vs 7-9% of all children, (DfE, 2011), yet make up 14% of children experiencing incidents leading to a Serious Case Review (Brandon et al, 2020). These phenomena remain poorly understood (Stalker and MacArthur, 2012). This systematic review would address this significant shortfall in our understanding. It will build the evidence-base on the specific safeguarding needs of disabled children and young people, and the quality and tailoring of effective social work responses.

Exposure to abuse: Studies consistently show disabled children are 3-4 times more likely to experience violence and abuse than those without disabilities (Jones, et al, 2012). Disabled children are over-represented among children exposed to ‘new and emerging harms’ (Working Together, 2018), such as child sexual exploitation, including that perpetrated in gangs (Berlowitz et al, 2013; Franklin et al, 2015), criminal exploitation associated with county lines (Home Office, 2018) and online bullying and abuse (NSPCC, 2013). The underlying reasons for disabled children’s increased risk of abuse and neglect are complex, but are not well understood (Jones et al, 2012; Leeb et al, 2012).

Identification and referral: Disabled children experience greater and specific barriers to disclosing abuse than their non-disabled peers (Taylor et al, 2014; Jones et al, 2017). When they do disclose abuse, disabled children are less likely to be believed (Kvam, 2004; Herschowitz et al, 2007). Research indicates practitioners apply higher thresholds to disabled children for safeguarding referrals and are more likely to misattribute signs and symptoms of neglect and abuse to children’s impairments (Brandon et al, 2011; Ofsted, 2012; Taylor et al, 2014). Further barriers to making child protection referrals, raised by practitioners, include a lack of confidence and skills communicating with

disabled children about abuse and neglect and a related fear of getting it wrong (Taylor et al 2014; Prynault-Jones et al, 2017).

Assessment and Intervention: Available evidence consistently suggests disabled children are under-represented among UK children receiving support via a child protection plan (Ofsted, 2012). The reasons for their under-representation within the child protection system appear complex (Stalker and McArthur, 2012), but may partly stem from emerging concerns for disabled children being effectively responded to at an earlier stage via Section 17 child in need procedures (Ofsted, 2012). This explanation would appear at odds, however, with the finding that disabled children make up to a quarter of UK children living in out of home care (Baker, 2007; Kelly et al, 2016).

Associated risk and outcomes: Once in the care system, disabled children are much more likely to experience placement instability or be placed in residential care than their non-disabled peers (Kelly et al, 2016). They are also less likely to have access to appropriate therapeutic and mental health support to aid their recovery from abuse (Kelly et al, 2016). Of further concern is the finding that disabled children are at a disproportionately higher risk of experiencing significant harm leading to a serious case review, particularly during adolescence (Brandon *et al*, 2020). Evidence also indicates that disabled children are at risk of experiencing poorer outcomes than their non-disabled peers. For example, they are three times more likely to be not in education, training and employment than other 16-24 year olds (House of Commons, 2018) and are also over-represented within the criminal justice system (Laming Review, 2016).

Rationale: The available evidence outlined above suggests that despite their increased risk of experiencing abuse disabled children's access to safeguarding and support at all stages of the child protection system is at best inconsistent (Ofsted, 2012; Taylor et al, 2016). Research has highlighted that recognising and responding to abuse involving disabled children is often more complex, time consuming and frequently involves more finely balanced decisions between protection and family support and greater long-term commitment of resources than that concerning non-disabled children (Kelly and Dowling, 2015; Taylor et al, 2016). This complexity points to an urgent need to review and synthesise existing evidence relating to maltreatment concerns and practice responses to disabled children during and following child protection enquiries (Taylor et al, 2014). Despite the clear need to improve practice, a review of this kind using systematic methods has yet to be carried out (PROSPERO, 2020). In summary, the following reasons indicate why this review is both needed to support the sector, and is timely. This review will support:

- Evidence-informed planning and development of more appropriate, targeted, and cost-effective interventions for disabled children and their families.
- Better understanding of the complexity and nuances of safeguarding concerns and responses with this high- risk group of children and young people supporting the development of improved early help and reducing the need for crisis-driven, and costly, residential placements.

- Improved understanding of how and why many key issues facing the sector disproportionately affect disabled children (poor mental health, poorer outcomes, disabled children and their families lack of involvement in care-planning and the need for whole-family support) and identify possible solutions. Evidence that will support current agendas for change.

Our objective is to address the relative invisibility of disabled children within generic child protection practice evidence (Stalker et al, 2010) by synthesising existing evidence on the known safeguarding risks and poorer outcomes for this group.

Specific aims of the systematic review:

1. To synthesis the existing evidence as to:
 - a. The identification of harms of disabled children and young people under the age of 25 years
 - b. Referral and assessment processes for this group
 - c. Responses within social care, and other agencies to safeguarding disabled children
 - d. Outcomes (in the short and longer-term) for disabled children who have experienced abuse
 - e. Specific training and skills development for the workforce to effectively support disabled children.
2. To identify gaps and areas requiring research to further the development of an evidence-base for this group.

Research question(s)

As the review will be qualitative, we will be using PICO, which is more suitable and aligns with the approach outlined by the Joanna Briggs Institute. The PICO mnemonic stands for the Population, the Phenomena of Interest and the Context.

Population: Disabled children and young people aged 0 – 25 years

Interest: Safeguarding Practice

Context: Children’s Services (where relevant to safeguarding issues).

Specifically we will explore:

1- Why are disabled children and young people at greater risk of harm?

2- What tailor-made responses and interventions are available to disabled children and young people?

3- What are the outcomes for disabled children who have experienced abuse and associated trauma from the perspectives of disabled children/people, parents/carers and practitioners?

Part 2) Identifying relevant work

Search Strategy

Electronic databases

- ASSIA
- Scopus
- PsychINFO
- Social Sciences Citation Index
- Pubmed
- Social Work Abstracts/Social Services Abstracts/Soc Index
- Google Scholar (ordering search results by relevance and reviewing only the first 200 results)

Other sources

Open UK grey literature and websites to be searched to identify relevant country/culturally appropriate research data:

- SCIE
- NICE
- Research in Practice
- Children and Young People Now
- NSPCC
- Barnardo's
- Action for Children
- Children's Society
- Ann Craft Trust
- Council for Disabled Children
- PACE (Parents against Child Exploitation)
- NCB – National Children's Bureau
- Office of the Children's Commissioner in each UK nation
- Association of Child Protection Professionals
- Department for Education/Home Office/Department of Health
- NWG on CSE
- Centre for Expertise in Child Sexual Abuse
- Disabled Children's Partnership
- National Autistic Society
- Ofsted

Key stakeholders/academics to be approached via email and Twitter call

- NWG on Safeguarding Disabled Children
- Child welfare inequalities network
- British Sociological Association Childhood Studies Group
- (NWG) National Working Group on Child Sexual Exploitation
- National Organisation for the Treatment of Offenders (NOTA)
- British Association of Social Workers (BASW)
- Universities of Bedford, Birmingham, London Met, Middlesex, Edinburgh, Queens, Brunel, Kent, York, Bristol, Dublin, Flinders

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • End Violence against Women coalition • Women’s Aid • Galop • Safelives East
<p>Key search terms</p>	<p>(Child* OR “young people” OR youth OR adolescents OR Juveniles OR Teen) AND (Disabled OR disability OR impairment OR Deaf OR autism OR neurodiversity OR special needs) AND (Abuse OR Safeguarding OR Protection OR exploitation OR neglect OR violence OR prostitution OR trafficking OR pornography OR abuse images OR maltreatment OR trauma OR Sexting OR online harms) AND (Social Work OR Welfare OR Assessment OR Care OR Identification OR Reporting OR Practice OR Prevention OR Policy OR Intervention OR Social Services)</p> <p>We will use the search string above and apply the inclusion/exclusion criteria stipulated below. Due to the predominantly qualitative and broad nature of the review we will not apply any limiters.</p>

Study selection criteria

<p>Inclusion criteria</p>	<p><i>Study characteristics:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Disabled Children and Young People aged 0 – 25 years (see above definition of disability) • Experience of children’s services (in a safeguarding context) • Abuse, neglect, maltreatment, exploitation. <p><i>Report characteristics:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Published in English language only • Published from 1 January 2000 onwards • Studies obtainable within 2 weeks • UK literature first and then relevant academically published international literature (to be report separately) • UK grey literature from identified websites • Snowballing to maximum number which can be read and analysed in timeframe • Maximum number that can be read and analysed in the available time (n=100).
<p>Exclusion criteria</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Non-European, Non-AUS/NZ and Non-North American studies • Non-English language • Published prior to 2000 • Studies which have been carried out unethically.
<p>Process of study selection</p>	<p>Toft will take the lead on running the searches and collating the master list, bringing together the results from all the searches. Toft will apply the broad inclusion/exclusion criteria specified above (e.g. publication</p>

	<p>date, language etc.) and remove any obviously irrelevant literature by examining article titles. Franklin and Toft will then work to examine article abstracts to reduce and hone the included articles further. At this stage the expertise of the whole team will be accessed to assess the inclusion articles into what would be a final 'master list'. A table of excluded and included publications will be produced.</p> <p>Franklin and Toft will distribute the selected articles amongst the team (each article will be given to two members) who will assess eligibility and begin the extraction process. Toft will retain the master list to ensure that duplication does not occur. This will also allow for the assessment of any repeating articles.</p>
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Study records

Data collection	<p>The team will use a standardised extraction sheet to ensure consistency of the data across the research team. This approach has been successful in our previous projects and compliments the meta-synthesis approach we have used. In essence, the form will allow the team to record observations about the articles (e.g. methods used, key findings, conclusions, ethical information, the participants) alongside specific findings in relation to the research questions (and related sub-questions) that have been highlighted.</p>
Data management process	<p>Toft will initially store results in Endnote, as Endnote allows for easy access to details including title and abstract. After removal of obviously irrelevant articles, the records will be transferred to an Excel 'master list'. Using an excel list will allow for easier access across the team. Toft will be responsible for holding this master list and collecting completed extraction forms.</p>
Data items	<p>As the review is qualitative in nature the team will focus upon the research questions in relation to the data. In practice this means that the following 'variables' will be collected:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Participants including specific demographic characteristics - Type of abuse - Setting - Social care provision - Research methods - Key findings - Conclusions - Recommendations for policy and practice

<p>Outcomes and prioritisation</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Information on referral and assessment processes - Responses within social care, and other agencies to safeguarding disabled children - Outcomes (in the short and longer-term) for disabled children who have experienced abuse - Effective training and skills development for the workforce to effectively support disabled children.
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Part 3) Risk of bias assessment

<p>Risk of bias assessment criteria</p>	<p>We will use Critical Appraisal Skills Programme (CASP, 2017) principles and template for qualitative research to assess bias and validity of studies. This will be undertaken at the study and outcome level.</p> <p>https://casp-uk.net/casp-tools-checklists/</p>
<p>Purpose of risk of bias assessment</p>	<p>As the articles collected will be qualitative, measuring potential risk of bias is important when presenting the synthesised report. It will allow us to preface any arguments within the context of the way in which studies gathered, analysed and presented their data.</p>

Part 4) Summarising the evidence

<p>Data synthesis</p>	<p>Qualitative data will be synthesised using a combination of a meta-aggregation and thematic synthesis approach. This will involve the aggregation and synthesis of findings to generate a set of statements that represent that aggregation, through assembling the findings and categorizing these findings on the basis of similarity in meaning. These categories are then subjected to a synthesis in order to produce a single comprehensive set of synthesized findings that can be used as a basis for evidence-based practice. Where textual pooling is not possible the findings will be presented in narrative form.</p>
<p>Confidence in cumulative evidence</p>	<p>As the research is qualitative and we will be aggregating and synthesising the findings in a thematic fashion, we will use GRADE-CERQual. GRADE-CERQual focuses upon: Methodological limitations, relevance, coherence, data adequacy. The team will grade the confidence of these individually and</p>

	then collectively for the included articles. For ease of reporting and collation the assessments will be included in the data extraction sheet.
Reporting and interpreting findings	The review report will present findings in relation to the specified key questions and their implications for practice. We will also include recommendations for identify gaps and areas requiring research to further the development of an evidence-base for this group.

Registration

- This review is registered with the OSF and will be updated with outcomes at the end of the project.

Personnel

Professor Anita Franklin, Professor of Childhood Studies, University of Portsmouth (Principle Investigator) will oversee the project and quality assurance. She will lead on the development of the final report and recommendations.

Dr Alex Toft, Research Fellow, Nottingham Trent University will oversee and ensure methodological quality, designing the protocol, running searches and managing data.

Dr Jane Heron, Lecturer in Social Work, University of East Anglia will synthesis evidence, contribute to drafting the report and developing practice and research recommendations.

Jo Greenaway-Clarke, Senior Research Associate, University of Portsmouth will undertake data extraction, analysis and drafting of the report and recommendations.

Sarah Goff – Development Manager, Ann Craft Trust will contribute specialist practice knowledge, and contribute to the development of practice and research recommendations.

Timeline

Dates	Activity	Staff responsible/leading
16/11/2020	Protocol Agreed	AF/AT
23/11/2020	Run academic searches, Undertake key web searches Develop data extraction sheet, Quality control check process	AT/AF/JG
31/12/2020	Review documents retrieved, Undertake extractions	Full Team
25/01/2021	Draft table of excluded/included studies	AF/AT
19/03/2021	Synthesis, analysis, undertake stakeholder learning event and draft review	AF/Full Team
30/4/2021	Write final review, Peer review, Quality control.	AF/Full Team

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