



GUIDANCE FOR MEDIA REPORTING ON...

# CHILD ABUSE AND NEGLECT

*“ In reporting child abuse and neglect journalists must be mindful of the need for accuracy, for precision in the use of language and for sensitivity in reporting cases which, by definition are extremely difficult.*

*This guidance will be of practical assistance to journalists in meeting the daily challenge of serving the public interest without intruding into private grief or inadvertently adding to the pain and suffering of victims and their families. It complements the NUJ Code of Conduct which provides the ethical framework for all good journalism. ”*

**Séamus Dooley**  
**Irish Secretary**  
**National Union of Journalists**

*“ This is an important initiative that the DHSSPS is happy to endorse. Working with the media in a constructive way will better protect children in our society through raising awareness, challenging systems, improving practice and through these promoting understanding. ”*

**Séan Holland**  
**Chief Social Services Officer**  
**Department of Health, Social Services & Public Safety**

## Guidance for Media Reporting on Child Abuse and Neglect in Northern Ireland

### Purpose

This document has been written by journalists and child care professionals with an interest in the protection of children from all forms of abuse and neglect. Its origins are contained within a report prepared by two of the organisations involved in developing this guidance. The report<sup>1</sup> highlighted good practice and shows the clear need for improved communication between professionals and the public so children's well being can be better supported. Journalists have also highlighted the strong public interest in reporting on cases involving the serious injury or death of a child in Northern Ireland.

This guidance is designed to provide background information for journalists about child protection in Northern Ireland and to support the media and child welfare professionals to work together to ensure that this sensitive topic can be reported in ways which will help the public to better understand the issues involved.

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**CHILD  
ABUSE AND  
NEGLECT**

**KEY  
FACTS**

**Most children who suffer abuse and neglect are harmed by someone known to them and in a trusted position.**

1. Lazenbatt, Devaney and Bunting (2009) An evaluation of the case management review process in Northern Ireland. Queen's University Belfast and the NSPCC.

## Introduction

“Informed, sensitive and professional journalism is a key element in any media strategy for improving the quality of reporting concerning human rights and society. The daily challenge to journalists and media organisations is particularly felt in coverage of children and their rights.”

**International Federation of Journalists (2002)**

“The rationale for improving public confidence in the child protection system is not just about getting a message across, but about getting the right message across strategically to enhance the way the system functions.”

**Professor Eileen Munro, author of government-commissioned report on child protection<sup>2</sup>**

The media plays a vital role in reporting on child abuse and neglect and the operation of the child protection system. Media coverage helps to raise awareness of this issue of great public interest among victims and parents; it has an important role in prevention and in highlighting new and emerging issues and the media can also hold agencies and policy makers to account when necessary. However any media scrutiny of a situation involving the death or injury of a child should also respect the rights and dignity of the children and the families involved.

Professionals involved in this area work in an environment where there are ethical and legal issues relating to confidentiality. They must consider the implications for other siblings or family members of making material available and the legal issues involved in engaging in public comment.

This advice has been developed in conjunction with journalists and child care professionals to help with media reporting of cases where children have died or have been injured as a result of abuse and neglect.

The advice is not and cannot be prescriptive as each case is different.

This document also contains facts and statistics about child abuse which could be used within media coverage.

## Supporting families, protecting children

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In Northern Ireland each year there are over 34,000 referrals to children’s social services alone. Approximately 15% are in relation to child protection concerns, with the remainder coming from families and friends seeking support for themselves or others.

When referrals to children’s social services concern the safety and well-being of a child, the primary aim is to establish whether a child requires protection and whether their family would benefit from support. In these instances children’s social services, with colleagues in health, education and the police, have a duty to investigate these concerns.

## The facts about child abuse and neglect

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The involvement of children’s social services is primarily designed to support parents to meet their child’s needs. This requires a careful balancing of the needs of children, alongside the rights of parents and the expectations of the wider community. The underlying philosophy as set out in legislation requires the least form of intervention by public authorities in the lives of families, alongside a child-focused approach at all times.

2. Munro (2011) The Munro Review of Child Protection Interim Report: The Child’s Journey, London, Department for Education.



In thinking about the adversity some children experience in Northern Ireland key facts include:

- Whilst many of the high profile child abuse cases involve assaults on children by strangers, this does not reflect the profile of the vast majority of cases.
- Most children who suffer abuse or neglect are harmed by someone known to them and in a trusted position. The majority of concerns about children reported to social services relate to children having their physical, emotional or social needs neglected. This is usually associated with parents who are experiencing difficulties due to substance misuse, domestic violence or as a result of their poor mental health.
- There are approximately 40,000 children living with a parent who has a dependence on alcohol or drugs in Northern Ireland.
- There are approximately 30,000 children living in households characterised by domestic violence in Northern Ireland.
- Most sexual abuse of children is perpetrated by men but 7-12% of offenders are women.
- On average 2,400 children are listed on the Child Protection Register in Northern Ireland. These are children for whom a group of professionals have a plan in place to meet the child's need for protection and security. The most common reason for child protection registration is parental neglect of a child's needs.

## CASE STUDIES

### CASE STUDY 1

A mother of a 13-year-old girl asks for assistance as her daughter's behaviour and conduct is very hard to manage at home and she is putting herself at risk including possible expulsion from school. The social worker works with the young person and the mother sorting out difficulties, helping with boundaries and providing support and advice. She liaises with the school and agrees a plan to support and manage the young person's behaviour in school.

### CASE STUDY 2

The police were called to a report of domestic violence. They found a woman with serious head injuries and a young baby in the house. The police are concerned about the safety of both the mother and child and the case is referred to local children's services.

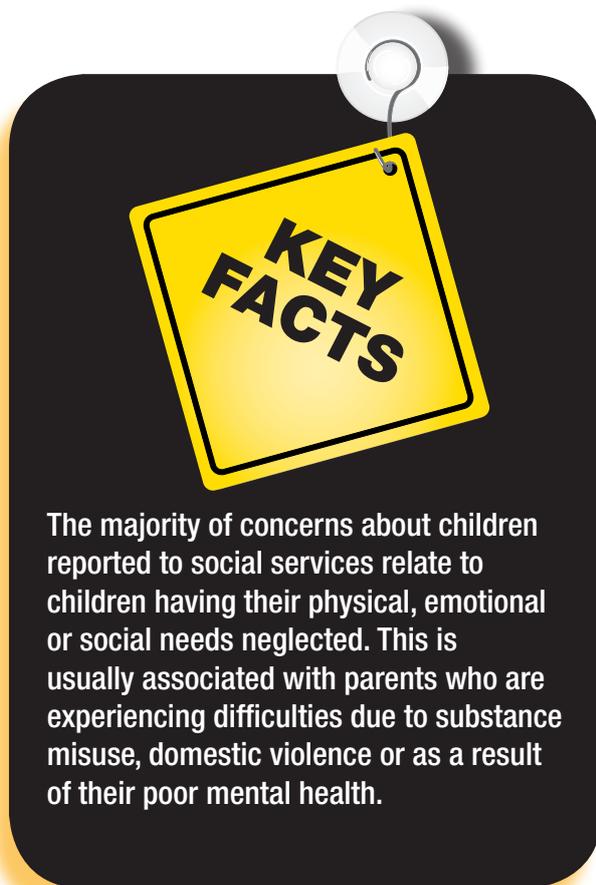
There are approximately 40,000 children living with a parent who has a dependence on alcohol or drugs in Northern Ireland.

## KEY FACTS

- A recent research study which surveyed adults found that a third of children and young people report abuse at the time, a third at a later point and the remaining third never report or disclose the abuse they have experienced.
- In the latest large scale prevalence study of child maltreatment in the United Kingdom, it is estimated that one in four children have experienced severe maltreatment in childhood.

From a prevalence survey of childhood abuse and neglect carried out across the UK by NSPCC<sup>3</sup> in 2010 we know that:

- One in four young adults (25.3%) have been severely maltreated during childhood.
- One in nine young adults (11.5%) have experienced severe physical violence during childhood at the hands of an adult.
- One in nine young adults (11.3%) have experienced contact sexual abuse during childhood.
- Almost one in 10 young adults (9%) have been severely neglected by parents or guardians during childhood.



**KEY FACTS**

The majority of concerns about children reported to social services relate to children having their physical, emotional or social needs neglected. This is usually associated with parents who are experiencing difficulties due to substance misuse, domestic violence or as a result of their poor mental health.

## Some issues and questions around the reporting of child abuse and neglect

### ***What's the reality of the danger children face from abuse and neglect?***

Death in childhood is an increasingly rare event and the death of a child from abuse or neglect is very rare. Over the past 40 years, the numbers of children who die from abuse and neglect have decreased significantly as a result of better public awareness and a more robust and responsive child protection system. In spite of everyone's best efforts, it may not be possible to predict, and therefore prevent, every incident that might result in a child's death. However, professionals have a duty to reflect on whether there may be learning to be gained about the way parents can be supported to care for their children and how professionals work together to keep children safe when families are known to be experiencing difficulties.

### ***When are children taken into care?***

While some children are admitted to care for a variety of reasons, the vast majority of child protection problems are dealt with in the community with children remaining with their families. The Children (Northern Ireland) Order 1995 requires that children are only taken into care when they are at significant risk of harm and directs professionals to early preventive interventions.

### ***How difficult is it to protect children from harm?***

Everyone has a role to play in keeping children safe, including parents, extended family, the wider community and professionals. Every day staff in health, social care, education and criminal justice have to make evidenced-based decisions about risk and put in place measures to protect and manage this risk to children. Careful judgment needs to be exercised in balancing a parent's right to care for their own child alongside a child's right to be safe.

3. Based on NSPCC child maltreatment survey of 1,761 young adults aged 18-24 years <http://bit.ly/LGnElm>

### ***Do health and social care professionals speak to the media?***

While health and social care professionals would like to be able to talk more freely about cases they are often bound by issues of confidentiality and other sensitivities:

- It is often very easy to identify children and families in Northern Ireland which makes it a very tricky issue to speak publicly about individual cases.
- There may be other children or siblings involved, or very good reasons for protecting the rights and anonymity of families.
- If other legal proceedings, particularly care or criminal proceedings, are underway, public comment could damage or jeopardise cases and breach legal requirements not to identify children.
- Communities have on occasion responded strongly or aggressively to some circumstances which ultimately impacts on families where children may have been abused or allegations made.
- In some circumstances the parent may actually fall within the definition of a vulnerable adult. The media should be conscious of this when engaging parents for interview- especially when a child is identified.

It is important that the media are fully informed about wider issues which may come to the fore as the result of individual cases entering the public domain. Journalists need to have as full a picture as possible to enable them to ask the right questions and elicit meaningful answers. Where professionals working in social care are constrained by confidentiality from public comment on individual cases they should where possible try and provide journalists with information, such as statistics, background details and briefings to help with understanding and reporting of an issue. As well as comments from health and social care professionals, informed views can be obtained from people representing children's organisations, bodies representing professionals and experts in the field in academia. This should enable the wider issues to be discussed and debated.

### ***The role of journalists***

Journalists' reports can at times be hard hitting, direct and possibly also not complimentary about the professionals involved in some children's care. Reports by journalists must be handled carefully, fully backed up with evidence and must also take account of any legal action. This can be aided by

official comment provided from health and social care trusts or the DHSSPS. Some media coverage will be short and to the point while other outlets will be able to give more time, space and thought to their articles. It is in the public interest for wider issues of concern related to some individual cases to be highlighted and brought to the fore.

### ***Learning from practice experience***

The current child protection system has evolved over the past four decades as a result of the learning gained from a range of sources including inquiries, research and service improvement processes such as audits and inspections. Professional organisations have contributed much to this learning and subsequent development, resulting in better informed staff and more effective responses to the needs of children and families. Identifying whether aspects of the child protection system need refined and developed can take place when tragedies occur.

## **Positive media reporting**

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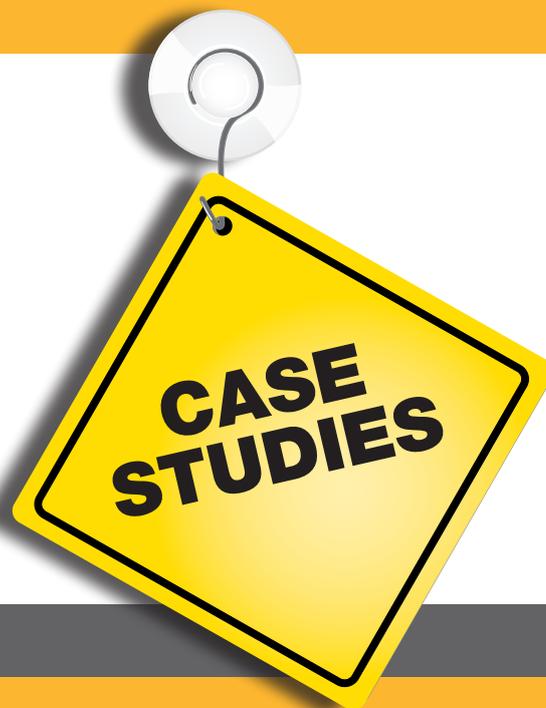
The media has played a very constructive role in raising the awareness of parents and young people of the potential dangers of certain activities and the role of professionals and services in responding to the needs of children and their families. One positive example has been the greater awareness of parents in handling their babies carefully



and raising awareness of the dangers of shaking an infant. In addition, working with child care and law enforcement agencies, the media have been able to share information about individuals who may pose a risk of serious harm to the public.

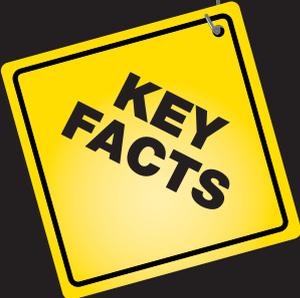
In other instances the media have provided an opportunity to engage in debate about important issues of public concern. One example of this would be the public debate about the safeguards needed to protect the children and vulnerable adults from those who pose a risk through vetting and barring arrangements. Media reporting on these issues has encouraged government to both strengthen and streamline these arrangements, both within Northern Ireland and across jurisdictions.

Media coverage can also reinforce the message that abuse is more likely to involve someone children know than a stranger. Giving abuse survivors the opportunity to speak out about their experiences can also encourage others in a similar situation to ask for help.



### **CASE STUDY 3**

In 2011 BBC NI ran a week-long series of programmes looking at the professionals working in public protection in Northern Ireland and showing how they actively manage adults who pose a risk to others. This showed the working of Public Protection Arrangements NI (PPANI) from the inside.



**On average around 2,400 children are listed on the Child Protection Register in Northern Ireland. These are children for whom a group of professionals have a plan in place to meet the child's need for protection and security. The most common reason for child protection registration is neglect.**



# Promoting media engagement

Public agencies engaging with the media to assist in the coverage of child abuse and neglect has many potential benefits, even if child care agencies are worried about the possibility of adverse publicity or criticism. Doing so at a time of a crisis or following a high profile incident will be easier if thought has been given by agencies to some key issues:

- Identify a person to liaise with the media and to manage any requests for information.
- Be proactive in sharing information with the media rather than just reacting to requests for information or comment.
- Be clear as to the limits of confidentiality in commenting upon a particular case or incident, but do aim to make a comment about the general issue of concern.
- Avoid making statements of “no comment” in response to requests for information or comment.
- Use requests as an opportunity to educate and to inform the wider public.

Underlying all of this advice are some clear principles:

- Public bodies should be open and transparent about how they discharge their functions.
- The public and elected representatives have a right to hold public bodies to account for the performance of their duties.
- Individual members of staff have a right to privacy and freedom from harassment, as mechanisms already exist to hold them to account for the standard of their practice.
- Families have a right to privacy following the death or serious injury of a family member.
- Information relating to the death or serious injury of a child should be handled with great sensitivity out of respect for the privacy of any other siblings.
- In interviewing and reporting on children, special attention is needed to ensure each child’s right to privacy and confidentiality, to have their opinions heard, to participate in decisions affecting them and to be protected from ongoing harm or future harm, arising from retribution or the stigma associated with their situation.
- Consideration must be given to any ongoing police or court proceedings.

The International Federation of Journalists (2002) has adopted a set of guidelines that underpin high journalistic standards

to promote the sensitive reporting of children’s issues. This includes advice that journalists and media organisations should:

- **Strive** for standards of excellence in terms of accuracy and sensitivity when reporting on issues involving children.
- **Avoid** programming and publication of images which intrude upon the media space of children with information which is damaging to them.
- **Avoid** the use of stereotypes and sensational presentation to promote journalistic material involving children.
- **Consider** carefully the consequences of publication of any material concerning children and shall minimise harm to children.
- **Guard** against visually or otherwise identifying children unless it is demonstrably in the public interest.
- **Ensure** independent verification of information provided by children and take special care to ensure that verification takes place without putting child informants at risk.
- **Avoid** the use of sexualised images of children.
- **Use** fair, open and straight forward methods for obtaining pictures and, where possible obtain them with the knowledge and consent of children or a responsible adult, guardian or carer.
- **Verify** the credentials of any organisation purporting to speak for or to represent the interests of children.
- **Not** make payment to children for material involving the welfare of children or to parents or guardians of children unless it is demonstrably in the interest of the child.

It is worth stating that a child under 16 must not be interviewed or photographed on issues involving their own or another child’s welfare unless a custodial parent or similarly responsible adult consents.

Similarly, journalists must not identify children under 16 who are victims or witnesses in cases involving sexual or other types of abuse or neglect.

## Conclusion

It is hoped that these guidelines will become a useful reference point for journalists and public bodies when it comes to reporting on cases of child abuse. Media coverage plays an important role in highlighting issues of concern relating to child protection – however, this should always be carried out in a sensitive manner with the children involved and their family members in mind.

This document was produced by a working group consisting of Hilton Dawson (Northern Ireland Association of Social Workers), John Devaney (British Association for the Study and Prevention of Child Abuse and Neglect), Dot Kirby (National Union of Journalists), Kathryn Torney ([www.thedetail.tv](http://www.thedetail.tv)) and Colin Reid (National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children).

## RESOURCES

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**DHSSPS Child Protection Statistics:**

<http://bit.ly/KYVhoE>

**A short guide to child protection procedures in Northern Ireland:**

<http://bit.ly/LFvcgc>

**NUJ Code of Conduct:**

<http://bit.ly/M0vEq3>

**NSPCC NI Policy and Public Affairs:**

<http://bit.ly/KCAmMc>

**Northern Ireland Children's Research Database:**

<http://bit.ly/M0vL56>

## HELPLINES

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**Details of where to report a child protection concern are available at:**

<http://bit.ly/KR455z>

**Alternatively you can contact the NSPCC's free and confidential 24 hour helpline service at  
0808 800 5000**

**or you can contact the Police Service of Northern Ireland on  
028 9065 0222**

**Counselling services can be accessed at:**

**ChildLine 0800 1111**

**Contact 0808 808 8000**

**Samaritans 08457 60 90 90**

**Useful telephone numbers:**

**NSPCC NI Communications Manager 020 32 224 264**

**NIASW 028 9064 8873**

**BASPCAN 01904 613 605**

**Belfast HSC Trust 028 9050 7000**

**South Eastern HSC Trust 030 0100 0300**

**Northern HSC Trust 030 0123 4333**

**Southern HSC Trust 080 0783 7745**

**Western HSC Trust 028 7131 4090**



This guidance is available online at:  
<http://www.baspcan.org.uk/northernireland/index.php>



September 2012