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Safeguarding children: Risk factors in child sexual abuse

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Abstract

Child sexual abuse is a common occurrence and involves the health services, police, social services and the legal system. In the UK, the legal age for consensual sexual intercourse is sixteen years and a child is defined as an individual who has not reached their eighteenth birthday. A retrospective study was carried out to quantify the incidence of child sexual abuse allegations and identify risk factors predisposing children to it in Lancashire, a county in the North West of England. Records of children presenting with sexual abuse allegations over a twelve-month period were reviewed. Demographic data was recorded and descriptive statistics of potential risk factors were calculated. These included alcohol or drug use, being 'looked after', physical disability, learning disability, previous consensual sexual intercourse, past psychiatric history, and history of psychiatric support. 138 paediatric cases were recorded. Alcohol and drug use was found to be a prominent factor in these cases. Early first sexual intercourse was also present in a large proportion of children involved. Ethnic minorities may account for many unreported cases. The number of potential risk factors increased with increasing age, as did the incidence of abuse. This study recommends increasing education about the risks of underage drinking and drug use, increasing sexual education for children and raising awareness of child sexual abuse in ethnic minority communities. These risk factors may be of use as targets for safeguarding measures aimed at preventing child sexual abuse. Further research is indicated in this area.

Biography

Eryl A. Davies graduated from the University of Manchester School of Medicine in 2012 after completing a Bachelor's degree in Medicine at the University of St Andrews. She is a Foundation Doctor in the UK and published this study in the *Journal of Forensic and Legal Medicine* in April 2013.