Briefing note

The link between safeguarding and communication difficulties

- Very young mistreated children commonly have speech and language delays and unusual interaction. This is often associated with the way that they have developed attachments with their parents. These early difficulties are likely to affect their ability to cope at school.

- Many of the children in the cases of abuse and neglect that have hit the headlines have been identified as having speech and language difficulties.

- Children’s communications skills are often the best indicator of how they are coping.

- Neglect needs to be considered separately from abuse. Communication problems are one of the most obvious effects of neglect. However, neglect has proved difficult to identify because it involves acts of omission rather than commission and often there is no physical evidence for it.

- These considerations underline the importance of systems for early identification of communication difficulties. Such difficulties need to be picked up not only in their own right but also as a potential indicator of welfare issues.

- The link between safeguarding and communication difficulties also works in the opposite direction: children who have complex needs are more at risk of abuse and this is in part because of their communication difficulties. Studies have suggested that disabled children are more likely to experience abuse than their peers and that children with communication difficulties could be at greater risk of abuse than other disabled children.\(^1\)

- Some of the most vulnerable children are those whose impairments prevent them from communicating what has happened to them (and who may therefore be deliberately targeted by some perpetrators of abuse).\(^2\)

- Inter-agency cooperation is essential for communicating with abused children whose impairments prevent them from communicating verbally.\(^3\)

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\(^3\) Westcott and Jones (1999) (see pp. 502-3).
• Speech, language and communication therapists (SLTs) may support children and young people with speech, language and communication needs (SLCN) in expressing their views and recounting their experiences. This might involve helping them to express themselves in interviews with social workers and modifying the level of the questions they are asked.

• SLTs may also support other professionals working with children with SLCN. This might involve training social work teams in how to identify and support children with SLCN and helping police officers to determine whether a child’s communication difficulties may have prevented him or her from reporting injuries inflicted through abuse.