Constructing a Definition of Vulnerability – Attempts to Define and Measure

Technical Paper 1 in Children's Commissioner project on vulnerable children

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JULY 2017

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Legislation, guidance and agency policies and procedures are littered with references to 'vulnerable children'. However there is no guarantee that they are talking about the same group of children, include the same types of vulnerabilities and are consistently applied over time. This section looks at some of the ways vulnerability has been approached in the past and suggests some key features to include in a contemporary operationalizable context.

Children Act 1989

The word vulnerable does not appear in the original Act and did not appear until the Act was amended to take account of the Safeguarding Vulnerable Groups Act 2006. The key distinction that is the focus of attention in the Children Act 1989 is that between child protection and 'children in need'.

According to the Act child protection is provided when a local authority has "*reasonable cause to suspect that a child who lives, or is found, in their area is suffering, or is likely to suffer, significant harm*". The Act says that "a child shall be taken to be in need if

> *(a) he is unlikely to achieve or maintain, or to have the opportunity of achieving or maintaining, a reasonable standard of health or development without the provision for him of services by a local authority under this Part;*

> *(b) his health or development is likely to be significantly impaired, or further impaired, without the provision for him of such services; or*

> *(c) he is disabled, "* (S17, 10).

"Development" means physical, intellectual, emotional, social or behavioural development; and

"health" means physical or mental health. (S17, 11).

Children in need appear to be those who are either disabled or are unlikely to achieve a reasonable standard of health and development in the future without the provision of additional support. It is worth noting that there is no mention of a vulnerable group with issues that fall below such a threshold.

As a definition it does, of course, beg a lot of questions, especially over what a 'reasonable standard' of development looks like. For example could children unlikely to obtain four GCSEs be deemed unlikely to achieve a reasonable standard of intellectual development?

Welfare Checklist

The Children Act 1989 also lists seven criteria under Section 1(3) which courts should consider when they are looking at making, varying or discharging an order. Among these criteria, the ones which appear to describe vulnerability are:

The child's physical, emotional and educational needs

Any harm the child has suffered or may be at risk of suffering

Capability of the child's parents (or any other person the courts find relevant) at meeting the child's needs.

This gives a further set of factors to consider when trying to identify the vulnerability or welfare of a child. The latter point, in terms of capability to meet a child's needs and capacity to change in order to do so, form a key focus in much family assessment work when considering court proceedings.

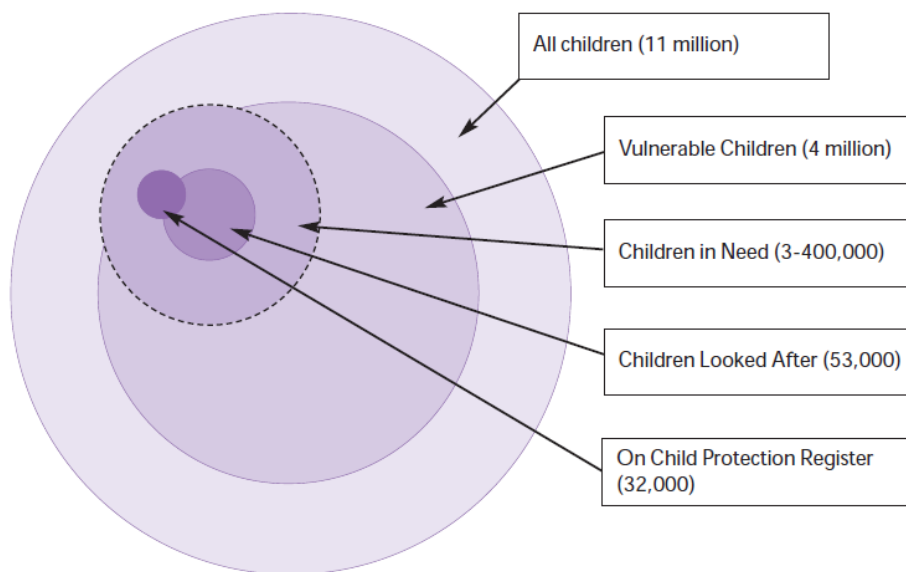## Assessment Framework and Social Exclusion

Further guidance about children in need was provided by the publication of Framework for the Assessment of Children in Need and their Families in the year 2000 by the Department of Health, the Department for Education and Employment and the Home Office. This document used the language of "disadvantaged and vulnerable children" (p vii) and described Children in Need as "some of our most vulnerable children".

The framework gave a definition of vulnerable children as "those disadvantaged children who would benefit from extra help from public agencies in order to make the best of their life chances. Four million children live in families with less than half the average household income." (p2). The relationship between the first and second sentence is unclear but points to a move away from a narrow focus on health and development and to a consideration of wider social factors in constructing a concept of vulnerability.

The Framework makes the point that the government at the time believed that, in addition to working with children requiring support from social services, that local authorities had a corporate responsibility to address the needs of a wider group of disadvantaged children. These were defined as children at risk of social exclusion. It was further said that "These are children who would benefit from extra help from public agencies in order to make the best of their life chances" (Framework 6.3) and therefore 'children at risk of social exclusion' must by definition be the 'vulnerable children' described above.

The four million figure is, in fact, supplied as the figure for the number of vulnerable children overall in a subsequent diagram. Suggesting that family poverty leading to social exclusion provides the most common context for vulnerable children, but that vulnerability also exists outside of this group (e.g. children in need such as disabled children, child abuse in more prosperous families). The four million is presented as a virtual maximum with more specific forms of vulnerability generally (but not exclusively) existing within this group of children living in socially excluded families most of which have less than half of the average household income. It is an approach that defined 36% of children as being vulnerable.

Figure 1: Representation of extent of Children in Need in England at any one time (Home Office 2000)

All children (11 million)

Vulnerable Children (4 million)

Children in Need (3-400,000)

Children Looked After (53,000)

On Child Protection Register (32,000)

Intriguingly the Framework incorrectly describes the Children Act 1989 as saying that it is it the duty of the State through local authorities to both safeguard and promote the welfare of vulnerable children (1.13). In fact, as stated above and separately and as cited in Framework itself, the Act makes no such mention and instead makes reference to a duty to safeguard and promote the welfare of children within their area who are in need. The assessment framework seems to be separating out and conflating the two categories at the same time.

The assessment framework also contained the now famous triangle which suggested that assessment should cover the three interrelated dimensions of children's development needs, parenting capacity and family/environmental factors. This is still reproduced in the 2015 edition of Working Together to Safeguard Children.

Figure 2: Framework for the Assessment of Children in Need and their Families assessment triangle
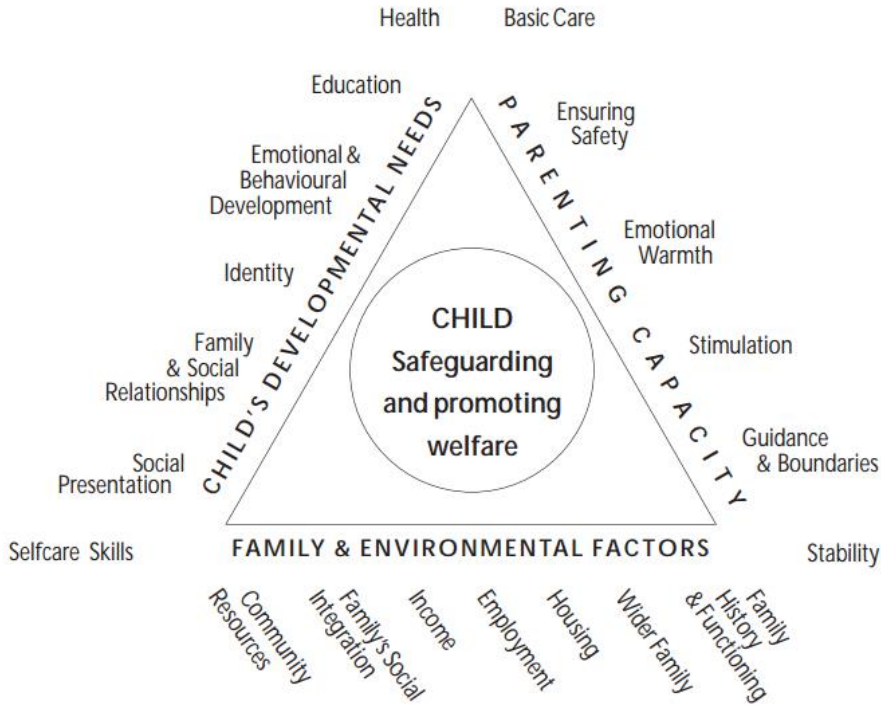
This model locates vulnerability in the interplay between these domains. The strength of this approach is that at its best it can provide a very rich and nuanced understanding of the challenges and strengths within and acting upon a family. The downside is that is that at its worst it can lead to overly-complex assessments that focus on describing a large number of factors at the expense of any analysis.

Every Child Matters

2003 saw the publication of Every Child Matters (Department for Children Schools and Families). This looked at five outcome areas with subsidiary aims and these had associated targets and indicators and inspection approaches. The subsidiary aims were a description what government desired for children. It was framed positively rather than negatively and was very popular with the children's social care sector.

Figure 3: Every Child Matters outcome areas

| Be healthy	Physically healthy
	Mentally and emotionally healthy
	Sexually healthy
	Healthy lifestyles
	Choose not to take illegal drugs
	Parents, carers and families promote healthy choices
Stay safe	Safe from maltreatment, neglect, violence and sexual exploitation
	Safe from accidental injury and death
	Safe from bullying and discrimination
	Safe from crime and anti-social behaviour in and out of school
	Have security, stability and are cared for
	Parents, carers and families provide safe homes and stability
Enjoy and achieve	Ready for school
	Attend and enjoy school
	Achieve stretching national educational standards at primary school
	Achieve personal and social development and enjoy recreation
	Achieve stretching national educational standards at secondary school
	Parents, carers and families support learning
Make a positive contribution	Engage in decision-making and support the community and environment
	Engage in law-abiding and positive behaviour in and out of school
	Develop positive relationships and choose not to bully and discriminate
	Develop self-confidence and successfully deal with significant life changes and challenges
	Develop enterprising behaviour
	Parents, carers and families promote positive behaviour
Achieve economic well-being	Engage in further education, employment or training on leaving school
	Ready for employment
	Live in decent homes and sustainable communities
	Access to transport and material goods
	Live in households free from low income
	Parents, carers and families are supported to be economically active

Every Child Maters revisited the four million figure for vulnerable children, moderated to three to four million but apparently based on the same approach of social exclusion. The language of vulnerability is used a lot more but with no new definition offered.

One possible way of defining vulnerable children' in such a system would be those who appear unlikely to achieve the aims given against the five domains. The largest group of such vulnerable children would be those who do not 'live in households free from low income'.

Current Threshold Frameworks

A standard approach in many local authorities is to distinguish between types of cases suitable for different levels of offer. This approach appears to be an adaptation of the Hardiker tiered model and is reproduced in most local authority threshold documents. An example is given below.

Figure 4: 'Windscreen of Need' - levels of services on offer by threshold
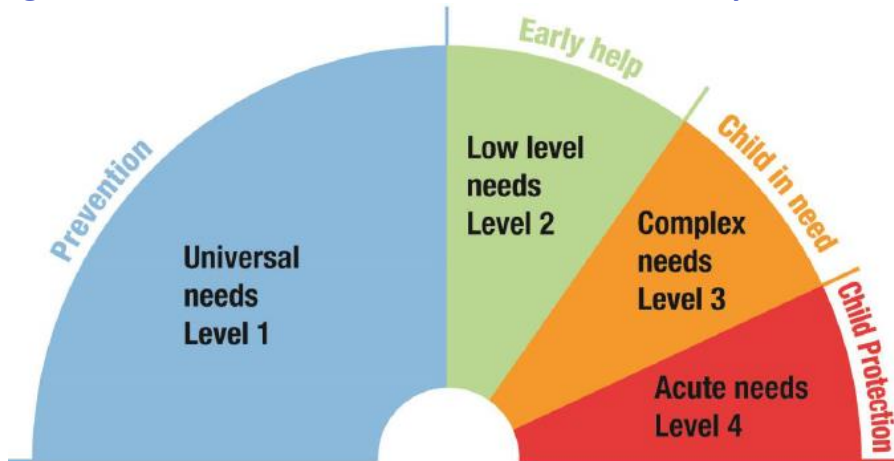
The language used is that of both level/severity and complexity of needs. However at its core it may in fact be more a description of service response rather than of children's needs. For example 'complex needs' may not be complex in themselves; rather it may be that the way services are configured in the UK requires a multi-agency response. The complexity may be a matter of supply rather than innate to children and their circumstances in which they find themselves.

Early Help services typically working alongside universal services to meet a range of children, young people and families who need support. Children may have low levels of need or may be vulnerable to poor outcomes and require extra support and services to help them overcome any difficulties. Services provided at this level will work to prevent further escalation of need.

In practice this level 2 may be the current working model of what agencies think of as 'vulnerable children'. It is not a definition of a set of characteristics or a stable population but instead conceptualises them as a fluid population of children and families who do (or should) step up to early help (and beyond) and step down to universal services when they no longer require additional support.

This has its attractions but is very service led and does not account for children whose needs are outside, or do not take up, the early help offer. Nor does it consider the presence of underlying factors that can precipitate entry into early help as a form of vulnerability in themselves.

THRIVE

The THRIVE framework was an attempt to move away from a classic tiered model of service threshold and generate a shift in the way that Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS) are conceptualised and potentially delivered. Instead it describes "resource-homogenous groups … who share a conceptual framework as to their current needs and choices" Anna Freud Centre – Tavistock 2014.

Figure 5: the THRIVE framework
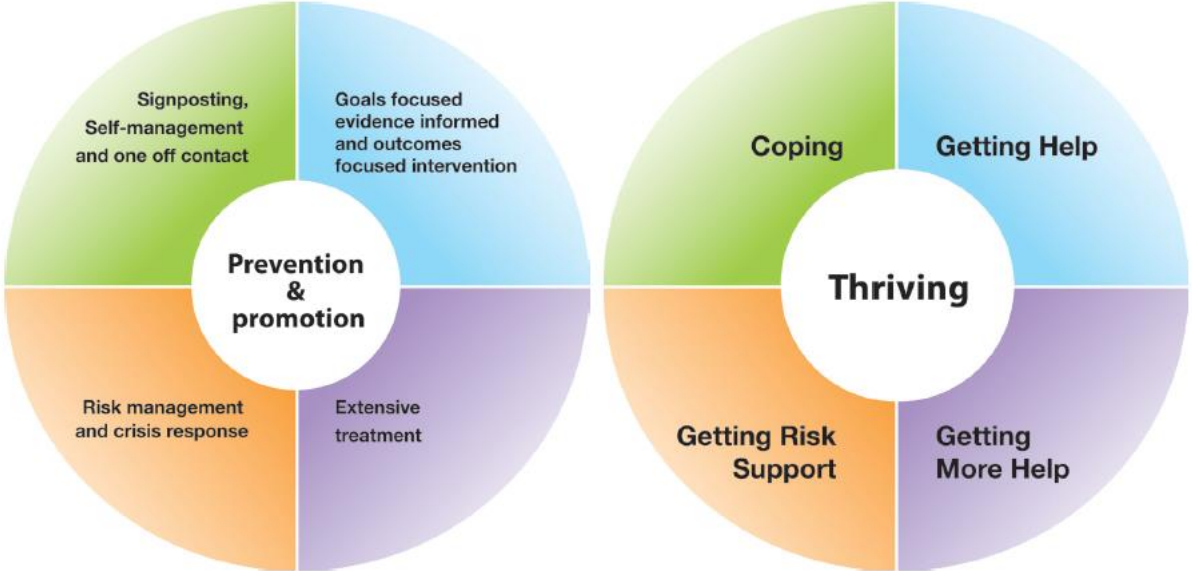
The terms in the right hand image describe people's relationship to services, using language informed by consultation with young people and parents with experience of service use.

Although developed for CAMHS the focus on the experience of young people and families and their relationship to services is very attractive. Vulnerable children in this context would be those coping and may include those with mild or temporary difficulties as well as those with more entrenched or fluctuating problems which they manage themselves but where they may need to get specific help at a future date.

Learning from Coram's qualitative studies

As part of this programme of work Coram examined first-hand accounts of how children experience and internalise aspects of their vulnerability. This provided some important lessons in constructing a framework for describing vulnerability in children's lives.

The labels and categories used to classify vulnerability in childhood can result in children feeling stigmatised and singled out amongst peers. In addition, a disconnect was found between a child's perceptions of this situation and the recorded assessments by professionals and other adults. Children's own views should be sought when defining vulnerability to avoid replicating this.

Children's experiences of vulnerability were found to be strongly related to their sense of aspiration and hope about the future. Those children who were able to imagine their lives beyond their immediate circumstances expressed higher levels of self–esteem and self-efficacy, and ultimately higher levels of subjective wellbeing. Positive aspiration, as expressed perhaps by Every Child Matters, may be a helpful way to construct notions of vulnerability.

The presence and absence of positive and supportive relationships and sense of belonging appear to be another key dimension of vulnerability that young people themselves recognised. This served to mitigate or compound other forms of vulnerability, influencing children's decision making, coping and resilience.

Children's own views and perspectives on their life circumstances should be taken seriously when constructing concepts of vulnerability. Minimising children's sense of agency and control undermines their coping and exacerbates vulnerability. So ideas of coping and managing as used in THRIVE may be attractive way of incorporating their relationship to their own circumstances and conceptualising the nature of their vulnerability.

Conclusion

The Children Act 1989 focuses on the distinction between children requiring protection and those in need. The definitions used however are fairly narrow and leave much room for interpretation. Children with vulnerabilities are not mentioned.

When the term 'vulnerable children' is used, there is little consistency or guarantee about how this is defined.

The 2000 Framework for the Assessment of Children in Need and their Families moved us away from the focus on just health and development and considered wider social factors when constructing a concept of vulnerability. In this framework the figure of four million vulnerable children is used. These are children who would benefit from extra help from public agencies in order to make the best of their life chances and counteract a risk of social exclusion.

Every Child Matters used the language of vulnerability more than previous legislation and guidance. This still did not offer a clear definition of vulnerability but described a set of positive outcomes. Risk of not achieving these outcomes could be potentially be used as a comprehensive approach to defining vulnerability.

The current threshold approach to distinguishing service levels provides a description of services available rather than of children's needs. This is service led and may exclude children who fall outside the local authority early help offer, but may still be vulnerable.

Although mental health focused, THRIVE offers some useful ideas about how to include children who are coping both with mild and entrenched difficulties as a vulnerable group by reference to the child and family's methods of accessing and relationship to services.

Coram's investigation into children's perception of vulnerability highlighted the disconnect between their own assessment of their "vulnerable" situation and that of professionals, the damaging effect that the labelling of vulnerability can have, the importance of aspiration and hope about the future and the role of agency and control.