

The role of a social worker

May 2019

This Action for M.E. factsheet is aimed at the parents of children and young people with M.E., teachers, and other professionals supporting the family. It answers the questions:

- *What do social workers do?*
- *What about families who have a child with M.E.?*
- *Will they take my child/children away?*
- *Can't I just tell them to go away?*
- *What should I do if Social Services has concerns about my parenting?*
- *How can this happen if my child has a diagnosis of M.E./CFS?*
- *Will I be told who has raised concerns?*
- *What happens when concerns are raised?*
- *What next?*
- *What is Action for M.E. doing about this issue?*

What do social workers do?

Social workers support individuals and their families through difficult times and ensure that vulnerable people, including children and adults, are safeguarded from harm. Their role is to help improve outcomes in people's lives. They maintain professional relationships and act as guides and advocates.

What about families who have a child with M.E.?

We know from a survey undertaken by Action for M.E. in June 2017, which resulted in our *Families facing false accusations* report (see useful links on p 4) that a disproportionate number of families of children with M.E. face allegations of harming their children.

With 270 families responding to our Children's Services Team survey, which ran for three months from February to April 2017, results indicated that:

- 96% of respondents felt that a lack of understanding of M.E. negatively impacted on the support that they receive
- 90% agreed they were concerned that professionals involved with their child did not believe them
- one in five (22%) said a safeguarding/child protection referral had been made against them
- nearly half of these referrals related to claims of fabricated/induced illness or FII (previously known as Munchausen's by Proxy), which occurs when a parent or carer exaggerates or deliberately causes symptoms of illness in the child; this heightened frequency of FII claims sits widely outside the national prevalence rate
- a smaller number of the claims were of neglect (17%) or emotional (10%) or physical (2%) abuse
- 70% of all cases were dropped within a year.

If this happens to you there is information below to help and you can contact us for information, guidance and support. The team have helped many families like yours, and have the experience and expertise they need to help you.

Will they take my child/children away?

This is usually the first question we are asked and the answer is simple. Unless there is evidence of actual harm and leaving the child/children with you would put them at risk, the answer is NO.

Will they investigate? Yes, they have to. As parents, if we think about it logically, we would want all concerns raised about a child/children at risk to be investigated (we have all read horrendous headlines when cases have been missed).

However, when it's your family and your children it feels very different, *because you know you are innocent*. That is what you, with our support, have to prove to Social Services, using the facts.

Can't I just tell them to go away?

We strongly advise you not to do this. Instead, you need to work with Social Services to achieve your desired outcome. If you tell them to go away, they won't, and you will end up in Court with the risk that your children really will be removed.

What should I do if Social Services has concerns about my parenting?

Ian Walker Family Law and Mediation Solicitors offer the following advice:

- **Stay calm.** Remember, it is not Social Services' job to remove children and place them for adoption. Their main role is to make sure that children are safe and that they are receiving a good standard of care. You don't need to be the "perfect parent." Most cases don't end up in court.
- **Get advice.** Seek advice and support as soon as possible. You can contact us (see useful links on p 4) to arrange a meeting with our Family Support Worker. This is a free and confidential service for any family in the UK living with M.E.
- **Work with Social Services.** You cannot tell Social Services to go away. This will result in a court order. Work with them to achieve your desired outcome.
- **Be honest.** If you are open and show that you understand where things may be going wrong/need improvement, you are in a better position to put things right. If you lie you will probably be found out and will be seen as untrustworthy.
- **Build trust.** One of the main questions that Social Workers need to answer is whether they trust you to look after your children and provide a good standard of care? Be honest and reliable, and trust will begin to be established.
- **It's about your children, not you.** Although it may feel like a personal attack, the main job of social workers is to make sure that the children are safe. If you show them that you will provide good enough care and understand the problem, social services will be on your side.

- **Be nice.** Don't be rude to the social workers, they are just doing their job. They are people too and are there to make sure that your child is safe. By being hostile you are making the process harder.

How can this happen if my child has a diagnosis of M.E./CFS?

Concerns can be raised by anyone in education or health, by neighbours and on occasion family members who don't understand or believe in M.E.

They may have expectations about ability and recovery that are unrealistic. This may be based on the experience of knowing one child with M.E. whose journey was straightforward, who responded well to management, recovered and was able to return to school quickly.

Sadly we understand this is not a true picture for many children with M.E., particularly those more severely affected.

Will I be told who had raised concerns?

Not always, and in some cases the individual might have asked to remain anonymous.

However, most families tell Action for M.E.'s Children and Young People's Service that they "have a good idea who it is" because of behaviour and sometimes even bullying they have experienced in relation to M.E., prior to the allegations being raised.

What happens when concerns are raised?

Each local authority should have information they share with you from the very beginning. It is our experience that many don't, however. We have found Derbyshire Safeguarding Children Board's *Guide for parents and carers* (see useful links on p 4) in particular to be useful in sharing key information.

If you aren't provided with information about the process and what will happen, ask for it. If it's still not forthcoming, look on the local authority website.

What next?

- Contact us immediately (see p 4), and tell us what has happened. Our Information and Welfare Support team can arrange a meeting with our Children and Young People's services team. Your call will be prioritised and a member of the team will get back to you within 48 hours (usually sooner).
- Ask someone – maybe a family member, neighbour or friend – to come and be with you if you need emotional support.
- If social workers ask to see the child/children, comply with their request.
- Be open and honest: show them you have nothing to hide.
- Keep notes of every visit and call, recording everything you remember, as soon as possible afterwards.

What is Action for M.E. doing about this issue?

It is clear that some professionals still do not understand the uniquely complex impact of M.E. This must change.

As part of our ongoing work, Action for M.E. is:

- continuing to track the experiences of the family we support, so we can present evidence of the issues to policy-makers and professionals, including parliamentarians and the Chief Social Worker for Children and Families
- asking them to work with us to increase understanding of M.E. among frontline staff, and reduce the number of families subjected to false accusations
- targeting teachers and doctors to share accurate information and support about M.E. and its impact on children and young people, on our website, at events and in the press and media
- offering direct support to professionals working with children and families affected by M.E. via our Children and Young People's Services Team.

Useful links

Action for M.E.

42 Temple Street, Keynsham BS31 1EH

Information and Welfare Support: 0117 927 9551 (Mon to Fri 10am to 4pm)

Email: questions@actionforme.org.uk

www.actionforme.org.uk

@actionforme

Action for M.E.'s *Families facing false accusations* report, published July 2017

www.actionforme.org.uk/uploads/pdfs/families-facing-false-accusations-survey-results.pdf

Derbyshire Safeguarding Children Board

Guide for parents and carers can be downloaded at www.derbyshirescb.org.uk/site-elements/documents/pdf/child-protection-conference-guide-for-parents-and-carers.pdf



If you have found the information in this factsheet helpful, please consider making a donation to help us reach more children and families living with M.E.

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