



July 2025

Research evaluation for practice in Residential Child Care

**From trait to state: how Ofsted might consider conceptualising vulnerability for inspection and regulation**

**This research was commissioned by Ofsted and carried out by Research in Practice, which is a part of the NCB.**

**[From trait to state - how Ofsted might consider conceptualising vulnerability for inspection and regulation](#)**

**Overall**

**This is useful practical research that can enhance a home's practice.**

Using a more expansive definition of vulnerability we can today (!) target support better whilst the changes needed across the system are enacted

**Section One**

**Things we can do now**

**1.1 Show how we have enhanced our focus for practice (page31)**

**Statement of Purpose**

- how the setting **recognises** when children and learners are experiencing vulnerability, notices changes in vulnerability and understands the impact of multiple vulnerabilities
- how the setting **responds** dynamically to changing vulnerabilities and provides differentiated responses to children and learners, recognising where whole-setting approaches might be the most effective approach
- how the setting **reviews** the impact of the support it provides to children and learners to reduce vulnerability, identifying whether the support has been effective, and if the vulnerabilities experienced by the child or learner have changed; understanding what works in which context and why is crucial to being able to target limited resources most effectively.

## **1.2. Gathering evidence**

### **A template assessing where we are now (useful for Regulation 45)**

This is our ambition for children and learners in our setting who experience vulnerability....

In my setting children and learners experience vulnerability from.... we know this because....

Children and learners are worried about.... we know this because....

Parents and carers are worried about.... we know this because....

Community issues are.... we know this because.... These impact on our setting/service by.... we know this because....

We recognise how and when children and learners experience vulnerability by taking these actions....

We respond to children and learners experiencing vulnerability by doing....

We review how support helps children and learners experiencing vulnerability by....

We listen to children, learners, parents and carers by....

Here is our assessment of what we think is working well and we should continue....

Here is our assessment of what we think is working less well and we are stopping....

## **Section two**

### **Workforce development plan for a day (and beyond) – (homes can do this themselves)**

#### **A day 'Recognising vulnerability'**

##### **Morning**

##### **First session**

Focus group participants said that settings and services should be able to explain to inspectors the questions they ask, and the actions they take, to find out if a child or learner is experiencing vulnerability. Inspection activities exploring vulnerability should be a 'high support, high challenge, high curiosity' conversation, with inspectors asking probing questions to find out more about the quality of the response.

Here are some examples of questions settings and services or inspectors might ask, derived from an analysis of the focus group responses:

- how do you define and understand vulnerability in your setting, beyond the existing categories?
- how do you talk to children, learners and their families about vulnerability and how do you try to minimise any sense of stigma that might arise?
- how do you think about the drivers of vulnerability that exist outside of the child or learner? Do staff consider environmental, social or systemic factors that might create or increase vulnerabilities?
- how do you understand those you serve, at every level in your setting?
- how do you support children and learners experiencing vulnerability to overcome barriers, including barriers to learning, and how do you monitor the effectiveness of that support?
- how are you risk aware rather than risk averse?
- how does your setting contribute to the local area plan on vulnerabilities?

**Use the template above to structure the discussion**

**Gather the findings**

**Write them up.**

**Second session**

**Make all aware of the proposed definition of vulnerability**

Vulnerability is about how likely someone is to experience negative outcomes.

It is a state not a trait.

Many things contribute to vulnerability, including:

- big systems and structures (like government or services, poverty, prejudice and discrimination)
- things about a local area like how safe it is, how easy it is to get a good job, or whether a person has a sense of belonging to the community
- relationships with family and friends, and professionals
- individual circumstances (age, income, health, home, and identity).

People experience vulnerability in different ways. This can change over time, even if an issue causing vulnerability is a permanent part of our lives. Experiencing vulnerability may lead to more negative experiences. Lots of things can help to avoid this happening.

The things that help us are called 'protective factors', and just like the things that can make us vulnerable, these protective factors can happen at different levels, from individual things within us and around us (like feeling confident and cared for) through to things that society and government can do to make life easier (like

tackling discrimination and ensuring our neighbourhoods and homes are enjoyable to live in).

While everyone can experience vulnerability, it's important that the needs of children and young people experiencing the greatest vulnerability continue to be prioritised by settings and services.

## **Afternoon**

### **Case study (page 35)**

Responding to vulnerability ('who', 'how' and 'when') "explaining how concerns had been noticed, what actions were taken and how helpful the service or setting thought they were. This could include explaining where support had been increased or decreased. Further discussion could explore how settings and services make decisions about 'when' to step up or step-down support".

## **Section three**

### **Commentary on the research**

#### **3.1. Outstanding paragraphs orienting practice**

How well we know those we serve

"In considering how settings and services recognise and respond to vulnerability, the focus groups highlighted the significance of the relationships they have with the children and learners they work with. Knowing children and learners well means that changes in vulnerability are more likely to be noticed, and the impact of support noticed and adapted as vulnerabilities change. In exploring how well settings and services do this, important questions for inspection and regulation might include 'how well do we know the children, families and communities we work with?' and 'how do we understand and respond inclusively to their vulnerabilities in the way we practice?'"

"The need is recognised for "compassionate, curious practice necessary to identify children and learners who may be experiencing hidden vulnerability, or multiple vulnerabilities..."

#### **3.2 The research has 4 positives**

1. It emphasises social and bioecological model

"The theoretical literature suggests a broader and deeper understanding of vulnerability that captures its changing and complex nature. It also recognises the environmental and systemic factors that can make a child more vulnerable".

“Bronfenbrenner’s bioecological model helps us think about human development. It considers individual needs, personal relationships and the wider environment”. (Described well on page 12)

“Social models also show how environmental and structural factors shape the lives of children and young people. Importantly, the social model of disability highlights barriers to inclusion, such as discriminatory attitudes. The ecological or social models of disability do not support the idea that something needs to be fixed in the person”. (Whilst the description on page 12 is useful overall this specific section needs to be strongly critiqued as being narrowing and does not fit early with the rest of the research ...“the social model of vulnerability is similar to the ‘social model of child protection’ and the ‘social harms’ model for youth violence”).

Examples of promising practice - many examples provided of creative solutions to the complex problem of systemic vulnerability.

2. In emphasising vulnerability it is a corrective to the narratives of ‘character’ and ‘grit’.
3. Most professionals believed Ofsted should continue using the word ‘vulnerability’ and explain clearly what this means. But they agreed that there should be a shift from referring to ‘vulnerable children’ or ‘vulnerable learners’ to talking about a child or learner ‘experiencing vulnerability’. This would help reinforce the understanding that vulnerability can be caused by many factors and is influenced by how people respond to those factors.
4. Many professionals we spoke to said that ‘vulnerable’ was a negative word....  
(a) focus on weaknesses instead of strengths. The young people, parents and carers we spoke to agreed with this

### **3.3. There are still some issues**

1. Deficit based e.g. “Settings and services asked that their work to support children and learners experiencing vulnerability be recognised in inspection reports, particularly if they were making progress in this area, but may not be meeting other requirements”
2. Rapid evidence review starts from deficit – of vulnerability rather than the making of Resilience. Taking a safeguarding view is to be reactive, necessary but always after the fact rather than proactively for a facilitating environment.
3. Though it talks of a ‘stable home’ there is nothing on parenting eg page 13 Everyone can experience vulnerability is an opportunity to explain how poverty and scarcity affects the attentiveness a parent can provide. There is scope to explain and explore, even to restate and energise, the understanding of Attachment. Parents are Attachment makers and children are Attachment

takers. If the making is adversely affected this will inevitably have an effect on those taking , the recipient children.

4. One group of young people believed there should be a term everyone can use and understand when a person needs support. They said, 'identification is really important; without it, people won't get the right support'. Some parents and young people noted that being labelled as vulnerable can be key to getting services. Professionals from the education sector and from Ofsted expressed concerns about this. They worried that a broad definition might result in more children being labelled as vulnerable. This could put extra pressure on a system that is already struggling. **(So this is an acceptance that the system is involved in rationing rather being responsive to need? This is reinforced on page 35 "degree of caution was expressed that any change might lead to increased requests for support in a system that is already over capacity". The conclusion we reach is that, 'We may not yet know the needs, support needed?')**

## Section four

### Taking our thinking forwards

#### It is positive that vulnerability is recognised in the following way

Vulnerability was described many ways.

Depending on the way the terms vulnerable and vulnerability were used, it could suggest:

- vulnerability is something people are born with and cannot change; in other words, it is who a person is
- vulnerability is something that happens to us; in other words, what we experience
- vulnerability might happen because of the things we do, or the actions of other people.

These definitions didn't clarify how different types of vulnerability can overlap and interact.

The definitions focus more on the individual and how people experience single vulnerabilities. They do not take account of the 'systems' around us.

The report does not engage in these latter points. This is for us all to highlight in the debate that must now follow

