

## ORIGINAL ARTICLE



# A thematic analysis of the involvement of children and families in Child Safeguarding Practice Reviews in England

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## Abstract

The need to involve children and families in Child Safeguarding Practice Reviews (CSPRs) is set out within the current statutory guidance. However, there remains limited guidance that sets out how this should be done and the available research indicates that children and families are often excluded or choose not to be involved. The aim of this study was to explore how children and families are currently being involved in CSPRs in order to support the development of best practice approaches. The study was conducted by undertaking a thematic analysis of the involvement of children and families in the CSPRs published on the National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children (NSPCC) repository since the implementation of the guidance in 2018. The analyses identified four themes: 'reports do not mention family involvement', 'children and families were excluded', 'children and families were invited but were not involved' and 'children and families were invited and at least one member was involved'. The study concludes that there is a necessity for clearer guidance regarding how, when and who will engage with the children and families, taking an individualised approach that offers flexibility, provides support and addresses trauma.

## Key Practitioner Messages

- Guidance should set out how, when and who will involve children and families to ensure that a considered and flexible approach is taken to support meaningful involvement.
- Children and families should be provided with access to appropriate support to encourage involvement and reduce the risk of re-traumatisation.
- Reviews should consider a trauma-informed approach based on the principles of safety, trustworthiness, collaboration, support and empowerment and showing consideration to historical, cultural and gender issues.

## KEYWORDS

child, family, involvement, practice, review, safeguarding

## INTRODUCTION

The current Child Safeguarding Practice Review (CSPR) process for England came into effect in 2018 following the implementation of legislation (Children and Social Work Act, 2017) and subsequent guidance contained within Working Together (HM Government, 2018). Since 2013, the need to involve a family or surviving children in what was then known as a serious case review (SCR) was strengthened in the guidance and was becoming increasingly more common (Brandon et al., 2009; Dickens, Taylor, Cook, Cossar, et al., 2022). However, families may not be included for a

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number of reasons, such as family sensitivities, professional cultures and defensiveness, unnecessary delays and court proceedings (Brandon et al., 2009; Morris et al., 2015). The Wood Review (2016), requested by the Government due to concerns about the effectiveness of the previous arrangements to effect change within the child protection system (Preston-Shoot, 2018), was critical of SCRs for not directly engaging with those involved in order to understand events from their perspective. The current guidance states that local safeguarding partners are responsible for ensuring that the whole family are invited to contribute to reviews, understand how they are going to be involved and manage their expectations sensitively and appropriately (HM Government, 2018). It acknowledges that involving the lived experience of the child and family is crucial in ensuring that the child is kept at the centre of the process and aids understanding of how to improve the safeguarding system (Dickens, Taylor, Cook, Garstang, et al., 2022; HM Government, 2018).

In their annual report, the key learning identified by the CSPR Panel was a need for child and family contributions to be visible and analysed in high-quality reviews (CSPRP, 2022). The guidance does not, however, detail how reviews should be undertaken, allowing local safeguarding partners to determine the best approach (CSPRP, 2019). Similar guidance exists for Child Protection Committees in Scotland regarding undertaking what are known as learning reviews; however, this guidance is more in depth (Scottish Government, 2021). It sets out the need to develop a 'Family Liaison Strategy' and acknowledges that the family are likely to be suffering from trauma, suggesting that they be engaged in a trauma-informed way (Scottish Government, 2021).

The CSPR Panel commissioned the first independent review of CSPRs in 2021 following the implementation of the new guidance (Dickens et al., 2021). The review found that the views of families were missing from over a third of reports, citing reasons such as the time frame for completing reviews, ongoing legal proceedings involving the family or families declining to be involved (Dickens et al., 2021). The report recommended that where it was not possible to include them, CSPRs should provide a brief statement outlining the reasons why (Dickens et al., 2021). Furthermore, the report found that there was a determination by some authors to hear the voice of the child and good examples of engagement with children, such as providing children with questions or speaking to them face to face (Dickens et al., 2021).

The CSPR Panel commissioned a further review in 2022, which found that in a subsample of 20 reviews, 18 had made attempts to include the family; however, in six of these, the family had failed to respond or declined to be involved (Dickens, Taylor, Cook, Garstang, et al., 2022). Furthermore, although four cases reported that the family had met with the author and been provided with a copy of the report, it was not possible to determine how their views had been included or how they had contributed to learning (Dickens, Taylor, Cook, Garstang, et al., 2022). It was also found that involving children occurred less frequently (Dickens, Taylor, Cook, Garstang, et al., 2022). Overall, the report concluded that in good-quality reviews, the contributions of the child and family were visible and well analysed and additional learning was apparent (Dickens, Taylor, Cook, Garstang, et al., 2022).

It is acknowledged that little is known about the involvement and experience of children and families in CSPRs and this is under-researched (Morris et al., 2015). One study undertaken in England identified that between April 2013 and March 2014, a total of 71% of SCRs had involved the contributions of at least one family member (Laird, 2017). However, despite this, their contributions appeared to have little influence on the recommendations (Laird, 2017). Research undertaken in the UK identified that involving families provides important insights and it is within professionals' interests to learn from them (Morris et al., 2015). However, there were numerous barriers that hindered their involvement, such as professional cultures, defensive attitudes from professionals and tensions between care and criminal proceedings (Morris et al., 2015).

Families were often reluctant to be involved due to the historical nature of the relationship they had developed with professionals, and this influenced their engagement in the process (Morris et al., 2015). Critically, families shared the importance of a professional's ability to recognise trauma and demonstrate care and how, for some, engaging in the review provoked feelings of guilt and inadequacy and a lack of support caused feelings of anger and confusion (Morris et al., 2015). Families valued a flexible approach, which they could negotiate along with transparency about how their information would be used (Morris et al., 2015). Laird (2017) found that families were often offered only a single interview, limiting the opportunity to build rapport and ask more exacting questions or to discuss the volume of questions and create meaningful impact on improvements. In addition, initial contact was rarely made through a third party, such as a mental health worker, in order to support families in engaging in the process (Laird, 2017).

The aim of this study is to evaluate the involvement of children and family in CSPRs and to support the development of best practice approaches.

## METHODOLOGY

### Study design

A thematic analysis of published CSPRs was considered the most appropriate qualitative methodology as it enables the coding of qualitative data using a rigorous and systematic framework (Braun & Clarke, 2014). This would be followed

by using the coding to analyse and identify the meaning of patterns across the data set to derive themes in relation to the research question (Braun & Clarke, 2014).

## Sampling

The National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children (NSPCC) publishes an online repository of CSPRs that are available to the public, accessed via the NSPCC learning website. A search undertaken on the database indicated that 1812 published reviews were available. Results were reduced to 138 by applying an exclusion criterion that excluded reviews (1644 reports) that were not conducted under the latest Working Together 2018 guidelines (HM Government, 2018) so as to focus on the development of practice since then. Other exclusion criteria included thematic reviews that did not have direct involvement with individuals (12 reports), summary reports with too little data (6 reports) and reviews published outside of England as the devolved administrations use different guidance (12 reports). The criteria were designed to select only published reviews as outlined by the research question. These data were extracted and recorded on a spreadsheet. The review types, as defined by the authors, are shown in Table 1.

The Working Together guidance dictates that only national and local CSPRs are published (HM Government, 2018), and therefore, it is suggested that the learning reviews, multi-agency review and practice reviews are likely to have been local CSPRs. Although some reviews were named as SCRs, the reports confirm that the 2018 guidance was used when conducting these. The reviews included a mixture of cases of institutional, intra- and extrafamilial abuse, suicide, accidental death and children who died from natural causes. There were some cases where the type of abuse and perpetrator were not identified. The sample included 71 (51%) cases of serious harm and 67 (49%) deaths. Some reviews included multiple children.

## Data analysis

In order to meet the trustworthiness criteria, the data were analysed using a six-stage thematic analysis as outlined by Nowell et al. (2017). Each of the 138 reviews was read, and relevant commentary on the involvement of children and family was extracted and entered onto a spreadsheet for thematic analysis and coding. The first stage required familiarisation with the data followed by an initial generation of codes in relation to the research question. Next, the data were searched for themes and then reviewed again. In order for something to be considered a theme, it needed to identify 'something important about the data in relation to the research question' (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 82, para. 2) as well as evidence a pattern of responses or meaning (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The themes were derived from a thorough analysis of the content of the reviews in order to define and name them, and finally, the report was produced. It is acknowledged, however, that the process of thematic analysis is often not linear and involves a reflective and repetitious process as outlined, with the stages being interrelated and occurring simultaneously (Nowell et al., 2017).

To ensure that the research could be evaluated and compared with other studies in the field and to assist other related research projects, consistent coding was required (Braun & Clarke, 2006). For the purpose of this research, 'children and family' was defined as the child/children subject of the review and any connected persons, such as siblings, parents, step-parents, grandparents, aunts and uncles. Reviews that included both individuals who engaged and some that did not were coded under 'invited-involved'.

A 10% sample (14 reviews) of the data was blind-coded by the second researcher to assess the level of interrater reliability. The results indicated that in the randomly selected subsample, 'Method of Engagement' showed the total agreement to be equal to 70%. Use of the kappa statistic to assess consistency among the two raters demonstrated that there was moderate agreement (Landis & Koch, 1977), kappa = 0.53; the 95% confidence interval is CI = (0.14–0.92),  $p = 0.01$ . The agreement for all other variables was 100%. When exploring the reasons for the disagreement, it was identified that the reports contain insufficient detail to enable an exact interpretation of the data, leading to the

**TABLE 1** Breakdown of review types.

Type of review	Total
Learning review	13
Multi-agency review	1
National review	1
Practice review	81
Serious case review	42

discrepancies. An example of this would be where one sample stated, 'Father asked for a meeting', and this was coded as 'interview' by one researcher and as 'not stated' by the other as it was not possible to clarify whether by asking for the meeting, this could be interpreted as a method used to engage a parent.

## Ethics

A number of ethical issues were taken into consideration when designing this research study. As the research design involved a purely thematic analysis of data already available in the public domain and did not involve participants or any live cases, formal ethical approval, along with considerations such as the consent and confidentiality of participants, was not required for this study. Further ethical considerations were given to the storage of the data and the anonymity of authors and participants (Guillemin & Gillam, 2004). Data were stored on a secure drive with access limited to the researchers. The data stored replicated that in the public domain and did not name individuals, such as authors or participants.

## FINDINGS

The analysis identified four themes within the reports in terms of child and family involvement in CSPRs: 'reports do not mention family involvement', 'children and families were excluded', 'children and families were invited but were not involved' and 'children and families were invited and at least one member was involved'. These will be discussed in turn below. The four themes were found consistently across the different review types, whether the abuse was intra- or extrafamilial or whether the review related to a serious incident or a child death, suggesting that these were not factors in the findings.

### Reports do not mention family involvement

Twenty-four (17%) reports failed to make any mention of involving the family, and therefore, it was not possible to determine whether or how they were involved.

### Children and families were excluded

There was evidence within 13 reports (10%) of decisions to exclude children and family members from the process. The reasons stated were either ongoing criminal proceedings or the panel made a decision to exclude them; this was always in respect of children, stating reasons such as it would be 'unsettling' or the child's 'age' and describing concerns about the risk of re-traumatisation:

...would be unsettling and impact on her placement stability.

(Review 36)

...it would be disruptive and potentially distressing ...

(Review 112)

In two reports, there was information that outlined details of the author of the CSPR meeting with the child's social worker in order to understand the child's feelings and experiences.

In respect of the decision to exclude family due to ongoing criminal proceedings, there were two reports that stated an intention to meet with the family once criminal proceedings had concluded but then made no further reference to doing so.

### Children and families were invited but were not involved

There was evidence within 17 reports (12%) that children and their family were invited to contribute to the review, but they were still not involved. Where reasons were given, this was either due to the family failing to respond to the invitation (41%), the family choosing to decline it (29%) or a combination of both (18%) among different family members. On three occasions, the report did not outline the reasons why the family were not involved despite being invited:

...unfortunately it has not been possible to meet with the parents and incorporate their views into the review.

(Review 96)

The remaining 14 reports do not state how attempts to engage with the child or family were made, although three of them state that they made 'several attempts' (Reviews 89, 103 and 130). The three remaining reports described using methods such as an interview or writing to the family to engage them, with one report attempting to engage the children or family through a professional known to them. One report also described seeking advice from practitioners known to the family about how best to engage them; however despite following the advice, it was not possible to meet with them.

Four reports provided possible explanations for the child or family not wanting to engage, describing a young person who 'did not feel able to participate due to feeling overwhelmed at the time' (Review 101). Other reports stated the following:

They have declined to contribute, and it is appreciated that both parents are grieving the loss of their child.

(Review 74)

Given their relationship with statutory services, perhaps this is not surprising.

(Review 59)

However, despite being aware of the possible impacts of grief, stress or difficult relationships with professionals, other than the two reports already mentioned that attempted to engage the family through a known professional, no reports within this category described offering the family support to assist their involvement.

### Children and families were invited and at least one member was involved

Overwhelmingly, 84 (61%) reports showed evidence of at least one child or family member being involved, with many providing details of how they were engaged and their contributions. Of the 84 reports, 23 (27%) did not state which method of engagement they used, with the remainder engaging either by doing interviews, by telephone, by writing or by doing a combination of methods. Some reports (14%) opted to also use a professional known to the child or family to attempt to engage them, such as a social worker, a foster carer or victim support officers. Some authors showed tenacity in attempting to involve children, with one designing a specific leaflet, submitting questions to those uncomfortable in talking and interviewing others. A further review sought to engage with a child who had developmental and communication difficulties, with the support of his carer and utilising a picture exchange communication system, and as a result was able to understand his progress and plans.

Eight reports provided limited detail on child or family involvement, stating simply that they had met with the reviewer.

Some report authors acknowledged that the contributions of the family offered little to the findings of the reviews:

Following the meeting with father no additional learning was identified in this case.

(Review 32)

This meeting did not add anything new to the review.

(Review 102)

Despite this, only four reviews showed evidence of meeting with the child or family on more than one occasion and two facilitating further contributions in writing. Other reports, however, acknowledge the 'invaluable' contribution of family members and how their views helped to appraise 'what works well or could be done differently in future to achieve better outcomes' (Review 37).

A number of reports also acknowledged the difficult circumstances surrounding the family at the time of undertaking the review and described the potential impact on involvement such as 'grief' or the family had

...been devastated by Child C's murder and did not feel able to meet ...

(Review 6)

Some reports acknowledged the risks of re-traumatisation:

...it was thought that participating in the review would risk further trauma at what was known to be a difficult time.

(Review 44)

...neither Child (...) would be asked to participate in the review directly. This decision was taken to minimise the negative emotional impact ...

(Review 73)

Despite this, however, only 16 reports (19%) described any form of support being offered to the children or family with one report stating that

...the family were supported throughout the duration of the review process by a specialist and expert advocate ...

(Review 124)

Within 30 of these reports (36%), despite some child or family members being involved, there was also evidence of at least one family member or child not being involved. In line with other findings, this was because they either declined or were excluded due to ongoing criminal proceedings. In respect of children, this again was due to their age or a risk of re-traumatisation.

## DISCUSSION

Although the requirement for the involvement of children and families in CSPRs appears to now be widely accepted, there continues to be disparity in the application of this. In line with earlier research (Dickens et al., 2021; Laird, 2017), the views of children and families are not always reflected in review reports, with over a quarter of the reports in this study failing to make any mention of either the child or the family or choosing to exclude them. Despite recommendations in a report commissioned by the CSPR Panel in 2021 for reports to provide a statement explaining why the child or family had not been included (Dickens et al., 2021), 17% of reports in this study failed to do so. The limitations of this study meant that it was not possible to ascertain whether family involvement did occur and it was not mentioned in the report or whether the family were excluded from the process and the reason for this, such as a family member being the perpetrator or concerns of re-traumatisation. Historically, the lack of policy and practice guidance has led to variable practice in terms of child and family involvement (Morris et al., 2015), with the findings of this study suggesting that this continues to be the case.

When a decision was made to exclude the family citing the reason of ongoing legal proceedings, this was again reflected in earlier research (Dickens et al., 2021; Morris et al., 2015). Although this is an apparent barrier to including families, little effort appears to have been made to represent their views through other means, such as meeting with extended family. The current CSPR Panel guidance indicates that it is possible for these two processes to run in tandem as they are fundamentally different, with one looking at system learning and the other looking at individual culpability (CSPRP, 2019). In addition, the guidance describes the need to work with the Crown Prosecution Service (CPS) and directs individuals to the CPS' protocol for liaison and information exchange when the two processes coincide (CSPR, 2019). Although consideration needs to be given to any risks of prejudicing the criminal investigation, there is nothing in either of these guidance documents that indicates the requirement to exclude the family from the CSPR (CPS, 2020; CSPR, 2019). Consideration should be given to the impact on the family of being involved in these concurrent processes; however, ongoing legal proceedings alone should not automatically preclude a family's involvement.

Historically, research has found varying practice regarding the involvement of children in reviews, with some finding failures to make arrangements for their differing needs and limited attempts to adapt to these (Dickens, Taylor, Cook, Garstang, et al., 2022; Morris et al., 2015) and others finding a determination to engage with children and hear their voice (Dickens et al., 2021). Similar findings were observed in this study, with evidence of either a decision to exclude children or varying attempts to understand the child's views through other means. Where a decision was made to exclude children, this appears to have been due to concerns about the impact of participating, their age and risks of re-traumatisation. One review, however, sought to involve children from 65 different local authorities, utilising a variety of methods that were child-focussed and individualised. Findings therefore suggest careful consideration of how best to involve children and gain an understanding of their views, such as allowing them to submit written information or engaging with professionals known to the child, and it is possible to involve them despite their varying issues and needs.

Findings from this study indicate that some report authors acknowledged that family involvement offered little to the findings of the review; however, only four of the 84 reports where families were involved had evidence of meeting with the family on more than one occasion and two allowed additional information in writing. In addition, of the 17 reports where the family were invited but not involved, only three stated that they made 'several' attempts to engage the family. This echoes the findings of a study undertaken by Laird (2017), which found limited evidence of meeting with the family on more than one occasion and rare instances of enlisting the help of a third party. Limiting attempts to try and engage with families could be indicative in some cases of a failure to understand the value of their involvement.

Allowing more time to build rapport has been suggested as a means of enabling more specific and complex questions to be asked (Laird, 2017). In addition, allowing families to participate in the development of the terms of reference and offering an approach that is negotiable have been suggested as principles that would support family involvement (Morris et al., 2015). There is evidence within some reviews in this study that authors went to significant lengths, such as using a variety of methods to involve the family, friends and wider community, seeking assistance from the family liaison officer and specialist advocate. Where such efforts were made, there was evidence of the recognition within reports of families' integral role within this process. Research has highlighted the importance of family involvement and the contribution to understanding the child's story (Dickens, Taylor, Cook, Garstang, et al., 2022; Sidebotham et al., 2016). Therefore, by facilitating meaningful engagement, such as involving them throughout the process or offering multiple opportunities for engagement, reviews are more likely to gain high-quality information that contributes to learning.

The CSPR Panel guidance indicates that support for the family should be considered at the point of sharing the report and afterwards; however, it does not stipulate a need to support children and families prior to this or during their involvement in the review (CSPRP, 2019). However, Morris, Brandon and Tudor (2015) found that families expressed anger and confusion at the lack of support and this impacted on any preconceived ideas they had of the value and purpose of their engagement. Despite difficulties in engaging the families outlined in this study, only 14 enlisted the help of a professional known to the family to support them. It was also found that in the 19% of cases where support was offered, the family always chose to be involved, suggesting that the offer of support increased involvement.

Trauma and the risk of re-traumatisation appear to be significant factors in the consideration of children's and families' involvement in the CSPRs that were analysed. Trauma results for some individuals when they are exposed to a distressing event or repeated events; an example in this context could be the removal of a child due to safeguarding concerns or a child death (Knight, 2015). Therefore, the very nature of needing to conduct a CSPR would be indicative of a child's or family's exposure to a traumatic event (Morris et al., 2015). In addition, adults involved with the child protection system have often experienced trauma within their own childhoods and their current difficulties need to be understood in this context (Knight, 2015). However, despite some report authors acknowledging the presence of trauma, little consideration was given to how best to address this or the need to provide children and families with support in order to increase involvement.

This study did not interview children and families to gain an understanding of why they chose not to be involved. However, as there were occasions where they were excluded due to concerns about re-traumatisation, it could be suggested that a fear of re-traumatisation might have been a reason why family members opted out, or could be considered to have been a trauma response. Trauma responses are known to impact on behaviour, increased anxiety and feelings of depression, self-worth and difficulties in forming relationships (Knight, 2015). Historically, research has found that family involvement was linked to the prior relationship they had had with professionals (Morris et al., 2015), which was also outlined in some reports in this study. Therefore, the decision to not be involved in the CSPR could also be interpreted as an indicator of professionals' inability to understand the trauma context. Highly skilled practice and individual capabilities were essential to making the difference to family involvement in this context, and an ability to recognise trauma was valued by families (Morris et al., 2015).

There is little evidence within this study of a trauma-informed approach (TIA) being adopted when trying to engage with children and families as part of the review. In contrast, the Scottish learning review guidance acknowledges that a family is likely to be suffering trauma and sets out a TIA that underpins its approach to engaging children and families (Scottish Government, 2021). TIAs that adopt the principles of safety, trustworthiness, collaboration, support and empowerment and show consideration to historical, cultural and gender issues are best positioned to reduce the risk of re-traumatisation (Barker et al., 2023). The authors of this paper suggest that the absence of a TIA will impact not only the likelihood of children and families willing to be involved but also the quality and meaningfulness of this involvement and the risk of re-traumatisation. In order to incorporate a TIA in this context, consideration should be given to the need to ensure that the report authors are skilled in their understanding and ability to engage children and families in a trauma-informed way.

## Reflections and limitations

Completing a thematic analysis of the data from published reviews meant that it was not possible to explore further information, such as whether a TIA was taken and whether support was offered or whether these details were omitted from the report. Guidance does not currently stipulate the need to include these details within the report (CSPRP, 2019). In addition, the need to keep children's and families' details anonymous could have impacted on the level of detail about their lack of involvement. These issues could have been addressed by speaking directly to the report authors or to the children and families involved. However, consideration of the potential for engagement to result in re-traumatisation would need to be considered (Barker et al., 2023; Knight, 2015) and support available.

## CONCLUSION

This study suggests that the need to involve children and families in CSPRs is widely recognised, with attempts to ensure that this takes place in the majority of cases. However, there is also significant evidence to suggest that despite this, there are instances when children and families are choosing not to be involved or failing to respond and little appears to be done to recognise why this is or how to address it. In addition, a decision to exclude a child or family appears to frequently take place, primarily due to concerns about the impact and risks of re-traumatisation or due to ongoing criminal proceedings.

Where attempts are being made to involve children and families, this often appears tokenistic, with one-off meetings limiting opportunities for involvement, failing to enlist the assistance of professionals known to the child or family and no access to support or consideration of the impact of trauma or how to overcome this. The evidence from this study would indicate that professionals do not fully understand the enriched learning that can take place when children and families are provided with the best opportunity to be involved in the process. However, there is also some evidence of instances where this has been done well, setting out a clear understanding of the needs of the children and family, adopting an individualised approach that considers different methods of engagement, considering who is best placed to meet with the child or family and other means of obtaining their views and the impact of trauma and providing access to necessary support. Instances where reviews took these approaches were successful in involving the children and family and there is evidence that their contributions were beneficial to the overall learning.

Findings from this study echo those from earlier research (Dickens et al., 2021; Laird, 2017; Morris et al., 2015) suggesting that limited progress has been made in this area. The absence of a guidance document that clearly sets out the purpose and process for family involvement, including when concurrent proceedings are taking place, continues to lead to a wide variation in practice.

If CSPRs in England are going to truly benefit from involving children and families, there is both a practice and a moral obligation to ensure that this engagement is meaningful and addresses trauma and risks of re-traumatisation, which appear to be fundamental barriers to this meaningful involvement. Further research that explores the views of children and families about the impact of being involved in reviews and what would better support their involvement would also be beneficial to the development of practice in this area.

## CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

## ETHICS AND INTEGRITY STATEMENT

As the research design involved a purely thematic analysis of data already available and in the public domain and did not involve participants or any live cases, formal ethical approval, along with considerations such as the consent and confidentiality of participants, was not required for this study. Data were stored on a secure drive with access limited to the researchers. The data stored replicated that which was in the public domain and did not name individuals, such as authors or participants. The data is retained and available upon request.

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**How to cite this article:** Harrison, C. & Barker, C. (2024) A thematic analysis of the involvement of children and families in Child Safeguarding Practice Reviews in England. *Child Abuse Review*, 33(6), e70005. Available from: <https://doi.org/10.1002/car.70005>