

PRACTITIONER BRIEF: LEARNING FROM NEGLECT (7-15 years)

OVERVIEW

The learning has derived from a multi-agency audit of a young person from a family of five children, who were all known to Children's Social Care and Early Help services over several years and the subjects of Early Help, Child in Need and Child Protection Plans.

Concerns related to poor school attendance, missed health appointments, allegations of parental substance misuse, physical abuse, poor home conditions, which were referred through various sources, which included school, health, and anonymous.

LEARNING

Child neglect is the most common form of child abuse but is not always easy to identify (NSPCC)¹. Research indicates that neglect is likely to have long-term adverse consequences across children's physical, cognitive, social, emotional and behavioural development and has a negative impact at all ages, although thought to be particularly harmful in the early years because of the impact on the child's neurobiological development and the attachment process. The negative impact of neglect has been shown to continue throughout childhood and adolescence, and into adulthood².

An early response and change are necessary in families where neglect is evident. Providing early help is more effective in promoting the welfare of children than reacting later. However, the system and practitioners struggle to provide a quick and effective response to child neglect, often meaning that children have endured a chronic lack of physical and emotional care over lengthy periods before they come to the attention of the authorities. It is important therefore that all organisations, including the voluntary and community sector, are supported to understand their role in identifying low level emerging problems and potential unmet needs and to feel skilled and confident to take on the Lead Practitioner role to formulate an early help assessment and plan².

Shortcomings in assessments have been a consistent feature in many cases of severe injury or child death, therefore the quality of assessment is significantly important as inadequate assessments are more likely to be associated with worse

¹ National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children – [Neglect Facts & Statistics](#)
NSPCC (2016). [How Safe Are Our Children? The most comprehensive overview of child protection in the UK.](#)

² Action for Children (2013) – [Action on Neglect – a resource pack](#)

outcomes. Good assessment involves more than just information gathering, it needs the practitioner to draw upon evidence and to be able to analyse and make sense of all available information³.

Assessment of parents' capacity to meet the needs of each child include the importance of understanding the basic requirements of parenting and of considering parents' ability to change⁴, which must be understood in the context of trauma. Change can be difficult, but even harder for those parents who are struggling with an interlocking web of problems. Change also takes time and whilst it can be supported and promoted through effective interagency interventions, it cannot be imposed and will not happen unless parents are proactively engaged⁵.

Most parents whose families are the focus of child protection interventions are involuntary participants in a process they may resent, and agencies can be perceived as a threat meaning that families are fearful and reluctant to cooperate. Families can develop skilful strategies to keep professionals at 'arms length'; disguised compliance occurs when parents want to draw the professional's attention away from allegations of harm and unsafe parenting with the aim of minimising or avoiding agency interventions in family life.

WHY IS THIS MORE WIDELY RELEVANT?

The circumstances of the child (family) subject to the audit are not unique to them alone. As indicated earlier child neglect is the most common form of child abuse but is not always easy to identify (NSPCC)⁶. The negative impact of neglect has been shown to continue throughout childhood and adolescence, and into adulthood.

For older children⁷ there is often a whole host of serious and complex problems they present that is the focus of agencies working with them, while the underlying causes – like neglectful parenting - are sometimes missed, or not properly dealt with. Some older children neglected for many years are incredibly vulnerable children, who whilst on the surface appear to be 'resilient' and making 'lifestyle choices', are in fact finding unsafe ways of coping, like getting involved in gangs or misusing drugs and alcohol. Neglect is not something that is commonly associated with older children and teenagers. It is often easier to spot the signs of neglect in younger children, such as delayed speech or failure to gain weight, but when it comes to older children, this is less straightforward.⁸

³ Social Work Policy Institute

⁴ Turney et al (2011), Social Work Assessment of Children in Need: What Do We know? Messages from Research.

⁵ Ward, H et al. (2014), Assessing Parenting Capacity to Change when Children are on the Edge of Care. DfE

⁶ National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children – [Neglect Facts & Statistics](#)
NSPCC (2016). [How Safe Are Our Children? The most comprehensive overview of child protection in the UK.](#)

⁷ 7 years +

⁸ Ofsted (2018), Growing up Neglected – A Multi-agency Response to Neglect.

WHAT NEEDS TO HAPPEN?

It is important that all organisations, including the voluntary and community sector, are supported to understand their role in identifying low level emerging problems and potential unmet needs and to feel skilled and confident to take on the Lead Practitioner role to formulate an early help assessment and plan⁹.

Assessments need to be holistic, evidence based, analytical and completed in a timely way and the behaviour of older children must be understood in the context of trauma¹⁰.

Practitioners need to more effectively challenge themselves and others in circumstances of drift and delay in progressing plans for children.

Adult services, including probation and adult health services, have a vital role to play in recognising neglectful parenting, and must consider the whole family and the impact of adults' behaviour on children.

Practitioners and managers need to understand the impact on parents and parenting capacity from the impact of adverse childhood experiences¹¹.

⁹ Action for Children (2013) – [Action on Neglect – a resource pack](#)

¹⁰ Ofsted (2018), Growing up Neglected – A Multi-agency Response to Older Children.

¹¹ Wilkinson. J, (2018), Developing and Leading Trauma Informed Practice. Research in Practice.