

# Missed Opportunities: Indicators of Neglect – What is Ignored, Why, and What Can be Done? - Research Report

## Introduction

The research report Indicators of Neglect: Missed Opportunities (<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/indicators-of-neglect-missed-opportunities>) was put together by an expert advisory group brought together by the DfE. It sets out to help practitioners understand what research and practice tells them about the risk factors for neglect that are associated with actual or future harm to very young children.

It is an important document which will be helpful to anyone working within the safeguarding arena. It will be particularly useful for practitioners carrying out assessments on children at risk of neglect. It should be considered by Local Safeguarding Children Board's (LSCB) in their work on neglect and anyone designing and delivering training on neglect. This briefing provides an overview of the contents of this research.

## What do we know about Neglect?

What is meant by neglect? There is an overlap between neglect and emotional abuse, along with the complexity of agreeing clear definitions and thresholds for neglect. The report suggests that the focus on the likelihood of significant harm or impairment to the **child's development** may be a more helpful focus than trying to determine whether child has experienced harm.

Neglect has a significant impact on a child's development which, though, rarely life-threatening has significant impact across multiple domains. The ongoing impact of neglect results in delayed cognitive development, poor language skills, poor social skills and coping abilities. Neglect can also be seen by its impact on childhood behaviours with children internalising (depressed, withdrawn, lacking in self-confidence) and externalising (acting out, aggressive, impulsive) behavioural problems in later childhood. Neglect in childhood is also associated with a range of mental health problems in adults and an increased likelihood of anxiety disorders, suicide attempts, substance misuse or risky sexual behaviours.

Findings from Serious Case Reviews (SCRs) suggest that the majority of neglect related deaths of very young children involve accidental deaths and sudden unexpected death in infancy, where there are pre-existing concerns about poor quality parenting and poor supervision and dangerous, sometimes unsanitary living circumstances that compromise the child safety. These issues include the risk of accidents such as fires and the dangers of co-sleeping with a baby where parents have substance and / or alcohol misuse problems. It requires practitioners to take a wider look at what is going on in the child's environment when considering risk. Neglect is more likely to be fatal when it is found in combination with other factors.

The authors explore some of the mindsets which may explain that why when neglect is identified it is not always acted upon. This can be because some professionals lack knowledge of the full extent of the impact on the child of neglect. They may feel that the necessary resources limit what can be achieved when working with neglect and finally the report identifies, some of the potential mind-sets that may hamper professional's confidence and limit their actions. These mind-sets include:

- Fears about being considered judgemental;
- Focusing on the parent rather than the child;
- Failure to consider the child lived experience or understand the child's world;
- A fixed view of the family that clouds thinking and limits taking on new information;
- Parents superficial or false compliance;
- A reluctance to refer concerns (sometimes connected to previous experience of trying to refer those cases);
- Believing it is not their area of expertise and that someone else is better placed to carry out the assessment.

## Overcoming Barriers to Identifying Neglect

The Working Together definition of neglect is used to explore the observable indicators of or risk factors for neglect for the different areas of the definition. There is a difference between risk factors for neglect and indicators of actual neglect in day to day practice. This means that risk factors do not always lead to neglect but what practitioners can observe in the environment, in the parents interactions with the child and in the child's development will help indicate that a child is experiencing neglect.

Observable social and environmental factors (Poverty, Poor Living Conditions and Social Isolation) can contribute to the potential risk of neglect.

There are a number of observable risk factors within the family such as maternal mental health problems, learning disabilities, drug and alcohol misuse and living with domestic violence that may increase the risk of neglect particularly when they occur in combination. The existence of a risk factor does not mean that the child will be neglected but it may make the child more vulnerable and highlights the pressures that may exist for those parents which could be impacting on the child.

Most of the research on neglect focuses on the experience of women. Men are often overlooked in practice or just seen as a risk. This is not always the case and they can be a resource and a support. Their role within the family is important and has an impact which is not always just about risk and their views need to be included. Sometimes they may be both a risk and a resource.

The previous history of maltreatment in parents may need further exploration if there are concerns. Parents' understanding of the maltreatment of their own children can be mediated by the impact of their own childhood experience. The precise links between experiencing childhood maltreatment and neglectful or abusive parenting are not clear but need to be considered.

There are some characteristics of young children which put them at an elevated risk of neglect. This is especially the case for babies born before term, with low birth weight, or with complex health needs. Although older young people are more at risk of neglect overall, pre-school aged children and babies are innately more vulnerable and can suffer severe harm from neglect very quickly (for example through dehydration or drop in weight).

Another particularly vulnerable group of young children is those with disabilities. Disabled children are more likely to be maltreated than their non-disabled peers and neglect is the most common form of maltreatment they experienced.

It is in the interaction between the parent and child that indicators of neglect are best observed. Persistent, severe neglect indicates a breakdown or a failure in the relationship between parent and child. There is a section that looks at the different parent child interactions that may indicate neglect for children 0 -12 months, 1 to 3 years, and 3 to 5 years. This is followed by the observable impact on the child's functioning for the same time periods. This is an important section as it is some of these observations that are the best indicators that the child is being neglected.

Harmful parental behaviour that may be seen in poor supervision and an increased risk of certain types of accidents, often as a result of some of the environmental factors. The 2007 government document 'Staying Safe' suggests that children from disadvantaged backgrounds are 13 times more likely to die from accidental injuries, and 37 times more likely to die because of smoke, fire and flames than their peers.. The findings from SCRs include fatal accidents where there may be issues of parental supervision and care, resulting in accidental ingestion of drugs or other household substances, drowning, falls, electrocution, and fires. The risk to the child in their environment needs to be taken into consideration.

Unmet health needs of the child and more specifically where a child has additional health needs, where neglect of those needs can put the child at heightened risk. The report explores the reasons that can sometimes lead to those needs being overlooked and acknowledges that where a child has additional health needs that this often calls for a higher standard of parenting and vigilance. This can sometimes be because practitioners readily understand the stresses and pressure this brings for these parents that they may accept a lower standard of care or fail to recognise neglect. Dental neglect is also discussed and highlighted as an often unseen and unspoken indicator of neglect.

## Tiers or Levels of Concern: Explanatory Framework

Danya Glaser's concept of explanatory relationships between tiers or levels of concern about neglect is discussed as it provides a helpful way of organising and understanding concerns about neglect at different levels and areas of concern. The framework also helps to distinguish between risk factors for neglect and observable indicators of actual neglect in children and within families. An outline for an assessment is proposed that covers:

- a. Description of current state and identification of any current indicators of neglect:
  - i. Exploration of persistence of indicator – is this something that happens frequently / all the time / never been noticed before?
  - ii. Assessment of the current functioning of the child and of the family.
- b. Reviews of underlying risk factors incorporating a previous history of:
  - i. The child and of each parent / caregiver;
  - ii. Professional involvement and the family's response to this.
- c. Assessment of the parents' capacity to change:
  - i. This can only be tested as part of the parental response to sound, supportive intervention which focuses on social and environmental risk factors and neglectful parent-child interactions.

The use of Standardised, structured approaches such as the Graded Care Profile and Signs of Safety may be helpful in supporting practitioners when assessing neglect.

## Conclusion

The area of neglect presents a significant challenge. Neglect in the early years can have a long-standing impact across the whole spectrum of children's development, and throughout the life span. Early intervention and support for families where neglect is identified is therefore of utmost importance in safeguarding children from harm.

This report is very helpful in supporting practitioners to identify it early and to be able to take timely action. While the report is targeting children aged 0 to 5, the learning is much wider than this and it is worth mentioning the work being done by the Children's Society and the NSPCC in highlighting the serious impact on teenagers of neglect.

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