

NEGLECT TOOLKIT

Guidance for Practitioners

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1.0 Introduction

Awareness of child neglect and its consequences on the future well-being and development of children has increased during the last two decades. It is notoriously difficult to define and varies by type, severity and chronicity. Research shows that it often co-exists with other forms of abuse and adversity. To make the management of neglect even more complex, numerous reviews have commented on the dynamics of professional uncertainty regarding thresholds and criteria and what constitutes significant harm. Thus neglect can lead to a difference of opinion and professional optimism in relation to 'good enough care'.

Neglect is the most common reason for child protection plans in the United Kingdom. Analysis of Serious Case Reviews has made the link between neglect and childhood fatalities. Apart from being potentially fatal, neglect causes great distress to children and leads to poor outcomes in the short and long-term. As with all areas of abuse including neglect consequences can include an array of physical and mental health problems, difficulties in forming attachments and relationships, lower educational achievements, an increased risk of substance misuse and higher risk of experiencing abuse, as well as difficulties in assuming parenting responsibilities later on in life. The degree to which children are affected during their childhood and later in adulthood depends on the type, severity and frequency of the maltreatment and on what support mechanisms and coping strategies were available to the child.

Neglect is a priority for the Northamptonshire Safeguarding Children Board (NSCB) and a number of initiatives are underway to improve awareness, recognition and interventions for children and families affected.

This guidance is designed for multi-agency Managers and Practitioners from all agencies working with children and their families, whether their principal focus is upon a child or an adult within the home. It is only by working together and co-ordinating our activities that we can be effective in addressing concerns about neglect.

This document has been produced to support professionals in their understanding, identification, assessment and interventions in childhood neglect. Thus this toolkit is intended to assist in decision making and planning so that children about whom there are concerns about neglect are effectively safeguarded.

2.0 Definitions and Types of Neglect

"Neglect is the persistent failure to meet a child's basic physical and/or psychological needs, likely to result in the serious impairment of the child's health or development.

Neglect may occur during pregnancy as a result of maternal substance abuse. Once a child is born, neglect may involve a parent or carer failing to:

- Provide adequate food, clothing and shelter (including exclusion from home or abandonment)
- Protect a child from physical and emotional harm or danger
- Ensure adequate supervision (including the use of inadequate care-givers)
- Ensure access to appropriate medical care or treatment.

It may also include neglect of, or unresponsiveness to a child's basic emotional needs."

HM Government 'Working Together to Safeguard Children: a guide to inter-agency working to safeguard and promote the welfare of children' 2015.

This is the official Government definition of neglect and is important as it supports a consistent understanding of neglect amongst multi-agency professionals. It provides a guide and a threshold in the identification, assessment and decision making process of neglect and is the criteria for determining whether a child's name is to be placed on a Child Protection Plan.

However the definition can only be useful if there is a clear and shared understanding of neglect – and its impact upon a child's health and development - in its broadest sense.

Neglect, (in contrast to other forms of abuse where specific and critical incidents can highlight significant harm) often presents us with less tangible and more diverse indicators which make it harder to identify. Further, differences of opinion about what constitutes *persistent failure*, *serious impairment* of health or development and *adequate* make this definition, as with others, more open to interpretation, resulting in confusion and a lack of consensus amongst childcare professionals about what neglect actually involves.

An additional difficulty that professionals may have in identifying neglect relates to concerns about imposing their own standards and values on other people and a reluctance to be judgemental. Yet professionals are tasked to make professional judgements, based on the best evidence available and within a co-ordinated multi-agency response. The definitions of neglect, an understanding of the impact upon the child's health and development and effective working together can help professionals to distinguish between being judgemental and articulating a defensible professional judgement.

In seeking to clarify neglect further, some areas to consider are:

- a. **Persistence:** Neglect is usually (but not always) something that is persistent, cumulative and occurs over time. It can continue without a critical event, or incidents may be widely spaced, but its effects are corrosive to children's development. Its presentation as a chronic condition requires the collation and analysis of sometimes small and seemingly insignificant events that only provide evidence that neglect is an issue of concern when viewed together.

Gardener (2008) warns of the danger of viewing neglect as a chronic phenomenon as this involves waiting for a time when chronic issues are deemed to be present which delays professional response to children's safeguarding needs.

Neglect can also occur as a one-off event e.g. where there is a family crisis or a parent is under the influence of drink/drugs. It is possible that one-off incidents are part of a wider background of the neglect of the child, thus any incident based reports need to be assessed to identify whether there are patterns, however widely spaced.

- b. **Acts of Omission and Acts of Commission:** Neglect is often (but not always) a passive form of abuse and the definition from *Working Together, 2015*, refers to failures to undertake important parenting tasks, which are often referred to as *acts of omission*. It is not always easy to distinguish between acts of omission and acts of commission however and both can occur simultaneously. For example, a parent leaving a child in the supervision of an unsuitable person involves both an omission to provide appropriate supervision and commission, in leaving the child with someone unsuitable. The issue for those identifying and assessing neglect is less about understanding intent and more about assessing which of the child's needs are not being met. Neglect may be passive, but it is nevertheless harmful.
- c. **Neglect often co-exists with other forms of abuse:** Certainly emotional abuse is a fundamental aspect of children's experiences of neglect. However other forms of harm such as physical abuse, sexual abuse, harm from exposure to domestic abuse and child sexual exploitation can and do co-exist with neglect. The existence of neglect should alert practitioners to exploring whether children are being exposed to other forms of abuse.
- d. **Parents and carers with complex and multiple needs:** A wide range of circumstances and stressors exist for parents whose children are neglected including poor housing, poverty and lack of capacity or knowledge about children's needs, disability, learning impairment, asylum or refugee status and other circumstances which might weaken parental capacity. Brandon (2012) in a review of serious cases involving child deaths collectively called parental substance and/or alcohol misuse, domestic abuse and mental health difficulties the *Toxic Trio*.

There is a complex interaction between the three areas which significantly increases risk for children. Parents need support to address their complex circumstances and needs so that they can parent their children effectively. Professionals may feel great empathy for parents and develop a tolerance for actions or inactions which are detrimental to the child. This type of a parent-centred approach invokes a risk that the focus on the child, the actual or potential harm they experience and the impact on the child's development, becomes marginalised. Keeping a focus on the child has to be a priority.

Types of Neglect:

Howarth (2007) identified five types of neglect and this breakdown is helpful for practitioners to begin considering where the child's needs may be being neglected. A thorough and methodical way of addressing failure to meet need will assist in identifying and planning interventions in neglect.

Medical – minimising or denying illness or health needs of children; failure to seek medical attention or administer treatments.

Nutritional – not providing adequate calories for normal growth (possibly leading to failure to thrive); not providing sufficient food of reasonable quality; recently there have been discussions about whether obesity should be considered a form of neglect.

Emotional – failure to respond to a child's basic emotional needs; to interact or provide affection; failure to develop child's self esteem or sense of identity.

Educational – failure to provide a stimulating environment; failure to show interest in education or support learning; failure to respond to any special needs related to learning; failure to comply with statutory requirements regarding attendance.

Physical – failure to provide appropriate clothing, food, cleanliness, living conditions.

Lack of supervision and guidance – failure to provide for a child's safety, including leaving a child alone; leaving a child with inappropriate carers; failure to provide appropriate boundaries.