

### Childhood Neglect: Improving Outcomes for Children

#### Learning Outcomes

To identify concerns about parenting capacity that may contribute to neglect.

**Audience** Groups 1-8 (Working Together 2010)

**Time** 30 minutes

#### Key Reading

Cleaver, H., Unell, I. and Aldgate, J. (2011) Children's Needs - Parenting Capacity. Child Abuse: Parental Mental Illness, Learning Disability, Substance Misuse and Domestic Violence (2nd edition). The Stationery Office, London.

Hester, M., Pearson, C. and Harwin, N. (2000) Making an Impact: Children and Domestic Violence. Jessica Kingsley, London and Philadelphia.

Jack, G. and Gill, O. (2003) The Missing Side of the Triangle: Assessing the Importance of Family and Environmental Factors in the Lives of Children. Barkingside: Barnardo's.

Nair, P., Schuler, M.E., Black, M.M., Kettinger, L. and Harrington, D. (2003) 'Cumulative environmental risk in substance abusing women: Early intervention, parenting stress, child abuse potential and child development.' Child Abuse and Neglect 27(9): 997-1017.

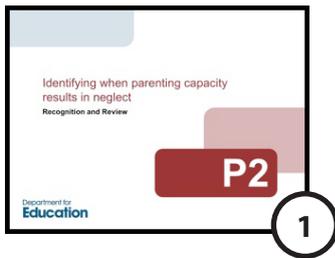
Spencer, N. and Baldwin, N. (2005) 'Economic, Cultural and Social Contexts of Neglect.' In J. Taylor and B. Daniel, B (eds) Child Neglect - Practice Issues for Health and Social Care. London: Jessica Kingsley Publishers.

#### Links to Common Core

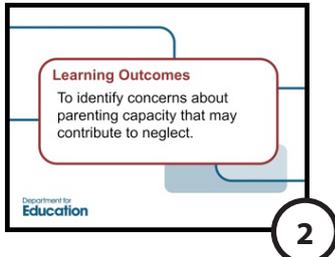
**Common Core 3** Safeguarding and promoting the welfare of the child (skill: Relate, recognise and take considered action). Understand the key role of parents and carers in safeguarding and promoting children and young people's welfare and involve them accordingly, while recognising factors that can affect parenting and increase the risk of abuse (for example, domestic violence).

Identifying when parenting  
capacity results in  
neglect

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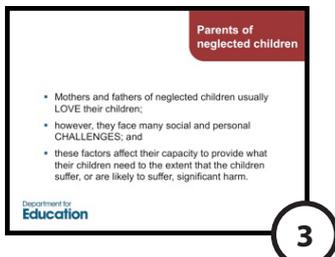


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Explain to delegates that the term 'parents' is being used to include parents and other potential main carers such as grandparents. Issues of parenting capacity also apply to foster care and, though the focus at this stage is not upon foster care, it is important to bear in mind that children's needs can be neglected by foster carers.



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It is also important to retain a sharp focus on the needs of the child even though the focus of this presentation is on parents. Explain that the case studies will be drawn on in exercises to help participants consider the issues that may be affecting parents and undermining parental capacity.

It is likely that participants will be aware of the Assessment Framework (Department of Health, Department for Education and Employment, and Home Office 2000) and will have had some introductory or more in-depth training in its use. The aim of this course is to provide evidence-based information to inform practice. It is important to remember that neglect often co-exists with other forms of maltreatment such as emotional, physical or sexual abuse. Therefore, practitioners need to be alert to the possibility of neglect when a child presents with signs of other types of maltreatment.

Most parents want the best for their children and this includes the parents of neglected children. The parents of the majority of neglected children do not aim to deliberately neglect them. This can pose difficulties for practitioners because this love for the children can mask the neglect. For the purposes of recognising and responding to neglect, it is key to understand this and not be distracted from the observations of the child, or by professional concerns about the ways in which parenting may be affected by substance misuse or mental health, for example.

Parenting capacity can be undermined by many factors that will be considered in this presentation.

Issues such as domestic abuse, mental health difficulties and substance misuse affect many parents. Here the aim is to understand the ways in which these issues can affect parenting capacity and to consider the indicators that parenting capacity has been affected to the extent that children are being, or are likely to be, neglected.

**Dimensions of parenting capacity**

- Basic care
- Ensuring safety
- Emotional warmth
- Stimulation
- Guidance and boundaries
- Stability

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The dimensions of Parenting Capacity are drawn from the Assessment Framework – it provides a useful structure for understanding the key components of parenting. Participants may be familiar with a range of additional assessment frameworks and tools, some created specifically for neglect, but all should be compatible with this assessment framework.

**Family and environmental factors**

- Family history and functioning
- Wider family
- Housing
- Employment
- Income
- Family's social integration
- Community resources

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The dimensions of Family and Environmental Factors are also drawn from the Assessment Framework and similarly provide a helpful structure. These dimensions are especially important in neglect as will be picked up in the next slides.

**Neglect and deprivation**

In a study of 555 families referred to children's social care about concerns of neglect or emotional abuse of the children:

- 57% had no wage earner in the household
- 59% lived in over-crowded housing conditions
- 10% had had 5 or more house moves in the previous 5 years
- 47% households headed by a lone parent
- 26% of parents and 24% of children had a disability or long term/serious illness
- 56% of parents reported high levels of emotional stress.

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Issues of poverty and deprivation form the backdrop of neglect and can pose huge dilemmas for practitioners.

**Discussion point:** It might be useful to discuss with participants what these dilemmas might be.

Deprivation can affect recognition of neglect in different ways. On one hand, practitioners may be reluctant to place additional stress on parents and believe it is not appropriate to hold parents responsible when their main problems appear to stem from deprivation – this means the unmet needs of children may be obscured.

On the other hand, sometimes practitioners become so accustomed to the presence of deprivation as a backdrop that they fail to assess its impact and do not incorporate attention to structural issues in their assessment and plans. It is important to remind participants of the corrosive impact of neglect. Spencer and Baldwin (in Taylor and Daniel 2005) cover this; and Horwath (2007) also discusses the impact of disadvantage upon parenting capacity.

**Socio-economic deprivation**

- 'poverty is not a predictor of neglect: it is a correlate of neglect'. (Dunne, 1993, in Horwath, 2007)
- The majority of people living in deprived circumstances parent their children effectively, but it is a lot harder.
- Deprivation can interact with other stress factors resulting in children's needs not being met adequately.

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Horwath (2007) provides some pointers towards disentangling the issue of deprivation as a direct cause or as a contributing factor to neglect. Whilst many people living in poverty do not neglect their children it is clear that deprivation can greatly exacerbate factors that may affect parenting capacity. In order to parent effectively in poverty it could be argued that parents require even more advanced skills and capacities than parents with sufficient means.

Minty and Pattison (1994) also help to disentangle the ways in which parents can either buffer their children from the effects of poverty or not and point to the emotional implications for children:

Children growing up in conditions of material disadvantage are more likely to grow up intellectually and culturally disadvantaged, but they are not more likely to grow up feeling that adults will be oblivious to their distress, their preferences and need to lean to discriminate, their needs for communication, confirmation and sensible controls. All this, however, may be the experience of the severely neglected child. (p.739)

Research tends to have focused on mothers and has suggested them to:

- be more likely to be poor
- be less able to plan
- be less able to control impulses
- be less confident about future
- be less equipped with sense of self-efficacy
- have psychological and psychosomatic symptoms
- have had poor educational attainment
- have a high sense of alienation...

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Research findings about the parental characteristics associated with neglect need to be considered within a wider ecological context. Caution is also needed to guard against a deterministic approach that suggests if certain factors are in place children will automatically be neglected. Many of the characteristics found in parents whose children are neglected are shared by other parents – so these need to be taken as indicators only and as pointers for assessment.

The bulk of research into parental factors associated with neglect has been undertaken with mothers and is underpinned by strong gender assumptions about the role of women and mothering. With these caveats in mind, there are a number of characteristics that have emerged from the research that are associated with neglect.

Some of the terms can sound judgemental to practitioners and, again, care is required in helping people to incorporate an understanding of these factors into their initial assessments without labelling people unhelpfully, stigmatising people or making assumptions about their characteristics.

Research tends to have focused on mothers and has suggested them to:

- struggle to manage money
- lack emotional maturity
- be physically and emotionally exhausted
- experience depression
- lack of knowledge of children's developmental needs
- struggle to meet dependency needs of children
- experience feelings of apathy and futility.

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Continuation of previous list.

Less research on fathers, but they are likely to:

- be unemployed
- be a less supportive partner
- be violent to the mother
- misuse substances.

The man in the household is:

- more likely to be the non-biological parent,
- less likely to have been in the relationship longer than 5 years.

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Research into the characteristics of fathers is more sparse, which is telling in itself. (More information on fathers is provided in presentation 16: Assessing the role of fathers/father figures). The main feature of fathers appears to be their absence from the family. However, it is vital that practitioners include attention to fathers and father figures in their assessments. Even in his absence a father can be a salient figure to the child. The father's own extended family also often holds important information and/or can be a source of support for the child. Practitioners may often fail to enquire about the child's father or they may fail to enquire about a male figure in the household.

The key message is that there should be an explicit note of who the father is, and if he is not known this should be recorded. There also needs to be information about any other important male/father figures.

**Factors associated with neglect that affect parenting capacity -**

- Own experiences of adverse parenting
- Lack of supportive network/family/other
- Learning disability
- Maternal depression
- Parental psychiatric illness
- Parental substance misuse
- Abusive relationships with partner/domestic violence

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Most people will be familiar with the kind of factors known to be associated with neglect as they are the recurrent backdrop in many settings. Those working in settings where their primary focus is adults should be reminded to consider the potential impact of these factors upon children and whether further assessment of the children’s needs is required.

Participants need to be aware that an association between these factors and increased likelihood of neglect does not mean that we can assume that there will always be neglect when these factors are present, but the more risk factors are present the more concerned professionals should be.

**Parental mental health issues**

- One in four adults will experience a mental illness in their lifetime.
- Of these, between a quarter and a half will be parents.
- Their dependent children are at greater risk of experiencing health, social and/or psychological problems.
- Combined issues such as genetic inheritance, social adversity and psychological factors may lead to an increased chance of children experiencing mental health issues.

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Sensitivity is required when discussing mental health issues. Given the prevalence in the population it is likely that there will be participants on courses who themselves are receiving or have received treatment for mental health problems, or are affected by the mental health issues of a family member or friend. These people may also be parents and may be affected by the implication that the presence of a mental health problem is associated with a tendency to neglect children’s needs.

Again, it is important to stress that parental mental ill-health is a feature in the circumstances of many neglected children, but that not all parents with mental health problems neglect their children.

**Parental mental health issues**

- The impact of mental ill health on parental capacity will depend on the parent’s personality, the type of mental illness, its severity, the treatment given and support provided.
- Many mental health problems are manifested in intermittent episodes of symptoms.
- This can result in fluctuations between good and poor parental capacity.

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The issue of fluctuating parental capacity and the intersection between child services and adult mental health services has been discussed by Darlington et al. (2005). It can be difficult to gauge and assess the impact of fluctuating parenting capacity on children and on the quality of care provided. There are many different mental health issues that manifest in many ways and participants, who are not experts in mental health issues cannot be expected to know about all the possible symptomology, indeed they should not attempt to over-reach their knowledge base.

However, professionals should be alert to the presence of mental health problems and be aware of when it may be necessary to consult with mental health professionals. Many people also have undiagnosed mental health problems and could benefit from expert assessment of their mental health needs.

**Parental substance misuse**

- Research carried out to inform the Advisory Council on the Misuse of Drugs report, 'Hidden Harm' (2003), estimated:
  - 200,000-300,000 children of problem drug users in England and Wales
  - this represents 2-3% of children less than 16 years.
- Between 780,000 and 1.3 million children are affected by parental alcohol use in England and Wales (Hewitt et al., 2005)

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**Parental substance misuse**

Parents report effects on:

- providing a daily structure.
- being consistent.
- managing their children's anger.
- coping with children's transition into adolescence, especially if it involves experimentation with drugs.
- generally perceiving difficulties rather than positives in child's behaviour.

(Coleman and Cassell, 1995)

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Substance misusing parents are reported to use more aversive behaviour; to feel inadequate; and to have higher levels of stress than comparison mothers (Coleman and Cassell 1995).

**Discussion point:** It might be useful to discuss what these core elements might be.

All these key facets of parenting are achieved within the evolving relationship between the parent and child and all can be disrupted and affected by the effects of drugs or alcohol. Again, participants who are not experts in substance misuse cannot be expected to know the effects of different kinds of legal and illegal substances and various combinations thereof.

However, they need to be alert to the potential effects upon children – not only of the direct effects of drug misuse on parenting, but on the indirect effects such as impact on household income, contact with dangerous people, dangers from drug paraphernalia.

**Domestic abuse**

- 26% children and young people report physical violence in childhood:
  - 47% physical assaults
  - 13% used object or weapon
- 5% violence frequent.
- £23 billion per annum (England and Wales).
- More than 90% of domestic abuse is committed by men against women.
- Approximately 10% to 50% of women have been physically abused by an intimate male partner.
- UK statistics indicate that one in four women is likely to suffer domestic abuse.

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Official figures are likely to under-estimate the true levels of domestic abuse, especially levels of emotionally abusive behaviour that is not necessarily accompanied by physical violence, but which may still have significant effects upon children. The cost to the taxpayer is hard to calculate, given the long term damage, but it has been estimated at £23 billion per annum (England and Wales).

**Domestic abuse**

The impact on parental capacity can manifest in:

- lack of emotional warmth
- emotional unavailability
- inconsistent or unpredictable care environment
- pre-occupation with the intimate relationship
- increased levels of irritability, hostility, rejection and aggression
- increased risk of parental mental ill-health and substance misuse
- physical exhaustion and low self-esteem
- increased likelihood of anxiety and social exclusion.

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There are many ways in which domestic abuse can have an impact on children. Impacts can include direct and indirect effects and it could be helpful to ask participants to contribute to a discussion about them. Children may be subject to physical violence if they try to get between parents or are subject to the violence as well. There is an association between the existence of domestic abuse and abuse of children.

Children will also be affected by the trauma of the violence in the home and by the impact upon the mother's parenting capacity. Their need for a consistent and safe father figure is also lacking. A father who is violent to the child's mother is unlikely to be viewed as a consistent and safe attachment figure for a child. In relation to neglect, domestic abuse can affect each of the dimensions of parenting capacity in both mothers and fathers.

Again, it could be helpful to ask participants to consider ways in which the mother's parenting may be affected and ways in which the father's parenting may be affected. It is important not to blame or stigmatise mothers who may often be trying their best to care for their children under very difficult circumstances.

**Accumulation of risk factors**

- Parenting is increasingly affected as stress factors accumulate.
- A study of the impact of an accumulation of up to 10 risk factors for mothers who misused substances showed that:  
...women with five or more risks found parenting more stressful and indicated greater inclination towards abusive and neglectful behaviour, placing their infants at increased risk for poor parenting, abuse and neglect.

(Nair et al., 2003)

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Nair et al. (2003) studied 161 substance-misusing women in the US over 18 months and examined the effects of the accumulation of 10 environmental risk factors: maternal depression, domestic violence, non-domestic violence, family size, incarceration, no significant other in the home, negative life events, psychiatric problems, homelessness and severity of drug use.

This study and research by Cleaver and colleagues (2011) reinforces the messages about the adverse impact of an accumulation of stressors.

**Parenting issues**

Parenting is challenging even in the context of extensive support and sufficient resources.

In the context of diminished financial resources, limited opportunities and social isolation, parenting is very demanding.

When parents use substances to cope, and/or are living with domestic abuse and mental health problems their capacity to care effectively can be seriously eroded.

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The neglect of children is often overlooked by practitioners in contact with parents affected mental health problems, substance misuse, domestic abuse or a combination of these factors, sometimes because they do not see the needs of the children as being within their remit, or because they want to retain a good working relationship with parents.

However, paying attention to the impact on parenting of these factors is not only important for children, it can also enhance the quality and efficacy of the work with the adults if their parenting role is incorporated within assessment and intervention.

## Notes

Identifying when parenting capacity results in neglect

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