Learning Outcomes

To assess family and environmental factors that may affect a child and parenting capacity.

Audience Groups 1-8 (Working Together 2010)
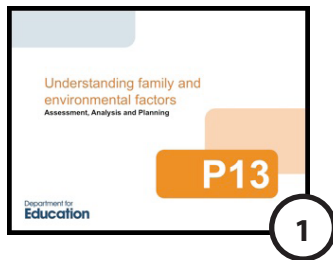
Time 30 minutes

Key Reading

Baldwin, N. and Curruthers, L. (1998) Developing Neighbourhood Support and Child Protection Strategies. Aldershot: Ashgate Publishing.

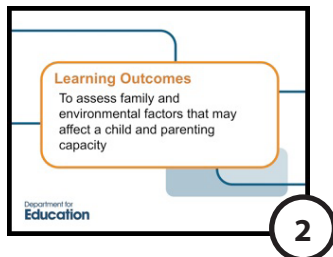Jack, G. and Gill, O. (2003) The Missing Side of the Triangle. Essex: Barnardo's Child Care Publications.

Vincent, S. (2010) Learning from Child Deaths and Serious Abuse. Edinburgh: Dunedin.

Links to Common Core

Common Core 3 Safeguarding and promoting the welfare of the child (knowledge: Self-knowledge). Know that assumptions, values and discrimination can influence practice and prevent some children and young people from having equality of opportunity and equal protection from harm.
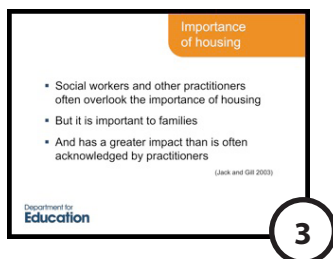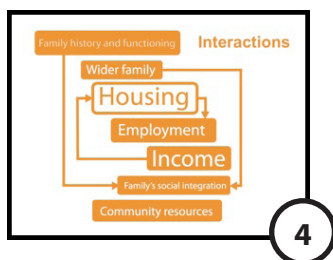
Understanding environmental factors

N13 1

1

Understanding family and
environmental factors
Assessment, Analysis and Planning

P13

Department for
Education

2

Learning Outcomes
To assess family and
environmental factors that may
affect a child and parenting
capacity

Department for
Education

Learning outcomes.

3

Importance
of housing

- Social workers and other practitioners often overlook the importance of housing
- But it is important to families
- And has a greater impact than is often acknowledged by practitioners

(Jack and Gill 2003)

Department for
Education

Jack and Gill (2003) offer a helpful overview of housing in their book that explores what they call 'the missing side of the triangle' – that is, the family and environmental factors domain in the Assessment Framework. They provide an overview of evidence that suggests that housing issues are often not given proper attention by social workers, even though they may be of pressing concern to families. For neglected children, in particular, issues of housing can be central.

4

Family history and functioning | **Interactions**
Wider family
Housing
Employment
Income
Family's social integration
Community resources

The slide offers a reminder of the domain of family and environmental factors:

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

The arrows are included to suggest the extent to which housing can be pivotal and can interact with other factors. For example, parents without a stable address will find it difficult to obtain employment and therefore will have low income. Unstable housing situations impact upon social integration and capacity to access community resources. For neglected children there can be an interaction between housing problems, their education and experience of stability within their family.

Understanding environmental factors

N13 **2**

Housing policy

- Social housing has been reserved increasingly to accommodate disadvantaged groups including:
  - people on very low incomes
  - a disproportionate number of elderly people
  - low-income families with young children
    (Jack and Gill 2003)
- Many houses were sold through 'right to buy' policies resulting in an imbalance of flats to houses
- More recent changes may result in more limitations in access to social housing

Department for
Education

5

Before looking in more detail at neglected children's circumstances in particular it is helpful to consider the wider context. Government policies in the late 20th century, resulted in social housing being used increasingly to accommodate disadvantaged groups including people on very low incomes; social housing areas now include a disproportionate number of elderly people and low-income families with young children (Jack and Gill 2003).

In more recent years, many sought–after houses have been sold through the government's 'right to buy' policies resulting in an imbalance of flats to houses.

Participants will be very familiar with the effects of local housing policies in their own areas and could be asked to discuss the general housing context. For example, there may be areas with very little mix of demographic and therefore social imbalances.

Discussion point: What has been the impact of housing policy within your area, and how has this impacted on local communities?

Impact of housing

- The provision of housing and its location will impact on a family's social networks and integration
- Many vulnerable families experience a period of homelessness which can often result in a move to homes and neighbourhoods away from their current networks, schools and access to services

Department for
Education

6

The slide is self-explanatory and re-iterates the contextual points.

Impact of housing

- Families with disabled children are often especially disadvantaged
- Children may need adaptations or equipment
- Children may need more space or particular configurations of space
- There may be a need for easy access in and out of the accommodation – working lifts, no stairs
- A marked parking space may be required

Department for
Education

7

Families living in poorer quality housing with disabled children are further disadvantaged because there is often a variable awareness among professionals of the importance of suitable housing on the wellbeing and health of disabled children. There may be inadequate funding available for adapting unsuitable housing and, for example, the lack of space available to accommodate the behavioural or sleep difficulties of a disabled child.

Families with disabled children are also often likely to be financially strained, making it more difficult for them to maintain their homes to a standard they would wish. Many of the same issues will affect families where a parent is disabled.

Understanding environmental factors

N13 3

Impact of housing

- Poor housing can be viewed as both a consequence of social exclusion and also a cause
- It is clearly an important factor in child wellbeing BUT
- There is little research within the UK on the impact of housing on the welfare of children and families
- This runs counter to the importance placed on this by families and its key role in child wellbeing

Department for **Education**

8

Just as housing is neglected in practice, it is also neglected in research. Research has focused very much on child protection systems and processes and on issues of risk of harm; there is less research on ways in which wider structural factors can be addressed to reduce the incidence of abuse and neglect.

Housing problems can be both a consequence and a cause of social exclusion. Families, who find it difficult to sustain stable homes, perhaps because of drug and alcohol problems and associated anti-social behaviour, will face frequent house moves and social exclusion.

On the other hand, families who are provided with inadequate and unsuitable housing in localities with many social problems will be hampered in their opportunities to integrate and develop supportive networks. Jack and Gill (2003) also describe the ways in which issues of homelessness can lead to a breakdown of contacts including disruption of Health Visitor contacts. For children there can be disruption of schooling or of assessment of additional needs and living in temporary housing can be associated with accidents and risk of poor health.

Focusing on housing

- Study in Toronto by Leslie (2005) indicated that housing issues could be associated with:
  - children being received into care
  - delays in returning children home from care
- Leslie draws links with Maslow's hierarchy of needs – and the importance of 'shelter'

Department for **Education**

9

Leslie's study in Toronto (2005) examined 'the links between inadequate housing supports for families with limited financial means and placement of children in care' (p.219). It was a replication of an earlier study. 191 family service workers in a large child welfare agency completed a questionnaire in relation to open cases in which they were asked:

'In your opinion, was the family's housing situation one of the factors that resulted in a temporary placement of a child/children into care?'

'In your opinion, was there any delay of the return home of the child from care due to any housing related problem?'

(Leslie 2005, p220)

Housing situations influenced the decision to admit to care for 39 families (20.7%), especially eviction and no permanent home. Of the 134 children looked after away from home housing was associated with delay of return in 11.5% of cases, including inadequate amount of living space, no affordable home or no permanent home. It may be interesting to ask the participants the same two questions and gain their reflections on their practice experiences in relation to neglected children in particular.

Leslie (2005) reminds us of Maslow's hierarchy of needs (1970) and of the basic importance of 'shelter' as a fundamental need. He suggests that if parents are struggling to meet the basic needs, including for adequate shelter, then they will find it difficult to 'achieve more altruistic and empathic ways of relating to family member' (p217).

Understanding environmental factors

N13 4

Overviews of child deaths and serious cases

- 'In Brandon et.al.'s (2008) sample of 47 cases there was evidence of house moves for a third of parents or carers; a similar proportion were living in poor conditions
- Sinclair and Bullock (2002) found evidence of poverty or accommodation problems in 17 out of 40 cases and in 19 cases the families had moved frequently
- 4 in 10 families had frequently changed address in both the Owers et.al. (1999) and the Brandon et.al. (2002) studies'

Department for **Education** (Vincent 2010, p)

10

Whilst not specifically focused on neglect, this summary of issues from overviews of child death and serious case reviews highlights the prevalence of housing issues in the most serious and fatal maltreatment situations. These studies relate to England and Wales, but Vincent (2010) found similar patterns in cases in Scotland.

Housing and neglect

In a study of 712 children under eight from 555 families referred because of concerns about neglect or emotional abuse Thoburn *et.al.* (2000) found that:

- 59% lived in over-crowded housing conditions
- 10% had had 5 or more house moves in the previous five years

Department for **Education**

11

This study focuses more specifically on issues of neglect.

Assess housing issues

Assessment should be built around three main areas:
1. adequacy of housing for family's needs
2. how housing and location structure human relationships
3. family's perception of their accommodation

(Jack and Gill 2003)

Department for **Education**

12

Taking all this into account Jack and Gill (2003) offer a helpful structure to consider when assessing housing. At this stage it would be helpful to engage in a discussion with participants about the specific issues they would identify from their practice in relation to neglected children and their families.

If the group is multi-disciplinary it would be an interesting exercise to ask them to describe the impact of housing issues on their realm – for example, for teachers to reflect on the impact of housing on education, for health visitors to reflect on its impact on health and so on.

Impact of housing

"Promoting improved housing policies for children and families with limited financial means will promote child, family and community wellbeing."

(Leslie 2004)

Department for **Education**

13

This quote ends the specific focus on housing.

What is community?

- Administrative/official boundaries
- Geographical boundaries
- Virtual communities?

Department for **Education**

14

The term 'community' is used in many different ways to denote different things.

Discussion point: How would you define a community? How many communities do you belong to? Are they all 'real'?

Communities can be described geographically or in relation to common interests or connections. Geographical boundaries: can mean different things to different people:

1. Someone isolated within an area may view the immediate geographical location as their community.
2. Black children and parents living on a primarily white estate may relate more readily to a more dispersed geographical community.

Increasingly, people are also inhabiting virtual, global communities which open up opportunities, but also poses additional dangers of exploitation and maltreatment.

5

Important considerations

- Demographic composition of communities
- Is the community safe?
- Are there support services or advice services (i.e. financial)?
- Urban-rural dimension in relation to poverty
- Do families' use the resources?

Department for
Education

15

It is difficult to discuss community in detail without local knowledge because areas vary so much and, in particular, urban and rural issues can be very different. This slide presents some issues for participants to consider when undertaking their assessment and planning on behalf of neglected children.

Demographic composition of communities - is there a lack of resources or facilities within the community? Is the community safe? Consider:

1. physical danger within the environment: dangerous buildings, unsuitable play areas
2. dangerous roads
3. danger from people within the community
4. danger from prevalence of drugs within the community.

Does the community have protective factors?

Community may be reasonably resourced, but:

- **do families know of the services/resources?**
- **are they aware of potential benefits?**
- **are they confident enough to access them?**

What are community resources?

- Systems of help, support, advice, guidance and general activities to which families have access: social integration
- The social capital within the community, including all the formal and informal networks of which the family is part: housing

Department for
Education

16

Community resources can be perceived differently in terms of whether you are a child, man or woman and the level and nature of resources may impact on how adults perform as parents. However, Spencer and Baldwin (2005) caution against taking too narrow a view on social capital. They suggest that the wider socio-economic forces can be great and make it extremely difficult to build social capital at a local level:

Too narrow a focus on localities risks placing the burden of change on the most vulnerable, emphasizing the moral and social responsibilities of parents and demonizing young people, without taking full account of wider influences. Regeneration and community development initiatives can only play a part in building safe, healthy and supportive communities alongside far reaching economic, educational and employment policies. Attempts to increase social capital need to take full and realistic account of these structural factors alongside far-reaching economic, educational and employment policies

(Spencer and Baldwin 2005, p.38)

Neglected children are some of the most likely to be living in some of the most disadvantaged areas alongside other disadvantaged children and their families.

Understanding environmental factors

N13 6

Each of these aspects of community can be considered in relation to parents and children. The issues are developed in more detail in the exercise: N13 Understanding environmental factors, but examples of each include:

Aspects of community	Parents	Children
Practical resources	Employment Good local shops	Good quality, accessible play Local schools
Natural networks	Non-threatening relations with neighbours Balanced community (mixed age)	Established supportive local networks Integration between school and community networks
Child and family safety	Community members perceived as safe	Children perceive their immediate environment as safe rather than threatening
Community norms	Established community norms around child care practice and values	Positive sense of identity and belonging conveyed to all children
Individual child and family	Personal resources and knowledge to access available resources	Developing confidence in local networks
Cumulative impact (positive)	Feel supported in the community Community perceived as good place to bring up children	Children feel community is a good place Children feel safe and valued
Cumulative impact (negative)	Parents ambitions are to leave the community	Children feel threatened, frightened and under-valued

As with housing, these factors can all interact. Social integration may impact upon the employment factor.

The degree to which a family may be integrated into their community may relate to the availability and accessibility of resources: if families are less integrated into local communities and networks, they may feel less able to access services or have less knowledge about how to (Jack 2000).

Understanding environmental factors

N13 7

Link between social integration and child protection

Research overview in mid-90s, suggested that a possible link between social isolation/ disorganisation and child protection concerns can be attributed to:

- the disengagement of the family from the community
- less sharing of resources
- little awareness of local services
- limited social capital
- children's more limited social networks.

Department for
Education

19

In terms of social integration, again, the research is limited especially research that focuses specifically on neglect. Moncher (1995) indicated that concrete support from work or school associates and emotional support in non-critical relationships were important in predicting decreased potential for physical abuse.

Neglect and isolation

Parents of neglected children:

- often lack social support
- tend to be isolated
- feel lonely
- have less access to emotionally supportive relationships

(Horwath 2007)

Department for
Education

20

Horwath (2007) summarises a range of research which has suggested that mothers who neglect their children feel more lonely and less supported, even if objectively there are people in their community who could potentially be a support, 'it appears although neglectful mothers may have access to a social network they have less access to emotionally satisfying relationships, which in turn leads to a sense of loneliness' (p.122). The equivalent studies have not been undertaken with fathers of neglected children.

Parents who misuse substances may have a number of acquaintances – but if all are involved in drug use the connections are likely to be built around substance misuse but not around the sharing of other interests. Parents may, often be in the company of others, but not experience reciprocal and supportive relationships.

Neglected children

- Neglected children have some of the most pressing needs for access to wider resources
- Resilience is associated with connections in the community and with access to resources beyond the home
- Plans for neglected children should consider ways in which resilience can be nurtured by building on community resources

Department for
Education

21

Neglected children can be amongst some of the most isolated children in society. They also have some of the most to gain from interventions that promote their wider connections and sense of community. Such links can often be built via school and local formal services for children. These children will often require a lot of support to access the more informal community supports – mentors can be especially helpful here.

Overall, the key message from the presentation is to stress the importance of assessing issues of housing and community and planning to address any identified issues that may be contributing to neglect or exacerbating its impact upon the child's wellbeing.

Understanding environmental factors

N13 8