

Handout

Developmental impact of neglect, internal models and learned helplessness

When emotional needs are neglected practitioners can struggle to intervene affectively. Although many practitioners voice their frustrations at how difficult it is to evidence neglect, it may not be the evidence that is lacking but the ability to analyse this evidence in a way which can provide the mandate for intervention. Emotional neglect occurs where “hostile or indifferent parental behaviour...damages a child’s self-esteem, downgrades a sense of achievement, diminishes a sense of belonging and stands in the way of healthy, vigorous and happy development” (Iwaniec 1995, p.5). A clearer understanding of the nature and impact of emotional neglect can aid more accurate assessment of need, in turn informing more effective interventions across a range of services.

Persistent neglect can have a significant impact on children and young people’s development. The long-term impact of neglect has been recognised by some research to be more severe than that of abuse (Hildyard and Wolfe 2002, Howe 2005, Trickett and McBride-Chang 1995) and the impact can make it extremely difficult for neglected children and young people to access the services and supports they need. Neglected children are less likely to see themselves as worthy of anything better or capable of bringing about change, as neglect creates apathy, passivity and social withdrawal (Crittenden 1981).

Children and young people who have experienced neglectful, disengaged parenting may not have learned to regulate their own feelings and emotions. They may have developed a range of behavioural adaptations which are designed to elicit love and interest from inconsistent and unreliable carers. These behaviours demand and provoke a response (any response being better than none) and place great demands on all social and emotional interactions (Howe 2005).

Attachment Theory

For an overview of attachment theory for child welfare and protection practitioners, see Daniel et al. (2010).

Attachment is a useful theory for helping practitioners to understand the impact of neglectful caregiving on children and young people. Early experiences of care provide a template or “internal working model” of the world which can help the developing child maintain their safety through their relationships with their caregivers. Early experiences lay down this theory of the world across three broad areas:

- **A theory of self – who am I? Do I belong? Am I loved and lovable?**
- **A theory of others – are my carers trustworthy? Are they predictable? Do they love me?**
- **A theory of the world – is the world benign? Is it a safe place?**

Children who are abused can develop internal working models like the following:

- **me – unloved and unlovable, responsible for parents’ anger, not understood**
- **other people – unpredictable, aggressive, not understanding, dangerous**
- **the world – essentially hostile and harmful.**