

Childhood Neglect: Improving Outcomes for Children

Learning Outcomes

To assess family and environmental factors that may affect a child and their needs.

Audience Groups 1-8 (Working Together 2010)

Time 30 minutes

Key Reading

Broad, B. and Skinner, A. (2005) *Relative Benefits: Placing Children in Kinship Care*. London: British Association of Adoption and Fostering.

Cleaver, H. (2006) 'The influence of parenting and other family relationships.' In J. Aldgate, D. Jones, W. Rose and C. Jeffery (eds) *The Developing World of the Child*, pp.122-140. London: Jessica Kingsley Publishers.

Cooney, C (1995) 'Neglectful Mothers, Their Mothers, and Partners: The Significance of Mutual Aid.' *Child Abuse and Neglect* 19(8) 885-895

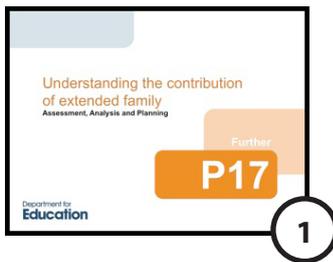
Links to Common Core

Common Core 3 Safeguarding and promoting the welfare of the child (skills: relate, recognize and take considered action). Make considered judgements about how to act to safeguard and promote a child or young person's welfare, where appropriate consulting with the child, young person, parent or carer to inform your thinking.

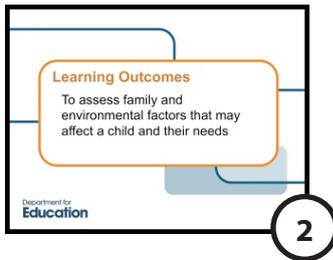
further

Understanding the contribution
of the extended
family

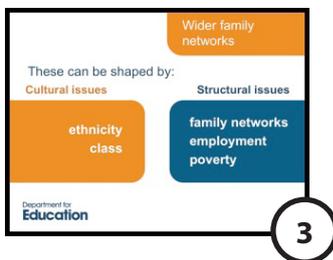
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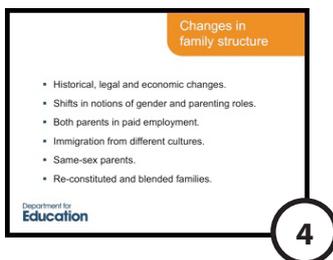
In a general introduction it will be helpful to discuss what 'extended' family is.



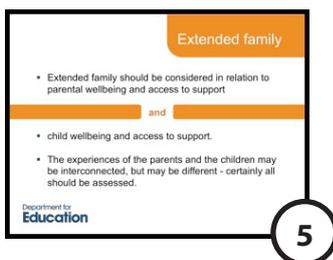
Learning outcomes.



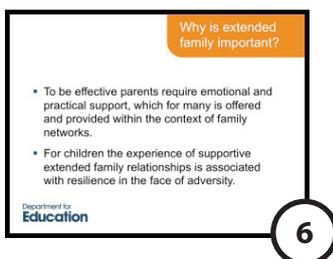
Discussion point: How do participants conceptualise family networks and what influences them? Networks: economic forces, cultural forces? Before moving into consideration of neglected children it is helpful to consider the broader context in contemporary Britain and ways in which family networks are shaped and maintained.



Cleaver (2006) gives a good overview of the changes in the nature of our understanding of 'family' over recent decades. Participants will be able to identify many of the factors that have contributed to our changing understandings of family, and consequently, of extended family.



There can be a tendency for assessment to provide scant attention to issues of wider family in relation to parents and to children. Reports may contain brief statements such as 'this family is isolated' or 'the family has little contact with extended family.' Such statements need much greater elaboration – ideally the networks of parents and children should both be described and their significance analysed.



The concept of resilience is helpful in relation to both adults and children. The availability of wider support is a well-established protective factor at any age or developmental stage.

Assumptions and expectations

- Practitioners need to be aware of their own views about what is an 'ideal' family.
- Assumptions that two parents are better than one.
- Cultural stereotypes about access to extended family support.

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Discussion point: Participants could be asked to discuss or work in pairs to explore some of the assumptions held in relation to family life. Where there is significant disharmony, for example, two parents living in the same household may not be better for children. Contact with extended family can be supportive, but can also be damaging, as will be explored in more detail as the presentation develops.

There is a separate presentation available 'Assessing the role of father figures' (presentation 16) that goes into much more detail about the role of men with neglected children.

Supporting families and carers

- For many families, relationships between adult partners within the family exert the most influence followed by close relatives beyond the household and then friends, neighbours, professionals.
- Amongst wider family relationships it is usually those between parents and their own parents (usually the mother) which are the most important/influential.

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Whilst being cautious about making assumptions, this slide offers generalities about the tendency within families in contemporary Britain and provides the background context for the next slide. The most common type of support offered includes:

- advice about the children
- personal relationships
- financial problems
- practical help.

This source of support is not to the exclusion of others, for example, health visitors are a source of advice about pre-school children's behaviour and friends are often a source of support for more private emotional matters.

Maternal grandmothers

- Mothers of neglected children tend to maintain relationships with their mothers.
- They often live near them and see them often.
- At the same time, they may hold negative views about them.
- The relationships tend not to be reciprocally supportive - limited opportunities to spend time with parents or to reflect on events.

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This slide draws on research by Coohey (1995) that explored the relationships between mothers whose children are neglected and their own mothers. Although they lived close to them and saw them often the relationships were less positive than the kind of relationships described by non-neglecting mothers. They saw their mothers as lacking warmth, being uncaring and unable to control their anger. They were less interested in receiving emotional support and the help they received tended to be baby-sitting. They also gave less support back to their mothers.

Given that neglect often presents as an inter-generational pattern this finding is not surprising. Links can be made with theory – especially the importance of taking a developmental and ecological approach and considering the history of relationships and their impact upon current functioning.

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Unhelpful family relationships

"The social networks of neglectful mothers tend to be dominated by relatives who are critical rather than supportive. Interactions with relatives may be frequent but not very helpful"

(Gaskin 1993, p.18, cited in Stevenson 2007)

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As well as including minimal assessment of wider family relationships, plans can also include vague aims to improve family relationships. However, there may be good reasons why people have distanced themselves from extended family. Their own experiences may have been of abuse and / or neglect – in some cases abuse and neglect may be ongoing.

For example, a mother who avoids her parents' home may herself have been sexually abused by her father and may want to keep her children safe:

'Practitioners should bear in mind that the maternal grandmother may well have maltreated her own children and may have poor parenting skills.'

(Coohey 2005, p90)

In particular when assessing the potential for grandparents and others to provide care for children, practitioners are encouraged to assess knowledge about parenting and levels of insight into the quality of parenting they provided.

Assessment

- Ascertain the facts about the family network.
- Detail the level of material and practical support on offer.
- Explore the emotional quality of the relationships.
- Consider levels of reciprocity.
- Assess risks of harm posed to parents and children by extended family members.

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This slide is a prompt to practitioners to make sure that in their assessments they should not only describe who is in the family network, they should also assess the nature and quality of the relationships.

This is a point at which to take stock with practitioners about the implications of the information for their own assessment, analysis and planning practice. They can be asked to reflect how much attention is routinely paid to extended family in assessment and planning. They could also be asked to reflect what they could do to improve practice within their own setting.

Children and extended family

One study of parents of young children in a disadvantaged area of Bristol noted that despite high levels of family breakdown (40%) experienced by the respondents, for the majority there was regular contact with local kin.

(Gil, Turner and Bland 2000)

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Moving to focus more on children's experiences, this slide gives a pointer to the broad context for children in the population about the extent to which extended family members can be important.

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Neglected children and family relationships

- There is an assumption that neglected children tend to be living with lone mothers – but frequently the mothers do have a partner.
- There may be a number of half-siblings and step-siblings in the same household.
- Children themselves may not always be clear about the biological relationships.

(Daniel and Taylor 2005)

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Practitioners will know from their own experience about the complexity of many neglected children’s family circumstances. The research into practice with fathers and father-figures points to the paucity of practitioner attention to men in children’s lives, so looking more broadly it is clear that understanding of wider networks is likely to be limited (Daniel and Taylor 2005). Families with neglected children often have larger numbers of children than the general population and the children often have different fathers.

There may also be re-constituted and blended families. The children may not always be clear about their biological relationships with members of extended families. They may, in particular, have limited contact with paternal extended family. Knowledge of biological links is not necessarily important for children – if a child has contact with someone in their wider circle who is kind to them it may not be important for them to know the exact relationships.

However, it is important for an assessment of a child’s family network to be accurate about the nature and quality of relationships. The language used in the family may not reflect fact. For example, many people use the term ‘step’ to describe half siblings; they may describe a child with whom they share a parent as a ‘step-sister’ when in fact she is a ‘half-sister’ and vice-versa.

Ecomaps and family trees can be very helpful here and should consider people and relationships, not just households. It is also very important for practitioners to find out from parents about what the children’s understandings are about the family connections – for example, it could be very damaging for a child to hear from a practitioner that a loved grandmother is not, in fact, their biological father’s mother.

Siblings

- Only children can be more vulnerable to the impact of parental substance misuse or mental ill-health.
- Siblings can be important attachment figures.
- Children may provide care for younger siblings.
- Siblings can support and comfort each other.

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Siblings (including half-siblings and step-siblings) can be sources of support and sources of stress and harm. No generalisations can be made about siblings in the context of neglect other than to emphasise the importance of assessing the nature and quality of relationships from each child’s perspective.

Neglect and extended family

- Neglected children can benefit from the availability of wider family.
- Family members can step in during times of parental ill-health or other incapacity.
- They can offer a place for children to go during episodes of domestic abuse.

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Practitioners are encouraged to look at the extended family when exploring potential sources of support for children and this is important. This slide encourages participants to consider the positive support that extended family can offer to children.

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However ...

- Use of drugs can alienate extended family.
- Domestic abuse can be associated with rifts with family or deliberate actions to isolate mothers from others.
- The extended family may also have problems or be unsafe carers.
- If the children's behaviour has been affected by their experience of neglect extended family may be unwilling to care for them.

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This slide tempers the previous slide by showing ways in which the family relationships can be fractured and complex. Children can be frequently caught up in these complex family dynamics, may be used as go-betweens, and are often more aware of tensions and acrimony than the adults involved realise.

Substitute care

The nature of care is changing:

- Increasing numbers of looked after children have challenging emotional and behaviour difficulties that impact on their substitute families.
- As a result, a significant number of foster care placements break down and children experience numerous placements, further damaging their attachments and sense of wellbeing.
- There is increasing concern over the effect of a lack of consistency in the quality and structures of local authority fostering services.

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This slide reminds participants of some of the concerns about substitute care by foster carers. There is a full presentation (presentation 22) about looked after children 'Working with looked after children' – here the slide is a reminder of some of the spurs towards considering relatives as possible respite or more longer-term carers for children.

Where there are intermittent problems with parenting, extended family often step in on an informal basis. For example, parental mental health problems can be associated with fluctuations in parenting capacity and grandparents and others can assist with childcare during periods of problems.

Assessment, analysis and planning can explore what informal arrangements are in place and their quality. In some cases a continuation of informal patterns of care may be appropriate; sometimes there is a need for more structure to be built around informal plans. And sometimes, there is a need to move towards longer term care by relatives.

Kinship care

Benefits include:

- children feeling loved and valued
- having a sense of belonging and identity through strong continuing family ties
- having more stable and lasting placements.

(Broad et al. 2001; Harden et al. 2004)

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There is an increased body of research about kinship care, although there is a need for further research. Broad (2007) provides a good review, and Aldgate and MacIntosh (2006) and Burgess et al. (2010) have undertaken research on children's perspectives of kinship care.

Kinship care

Kinship care is not a panacea:

- kinship carers required a different kind of engagement by social workers -
- a family-centred rather than systems orientated one.

(Broad & Skinner 2005)

There are risks associated with greater use of inappropriate kinship placements because of a lack of other fostering alternatives and resource issues.

(Broad 2007)

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There is a potential for bias in qualitative studies of kinship care because samples tend to be of young people who are doing well in kinship care, but with that proviso, research on young people's views suggests that they feel safe, cared for and loved when placed with kin (Aldgate and MacIntosh 2006; Broad et al. 2001; Broad 2004; Burgess et al. 2010).

There is an aversion to being accommodated in stranger foster care, which is perceived as marking them out as different from their friends and carries stigma. Contact with parents seems to be more frequent and informally arranged for young people living in kinship care, although Burgess et al. (2010) found that the informality could be a problem where relationships with parents were not good. Young people feel a sense of connection with their family of origin and their original family unit is important to them.

Children's views

"If you ever asked her she wouldn't want me to call her "ma". I asked her one night how would you feel if I called you "ma"? She said she wouldn't want that cos you've got a mum.

She may not be a very good mum. But I can see why she wants me to call her nana cos the other kids would get mixed up and it would be better calling her nana"

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In Burgess et al's study (2010) of 12 young people's views many of the transitions to kinship care had been fluid – many children and young people had moved back and forth between their parent and relatives' houses; in other cases all had been in the same household and parents had moved out.

Concepts of kin were also fluid with, for example, two young people living with their mother's ex-partner's mother who was not a blood relation. The young people felt very positive about their living arrangements, received a lot of support from their kin carers, had adapted well to their circumstances and understood the kin relationships.

Assessment

Use a range of methods including:

- ecomaps
- genograms
- toys, dolls, drawings
- family photographs
- family stories and anecdotes
- observation.

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This slide suggests some of the tools that can be used to help assess children's extended family relationships.

Overall, the participants should understand the need to assess the importance of extended family relationships to parents and children. They should consider the ways in which they may be helpful or unhelpful and how to plan to ameliorate the harm or build on the potential. The fact that parents are often isolated, and often for good reasons, is one of the factors that contributes to the need for longer-term formal and semi-formal support from services in cases of child neglect.

Notes