

Childhood Neglect: Improving Outcomes for Children

Learning Outcomes

To understand the barriers to recognition and response of neglect.

Audience Groups 2-6 (Working Together 2010)

Time 30 minutes

Key Reading

Daniel, B., Taylor, J. and Scott, J. (2010) Noticing and Helping the Neglected Child. London: Department for Children, Schools and Families.

Davies C. and Ward H. (2012) Safeguarding Children Across Services: Messages from research on identifying and responding to child maltreatment. Executive Summary. London: Department for Education.

Horwath, J. (2005) 'Is this child neglect? The influence of differences in perceptions of child neglect on social work practice.' In J. Taylor, and B. Daniel (eds) Child Neglect: Practice Issues for Health and Social Care, pp.73-96. London: Jessica Kingsley Publishers.

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.

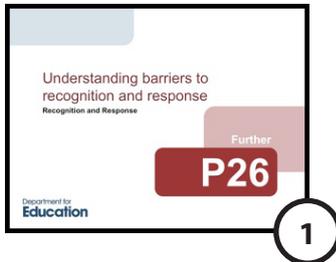
Links to Common Core

Common Core 3 Safeguarding the welfare of the child (skills: personal skills). Understand the different forms and extent of abuse and their impact on children's development.

further

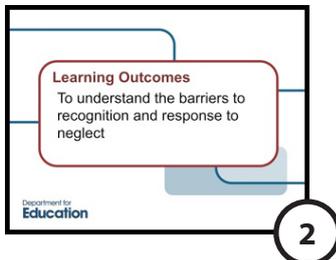
Understanding barriers
to recognition
and response

N26₁



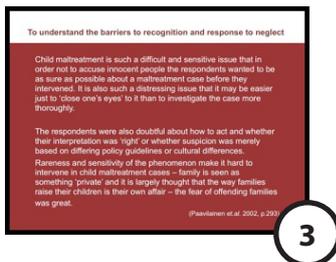
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This presentation would work best as part of an interactive discussion about some of the issues and factors that can affect recognition and response to neglect.



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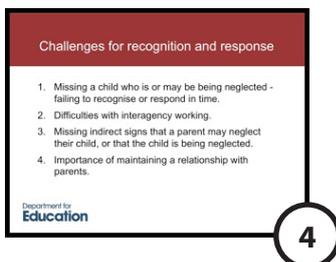
Learning outcomes.



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Paavilainen et al. (2002) gathered the views of 513 nurses and physicians in a children's hospital in Finland. 86% of the hospital-based staff study said that when they suspect maltreatment they discuss it with the team of colleagues; 5% that they refer to an outside agency (despite there being mandatory reporting legislation in Finland), 13% that they discuss the concerns with the parents or child and 1% that they do nothing.

This quote is long, but it aptly sums up the range of concerns that many people have about intervening with neglect.



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The issues are grouped under 4 main headings, but all are interconnected and inter-linked. Some are underpinned by the research study on recognition and response (Daniel, Taylor and Scott 2010) for which the briefing is available in the pack.

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Missing a child who is or may be being neglected - issues

- Lack of focus on the child
- Errors of human reasoning
- Working with hostile/resistant families
- Feelings of helplessness
- Dual role: support vs surveillance

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Discussion point: Why do people miss a child who is being neglected?

These factors that can be associated with missing a child, who is or may be being neglected should be recognisable to practitioners from all professions. A lack of focus on a child is not confined to those working with adults only. Health visitors and children's services workers can become too focused on the parent and their concerns and can overlook the needs of children (Davies and Ward 2011). Teachers and other education professionals have an explicit focus on the child, but can also overlook the social and emotional issues indicative of neglect if they are overly focused on issues of learning and/or behaviour.

The issue of errors of human reasoning was highlighted by Munro (1999) and refers to a range of common errors such as looking for evidence to confirm one's initial snap judgement and overlooking evidence that challenges a settled view. Her work highlights the need for all professionals to have the opportunity to stand back from situations and to check that they are not influenced by such errors. Munro's work also reminds people of the importance of seeking out all available information about the parent and child's circumstances because different people in different parts of the system may hold vital nuggets of information that could be available if sought.

Lawrence (2002) identified 'professional inaction' in the face of hostile and/or resistant families. This is a theme that comes up in many serious case reviews (Brandon et al. 2009, 2010) and can be a factor in preventing effective responses to neglected children. Sometimes professionals also feel rather helpless when faced with the chaotic or complex nature of the families where children are neglected. And the problems of balancing support and surveillance were identified over two decades ago (Department of Health 1991) but remain an ongoing issue for many practitioners such as health visitors, family support workers, voluntary agency practitioners. Finding a way to raise concerns and then to take them further by referring to statutory agencies remains a challenge.

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Missing a child who is or may be being neglected - issues

- Anxieties about parental culpability and intent.
- Confusions about whether there need to be direct signs of neglect and evident impact on the child's development.
- Professionals' fears of getting it wrong.

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Practitioners can find it difficult to disentangle issues of parental culpability and intent. Frequently it is very clear that parents are not deliberately neglecting their children's needs and that they are facing many challenges in their own lives. Participants can be reminded, though, that the starting point has to be the impact or potential impact upon the child, and that issues of intent do not need to affect the initial recognition that the child may need additional help – as stated in Taylor and Daniel (2005):

'...the establishment of intent is not necessary to determine that neglect is occurring, nor is it necessary as a precursor to a decision that protective intervention is needed. It is, however, essential in reaching a decision about the nature of that intervention and the extent to which legal authority will be required to back it up' (pp.14-15).

Glaser and Prior (2003) make it very clear that the definition of neglect should not depend on the existence of indications of current harm to the child. Intervention should not be delayed until there are actual signs of compromised development but should aim to prevent signs of harm. As stated in Working Together:

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

Practitioners from professions other than children's social work may have a range of anxieties about jumping to conclusions and may also have fears about catapulting families into section 47 enquiries on the basis of insufficient evidence. They therefore need to consider what professional advice they can access within their agency to discuss and check their concerns.

Not missing a child who is or may be being neglected - skills

- Skills in assessment.
- Skills in identifying when a child's needs are not being met.
- Appropriate use of intuition.
- Recognising and raising difficult issues.
- 'Forceful curiosity' (Scott 2003).

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This list of skills to help overcome the challenges has been derived from the following authors:

- Skills in assessment (Cleaver, Walker with Meadows 2004).
- Skills in identifying when a child's needs are not being met (Scott 2003).
- Use of intuition (Ling and Luker 2000).
- Recognising and raising difficult issues (Peckover 2003).
- Forceful curiosity' (Scott 2003).

Participants can be asked to discuss their confidence in their own skills.

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Interagency working - issues

- Failure to challenge colleagues.
- Different professionals have different foci.
- Role confusion.
- Insufficient scepticism.

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- Failure to challenge colleagues (CM 5730 2003).
- Different professionals have different focus (Stanley 2003).
- Role confusion is a barrier (Birchall and Hallett 1995).
- Insufficient scepticism (Parton 2004).

Interagency working - issues

- Fear that the 'cure' might be worse than the problem.
- Possibility that no resources will follow referral to children's social care.
- Previous experience of not being taken seriously by children's social care.

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Practitioners from a range of universal services often do not have problems with recognising a neglected child, and participants may well be able to describe experiences of being worried about a child and suspecting a backdrop of neglect.

However, practitioners can feel it is sometimes a challenge to convey these concerns to local authority children's social care services and for those concerns to be taken seriously and acted upon.

Interagency working - skills

- Seeing perspective of others
- Role clarification
- Challenging other professionals' views
- Assertiveness
- Building trust – showing respect, helping, negotiating and compromising

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The evidence for the benefits of role clarification, being able to challenge other views and assertiveness comes from literature that indicates where lack of these skills has led to difficulties.

Darlington has undertaken research into the potential for children to fall between the gaps of adult and child services – especially adult mental health services and services focused on child protection – and she has identified the importance of trust, respect, helping, negotiating and compromising (Darlington and Feeney 2008).

Missing indirect signs – issues

- There is little evidence about how and whether parents and children are able to recognise that they need help in relation to neglect.
- For many reasons parents and neglected children are unlikely to directly seek either informal or formal help.

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The messages on indirect signs are drawn from a systematic literature review on recognising and responding to neglect (Daniel, Taylor and Scott 2010). The research questions underpinning the review were:

- What is known about the ways in which children and families directly and indirectly signal their need for help?
- To what extent are practitioners equipped to recognise and respond to the indications that a child's needs are likely to be, or are being neglected, whatever the cause?
- Does the evidence suggest that professional response could be swifter?

The briefing from the study is available in the pack as background reading.

The study examined the existing empirical evidence about how parents and children directly and indirectly signal their need for support.

A key finding is that there is little research into direct help-seeking – the indications are that parents and children do find it difficult to identify that they need help and ask for it, but more research is needed on this issue. On the other hand, there was a lot of evidence about the parenting factors likely to be associated with neglect that should alert practitioners to potential concerns. The factors would confirm the practice experience and wisdom of participants.

Missing indirect signs – Issues

Neglect is associated with:

- impoverished home environments, fewer parental resources, receipt of welfare assistance, problems accessing childcare
- previous history of maltreatment, previous removal of a child
- parental substance misuse, severity of drug use, a drug-using social network
- domestic abuse
- parental mental health problems, depressive symptoms
- parental childhood sexual abuse
- young parent, 2 or more children.

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Researchers have attempted to disentangle the interactions between factors which may contribute to neglect and, to date, have not found it possible to develop a clear causal pathway – instead the research confirms that there are associations, but that the interactions are complex. The key message is that an accumulation of stressors elevates the likelihood of a child being neglected:

- when poverty is controlled for, risk of neglect was found to be associated with an impoverished home environment, fewer parental resources and a previous history of maltreatment (Scannapieco and Connell, 2003) and parental substance misuse (Ondersma, 2002)
- when tracking families considered to be ‘at risk’ the likelihood of neglect was elevated by domestic abuse (McGuigan and Pratt, 2001)
- when examining cases of substantiated neglect, substantiation was shown to be predicted by parental mental health or substance misuse problems (Carter and Myers, 2007)
- in the context of confirmed maternal substance misuse, risk of neglect was elevated by factors including childhood sexual abuse, severity of drug use, a drug-using social network, receipt of welfare assistance and problems accessing childcare (Cash and Wilke, 2003) and youth of parent, 2 or more children, previous child removal and depressive symptoms (Nair et al., 1997).

Missing indirect signs – Issues

In children various forms of neglect are associated with:

- increased levels of internalising and externalising behaviour in children at age three
- peer relationships and externalising behaviour at age six
- impaired socialisation and problems with daily living skills at age eight.

(Dubowitz 2002 and 2004)

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In relation to children, there is evidence from the USA to suggest that there are likely to be indirect signs of neglect in compromised development at a young age:

- psychological neglect is associated with increased levels of internalising and externalising behaviour in children at age 3 (Dubowitz et al. 2002)
- psychological neglect is associated with teacher report of problems in peer relationships and externalising behaviour at age 6 (Dubowitz et al. 2004)
- general neglect as identified by child protective services (i.e. children’s social care in the UK) is associated with behaviour problems, impaired socialisation and problems with daily living skills at age 8 as is the specific neglect of medical needs (Dubowitz et al. 2005).

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Seeing indirect signs - skills

Professional capacity to:

- provide a clear, factual account of the factors that may be affecting parenting
- describe the circumstances within which the child is living
- delineate potential effects on the child
- describe actual signs of neglect in the child.

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Research based around the rating of vignettes shows that the general public tend to give higher ratings of concern than professionals, and that professionals working in universal services give higher ratings of concern than those working in child protection settings.

Discussion point: What might be the skills needs to identify the indirect signs of neglect?

It is likely that the term 'threshold' will be brought up in discussion because issues of 'thresholds' are a frequent source of anxiety. Buckley has depicted the problem as an 'egg-timer' where there are needs that are perceived to have to be squeezed through a narrow isthmus to get at the services below – and the isthmus is guarded by statutory child protection processes (Buckley 2005).

The aspiration is that access to services should not depend on attaining a system label – in this instance 'neglect' and that there should not be a concept of moving the child from 'outside' to 'inside' a system to get a service. The 'longing for clear thresholds' as Stevenson puts it (2007) is as in vain as the search for one settled definition. Practitioners therefore need to be able to coalesce around a clear focus on the needs of the child. The skills of describing the circumstances and delineating the actual, or likely impact, on the child's development are vital.

Seeing indirect signs - skills

- Confidence in one's own professional judgement
- Skill in communicating that judgement to others
- Capacity to communicate with others about the concerns for the child

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Skills continued.

Maintaining a relationship with parents - issues

- Support vs surveillance creates role conflict
- The basis of contact may not always be clear (for example, support coupled with monitoring)
- Parents often find it difficult to ask directly for help
- Parents who neglect their children often have low self-efficacy
- They are likely to be fearful of losing their children.

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Support vs surveillance creates role conflict (Oberle and Tenove 2000). Practitioners in settings such as children's centres may be ostensibly offering support whilst being expected to 'monitor' the quality of parenting. In effect they may be expected to undergo a form of covert assessment of parenting capacity. van Nijnatten, Hoogstede and Suurmond (2001) found that workers 'pretended' to form a team with parent and were not really demonstrating honest and open practice. Coupled with parental concerns about the powers of the system and parental low self-efficacy and self-esteem the development and maintenance of good relationships with parents whilst simultaneously identifying and acting on concerns about neglect can be highly challenging.

further

Maintaining a relationship with parents - skills

- Enabling a parent can be **key** to protecting a child
- Open and honest practice
- Listening
- Conveying empathy
- Finding common ground
- Role clarification:
 - at outset of working relationship
 - be supportive first
 - convey in honest, jargon free terms, the reason for involvement
- Pro-social modelling

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The skills are drawn from a range of authors:

- **listening** (Gray 2002)
- **conveying empathy** (Shulman 1991; Forrester et al. 2008)
- **finding common ground** (Jack et al. 2002)
- **role clarification** (Trotter 2002)
 - **at outset of working relationship** (Jack et al. 2002)
 - **not necessarily – be supportive first** (Peckover 2002)
 - **convey in honest, jargon free terms, the reason for involvement** (Shulman 1991)
- **pro-social modelling** (Trotter 2004; Ferguson 2001).

What can practitioners do?

- Recognise direct, and indirect, indications of the need for help
- Operate as part of a protective network that actively helps children
- Recognise and assess aspects of behaviour and lifestyle that may impact on parenting

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The points here and on the next slide aim to encourage participants to communicate effectively with parents and to encourage parental involvement in the discussions about concerns – research suggests that parents may well be able to identify their own concerns if they are asked the right questions and are supported.

What can practitioners do?

- Work closely with parents in determining what aspects of neglect parents themselves can identify in their parenting.
- Be proactive in seeking creative and supportive ways to ask people about their parenting concerns.
- Reflect on the skills that can make a real difference to children and young people.
- Identify skills for further development.

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Encourage participants to identify their own skills and the skills they would like to develop.

Notes