



## Guide to Recognising Neglect

## Introduction

Over the last decade awareness of the extent of child neglect has grown and it is increasingly receiving more attention nationally and locally. Child protection statistics, prevalence research and enquiry reports indicate that too many children are still experiencing chronic neglect throughout large parts of their childhood and are not getting the help they need when they need it. Practitioners also feel there is a lack of agreement around what constitutes child neglect and when professionals should intervene. Thus the early indicators of neglect and opportunities for preventative interventions are often missed, and the professional staffs tasked to work in this area need support and training to develop the skills to address it.

A crucial part of any intervention to prevent families coming to Children's Social Care attention due to neglect is the "early offer" of help proposed by Professor Eileen Munro in her final report so that families who do not meet the criteria for social care can be helped to address problems before they escalate. There is also emerging research evidence regarding effective early intervention and the difference that therapeutic support for children and their families can make. It is important to listen to the wishes of the child; however anyone working with a child has a duty to act in the child's best interest, which may mean contradicting their wishes.

This guide to recognising neglect is for practitioners across the children's workforce. It aims to address the issue of what neglect is, what it looks like in different age groups and when intervention is necessary. It should be used in conjunction with the Reading LSCB Thresholds Guidance Document which identifies appropriate provision for different stages of need, from No Additional Needs through to Acute Needs.

## What is neglect and when can neglect occur?

Neglect can occur throughout a child's life from pregnancy until adolescence. Neglect is not an event but rather an absence of appropriate care, often over a long period of time. It may be difficult to distinguish between neglect and material poverty. Many forms of physical neglect, such as inadequate clothing, exposure to environmental hazards and poor hygiene may be directly attributed to poverty. While some families do face great financial hardship, aspects of neglect cannot be dismissed or overlooked. Neglect is a serious form of maltreatment and can be fatal. It can be summed up as the persistent failure to meet a child's basic physical and/or psychological needs, likely to result in the serious impairment of the child's health or development.

Neglect may occur during pregnancy as a result of maternal substance abuse. Once a child is born, neglect may involve a parent or carer failing to:

- Provide adequate food, clothing and shelter (including exclusion from home or abandonment)
- Protect a child from physical and emotional harm or danger
- Ensure adequate supervision (including the use of inadequate care givers)
- Ensure access to appropriate medical care or treatment
- May also include neglect of, or unresponsiveness to a child's basic emotional needs  
(*Working Together 2015*)

Neglect can have a profound and long-lasting negative impact on a child's development, as noted in *'Realising the potential: tackling child neglect in Universal Services' - NSPCC 2015*.

Neglected children often become neglected adolescents and can become neglectful adults. In adolescence neglect can be a lack of parental guidance leading to a young person becoming involved in risky behaviour or criminal activities, staying out overnight without their parents knowing where they are, and running away to avoid maltreatment. There is an abundance of research into early years neglect compared with the small amounts conducted into adolescent neglect. Thus it is vital to raise awareness about neglected adolescents and the importance of working against preconceptions such as the resilience of 11 to 17 year olds to neglect.

## **Children particularly vulnerable to neglect**

Some children are especially vulnerable to neglect. Amongst them are children born prematurely or with very low birth weight, children with disabilities, adolescents, runaways, children in care, asylum seeking children and refugee children.

The neglect of children with disabilities has been largely invisible. The research that does exist indicates that disabled children are more vulnerable to maltreatment than non-disabled children. Reasons for this are varied and complex. Firstly, children with disabilities might be less able to communicate their needs and to access help outside their families or care settings. Secondly, the needs of children with disabilities are often demanding and can overstretch a family's capacity to provide adequate care.



## The effects of neglect

Neglect can be far-reaching in its consequences for a child. It is now recognised as one of the most dangerous forms of abuse because of its harmful and sometimes fatal effects. There is now a significant evidence base about its severe impact upon children's well-being and development. Not only will the experience of it make a child's life miserable but it can affect all aspects of their development. It is also likely to influence the relationships they make with others in both early and later life and have an impact on how they parent their own children. In the most extreme cases, neglect can lead to the death of a child or be one of the causes of non-accidental death. The main areas of impact on a child will depend on how early the neglect occurs, but neglect can have effects across the child's lifespan, and can lead to the following:

### *Health and physical effects:*

- Effect on early brain development (especially under two), which will influence how a child reacts to stress or other stimulating situations in early or later life.
- A child being underweight or grossly overweight
- Persistent infections
- Developmental delay such as walking or toileting
- Cognitive difficulties such as language delay, poor intellectual ability, an inability to concentrate or express feelings.
- Poor hygiene

### *Emotional effects:*

- Insecure attachment problems can lead to difficulties in developing emotional relationships with peers or adults.
- Low self-esteem and self-regard, anxiety and depression, over-compliance or anger/hostility.

### *Social effects:*

- Social isolation due to difficulties in forming and keeping friendships, being bullied or being ignored by peers.
- Social exclusion leading to becoming involved with groups of children who display anti-social behaviour or who may bully others.
- Behaviour difficulties which can make managing the school environment hard.
- Poor school attendance and attainment which means the child does not reach their potential.

### *Longer term effects:*

- Difficulties in maintaining relationships
- Lower educational achievements
- An increased risk of substance misuse
- Difficulties in assuming parenting responsibilities later on in life

## Factors contributing to neglect

A number of factors are commonly present in the lives of children experiencing neglect. These factors should not be viewed as causing neglect in all circumstances, but, whether in isolation or combined; these elements can provide early indication of the potential for neglectful care of a child:

- Mental health – one or both parents has mental health problems.
- Substance misuse – one or both parent misusing drugs and/or alcohol.
- Domestic violence – unstable and abusive relationships between adults or children.
- Low income – the family has low income (below 60% of the median).
- Material deprivation – the family cannot afford a number of food and clothing items.
- Cycles of neglect and the adult caregivers' experience of poor parenting as a child.
- Housing – the family lives in poor quality and/or overcrowded housing.
- Qualifications – no parent in the family has any academic or vocational qualifications.
- Illness/disability – at least one parent has a limiting long-standing illness, disability or infirmity.
- Poor parental functioning (including learning disabilities).
- Social isolation of the family in their community.

While poverty is believed to increase the risk of neglect, it is important to highlight that poverty does not predetermine neglect. The majority of low- income families are not neglectful and do provide loving homes for their children. When poverty co-exists with other forms of adversity however, it can negatively impact the parent's ability to cope and undermine their capacity to adequately respond to their child's needs.

Neglect may also occur as a short term reaction to a crisis – “ordinary people in extra ordinary circumstances.”

## Attributes of Neglectful Parents

The influence and importance of parents/carers is fundamental to a child's life. Therefore how they behave needs to be considered in our understanding of neglect. Key behaviours that professionals need to be aware of include:

- Inability to plan
- Lack of confidence about the future
- Difficulty in managing money
- Emotional immaturity
- Lack of knowledge of child's needs
- Large number of children in the home
- Teenage parents
- High stress levels



## What does neglect look like for the child?

*Key behavioural signs that you need to be aware of include:*

- Passive baby
- Constant hunger
- Constant tiredness
- Frequent lateness or non- attendance at school
- Destructive tendencies
- Low self-esteem
- Neurotic behaviour
- Demanding attention seeking behaviour
- Running away
- Compulsive stealing or scavenging
- No social relationships

*Key physical signs that you need to be aware of include:*

- Poor personal hygiene
- Poor state of clothing
- Emaciation, pot belly short stature
- Poor skin and hair tone
- Untreated medical conditions (Persistent head lice, burns, sunburn, injections of harmful substances and road traffic incident)

## What to do if you have identified a child at risk

Please refer to our Thresholds Guidance. Available on the Reading LSCB

Website: <http://www.readinglscb.org.uk/information-professionals/threshold-criteria/>

Protecting children from neglect and abuse is everyone's responsibility but Reading Borough Council's Children's Services department has the statutory responsibility to ensure that children and young people are kept safe. Follow this link to find out more: [RBC Concerned about a child](#)

### Children's Single Point of Access

The Children's Single Point of Access is how you to raise concerns about a child (pre-birth to 18 years old); this includes safeguarding and child protection. It is a single point of contact for all early help and children's social care services, including disabled children. The line is open to all practitioners and the general public.

There are 3 ways to contact the team:

- Using a web form, which is the most secure and effective way of requesting help for a child. The form can be found at: [www.reading.gov.uk/childrensreferralform](http://www.reading.gov.uk/childrensreferralform)
- Calling the team on 0118 937 3641
- Emailing the team on [ChildrensSinglePointofAccess@reading.gcsx.gov.uk](mailto:ChildrensSinglePointofAccess@reading.gcsx.gov.uk)

The Children's Single Point of Access is available 9am to 5pm, Monday to Friday (excluding bank holidays). Outside these hours, contact the Emergency Duty Team on 01344 786543

## Useful Contacts:

**If you are worried about a child please call: Children's Single Point of Access  
Telephone: 0118 9373641, Monday to Friday, 9am to 3pm (except Bank Holidays)**

**Outside of these hours contact the Emergency Duty Team  
Telephone: 01344 786543**

**If a child is at immediate risk call the Police on 999**

*many thanks to Southampton and Bracknell Forest LSCBs for allowing the use of the 'Really useful guide to recognising NEGLECT' for the basis of this booklet.*

*Berkshire LSCB Child Protection Procedures*

*<http://proceduresonline.com/berks>*