

NSPCC

The relationship between Poverty and Neglect

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Defining neglect

Neglect is defined 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); or
- ensure access to appropriate medical care or treatment.

It may also include neglect of, or unresponsiveness to, a child's basic emotional needs.

Defining neglect

The normalisation of neglect:

- Difficult to define as it does not typically involve an abusive act, but omissions in care .
- Including the word 'persistent' sets an expectation for long standing maltreatment – this is problematic
- Professionals must decide when omissions in care reach the threshold deemed 'persistent'.
- 60% of social workers reported pressure to 'downgrade' neglect and emotional abuse cases
- 'Normalisation and desensitisation to warning signs of neglect'
- Neglect can be 'smokescreen' where are less likely to be believed or investigated for other abuse

Risk factors for neglect

Individual-level risk factors

- Evidence indicates significant crossover with the risk factors for all other forms of maltreatment, but that some children are more vulnerable to neglect. This includes babies and infants, children who live with siblings or other children are at increased risk and children with disabilities
- There is also evidence that older teenagers (aged 16-17) are at a higher risk of neglect
- Several parental and familial characteristics can increase the risk of child neglect. This includes parents who have experienced neglect and abuse themselves as children, young parents, single parents, parents with physical and learning disabilities and parents who suffer from loneliness or social isolation

Risk factors for neglect

Structural risk factors

- Evidence shows the likelihood of neglect increases when parental problems occur within the context of societal risk factors such as **poverty**, which are beyond the parent's control and reflect failures in economic, social, health and education systems
- The relationship between poverty and neglect is both nuanced and sensitive. Many parents living in poverty make astonishing sacrifices to ensure that their children are not adversely impacted by material hardship. While we must be clear that not all children living in poverty experience neglect, nor does neglect only happen in families living in poverty, emerging evidence does draw out the link between poverty and all forms of harm. The link is most prevalent between poverty and neglect.
- Families from the poorest neighbourhoods are 14 times more likely to be referred to children's social care than those from the richest areas.
- Poverty interacts with psychological and social factors, acting directly through material hardship and indirectly through things like parental stress, feelings of stigma and social isolation. Research shows that parents with a low income, or living in poorer neighbourhoods, are more likely to feel chronically stressed than other parents.
- While children in affluent families can also suffer neglect, they may be less visible to social services and have material and social resources to hide evidence or challenge professional decisions. They may be less likely to present with physical indicators of neglect such as poor hygiene, diet or living conditions, but still suffer from emotional or psychological neglect, which are harder to identify or assess.

Risk factors for neglect

“I’m worried about getting through the school holidays. I usually get free school meals and my form teacher always has extra fruit and biscuits she gives out. Dad’s not used to having to do lunch for us as well, and he’s really stressed about work at the moment so I’m worried about reminding him to get stuff in. He hasn’t said it to me, but I don’t think he’s making much money with the cost-of-living crisis at the moment” (Childline caller, girl, aged 13)

Poverty masking neglect

- Researchers have noted ‘whether poverty contributes to neglect is not widely disputed; what remains contentious is whether what is often reported or labelled as neglect simply is poverty’.
- Analysis of Serious Case Reviews shows that poverty can inhibit professionals being assertive in their interactions with parents, and so not responding adequately to risk. The increasingly normalisation of poverty means social workers may focus on providing practical support, such as help with budgeting and rehousing applications, rather than tackling the neglect itself. Professionals may miss the signs of neglect by confusing them with the signs of poverty and may fail to tackle neglect by focussing their attention on material aspects.

Reluctance to acknowledge impact of poverty on neglect

Reluctance to acknowledge impact of poverty on neglect

- The independent reviews of children's social care in both Scotland and England argued for a recognition of the impact of poverty on children's social care and there is international evidence that addressing poverty leads to a reduction in child neglect. However, for practitioners acknowledging the presence and impact of poverty can be difficult in circumstances where it feels insurmountable.
- There is also evidence of a well-meaning, but unhelpful, reluctance to discuss or pass judgement on patterns of parental behaviour when deemed to be associated with poverty.
- To provide direction and confidence for practitioners to address this, national guidance on neglect across the UK needs to explicitly recognise the relationship between structural factors and neglect. Alongside building practitioner confidence to respond to neglect in the context of poverty, the underlying problem that in 2021-22 4.2 million children were living in poverty must also be comprehensively addressed.

Thank you!

Any questions?