Affluent Neglect

Thanks to Merton Safeguarding Children Partnership for use of the information in this section.

Considering Affluent Neglect

Affluent neglect refers to the neglect experienced by children in wealthy families. This can be more difficult to spot, as the kind of neglect experienced by children and young people in these circumstances is often emotional.

There are a few risks that children from all walks of life face; being a child in an affluent family is often perceived to protect those children from some of these dangers. Children from wealthier, more 'stable' families are not as sheltered from neglect as is often assumed.

Emotional Neglect

In wealthy families, it can be the case that parents work long hours, leaving children in the care of paid nannies or au pairs. This can create a disconnect emotionally and leave children feeling lonely, with their emotional needs unfulfilled by their parents.

Affluent parents may also put a high amount of pressure on their children to succeed at school, which can sometimes lead to psychological and emotional problems for children.

Parental Alcohol and Substance Abuse, Domestic Violence, and Parental Mental Illness

These three factors are known as the "Toxic Trio" and are frequently considered as problems that only occur in poorer families, when, in reality, they can be found in any type of family and have lasting effects on the children in the home.

Drug Use and Sexual Activity

It can be the case that, due to a lack of parental supervision and guidance, wealthier parents may have a more relaxed attitude to the risks their children take, or in many cases aren't sufficiently present or available to know about what their children are doing. This often leads to increased risks for their children, who often have the financial access to facilitate drug abuse and the independence to engage in harmful sexual activity.

Why is Affluent Neglect often overlooked?

There are several barriers that may prevent more affluent children, who are experiencing these types of neglect, from accessing the support they need. Firstly, their symptoms may be harder to spot. The nature of emotional neglect can make it much harder to identify than other types of neglect. For example, due to the family having hired help to care for the children they may present as clean, well-dressed, and properly fed when they are, in reality, experiencing emotional neglect.

Staff training often focuses on children from poor or working-class families, so staff in educational settings may not be adequately trained to identify and intervene with cases of neglect among their wealthier families.

Wealthy families are often not 'on the radar' of protective services. There may also be increased hostility towards agencies, such as social services, from more affluent families, making it more difficult to improve outcomes for children in these circumstances.

The role of unconscious bias also needs to be considered when working with children from wealthier families. Schools and school staff may miss important pieces of the puzzle when they assume that children from wealthy families are less at risk than those from poorer backgrounds. These children may be coming in with new clothes bearing expensive brand labels. It is easy to make presumptions from these indicators that a child is being well looked-after.

Children attending boarding school are even more difficult to identify as neglected. Their parents may often live out of the area or even out of the country. This adds another layer of complexity and can prove challenging, not only for identifying issues in their home life, but also for corresponding with parents to improve child outcomes.

What is the impact?

The emotional neglect, exposure to the toxic trio, and lack of supervision sometimes faced by children from affluent families are adverse childhood experiences (ACEs). ACEs can affect brain development and change how a person's body responds to stress. They have a lasting impact on an individual and the consequences of these adverse experiences can lead to long-term mental and physical health problems, as well as substance misuse and addiction in adulthood.

Further Reading

Website: Neglect and Affluent Neglect - Merton Safeguarding Children Partnership (mertonscp.org.uk)

Special report: Emotional neglect in children with affluent parents (willispalmer.com)

Report Neglect in Affluent Families – Dr. Claudia Bernard