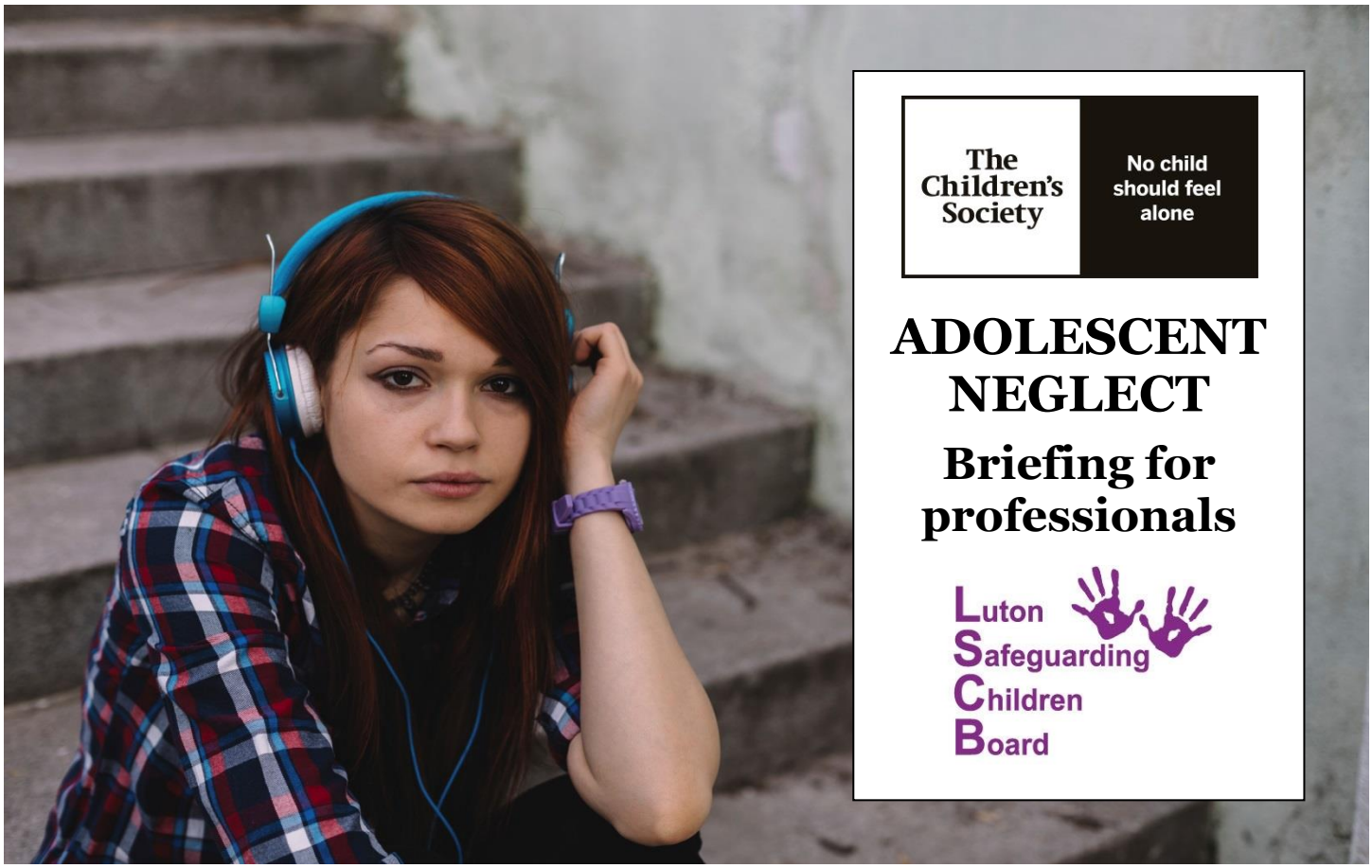

The Children's Society

No child should feel alone

ADOLESCENT NEGLECT

Briefing for professionals

Luton Safeguarding Children Board

Introduction

It is rarely acknowledged that, just like younger children, adolescents are more likely to experience neglect at home than any other form of child maltreatment. There is evidence that professionals struggle to identify adolescent neglect and are unsure what to do when they come across it.

This briefing is aimed at improving knowledge, understanding and confidence around identifying and responding to adolescent neglect. It is for anyone whose work brings them into contact with young people or with adults who are parents or carers.

The briefing outlines the key findings from a review of research for the Luton Safeguarding Children Board (LSCB) which was done to support the development of a strategy to tackle neglect.

Throughout the document, when we refer to 'adolescents' we mean young people aged 11-17, and when 'parents' is used, this is a shorthand for adult care-givers in a household, including step parents, foster carers, etc.

Why is adolescent neglect important?

There has been a tendency in research and practice to downplay the importance of neglect, particularly the neglect of adolescents.

This has partly been based on misconceptions, including that adolescents become resilient to neglect and that neglect is less harmful than other forms of maltreatment. But even the limited research that has been done gives ample reason to treat neglect as seriously as the different forms of abuse and to acknowledge the vulnerability of all young people, regardless of their age.

Neglect has been linked to a variety of problems for adolescents, including to 'challenging' behaviours - e.g. poor engagement with education, violence and

aggression, increased risk-taking (offending or anti -social behaviour, substance misuse, early sexual intercourse). It can lead to poor physical health, difficulties with relationships (with peers and adults) and be behind 'internalised' problems - e.g. low levels of well-being or mental ill health. And a recently-published study found that being neglected increases vulnerability to other forms of maltreatment, and leads to a higher likelihood of becoming a perpetrator of maltreatment.

In the most extreme cases - as learning from Serious Case Reviews now tells us - neglect can lead to grave harm and even to death.

Who should respond to adolescent neglect?

Any professional who comes into contact with young people or their parents can have an important role in responding to adolescent neglect.

Neglect can take many forms and can develop in different ways. A young person who is being neglected at home will engage with a range of agencies over time, providing many opportunities to intervene and, potentially, to prevent further neglect.

A one-off contact can offer the chance to identify the signs of a neglectful situation (e.g. when a parent is unwilling to support their teenager after an arrest; when a young person visits a GP and shows signs of being under-nourished or withdrawn). An ongoing relationship can allow for the observation of a number of indicators of neglect over time (e.g. when a young person's behaviour at school changes and parents fail to engage with events like parents evenings, or reply to correspondence).

Similarly, professionals who work with adults who have children should be aware of the possibility that they are facing difficulties with parenting. For example, a parent with a degenerative illness, or a parent who has episodic mental ill health such as depression, may have reduced parenting capacity.

Poor parenting is unlikely to be intentional and may be premised on lack of knowledge or preoccupation with other problems, or both. Often support at relatively low levels could help reinvigorate or strengthen how parents go about their role, and work to improve communications and relationships at home can mitigate the risk of neglect re-occurring.

It is vital that all professionals who work with adolescents, or the parents of adolescents, are alert to the possibility that neglect at home may be happening and, when appropriate, to:

- **Exercise 'professional curiosity' by asking questions which could reveal signs of neglect**
- **Involve others - including colleagues from other agencies - in assessing the gravity of the situation**

Taking the initiative where there are signs of neglect - including making a referral to children's social care if necessary - is key to successful work to mitigate and prevent neglect, and to avoid the potential for serious harm to develop.

What is adolescent neglect?

Practitioners, policymakers and researchers have found it challenging to know when poor parenting becomes neglectful parenting and there are many factors in the wider context for a family that can influence whether a situation might be regarded as being neglectful or not.

The official definition of neglect in the 'Working Together' guidance is a helpful basis for understanding and assessing neglect, but it is also unclear (e.g. what are the 'basic needs' of an adolescent?).

Practitioners may also need to bear in mind that:

- **Neglect can be acute or chronic**. Neglect is usually seen as being made-up of a combination of different aspects of poor care and support over time - but individual events can also signal neglect (e.g. forcing a young person to leave home).

- **There are different types of neglect**. Researchers have developed categories which can be helpful in thinking about the different ways neglect can be experienced.

- **Adolescents have a stake in their own experiences of parenting.** Neglect is most often categorised in terms of the things parents don't do - but as a young person gets older, their own perspective on the care they receive becomes increasingly important and changing relationships with parents can affect the way they are looked after.

Types of neglect	Examples
Educational	Poor / no support around school or interest in young person's aspirations
Emotional	Lack of responsiveness, affection or interaction
Physical	Can include poor living conditions (unhygienic or unsafe), lack of appropriate clothing or food - 'environmental neglect' – and / or 'medical neglect' where illness is minimised / denied and there is a failure to seek professional care
Supervisory	Failure to protect a young person from physical or other harm, absence of rules and boundaries for behaviour or interest in young person's activities / relationships

When is neglect more likely to happen?

Neglect is more likely when:

- **Parents have their own problems**
  Issues such as substance misuse, mental or physical ill health can reduce parenting capacity.
- **Change occurs for a family - including unanticipated events**
  A separation, divorce or the introduction of a new partner (and maybe their children) to the family can lead to neglect - and redundancy, the onset of illness, or a bereavement can all reduce parents' capacity to provide adequate care and support.
- **Wider support is lacking**
  When a young person and their family have few options for support - from extended family, neighbours, friends or school - there can be a higher likelihood of neglect.
- **A young person regularly gets into trouble**
  A young person's activities outside the home (e.g. involvement in offending or anti-social behaviour) can have a negative effect on relationships with parents and lead to a decrease in support over time.

There are also particular characteristics or contexts which can make neglect more likely:

- Disabled young people are more likely to experience neglect.
- Boys are more likely to be neglected in terms of supervision and monitoring.
- Becoming 'older' - i.e. progressing through adolescence - may mean that parents give less emotional support.
- Living in a more affluent family may also link to experiencing more emotional neglect.

Debates around how much socio-economic class, ethnicity or living in a deprived neighbourhood contribute to a higher risk that young people will be neglected remain unresolved - although poverty has been closely linked to neglect and it has been suggested that a lack of material resources may exacerbate parents' stress and hinder their parenting.

Recent research has shown that it may be the combined effect of deprivation and other factors that makes neglect most likely.

There is no clear prescription for when neglect will happen although many things can make it more likely. Adopting a holistic approach which takes into account all the factors within *and* around the family which could lead to neglect is key to effective identification.

It's also important to:

- **Include a young people her/himself in any assessment.**
  Understanding the 'lived experience' of a young person - what they feel is neglectful about how they are cared for - is particularly important for this age group.
- **Be aware that neglect often co-occurs with other forms of maltreatment, particularly in cases which are deemed sufficiently serious to warrant statutory intervention.**

How will I know if a young person is experiencing neglect?

Research has suggested that many professionals have good 'radar' for neglect, and - alongside collecting appropriate evidence - should trust their professional instincts and be proactive in raising concerns if they think a young person is suffering neglect.

It is difficult to give a definitive list of signs of adolescent neglect because the different forms of neglect will have varying effects – but some of the indicators can include:

- Becoming isolated from peers: being bullied.
- Being non-communicative, tiredness, depression, self-harm, suicide ideation.
- Anger, aggression and violence.
- A young person being outside / away from home late at night; being involved in anti-social behaviour, substance misuse and other risk-taking.
- Early 'consensual' sexual activity; teen pregnancy and birth.
- Hunger, lack of personal hygiene, etc. (outward signs of physical neglect, although, equally, these may be the result of poverty).

It is also important to understand that individuals may react differently - some will internalise their problems, others will externalise, but both reactions can be symptomatic of neglect.

Read the accompanying report reviewing research on adolescent neglect at:
childrenssociety.org.uk/lutonscbreport

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