

WORKING WITH CHILD NEGLECT DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

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Introduction

Working with cases of child neglect in these difficult times is no mean challenge. The situation is exacerbated by the lack of research and practice experience regarding family behaviour during a period of lockdown. To fill this vacuum, I have drawn on research into child neglect (Horwath, 2007;2013;2019) and make suggestions as to how neglectful parents and children may respond to lockdown. The analysis below is designed to provide practitioners with some guidance that may prove useful in understanding parental behaviour and establishing the needs of the most vulnerable children experiencing neglect.

Types of neglect

Child neglect presents itself in many ways and is usually related to parental behaviour. Crittenden (1996) and Howe (2005) have analysed the various types of child neglect and the ways in which they may manifest themselves. These include:

- Disorganised neglect
- Emotional neglect
- Depressed, passive and physical neglect

Drawing on their analysis I consider how parental behaviour may be affected during lockdown. It is, however, important to note that individuals do not necessarily fit neatly into the various categories. Therefore, the analysis is offered to indicate *possible* reasons why parents behave in particular ways during lockdown and the signs and indicators that practitioners should consider when exploring the impact on children.

Disorganised neglect: Factors to consider regarding lockdown

Parents exhibiting disorganised neglect are driven predominantly by emotion rather than rationale understanding of need. They have often experienced unstable childhoods which means they have learnt not to depend on others but just focus on meeting their own needs. Consequently, their needs are paramount and take precedence over those of the child. At times there may be consistency between what they want and the needs of the child at other times this will not be the case. Relationships between partners may be volatile: fluctuating between love and loathing. The parents' relationships with friends and extended family may also be unpredictable with many fallouts. The home environment is likely to be chaotic with the family lurching from crisis to crisis.

This means the child experiences inconsistent and unpredictable parenting.

These parents will find lockdown hard for the following reasons:

1. As the parents tend to live for the moment their attitude towards lockdown will fluctuate. For example, if their need to get out of the home for whatever reason dominates their thinking then this will inform their decision-making regardless of any guidance regarding 'staying safe'. They may also place their children at risk if they want something out of the home. For example, hand-washing and other protective measures are likely to be inconsistent in their application.
2. Children's safety may take a lower priority than meeting the parent's own needs. For example, 'get out of my sight you're driving me mad', leading to children and young people being out and about rather than at home.
3. Tensions in the home may run high with parents struggling to cope with the massive changes that lockdown mean for them. For example, coping with their own issues, food insecurity and gaps in socio-economic resources.
4. Parents may appear to be managing and interacting with their children, providing activities etc. They may also indicate to practitioners they have all sorts of plans for schooling and activities. However, these may never come to fruition as another crisis or need overwhelms them. Alternatively, activities etc may be short-lived as the parent becomes bored or decides they want to do something else.
5. Children may attend school on the days the parents feel it is beneficial for the parents themselves to get the child to school. However, attendance is likely to be inconsistent and poor.
6. Attitudes towards workers may fluctuate. For example, practitioners may receive urgent calls requesting immediate assistance in response to a family crisis. However, by the time the worker has responded the crisis has passed and another issue is top of the agenda.

Impact of disorganised neglect on children and young people; factors to consider regarding children and lockdown

Children in these families are desperate for attention at the best of times. They tend to seek negative attention if positive is not available: anything to be noticed.

1. These children's normal experience of life is dominated by a lack of consistency which is likely to be exacerbated during lockdown.
2. The child's anxieties and confusion about Covid-19 and lockdown may not be understood and addressed by parents. This means they do not receive the emotional support and attention they require. This in turn, can leave to regressive behaviours such as bed-wetting. In older children it may lead to self-harming and risk-taking behaviours.
3. Children living with disorganised neglect tend to demonstrate attention-seeking behaviours if their emotional needs are not met. This may be exacerbated by lockdown with children and young people, being provocative, goading parents and generally going too far. Therefore, these children may be more vulnerable than usual to abuse.

4. The lack of attention at home, combined with an absence of usual support networks provided by schools, family centres etc, mean the children and young people are increasingly vulnerable to abuse outside the home from anyone who gives them attention. This can make children particularly vulnerable to criminal exploitation.
5. The child living in this environment may try to take some 'control' of their lives and this could lead to conflict with parents and in some cases physical and verbal abuse by the child towards the parent.

Depressed, passive and physical neglect: Factors to consider regarding lockdown

Parents exhibiting this form of neglect are unavailable to their children in terms of both providing emotional warmth and meeting their other developmental needs. This is considered one of the most negative environments for children with lockdown exacerbating the situation.

1. These parents are often 'lost in an empty world of their own' (Howe, 2005 p.136) and consequently lockdown may wash over them as they take little interest in anything.
2. The parents are likely to have limited links, if any, with social or extended family networks and consequently self-isolating may be experienced as not vastly different from everyday life.
3. These parents struggle to provide any routine or structure to their day. Without input from practitioners etc, who would normally be engaged with the children and the family, basic care needs may reduce from an already low baseline.
4. Any additional demands made on the parents, such as having to manage children being at home all the time, getting food when there are shortages, shopping restrictions and addressing economic challenges etc will all be put into the 'too difficult' box and parents may just feel powerless and do nothing to meet the child's and indeed their own basic needs.

Impact of emotional neglect on children and young people: factors to consider regarding children and lockdown

These children have learnt that nobody is particularly interested in them and life is about living in a non-stimulating environment with few if any of the essentials.

1. The standard of care, normally poor, is likely to be reduced further during lockdown meaning these children may not have their basic needs met. For example, they may be hungry, fail to thrive, have medical needs be cold and living in poor home conditions for 24/7.
2. The lack of supervision by their parents mean that these children are vulnerable not only to hazards in the home but also outside. Parents may not notice if even young children wander out of the home and are vulnerable to sexual abuse and accidents. Older children may be targeted by criminal gangs for county lines or sexually exploited.

3. Parents are unlikely to make the effort to get the child to school during lockdown. Consequently, these children, will lack any type of stimulation. This may exacerbate their lack of curiosity, listlessness and aimlessness, resulting in them becoming withdrawn and depressed.

Emotional neglect: factors to consider regarding lock-down

Whilst parents exhibiting emotional neglect may be providing a good standard of physical care and may be meeting the child's cognitive needs, they are unable to provide a warm caregiving environment. They are likely to be withdrawn, unavailable and unresponsive to the child. These parents may well have experienced harsh high criticism low warmth childhoods. Therefore, they struggle knowing how to relate at an emotional level with the child.

1. These parents may feel positive about lockdown. They are often socially isolated already and normally keep contact with the outside world to a minimum. Thus, lockdown is a legitimate excuse to be socially isolated.
2. These parents may use lockdown as an excuse to keep practitioners at a distance. They may appear wary of authority figures at the door during social distancing. In other cases, they may be openly hostile threatening practitioners for 'spreading the virus'. In effect what they are trying to do under the cover of lockdown is prevent practitioners from learning about their family life.
3. The parents are often isolated from family and social networks and may experience depression. Therefore, particularly during lockdown there is little insight as to what is happening within the family home.
4. Some of these parents thrive on routine and order. Under lockdown they may keep the family busy with numerous jobs as well as schoolwork etc. however expectations may be high with children being constantly criticised for falling short of the expected standard.

Impact of emotional neglect on children and young people; factors to consider regarding children and lock-down

Children brought up in an emotionally neglectful family are likely to have a poor sense of self-worth, believing no-one loves them. During lockdown, these feelings will be exacerbated as there is little reprieve from the stresses of family life.

1. Children experiencing anxieties and fears about Covid-19 and lockdown may find parents respond to their concerns with coldness and derision.
2. In some cases, the parents may use the child's fears about Covid-19 as a weapon to terrorise the child. 'If you don't behave then we'll make sure you catch the virus and die'.
3. In the confined family environment, the child who makes too many emotional demands on the parent, who themselves may be stressed and anxious, is likely to be physically isolated left to cope with their anxieties on their own.
4. The child may witness domestic violence as some parents express their fears and anxieties through arguments, physical and verbal violence.

Implications for practice

When assessing child neglect during Covid-19 it is important that practitioners distinguish between the different world view parents may take in order to understand how best to intervene. For example, the parent who exhibits disorganised neglectful behaviours and lurches from crisis to crisis is very unlikely to ensure their child attends school regularly despite all sorts of reassurances to practitioners they will do so. The parents who exhibit depressed neglect may be unable to apply for food vouchers for their children or go to foodbanks.

The following questions are designed to enable practitioners to gain some insight into the way the parents are functioning. Consider:

- What do you know about the daily lived experience of each family member during lockdown?
- What have you learnt about the parent's behaviour during lockdown?
- What does this tell you about the way in which their emotions, issues and needs are impacting on their understanding and ability to meet the child's needs?
- How is their behaviour impacting on the health and development of the child/ren? Consider in particular the child's anxieties, concerns and quality of life during lockdown?
- What are the socio-economic stresses that are impacting on family life?

Drawing on the responses to these questions, what is the most effective way in which to engage the parent and the child?

- Any intervention should consider what works in order to address the immediate impact of lockdown considering the different types of neglect.
- Many of these children need immediate support and therefore strategies to meet their needs in the short-term are crucial. In other words, during lockdown practitioners are unlikely to dramatically change parental behaviour, indeed the behaviours are likely to be exacerbated. Rather, interventions need to centre on the ability to support the child and find ways to ensure their needs are met whilst they remain at home. And, if this is not possible that alternative caring arrangements are made.
- In order to support children within the home:
 - Children experiencing disorganised neglect need some routine and consistency in their daily lives. Enabling the child to maintain regular contact with a teacher and/or mentor, for example, by providing them with a phone or tablet may be helpful.
 - Children experiencing emotional neglect are likely to be highly anxious and concerned about the current situation. They will feel isolated and that no-one is bothered about them. They need contacts that enable them to address their concerns and provide them with the opportunity to believe that there are people who do care about them.

- Arguably the most concerning situation is experienced by children living in depressed neglectful households. These are the children who will need careful monitoring and support from a multidisciplinary group of practitioners to ensure their needs are met. If this is not available some of these children will be better off in out of home placements.

References

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