

Neglecting the issue:

impact, causes and responses
to child neglect in the UK

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Introduction

Child neglect is the most pervasive form of child abuse in the UK today. It robs children of the childhood they deserve – that is their right – and leaves broken families, dashed aspirations and misery in its wake. And, while we know more about the causes and consequences of neglect than ever before, it remains the biggest reason for a child to need protection. As a society, it is in our power to change this.

In response to this overwhelming need, in October 2009, Action for Children launched a dedicated campaign to raise awareness of – and funds to directly tackle – child neglect. In the course of our campaign, we have spoken to a broad cross-section of society to find out what they know about neglect, if and how they see it, and how they respond to it. We have consulted the general public, childcare professionals such as nurses and nursery workers, police, social workers and children themselves. The results have been startling, even to us. Child neglect is everywhere, and our collective response simply not good enough.

We have also found that there is a lack of a coherent, straightforward review of external findings around neglect: definitions of the issue and what it looks like in practice; UK trends; the effects of neglect on children, young people, families, social settings and communities; the most appropriate forms of response and the role agencies play in this; and – crucially – gaps in both knowledge and service provision. This report brings together existing knowledge and evidence for the very first time.

To tackle neglect, and rescue the thousands of children who live with its devastating effects every single day, a clear, integrated approach is urgently needed. This approach must investigate the following six key areas:

Fathers' roles

Research shows that children with highly involved fathers tend to have fewer behavioural problems, higher educational achievement and higher self-esteem and life satisfaction – among many other benefits.¹ Where appropriate, fathers must be encouraged and helped to better support their children. Public opinion would appear to be ahead of government policy in support for families and the role of fathers, with seven out of 10 (70%) agreeing (42% strongly agreeing) that society values a child's relationship with its mother more than it values a child's relationship with its father; almost six out of 10 (59%) agreeing that society assumes mothers are good for children, fathers have to prove it; and seven out of 10 (70%) agreeing (50% strongly agreeing) that there should be a zero-tolerance approach if fathers do not take on their parenting responsibilities.²

Targeting families

Research evidence is growing about what types of support work best to help families whose children are at risk of or experiencing neglect. There are evaluations of initiatives such as Sure Start, which includes a range of support services for children and families (for example, in one review, inspectors found that just one in 10 was not effective, compared to 57% gaining 'highly positive' feedback and 32% labelled as 'adequate').³ More of this type of evidence is needed.

Public health and prevention

Public awareness campaigns have shown to be very effective in other areas (for example, a controlled trial of a TV advertising campaign in

central and northern England provides evidence that mass media campaigns may be able to change behaviour. The campaign was effective in reducing smoking prevalence by about 1.2% over 18 months).⁴ As well as highlighting the role we all play in tackling neglect, similar campaigns around the issue could help reduce and even prevent it from arising.

Parents' and carers' views

We need to understand more about how care-givers can be encouraged to seek help without fear of major repercussions, such as their children being immediately removed from their care. This will enable us to develop support services which families feel safe to access without fear.

Children's views

While some work has been done in trying to understand how best to enable children to ask for help, the picture is unclear. For example, a study into young people's experiences of their parents' drug and alcohol misuse found that young people wanted to approach adults, for example teachers, for support but were worried about too much intrusion into their home lives.⁵ On the other hand, research into children's views of their changing families has also found that only two per cent of children spoke to a counsellor and two per cent to a teacher in the first weeks after parental separation.⁶ More must be done to identify ways in which children can be encouraged to ask for help directly.

Understanding the scale of neglect

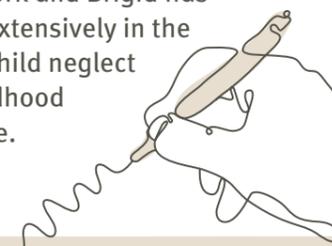
We need to be able to see a regular snapshot of the extent of neglect – and the collective response to it – in order to understand if this is getting better or worse.

Further exploration of these six essential issues is key to helping both childcare professionals and the public at large to better understand – and so be more able to prevent – child neglect.

As part of our 'Take your action for children' neglect campaign, we are committed to sharing this report and helping to fill the gaps in knowledge that we know exist. In partnership with the University of Stirling, we are also committed to undertaking an annual review of neglect and the response to it, and to seeking funds for a centre of child neglect expertise to continue to develop our understanding. Most importantly, we will use our findings to inform our work and do all we can to influence the public and policy-makers alike to improve the way child neglect is tackled in the UK.

Unfortunately, although our understanding of neglect is increasing, far too many children are still suffering from the day-to-day realities of neglect. There is an urgent need for national and local policies and services to rectify the situation and act in ways which meet the needs of children and their families and improve their lives.

This report was written for Action for Children by Cheryl Burgess, research fellow and Brigid Daniel, Professor of Social Work, from the University of Stirling. Both have research and practice experience in child and family social work and Brigid has written extensively in the area of child neglect and childhood resilience.



What is child neglect?

Neglect is a major form of child abuse in the UK today. A child experiences neglect when the adults who look after them are not providing for their needs in an adequate way.

This may be in one or more of these aspects of the child's life:

- ▶ basic daily care: food, clothing, shelter and warmth
- ▶ safety, health care and stability
- ▶ emotional warmth
- ▶ stimulation
- ▶ guidance and boundaries

The English government definition of child neglect is:

'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. It may involve a parent or carer failing to provide adequate food, shelter or clothing, failing to protect a child from physical harm or danger, or the failure to ensure access to appropriate medical care or treatment. It may also include neglect of, or unresponsiveness to, a child's basic emotional needs.'

(HMSO, 2006)

Our understanding of child neglect develops over time as we take into account society's changing attitudes to child care, evolving expectations of parents and differing cultural ideas. Generally, child neglect is 'an absence or breakdown of the relationship of care'.⁷ This could be a parent or carer allowing their child to suffer serious harm on a one-off occasion, or failing to care adequately for their child over a long period, which could lead to the child suffering 'cumulative harm'.

Child neglect must be understood in its broadest sense – when a child is not having their needs met in the areas above, and when this is likely to have a detrimental effect on their health, development and wellbeing. Child neglect in its most extreme form, particularly neglect which leads to the death of a child, is clearly a 'headline grabber'. However, there are also many children who are experiencing neglect in a less visible way. Many are currently not receiving the help they need to improve their situation. In order to improve the life chances of a large number of children, this problem needs tackling urgently.



Trends

Child neglect has been the most frequently reported form of maltreatment in the developed world over the last 10 years.⁸ It is the main reason for child protection registrations in the UK, most often as the sole reason but sometimes coupled with another form of abuse.

In England

In England, **17,200** of the **39,100** children (**43.5%**) registered in the year up to the end of March 2010 were on the register because of neglect, as either the partial or main reason

In Scotland

In the same period in Scotland, **1,098** children were registered due to neglect out of a total of **2,518** children (**43.6%**)

In Wales

In Wales, **1,355** children out of **2,730** registered (**49.6%**) had neglect recorded as the sole or partial reason

In Northern Ireland

In Northern Ireland in the year ending March 2009, the number was **1,234** (neglect as the sole or partial reason) out of a total of **2,488** children registered (**49.5%**)⁹

There has been a steady rise in registrations for neglect in Northern Ireland and a small rise in Wales, although in Scotland the number has reduced by 150 since March 2009. In England, the number has been rising by approximately 1,000 children per year, although a new method of collecting statistics was brought in this year, so the figure must be treated with caution.

In addition, figures are now available for children referred to social services in England who are considered 'in need'. There were 375,900 children 'in need' at 31 March 2010, of which **39 per cent** were referred for reasons of abuse or neglect.¹⁰ In relation to international comparisons, as statistics are collected in different ways, it is difficult to make clear comparisons between the UK and other countries as to the prevalence of child neglect.

There are many more children than this who suffer neglect but whose situation is not recognised. While we are unsure how many children in the UK may be affected, studies suggest that up to 10 per cent of all children (that is, nearly 1.5 million) in the UK have experienced it in some form.¹¹

Why does child neglect occur?

A number of circumstances can influence an adult's ability to look after their child. Research and the experience of those who work with children have given us a greater understanding of the reasons why a child may not be cared for adequately, and the living situations which lie behind this.

These reasons have not changed over the years – a depressing fact. The vast majority of families care well for their children despite various difficulties, but a combination of the following can increase the risk of child neglect taking place:

- ▶ **society reasons** (such as poverty, poor housing, poor sanitation and local family support services being difficult to access)
- ▶ **family reasons** (for example parents or carers not being brought up in a positive way themselves and passing on these negative experiences to their children)
- ▶ **individual carers' personal circumstances** (for example mental health issues, substance misuse or living with domestic violence)

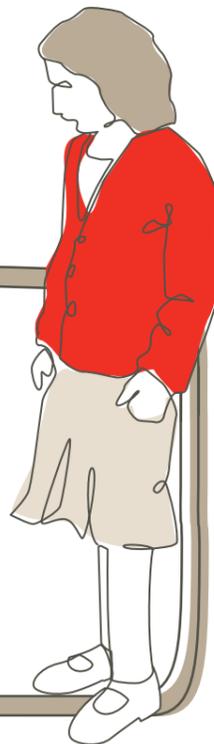
In addition, it can be that a child's carer does not have the practical or emotional understanding to provide good care – neglect of children is often due not to unwillingness but inability to care.

While the circumstances above do not necessarily lead to a child being neglected, they can increase the chances that neglect might occur, and some of the 'risk factors' above can lead in turn to others.

Studies suggest up to 10 per cent of children in the UK experience neglect – that's almost 1.5 million

Lisa, five years old, is arriving at school late and unaccompanied. In cold weather she has been wearing a thin jacket and old trainers and she is very cold. She is hungry and says she is given money to buy a bar of chocolate on her way to school. Lisa comes across as dreamy in class – unable to concentrate or take an interest

in classroom activities. Lisa is finding it hard to make friends because she is quiet and withdrawn and finds it difficult to interact with other children. She says very little about her family or life at home.



Annie's story

My name is Annie and I'm 18. I live at home with my mum and dad who are both drug addicts. I have three sisters and a brother, but I don't see the youngest two much as they've both been in foster care for years.

It was me who reported Mum to social services, and because I did, my brother and sister will never be coming home. I know it's the best thing for them but I do feel sad about it. Because of our home life I don't know them and they don't know me.

When I was seven or eight, I started getting bullied at school – mostly by people saying my mum was a 'smack head'. I remember being the only girl in my class who was bullied this way. It was about the same time that we first got separated from our parents. It happened after my mum was full of drugs and my baby sister crawled and fell down the stairs. Mum and Dad were clean for a while and we went home, but it didn't last and we were soon back in care.

Our house was never really nice, always needing decorating and repairing. It was hard bringing friends home because of the state of the house and because of my mum and dad. I can remember getting a bike one Christmas which my dad had stolen from another family. I can even remember helping my mum to inject herself when I was about 15. I did it to calm her down and make her feel better.

I feel embarrassed about my life. I haven't felt as important as other people – I feel small and 'at the bottom of the pile'. I sometimes pull out my hair and cut my arms with a light bulb if I feel very stressed.



How do we recognise when a child is neglected?

One of the difficulties in identifying children who are being neglected is that there is no set standard about what is 'acceptable care'.

The care of children falls across a spectrum which ranges from excellent on one side to clearly unacceptable, even potentially fatal, on the other, with a broad grey area in between. The two extremes are easy to recognise but it is harder for the general public and even professionals working in school and health settings to decide whether the quality of a child's care is low enough to warrant decisive action, such as contacting social services.

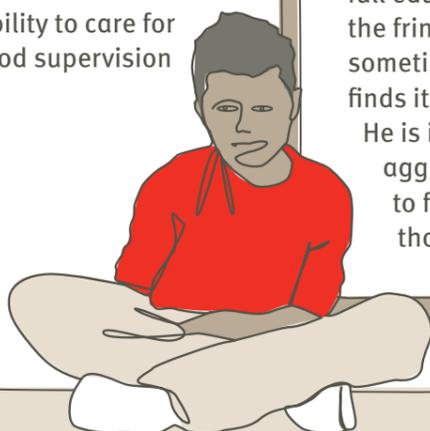
The Action for Children *Child neglect: experiences from the frontline* report,¹² undertaken in 2009, highlighted what school and health service staff saw as the potential warning signs of a child being neglected.

These include:

- ▶ a child being dirty or poorly dressed
- ▶ a child being hungry
- ▶ a child often being late for school or not collected on time
- ▶ a child's behaviour giving cause for concern
- ▶ a child not receiving medical treatment or being taken for health check-ups
- ▶ a child's home feeling unsafe or being in poor condition
- ▶ worries about a carer's ability to care for their child and provide good supervision

Neglect is not always recognisable through a child's outward appearance and can occur, sometimes in a less obvious way, in affluent families. Child neglect does not only take place in poor or socially marginalised families. Children may appear to be materially well provided for but may be suffering forms of less-recognised neglect. For example, they may be left unsupervised while carers work or may be deprived of their carers' attention because the adults are putting their own career or other needs first and are too tired or preoccupied to respond adequately to their children.

Research for Action for Children in 2009,¹³ which surveyed 1,000 adults, showed that the general public was unclear about what constitutes neglect and uncertain about how and when to act if they were concerned that a child was being neglected. And yet other studies have shown that people are instinctively very able to recognise the warning signs of child neglect.¹⁴ It may be that they lack the confidence to act on their feelings or are not sure how agencies will respond.



Steven has a history of early neglect and some of the effects of this are showing as he makes the move to secondary school. He is often absent from school with minor illnesses, finds it hard to settle to work when at school and is not working to his full educational potential. He is on the fringe of a group of boys who are sometimes excluded from school but finds it hard to make close friendships. He is increasingly hostile and verbally aggressive to teachers and appears to find it hard to trust adults, even those who want to help him.

The *Seen and now heard* report¹⁵ by Action for Children (2010) showed that children themselves were very aware of other children who were not being cared for.

According to the eight to 12 year olds surveyed:

- ▶ almost two-thirds had seen suspected signs of neglect in other children
- ▶ on average, children had seen at least three children with some of the signs of neglect that year
- ▶ more than one in 10 said they had seen suspected neglect nine times that year alone
- ▶ children as young as eight are seeing signs of neglect in their peers

So while children, adults and professionals are all able to recognise the signs of neglect, people face real difficulties in deciding what action to take about this. Judgements about whether to contact statutory agencies can also be influenced by a seeming lack of action by social services once informed, especially in areas with a large number of families 'in need'. This is happening even more as resources and services are reduced. Even teachers and health visitors who bring children to social workers' attention report being frustrated by this.¹⁶

A lack of resources and services to help all the children who need it dictates where the priorities lie, and families are often at a high level of crisis before social workers are able to intervene. In some cases, social work agencies have become hide-bound by the narrow definitions of neglect which are required in order to take statutory or legal action, such as child protection procedures or supervision orders.¹⁷

Despite these obstacles, intervening at an early stage of a child or family's difficulties is in many cases the best way to make a difference. There is growing evidence that if help is offered to families early on when difficulties are noticed, it can be effective.¹⁸ It can bring about changes in the way families live and prevent children from suffering longer than necessary. It is also more cost-effective in reducing the need for more expensive services later on. However, early intervention should not be viewed as a 'quick fix' because ongoing support may be needed for some families.¹⁹



Children as young as eight are seeing signs of neglect in their peers

Research shows that some groups of children may be at higher risk of suffering neglect, although this is clearly not to suggest that there is always a direct link – complex factors within these groups are likely to apply.

The groups are:

- ▶ children born to mothers who misuse substances, have significant mental health difficulties or who suffer domestic abuse
- ▶ low birth weight babies, which can lead to early bonding problems
- ▶ children with disabilities
- ▶ children whose parents or carers find them hard to care for – perhaps if they are perceived as being overly demanding or withdrawn

The potential role of fathers in nurturing their children or providing support that helps to protect against neglect is often unrecognised

Research and practice with neglect has tended to focus very heavily on mothers – perhaps reflecting social assumptions that mothers are primarily responsible for the nurturing of children. There is very little information about the role of fathers, except in relation to the risks posed to children living in households with men who are violent to their partners. The potential role of fathers in nurturing their children or providing support that helps to protect against neglect is often unrecognised.

In general, if there are signs that things are seriously problematic in the relationship between the carer and child or if any of the warning signals listed at the start of this section apply, it is possible that a child is suffering neglect, and action should be taken to notify an agency such as their school, GP or social worker.



Sunita's story

I'd drink if I were sad, I'd drink if I was happy, I would just drink and I would not admit I had this problem with alcohol at all, I just would not admit it.

I was getting my son to school, I were doing what was right routine-wise, but then once he got to bed I'd drink. And I didn't realise I were putting him in danger really by drinking and not being alert to his needs. When you drink, and you drink to oblivion, then you're not there to give them what they require.

I basically never used to take him out. I used to sit in my yard with a paddling pool and I'd left it filled up, which was highly dangerous, because he was only a toddler and he could have fell in it and you know, anything could have happened really.

Unfortunately he came to harm, and I did myself, from a man. He wasn't charged for it, but the evidence was obvious. We both had been hurt, my son had a mark on his eye and I was black and blue as well. So it was obvious that I had irresponsibly let someone in that could harm a child and could harm me. It could have ended up a lot more tragic.

It was 'cos of the background I come from as well, my dad was an alcoholic, but he never harmed us in any way. But he was an definitely an alcoholic and you don't recognise the deepness of alcoholism until it's sort of pointed out to you and you have accepted it, you know.



What are the effects of neglect on children?

Neglect can be far-reaching in its consequences for a child. 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.²⁰

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, potentially leading to the following:

Health and physical effects

- ▶ early brain development being affected in ways which influence how a child reacts to stress and other stimulating situations in their early and later life
- ▶ a child being underweight (or grossly overweight), having persistent infections, being late in developing abilities such as walking, being tired and listless and having toileting problems
- ▶ cognitive difficulties such as language delay, poor intellectual ability and inability to concentrate or express feelings
- ▶ physical injuries as a result of accidents, due to lack of care or supervision

Emotional effects

- ▶ the bonding between child and care-giver potentially being affected and leading to insecure attachment problems
- ▶ low self-esteem and self-regard, anxiety and depression, over-compliance or anger/hostility
- ▶ difficulties in seeking emotional support from adults

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

Later effects: adolescence and adulthood

- ▶ becoming involved in risky behaviours such as substance misuse, criminal activity and sexually exploitative relationships²¹
- ▶ self-harm and suicide attempts
- ▶ difficulties in forming relationships, becoming involved with violent partners and adopting parenting styles which may pass on similar problems to their own children

The resilient neglected child

Some children are not as affected by a neglectful past as others and are able to overcome many of the effects of neglect because of 'protective factors' which can help to balance the hardships they have experienced. Sometimes support is in place in the child's extended family, friends and community influences, which can offer protective experiences for them, or they can be put in place by professionals. Sometimes, additional support is required to sustain informal support. The importance of children developing long-lasting relationships with trusted social care staff, teachers and volunteer befrienders or mentors cannot be underestimated.

The importance of children developing **long-lasting relationships** with the people supporting them cannot be underestimated

Tom, a young parent, living alone and with few family or friends to turn to for help, is suffering from low self-esteem and depression. Without support, he has found it hard to find a part-time job and is living on a low income. He has

become very isolated socially. As a result of feeling low and having few personal and social supports to call on, Tom is struggling to respond in a warm and caring way to his child and give her the attention and stimulation she needs.



Child neglect: where are we?

Developments

Although neglect is a major form of child abuse, less work has been undertaken to try to understand it compared with other forms of abuse. This may be because we have had less knowledge about how widespread it is, except when it is serious enough to lead to a child protection investigation, and because of uncertainties about how to take action about it. It may have been seen as a less serious form of abuse. There is clearly a need to support the public and staff in universal provisions such as schools and health services to feel able to notify agencies if they are concerned about a child. They need to believe that their concerns will be acted on. It may be appropriate for staff in universal services to provide direct help themselves to some children they believe are experiencing less serious forms of neglect. Teachers, for example, if given adequate support, can provide a positive and nurturing experience for children which can help to make up for some deficits in their care, and which may improve their long-term social and educational prospects.

Family support services can help families to care for their children and act as a safeguard so that signs of neglect can be spotted

Early intervention and family support services

UK-wide, there are numerous family support services, for example those based in children's and family centres, and run by social services or voluntary agencies. They offer practical, social and emotional support to children and families and run parenting programmes, offer educational help to children and help families build informal networks to help one another. There are also schemes such as the nurse-family partnerships which offer help to families with young children who are otherwise unsupported, and encourage strong bonding between parent and child. These schemes can help families to care for their children and act as a safeguard so that signs of neglect can be spotted.

A recent report by Graham Allen MP²² outlines the case for early intervention support services and lists a number which research shows can make a difference to families. Research reviews also tell us that of equal importance to the content of services is that they are run by staff with whom families have trusting relationships and provided in an empathic way. Interventions must be provided for families who need them at crucial times in a child's life, and may sometimes need to continue in some form for a lengthy time period, and professionals involved with a family need to work well together.²³ The ways in which funding could be provided if such services are to grow have yet to be decided.



The role of social workers and social care professionals

We are learning more about what can be put into place to make a difference to children and families where neglect is occurring.

We know that:

- ▶ becoming involved with families early, when difficulties are first recognised, is crucial but that helping families to make changes even at this stage may not be straightforward – there are often serious underlying problems which need to be worked through before changes can take place
- ▶ social workers and other social care professionals need to be able to recognise the type of neglect taking place (for example, is the care-giver neglecting their child because they are disorganised, depressed, economically deprived or have other emotional problems?)
- ▶ social workers must take care to look at the whole family and how they relate to one another – sometimes the parents' needs can overtake those of the children and action may need to be taken at an early stage before the child's situation becomes worse
- ▶ frameworks²⁴ for assessing what the child needs, but may not be getting in relation to their care, and what support the care-giver needs to care for their child, are helping. These assessment and planning frameworks have helped social workers to focus on what sort of help must be offered and which agency should do this. However, particularly when budgets are tight, help is not offered early enough and sometimes not until the situation is so extreme that the child is likely to need a local authority care placement
- ▶ social workers and family support workers need sufficient time to have good-quality contact with the family and the child in order to build family members' trust and form an honest working relationship with them, so that they can be challenged and supported to make changes – services need to be set up to support rather than undermine this type of relationship
- ▶ evidence shows that a range of strategies must be adopted across society to prevent and address child neglect, and that correctly targeted family support intervention can be effective, if tailored to a family's individual circumstances
- ▶ there is increasing recognition of the signs when older children and teenagers are being neglected and ideas about how this can be counteracted are being developed
- ▶ ongoing training, effective supervision and the capacity to provide good-quality support to children and their families must be provided by all agencies whose staff are involved in the area of child neglect

What are the gaps in our knowledge? What are the plans to fill these gaps?

Although research and the experiences of those working with neglected children are adding to our knowledge, there are some areas which need further exploration:

▶ work with fathers

The role of fathers in families where children are neglected needs further study. Until now, the main emphasis has been on the mother's responsibility for child neglect, although men are sometimes seen as partially responsible when neglect has been caused by lack of supervision of the child. According to one study, this emphasis on mothers is not in line with public opinion, which is running ahead of government policy in support of families and the role of fathers.²⁵ The research found that:

- ▶ seven out of 10 mums (68%) believe their partner is as good a parent as they are
- ▶ seven out of 10 (70%) agree (42% strongly agree) that society values a child's relationship with its mother more than it values a child's relationship with its father
- ▶ almost six out of 10 (59%) agree with the statement that society assumes mothers are good for children, fathers have to prove it
- ▶ seven out of 10 (70%) agree (50% strongly agree) that there should be a zero-tolerance approach if fathers do not take on their parenting responsibilities
- ▶ eight out of 10 women (80%) and more than six out of 10 men (62%) agree that fathers are as good as mothers at caring for children

A small number of research studies have explored the role of fathers and whether their presence in family life had a bearing on whether child neglect continued or ceased. Some concluded that fathers should be encouraged to increase their supporting role in the family and also become more involved with their children's schooling. One study in particular²⁶ found that children with highly involved fathers tend to have:

- ▶ better friendships with better-adjusted children
- ▶ fewer behavioural problems
- ▶ lower criminality and substance abuse
- ▶ higher educational achievement
- ▶ greater capacity for empathy
- ▶ less stereotypical attitudes to earning and childcare
- ▶ more satisfying adult sexual partnerships
- ▶ higher self-esteem and life satisfaction

Family support services such as family centres could also find ways to include fathers. A study in Northern Ireland in 2003²⁷ sought fathers' views about how family centres could help them to be more involved, and found that having more male staff and running groups for men, among other things, would make a difference. Further research is required into the role of fathers in child neglect and their views about what would support them in their parenting role.

▶ targeted support for families – what works?

Research evidence is growing about what types of support work best to help families whose children are at risk of or experiencing neglect. There are evaluations of initiatives such as Sure Start, which includes a range of support services for children and families (for example, in one review, inspectors found that just one in 10 was not effective, compared to 57% gaining 'highly positive' feedback and 32% labelled as 'adequate').²⁸ There are similar studies of the Nurse-Family Partnership, which is a home-visiting service provided by nurses during the first two years of a child's life, aimed at first-time mothers with low incomes.

Results of studies show that some parent training programmes, school-based social workers, social network support and therapeutic approaches with parents and children may help, but more evidence would be useful. We do know that intervening in neglect is likely to be costly, requiring intensive, long-term, multi-faceted work by a highly skilled workforce.²⁹

Although work is continuing to look at what types of family support helps parents to care for their children better, more research into this is needed to build up the evidence of good practice. There are a number of ways in which this could be developed if funding was made available. Most importantly, evidence is needed to look at the long-term effects for children when family support has been put in place. There are improved ways of evaluating family support programmes but more of these evaluations need to be done. Of fundamental importance, though, for any support service, is the establishment of good working relationships with parents and children that are enduring and consistent.³⁰

▶ public health and prevention approaches

Recent studies suggest an approach which raises public awareness by delivering information campaigns through the media, similar to anti-smoking campaigns and those to reduce child traffic accident deaths, might help to identify neglect at an early stage of it occurring. For example, a controlled trial of a TV advertising campaign in central and northern England provides evidence that mass media campaigns may be able to change behaviour. The campaign was effective in reducing smoking prevalence by about 1.2 per cent over 18 months.³¹ Likewise, levels of knowledge and awareness of issues relating to alcohol have changed during mass media public health campaigns:³²

- ▶ awareness of 'sensible drinking message' unit – up from 39% to 76% (1989–94)
- ▶ knowledge of units in popular drinks – up 300% (1989–94)
- ▶ people's accurate assessment of their own drinking – up 5% (1990–94)

Similarly, public health approaches to tackling the factors known to be associated with neglect could help prevent neglect occurring in the first place. We understand more about how neglect and other forms of child abuse could be prevented, and how much better it is for children if ways can be found to prevent neglect from happening in the first place, rather than them eventually having to be removed from their homes and families.

A public health approach, similar to campaigns to reduce skin cancer or road accidents, means long-term financial and political commitment across government departments to fund services which aim to reduce the risks in families which we now know make child neglect more likely.³³

▫ parents' and carers' views on seeking help

We need to understand more about how care-givers can be encouraged to seek help without fear of major repercussions, such as their children being immediately removed from their care. Some work has been done on this. We know, for example, that parents can feel anxious about involving social care services in their lives and that help offered by voluntary agencies is sometimes viewed more positively.³⁴ Asking for help can be daunting and humiliating. There is little evidence yet about how parents can be encouraged to ask for help, although some parents do so in indirect ways. Studies show that many families struggle for a long time before asking for help, and then may be less likely to get help if they ask for it themselves than if they are referred by a service.³⁵

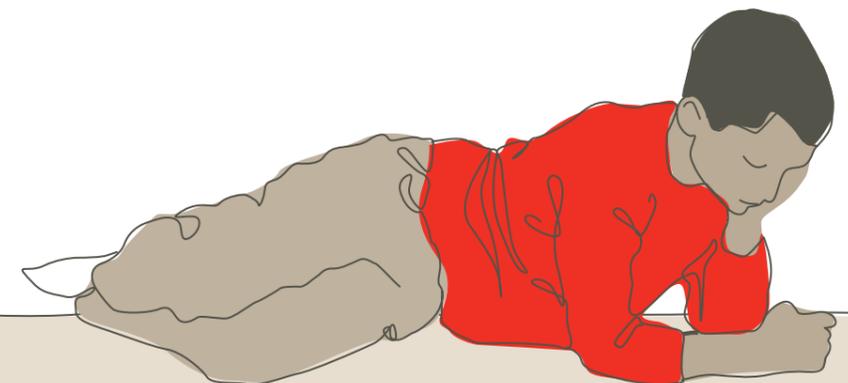
More work is required if we are to develop accessible, supportive services that families feel safe to access. Research suggests that health visitors, for example, if they take the right approach, may be able to ask questions of parents and carers which could help them to open up about their own worries about how they are caring for their children.³⁶

▫ children's views about how to seek help

Some work has been done to find out from children how they can be encouraged to seek help from adults. For example, a study into young people's experiences of their parents' drug and alcohol misuse found that young people wanted to approach adults, for example teachers, for support but were worried about too much intrusion into their home lives.³⁷ On the other hand, research into children's views of their changing families has also found that only two per cent of children spoke to a counsellor and two per cent to a teacher in the first weeks after parental separation.³⁸ Another study found that friends were very important sources of support, especially for girls. When asked about helping agencies, young people thought they would use helplines or a guidance teacher, but were reluctant to use formal agencies. They were very unclear about how one would access services and felt GPs would be too busy to listen. Teachers and school nurses were seen to be unavailable. Confidentiality and trust were especially important for young people.³⁹ More needs to be done to find out the best direct ways for them to do this. There are computer-based, child-friendly questionnaires they can fill in and confidential helplines. We need to find ways to overcome the problem of children's mistrust of adults in authority and their fear of the consequences for their family if they confide in them. More research is needed to see what helps children to talk about their situation most easily.

▫ review of extent and response to child neglect in the UK

There is an urgent need to learn about the scale and severity of child neglect so the changing situation for neglected children in the UK can be monitored. The gaps in knowledge about child neglect need to be filled. Action for Children, in partnership with researchers from the University of Stirling, is currently undertaking a UK-wide review to gather evidence about the extent of neglect and how services are responding to it. Over the next few months, local authorities and health and social care trusts in Northern Ireland will be surveyed to try to find out how statistics about neglected children are collected, how many there are in each area and whether services to help them are adequate. We are also trying to gather statistics about child neglect from across Europe, and world-wide where possible. The aim is that the review could be repeated annually to monitor whether the situation for neglected children is improving or getting worse.



The current situation

The economic recession is starting to have a detrimental impact on the funding of services. The 2010 comprehensive spending review set out real-terms reductions of 28 per cent in local authority budgets over the next four years. The fear is that these reductions will undermine councils' capacity to pay for targeted early intervention and intensive support services for families. On top of this, there was a 27 per cent increase in Children in Need referrals to local authorities between 2007 and 2010, highlighting the potential 'double whammy' impact of increased demand and dramatically reduced budgets. Similarly, as unemployment grows and jobs are lost, there are increasing financial strains on individual families, which may in some cases have a negative effect on the care of children.

It is important that the current challenging economic climate does not divert us from making further progress in our understanding of and timely response to child neglect. We also need to ensure that people know where to go if they are worried about a child and feel that their action will make a positive difference to that child. Perhaps more than ever, there is a need to put in place the resources required to help the families and children who need it, building on our existing knowledge and using new and innovative programmes of support. It is important that cuts to services do not result in more families who ask for help from social services being turned away, which research has shown happens to as many as a third of families in some areas.⁴⁰

As well as for individual children, there are wide-ranging consequences for society in economic, social and health terms if child neglect is not reduced as far as realistically possible. We must continue to find ways of supporting parents to look after their children so that neglect is no longer an issue which damages our society.

We now know more than ever about the causes, consequences and costs of neglect. We also know it is possible to prevent child neglect. Knowing this, we must move towards a system where children with unmet needs are noticed, listened to and supported. To do so will take time and huge commitment.

'In the end, what children want is straightforward: enough food, warmth, adults who love and nurture them, consistency, achievements and to be treated with dignity as befits their status as child citizens.'⁴¹

This should not be too much for children to expect, or for adults to provide



Endnotes

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Action for Children is committed to helping the most vulnerable and neglected children and young people in the UK break through injustice, deprivation and inequality, so they can achieve their full potential.

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