



**Action on Neglect**  
- a resource pack

## What is the problem?

- We have lots of evidence about the causes of neglect.
- We have lots of evidence about the effects of neglect on children's development in the short and long term.
- We have quite a bit of evidence about what is needed for effective intervention.
- But we seem to struggle to find a way to put what we already know into **policy** and **practice**.

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## Why have we made neglect so complicated?

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## A look back

'From the late 19<sup>th</sup> century up to the 1970s, child neglect dominated in definitions of maltreatment. Annually, up to 90% of cases were defined as neglect' (Ferguson, 2011 p.29).

- Shift from 'inspection' of homes by NSPCC officers.
- Rise in local authority professional social workers working 'in partnership' 'with families.
- Rise in radical social work, highlighting the impact of structural factors.
- Anti-discriminatory practice.

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## Outcomes for children

We know that children who are neglected have some of the poorest emotional and cognitive outcomes, are at high risk of accidents and are vulnerable to sexual abuse.

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## Beginning of procedure

- From 1960s rise in attention to physical abuse with Kempe's 'battered child syndrome'.
- '70s and '80s attention to sexual abuse.
- Maria Colwell Inquiry (1974) and Cleveland Inquiry (1988) ->
- development of processes and systems, including the forensic approach ->
- focus on incidents and investigation.

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This is an unhappy group of children, presenting the least positive and most negative affect of all groups... These same children were also the most dependent and demonstrated the lowest ego control in the preschool and in general did not have the skills necessary to cope with the various situations.

Minnesota Longitudinal Study '75 ->  
(Egeland, Sroufe & Erickson, 1983, p.469)

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## SCRI: Research Questions

- What is known about the ways in which children and families directly and indirectly signal their need for help?
- To what extent are practitioners equipped to recognise and respond to the indications that a child's needs are likely to be, or are being neglected, whatever the cause?
- Does the evidence suggest that professional response could be swifter?

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Child maltreatment as a social problem: the neglect of neglect.

(Wolock & Horowitz, 1984)

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## Method

- Empirical studies, published 1995 and 2005.
- Filtered for *quality* and *relevance*.
- 63 papers, published in English, from across the world.

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## Backlash of procedure

- 'Re-focusing' debate
- Attention to 'need'
- Introduction of Framework for Assessment
- Neglect becoming high priority for statutory and third sector agencies
- 'Rediscovery of neglect' (Scourfield, 2000)

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## Annual Reviews of Child Neglect with Action for Children

1. Do we know how many children are currently experiencing neglect in the UK?
2. How good are we at recognising children who are at risk of, or are experiencing neglect?
3. How well are we helping children at risk of, or currently experiencing neglect?

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- Collation of UK statistics about children already 'officially' labelled as neglected and in need and affected by parental substance misuse, mental health issues and domestic abuse,
- analysis of policy documents,
- survey of LAs/Boards across the UK - 47 (2011) / 27 LAs (2012),
- focus groups 6 / 12,
- online poll:
  - 2,062 / 3,263 adults in the general public
  - 2,174 / 2,153 professionals (including social workers, police, health professionals and teachers).

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*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. 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.*

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### Definitions

- In literature review range of definitions:
  - developmental researchers focus on need and use broad definitions
  - researchers into the 'system' use narrower ones.
- Policy has tended to focus on unmet need and early intervention.
- Practice is driven by tighter operational definitions.

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There have been children I worry about when I go home at night

Head Teacher

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### Do we know how many children are currently experiencing neglect in the UK?

- It depends what we mean by neglect.
- It is relatively easy to find out about the *tip* of the iceberg.
- In both reviews neglect is the most common reason for children being made subject to a child protection plans 42.49%, 1 in 10.
- Less than half of the areas surveyed could give us figures about the *rest* of the iceberg, some figures suggest 3 in a 100.
- But Radford *et. al* (2000) suggest 1 in 10.

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'Neglect'

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... in reality, neglect is what the school teacher, physician, social worker, judge, psychologist, or police officer "say it is" at the time of the report...one should not get hung up on the definition of child neglect but rather get on with helping these children, who are being cared for in a manner far below our society's accepted standards.

ACTION ON NEGLECT Helfer, 1987

### Noticing and helping

- Noticing ('recognition') is not that complicated.
- The literature review and reviews showed that health visitors and teachers are perfectly well able to spot children who may be neglected.
- They also see it very much as part of their job. They do not need to be persuaded of the importance.

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### Helping is more complicated

- The literature and annual reviews show that helping ('response') tends to mean 'referral' for universal services and 'investigation and evidence-gathering' for children's social care and police.
- Problem at the interface between universal and statutory 'protection' services, especially when parents do not accept the concerns.

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## Spectrum of support

- Because neglect affects every part of children's lives they need support to develop in every domain.
- Intervention has to be within a model that does not split 'child protection' from 'family support' -

**'Effective family support is protection, effective protection is supportive.'**

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...many *different* protective service workers may be involved with the same family over a period of years. This method of delivery is outmoded and cannot be condoned. Ongoing long-term service given by a given protective service worker with a family can be invaluable.

(Helfer, 1987)

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## Seamless services

- Empathic responses, coupled with concrete practical and emotional help, can stave off many future disasters.
- Some parents are not able to use of this kind of voluntary support for all sorts of reasons:
  - some find it hard to admit to needing help,
  - some don't really see what the problem is,
  - some deliberately evade all professionals.
- Universal services need support to recognise these situations.
- Intervention has to be authoritative.

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...these services must continue until they are old enough to fend for themselves. While the cost of this type of intervention ... is almost prohibitive, **the cost of not caring for these families is enormous.**

(Helfer, 1987)

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## Comprehensive packages that

- are based on a working relationship,
- are focused on the needs of the child,
- address the issues at each ecological level,
- provide direct support for children,
- deal with the factors affecting parenting,
- pay attention to the *processes* underlying service use and change,
- are long-term, not episodic.

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## Focus on the child

Authoritative practice couples empathic support for parents with an unwavering focus on improving children's lives.

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