

9 steps to improving neglect assessments

Robyn Johnson shares her lessons learned from evaluating Graded Care Prof. Identifying and assessing child neglect can be difficult, and monitoring progress over time – or lack of it – can be even trickier. Yet this is crucial for making the right decision about a child’s welfare.

Tools like the [Graded Care Profile](#) are designed to help, and our evaluation has shown it to be effective in practice. But what can it tell us about how best to facilitate assessments more broadly? Here is what we learnt.

1. Help parents engage by identifying their strengths as well as weaknesses

The strength of the Graded Care Profile is that it enables social care (or other) professionals to identify what parents are doing well, as well as areas for improvement.

Our evaluation found that focussing on positive feedback by highlighting where care was meeting expectations helped parents engage in the assessment. It also helped parents respond to suggestions for improvement.

2. Keep the focus on the child

It is crucial to focus on the experience from the child’s perspective. Consider the child’s needs, the level of care they are receiving and the impact on the child. It’s also important to acknowledging family and environmental factors. What is it like to be a child in that home? Where possible involve children in the assessment process and gather their views.

3. Take a flexible approach to carrying out the assessment, tailored to the family

Co-working with another person was seen to have a number of benefits. Our practitioners reported that it could facilitate a more thorough assessment, for example, or enable a more co-ordinated approach, where the other professional was from another agency. However it is recognised that in many cases this won’t be possible. Unannounced visits were also seen to be helpful, particularly where there were concerns around disguised compliance.

4. Use family friendly language

This was actually a criticism of the Graded Care Profile from both social workers and parents – the language was seen as too complex and formal. It is vital to use language that the family understands and that you, as the practitioner, feel comfortable in using. That’s why we have produced an updated version of the tool, Graded Care Profile 2, developed with the original author Dr Prakash Srivastava and based on our evaluation.

5. Collect different types of evidence from different sources

As part of the Graded Care Profile, social workers carried out observations of family routines such as mealtimes, as well as parent-child interactions. There were also observations of the condition of the home and children's clothes, and investigations of refrigerators and kitchen cupboards to examine the quality and quantity of food available. This was balanced with discussions with the family. Gathering different types of evidence and from different perspectives was seen as an effective approach in gathering evidence in relation to neglect.

6. Don't be afraid to use a scoring system

The Graded Care Profile adopts a scoring system, where the social care professional rates the quality of care provided by the parents(s) on a scale of 1-5 across different aspects of neglect. While this could be initially off-putting for some, it was found to be beneficial in a number of ways. For example, it meant that neglect was quantified and made more visible. It also helped parents to understand professionals' concerns, as well as other people working with the family, and in some cases, courts. Colour coding of the scoring was also very useful, when it was used, especially in explaining the findings of the assessment to the family.

7. Think about both the breadth and depth of assessment

Ensure you cover all aspects of parental care, and explore each area with sufficient depth, even in situations where there is a specific concern in relation to one area. The Graded Care Profile helped practitioners to do this by setting out 4 domains for assessment – physical care, health, love and esteem, such as if a child is praised for doing something good.

8. Ensure clear, focused case planning

The Graded Care Profile enabled social workers to be focussed in their case planning, with targets that were specific and achievable within realistic timescales. This meant parents were given specific areas to address and different aspects of parenting are broken down, making expectations and the timescales in which they should be achieved clear. It was felt that this motivated parents to make positive changes.

9. Carry out a follow up assessment

The Graded Care Profile is designed to be used again after a period of time in order to measure the extent to which targets have been met. Where this was done, it was seen as helpful by both professionals and families in charting the progress made, or lack of it.