Child Neglect – An annotated bibliography

Introduction

Neglect is known to be the primary reason for almost half of all child protection registrations in the UK (Easton *et al.,* 2013), and it may affect ten per cent of children in the UK according to some studies (Action for Children, 2012). It is noted by professionals as being a challenging issue to identify and respond to. Whilst chronic neglect is best addressed through child protection procedures, there are considerable challenges for practitioners to identify and address neglect at an earlier stage before children's social services need to become involved. There has been a slow development in knowledge, partly due to the lack of clear definitions about what constitutes neglect and a dearth of valid and reliable measures (Dubowitz *et al.,* 2005). This summary outlines some key current research findings on prevalence, recognition, assessment and intervention of child neglect alongside highlighting further sources of information and training.

Gardner, R. (Editor) (2016) *Tackling Child Neglect – Research, policy and evidence-based practice.* London, Jessica Kingsley Publishers.
http://www.jkp.com/uk/tackling-child-neglect-34245.html

This recently published book is a comprehensive publication bringing together a wide variety of research and information about child neglect. It promotes a systematic approach to the topic, covering, prevalence of neglect; causes and harmfulness of neglect; and methods of intervention including Signs of Safety, evidence based parent support including Safe Care, and video interaction guidance. Incorporating the views of children and young people it provides a thorough coverage of the key issues.

Ghate, D. and Hazel, N. (2003) *Parenting in Poor Environments: Stress, support and coping.* London, Jessica Kingsley Publishers.
http://www.jkp.com/uk/parenting-in-poor-environments.html

This book helpfully reminds us of the impact of poverty on parenting, and the role of both formal and informal support systems. The book draws upon research with 1750 parents, drawing out the implications for policy and practice.

Stevenson, O. (2007) *Neglected Children and their Families. (Second Edition).* Oxford, Blackwell Publishing.
http://eu.wiley.com/WileyCDA/WileyTitle/productCd-1405151714.html

In this book the author provides a useful introductory overview of the presentation, recognition and potential response to childhood neglect. The book contains a number of helpful appendices to assist in the assessment of neglect.

Prevalence

Stoltenborgh *et al.* (2013) conducted a meta-analysis into the prevalence of neglect identifying that while the extent of neglect was a considerable problem impacting many children's lives, there was a significant lack of quality research into the prevalence.

The incidence of neglect is hard to quantify but the review by Action for Children highlighted professional belief that the number of neglected children is rising (Ofsted, 2014). There are difficulties in confirming the numbers due to the lack of statistical data collected in some areas, and the challenges in 'labelling' neglect as it is often considered as part of the spectrum of 'parenting capacity

or incapacity' and is often part of a broader picture of family needs (Action for Children, 2013). The NSPCC prevalence study (2011) of child abuse and neglect found neglect to be the most prevalent type of maltreatment in the family across all age groups, with 9% of children reporting severe neglect, and 16% reporting neglect at some period during their childhood.

Burgess, C., Daniel, B., Scott, H., Mulley, K. and Dobbin, H. (2013) *The State of Child Neglect in the UK. An annual review by Action for Children in partnership with the University of Stirling.* London, Action for Children.
https://www.actionforchildren.org.uk/media/3214/preventing-child-neglect-in-the-uk_annual-review_march2014.pdf

This is the second in a series of reviews that monitors the impact of changes in national and local policy and practice to assess whether those changes are helping children who are at risk of, or experiencing, neglect. It highlights that child neglect remains a major cause for concern. It recognises that there has been an attempted shift to early intervention and help within the policy arena, however systems and local structures to facilitate this shift remain inconsistent and sporadic. It highlights the continued challenges of establishing effective data collection mechanisms to capture the true scale of neglect.

Recognition

In order to recognise neglect it is imperative to consider how it is defined and how it might present. The failure to meet a child's basic needs is the essence of neglect, although children who are neglected often also suffer from other types of abuse. It is acknowledged that children are usually neglected within the context of their parents experiencing other significant challenges in their lives, such as substance misuse, learning disability, domestic violence and/or poor mental health.

Cleaver, H., Unell, I. and Aldgate, J. (2011) Children's Needs – Parenting Capacity. Child abuse: Parental mental illness, learning disability, substance misuse and domestic violence (2nd Edition). London, TSO.
https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/182095/DFE-00108-2011-Childrens_Needs_Parenting_Capacity.pdf

In Northern Ireland neglect has been defined as:

"The failure to provide for a child's basic needs, whether it be adequate food, clothing, hygiene, supervision or shelter that is likely to result in the serious impairment of a child's health or development."

Department of Health (2016, p.13)

However, standards of minimum care have not been fully established. Legally, the standard is omissions in care resulting in imminent risk or observable harm, however, developmentally a pattern of caregiver omissions may result in significant emotional and/or physical harm to children in both the immediate and longer term.

Easton, C., Lamont, L., Smith, R. and Aston, H. (2013). 'We Should Have Been Helped from Day One': a Unique Perspective From Children, Families and Practitioners. *Findings from LARC5.* Slough: NFER.
https://www.nfer.ac.uk/publications/LRCF01/LRCF01.pdf

Practitioners have found that they need to use professional judgment to define child neglect, and that it can be a 'grey area' requiring an element of flexibility within an early intervention context. The report by Easton and colleagues identified four categories of risk factors: *Physical Neglect, Emotional Neglect, Educational Needs* and *Parental Behaviour.*

The research utilised Southhampton's Local Safeguarding Children's Board (LSCB) *Really Useful Guide to Recognising Neglect* (http://southamptonlscb.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2012/10/Neglect-Guide-Final.pdf) which provides definitions of five levels of neglect. In summary these are:

• Level 1: families who are thriving and accessing universal provision

• Level 2: families characterised by parent/s mostly meeting the child's needs

• Level 3: children have some unmet needs; they live in a family home that lacks routines; have parents with poor awareness of safety issues; and the child receives limited interaction and affection.

• Level 4: families related to adults' needs being put before the child, with the child having low nutrition and scarce stimulation

• Level 5: children who are at significant risk of harm and should be supported by statutory services.

Dubowitz, H., Newton, R.R, Litrownik, A.J., Lewis, T., Briggs, E. C., Thompson, R., English, D., Lee, L. and Feerick, M. (2005) Examination of a Conceptual Model of Child Neglect. *Child Maltreatment* 10(2): 173- 189

Dubowitz *et al.,* (2005) view neglect as a continuum of children's needs being met ranging from all being met fully to none being met at all. The authors identified 12 types of needs for children from longitudinal studies. From this a measurement model was developed considering emotional support and/ or affection, protection from family conflict and/or violence, and from community violence. Applying empirical data to these three domains, the authors were able to link the consequences with the unmet children's needs.

English, D.J., Thompson, R., Graham, J.C., and Briggs, E. C. (2005) Toward a Definition of Neglect in Young Children. *Child Maltreatment* 10(2): 190-206

English *et al.,* (2005) utilised a similar approach focusing on younger children's needs (under 4 years) utilising empirical data to consider the impacts of lack of physical safety, security and well-being, psychological safety and security of the child. These have been incorporated into the table below. Findings from this study suggest that failure to provide for the basic needs of children including clean and safe environment, adequate hygiene, adequate food, stability of living environment, medical needs met, and caregiver's verbally aggressive behaviour towards a child produce significant development delays related to language development and communication as well as socio-emotional and behavioural problems. While the child is not deemed to be at 'imminent' risk of immediate harm the data suggests the potential for significant long term harm in terms of health, child growth and development.

Table 1: Types of Children's Basic Needs and consequences if not met (adapted from Dubowitz et al., 2005 and English et al., 2005).

Children's Needs	Consequences
Inadequate food	Impaired cognitive development Internalising behaviour problems Diminished birth weight Chronic health conditions such as increased risk of cardiovascular disease Failure to thrive
Exposure to household hazards	House fires Access to firearms Fall from heights Toxic exposures Disability or death
Inadequate personal hygiene	Adverse health outcomes Obesity
Inadequate heath care	Serious injuries not treated Several health problems not identified or treated Untreated dental problems Death
Inadequate mental health care	Suicide Delinquency Poor school achievement Psychiatric symptoms
Inadequate emotional support and/or affection	Externalising problems High risk behaviour Poor academic performance
Inadequate parental structure and/or guidance	Sexual risk taking Heath risk behaviour such as substance and/or drug use, violent behaviours, and school truancy.
Inadequate cognitive/ stimulation/ opportunity	Delayed motor and social development, lower language competence and achievement test scores, behaviour problems Externalising problems and aggression Delayed socio-emotional and cognitive development Aggressive coping
Unstable caregiver relationship	Insecure attachment Externalising behaviour Internalising behaviour
Unstable living situation	Externalising behaviour Internalising behaviour Anxiety
Exposure to family conflict and/ or violence	Poor physical health Lower heath status Internalising and externalising behaviour Post-traumatic stress disorder

Children's Needs	Consequences
Exposure to community violence and/ or lack of neighbourhood safety	Behaviour problems Poor school attendance Distress Social maladjustment

Using a model such as this can help staff and services in the conceptualisation and recognition of child neglect.

Assessment

Ofsted (2014) *In the child's time: professional responses to neglect.* Report 140059.London, Ofsted.
https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/419072/In_the_child_s_time-professional_responses_to_neglect.pdf

This report on long term child neglect, primarily with children under 10yrs, found that the quality of professional practice was too variable citing concerns regarding assessments. They highlighted a number of key tools that some local authorities utilize:

Practitioners Tool Kit - South Gloucestershire
The aim of this guidance is to establish a common understanding and threshold for intervention in cases where the neglect of children is a concern. It includes definitions and possible causes of neglect, a framework for identification of neglect, and guidance on decision-makings and thresholds, including guidance as to what to include in a referral to children's social care.

Signs of Safety - Northumberland
This strengths based and safety organised assessment and planning framework was originally developed in Western Australia by Turnell and Edwards. It encourages a shared multi-agency approach to child protection and enables the experiences and views of children to be heard and considered. Signs of Safety has been refined and amended in many places, including in Northern Ireland within the Western HSC Trust (Safety in Partnership).

Easton *et al.*, (2013) highlighted in their report that given the complexities around neglect, and the subtleties of early intervention more generally, it is unsurprising that professional judgement was seen to be pivotal to identifying and addressing neglect.

Ward, H., Brown, R. and Hyde-Dryden, G. (2014) *Assessing Parental Capacity to Change when Children are on the Edge of Care*, Research Report. London: Department of Education
https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/330332/RR369_Assessing_parental_capacity_to_change_Final.pdf

The report by Ward and colleagues considers the current research evidence, bringing together the key messages concerning factors which promote or inhibit parental capacity to change in families where there are significant child protection concerns. The report acts as a reference tool for social workers supporting families where children's safety and developmental functions are at risk. The purpose is to encourage more focused and robust assessments of capability and parental capacity to change, as well as assisting legal professionals in evaluating the

quality of assessment work in court proceedings. The key findings highlight that change is both important and necessary when children are suffering abuse and neglect. However, it highlights the challenges and complexities in making changes. Change is a complex process, and although it can be supported and promoted through interagency interventions, it cannot be imposed and will not happen unless parents are proactively engaged.

Sen, R., Lister, P.G., Rigby, P. and Kendrick, A. (2014) Grading the graded care profile. *Child Abuse Review*, 23(5), pp.361-373.

One specific tool to assist in the assessment of neglect is the Graded Care Profile. This tool aims to provide an objective qualitative grading of the care given to a child by his/her carer, identifying strengths and difficulties and acknowledging the effort and commitment shown by the carer. Field testing of the Graded Care Profile has shown it to be 'workable in routine practice', 'user friendly' and with 'high inter-rater agreement' (when completed by different people assessing the same situation). However, Sen and colleagues argue that it is important to listen to parents when there are substantive disagreements about the quality of care, and to explore this further with carers.

Intervention

Moran, P. (2009) *Neglect: research evidence to inform practice.* London, Action for Children.
https://www.actionforchildren.org.uk/media/3368/neglectc_research_evidence_to_inform_practice.pdf

It is a useful reminder from Moran that in seeking to address neglect we should consider the resources within extended families and the wider community. In particular it is important to think of the role of all adult carers, including fathers, whether resident with the child or not. Adopting such a holistic and systemic perspective reduces the tendency of seeing neglect purely in terms of parental failings, whilst also recognizing that families are more likely to accept support from sources that are more familiar to them.

Easton, C., Lamont, L., Smith, R. and Aston, H. (2013). 'We Should Have Been Helped from Day One': a Unique Perspective From Children, Families and Practitioners. *Findings from LARC5.* Slough: NFER.
https://www.nfer.ac.uk/publications/LRCF01/LRCF01.pdf

Based on insights from both practitioners and families, Easton et al (2013) identified a number of ways that support to families can be conducted. These centred around:

• local support services being promoted in a way that is accessible to families and practitioners which would support practitioners in sign posting families to appropriate services and may also encourage families to ask for help earlier

• multi agency working and information sharing between practitioners and services allowing accurate assessment of families' needs and allowing more timely and effective support to be offered

• relationships between practitioners and families being built up over time based on trust, honesty and openness

• families needing a combination of both emotional and practical support to help them cope with parenting, their child's behaviour, mental health issues and/or financial management. Families also valued support programmes for parents and activities for children and young people.

Dubowitz, H., Newton, R.R, Litrownik, A.J., Lewis, T., Briggs, E. C., Thompson, R., English, D., Lee, L. and Feerick, M. (2005) Examination of a Conceptual Model of Child Neglect. *Child Maltreatment* 10(2): 173- 189

Using a model such as that detailed by Dubowitz *et al.* (2005) allows more targeted intervention depending on the specific area of neglect allowing a shift from parental behaviour towards a focus on children's basic needs. For example, increasing parental behaviours that would be interpreted as affectionate and supportive by a child, or focusing on a home environment with less conflict could be the target of an intervention depending on the form of neglect that is occurring.

Ethier, L. S., Couture, G., Lacharite, C. and Gagnie, J. (2000) Impact of a Multidimensional Intervention Programme Applied to Families at Risk for Child Neglect. *Child Abuse Review* 9: 19-36

Ethier *et al.*, (2000) evaluated the effects of an intervention programme applied to families at risk of child neglect. Comparing two groups, one participated in a multidimensional eco-systemic intervention programme, and the other underwent psychosocial intervention. The eco-systemic approach had four aspects, a Home Visiting Family Assistance programme with the aim of better integration of the target family into the social environment; group meetings for parents focusing on relational and parental competency issues; stimulation of children through educational activity; and individual counselling specific to the needs of individual families. By contrast the other group intervention was social work family relational focused.

Findings from this study suggest that both approaches were equally effective in decreasing risk of child neglect, however the eco-systemic approach was superior in improving the mothers' relationships with her environment which may lead to longer lasting change and improvement.

Staff Training

Finally, training in respect of how to identify and respond to issues of neglect appears to be a central and crucial part of the response. Comprehensive multi-modal training resources have been commissioned by the Department for Education (2012a, 2012b) English https://www.gov.uk/government/collections/childhood-neglect-training-resources, and SCIE have recently launched a new E learning course on Child Neglect using a systems approach http://www.scie.org.uk/training/children/child-neglect.asp.

The materials have been developed using the assessment framework for children and families as their basis, and therefore are very suitable to the Northern Ireland UNOCINI Framework.

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