

# 7 Minute Briefing: Neglect in Childhood

## 1. Background

Neglect is the ongoing failure to meet a child's basic needs. It is a significant factor within serious case reviews (Vincent 2010). Neglect was one of the main reasons for a child to be the subject of a child protection plan and be on the child protection register, 2018 - 2019 (Scottish Government 2019). Neglect takes many forms and can be hard to define as it can be subjective compared to other forms of abuse. Professionals from all agencies must be able to recognise both physical and emotional neglect with a realization of the impact on the child of both the short and long term consequences of this.

## 2. Why it matters

Neglect is a serious form of harm. It is classed as an Adverse Childhood Experience (ACE) often causing lifelong physical and/or mental health consequences (Bellis et al 2019). It is potentially fatal. Neglect affects the ability to form relationships not only with the child's caregiver as it interferes with the attachment process but with other people too, throughout life. The type of neglect along with the severity and frequency affects the impact of it. The child's resilience which is defined as normal development under difficult circumstances (Fonagy et al, 1994) coupled with any other protective factors may buffer some of the effect.

## 7. What to do

What would you expect to see in a child who was neglected, what might they tell you? What would you observe in the parents' behaviours? I.e. what would they say/ do? Professional curiosity - ask probing questions to help clarify/expose gaps in information. Listen to what the child is saying both verbally and often non-verbally. Look at the child. Use of tools to gather information e.g. 'Neglect Toolkit'. The toolkit helps agencies assess circumstances where neglect is evident to help inform their referral to social work.

## 5. Professional Curiosity

The significant case review into the death of Child B (Glasgow CPC 2019) highlighted a need for workers to have more professional curiosity and have confidence in their concerns about a child. Child B died aged two years five months malnourished and filthy with a severe lice infestation. Child B's mother and partner are now serving a custodial sentence for her neglect. We need to take neglect seriously and understand that children and adults speak about it differently and listen to the child. Think about what a day in the life of a child may be like? Professional curiosity can unveil signs of abuse/neglect when looking at seemingly unrelated incidents. When visiting a family instills a feeling of dread, think how it must feel to be a child living in that environment.

## 3. Information

Neglect is not a singular dramatic event but an accumulation of issues over time. The ongoing failure to meet a child's physical and/or psychological needs are likely to result in impairment of the child's health or development. It can occur in pregnancy if a mother has drug/alcohol issues. After birth the neglect may involve the parent(s) /carer(s) failing to: provide adequate nurture, food, clothing or shelter. It can be a lack of affording protection from physical and / or emotional harm. Not ensuring adequate supervision, access to medical care and/or being unresponsive to a child's basic emotional needs (Sidebotham et al 2016).

## 4. Causes of neglect

In its broadest terms compromised parental capacity can be considered as the cause. Capacity can be compromised by issues such as poor mental health, addiction or learning difficulties. Sometimes neglect is 'hidden' by the more obvious parental issues. It is highly unlikely to be a 'quick fix' situation.