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Understanding Child Neglect

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Child neglect is one of the most common forms of maltreatment. Neglect is a topic that encompasses complex issues, many of which are also emerging research areas. This paper aims to provide a broad overview of these issues in relation to current thinking and to generate discussion points for practitioners, policy makers and researchers.

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Key messages

- » Poverty and child neglect are closely linked but not all children from poor families are neglected and children from more affluent families can be neglected.
- » Neglect is often portrayed as the “fault” of mothers, while failing to take into account the role of neglectful fathers. The gendered nature of “neglectful parenting” may be, in part, explained by links between single mothers and poverty.
- » A tertiary child protection response may not be the best way to respond to children who are being neglected

Related content

[Spotlight on child neglect](#)



NCPC Issues
 Examines child neglect, the way it is minimised and the place of neglect in the child protection



What is neglect?

- No universally accepted definition
 - ◆ measurement
 - ◆ identification of children who are neglected
 - ◆ mis-identification of children who are not neglected
- Failure of caretaker to provide adequate supervision, emotional nurturance, medical care, food, clothing and shelter



What is neglect?

- Poverty is also inadequate food shelter and clothing
 - ◆ not all neglected children impoverished and not all impoverished children are neglected
 - ◆ statutory response always appropriate?
 - financial assistance
 - parent education



Influences on definition of neglect

- Social understanding and evolving knowledge
- Cultural context
- Assumptions of 'normative'
- An act of omission, rather than commission
- Subjective standard of 'good enough parenting'
- Not a single entity – a number of 'types'



Types of Neglect

- Supervisory
- Physical
- Medical
- Educational
- Abandonment
- Emotional
- New types evolving



How common is neglect?

- Internationally – range between 1.4% and 10.1% (Gilbert et al, 2009)
- Australia – no national population-based studies
 - 3 studies found range between 1.6% and 12.2% (Rosenman and Rodgers, 2004, Price-Roberston et al, 2010, Straus and Savage, (2005))
 - 2012/13 AIHW child protection data found 28% of all substantiated abuse was neglect (AIHW, 2014)
 - ◆ Also very commonly occurs with other forms of maltreatment (26.5%)
- Many issues in the measurement of maltreatment



Risk indicators for neglect

- Ecological context – child, parent, family, community and societal impacts
 - ◆ parents considered responsible but societal and professional action or inaction also important



Risk indicators

- **Socio-economic factors**
 - ◆ failing to address poverty at a societal level
- **Workforce participation**
 - ◆ unemployment associated with higher rates of neglect
- **Role of ethnicity**
 - ◆ Canada – maltreatment higher in Aboriginal children (50%) than non-Aboriginal (38%)
 - ◆ Australia – poverty and low SES in NT Aboriginal households
- **Family structure**
 - ◆ single parent families
 - ◆ role of fathers
- **Child characteristics**
 - ◆ have to consider home environment too
 - ◆ younger children more vulnerable
- **Parental history and well-being**
 - ◆ associated with DV, alcohol/substance misuse, mental illness



Effects of neglect

- More severe, prolonged neglect = worse impact
 - ◆ some children and families more resilient than others
- Varies by sub-type
- Developmental stage of child influences impact
- Emphasises importance of identification and appropriate response



Responses to neglect

- Not usually a single incident but long-term circumstances
- Cultural and contextual circumstances influence perceptions of acceptable care
- Must consider what is available for families
- Difficult decision – parental omission, lack of access to services, environmental conditions



Responses to neglect

- Harm is cumulative
 - ◆ individual incident may not reach threshold
 - ◆ may go unrecognised within CP system
- Child protection systems designed for serious and immediate harm
- Even with structured decision making tools – remains a subjective decision
 - ◆ biases, personal judgement
- Fear of adding to family burden
- Requires long-term community, societal involvement



The challenge of working with neglectful families

(Tanner and Turney, 2003)

- Identification of threshold is subjective – rule of optimism
- Occurs over long period of time
- Sensitisation to family situation over time
 - ◆ low level neglect
 - ◆ ‘defensive’ practice – routinised responses, increasing thresholds
- Intuitive, rather than evidence based practice
 - ◆ lack of research or poorly disseminated and not easily accessed for practitioners



Intervention

- Ecological framework – child part of bigger system
- No one size fits all responses
- Advocating for resources – housing, alcohol and drug services, income support
- Not enough to treat the symptoms – must see changes that result in an end to the neglect



Alternative perspective on types of neglect

(Crittenden, 1999)

● Disorganised neglect

- motivated by emotional responses, feelings and affect i.e.) children fighting generates a response but the phone bill is set aside until things calm down
- multiple problems – always another crisis
- unpredictable response to children – teaches children to over dramatise situation, contributing to the chaos
- intervention must focus on predictable consequences for actions
- teach family to respond cognitively instead of emotionally
- support for family must be maintained



Alternative perspective on types of neglect

(Crittenden, 1999)

- Emotional neglect

- characterised by cognitive responses
- family often able to provide material needs – but not emotional
- emphasis on education, performance, learning rules
- punished for exhibiting negative emotions so learn to suppress them
- better to leave children in home with parents to avoid issues of separation
- offer services at home to teach parents to engage emotionally with their children and seek support from places other than their children



Alternative perspective on types of neglect

(Crittenden, 1999)

- Depressive neglect

- more typical picture of neglect
- families withdrawn and dull, little interest in changing or ability to understand change is needed
- child development is inhibited as parents don't respond
- focus should be on learning behaviours that cause predictable and meaningful outcomes
- teach caregivers children need stimulus and how to engage with appropriate affect (smiles, laughter)



Intervention guidelines (Gaudin, 1993)

- Strengths based approach – most parents want to do the right thing
- Respect and build on cultural strengths – respected elders, affirmation of religious and spiritual beliefs and values
- No assumptions or generalisations – each family is unique
- Empower independence through reinforcement and praise
- Legal action should be a last resort
- Intervention plans must include advocacy to access formal and informal services – when outside sources assist family feelings of hopelessness, resistance and distrust will be minimised



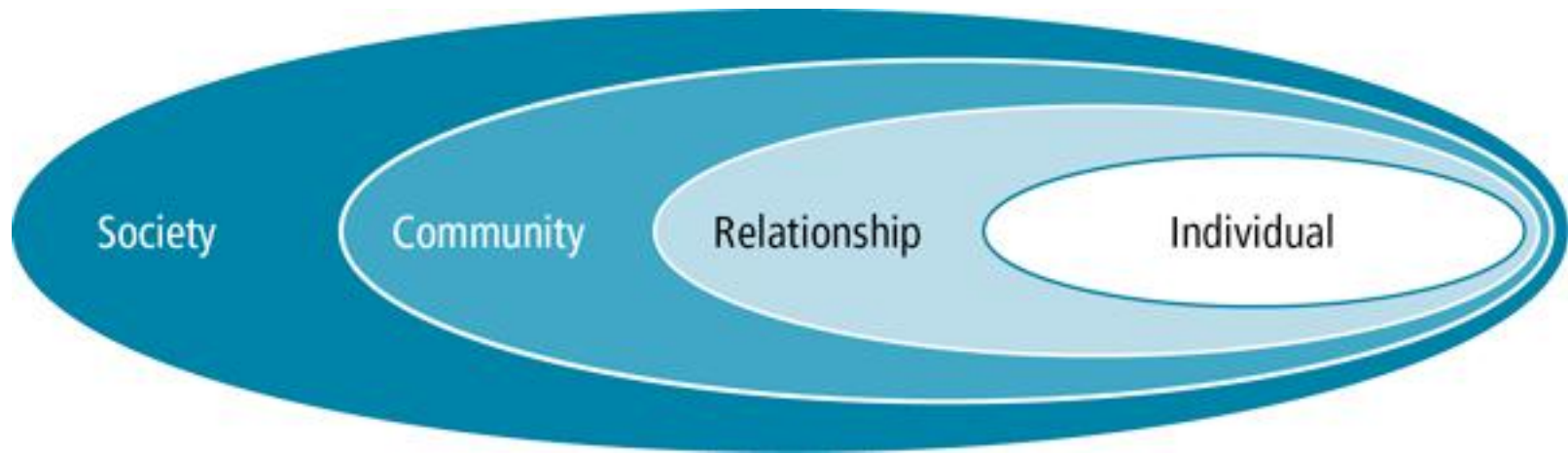
Differential response

(Dual Track, Alternative Response)

- Provides scope for more than 1 kind of response
- Partnership model as opposed to more adversarial investigation, substantiation
- ‘How can we work with the realities you face to ensure the safety and wellbeing of your children’
- More likely to break cycle of poverty and neglect
- Enables tailored response – low cost housing, transportation, recreation programs, job training



Role of community



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Source: Krug, E., Dahlberg L., Mercy, J., Zwi, A., and Lorenzo, R. Eds). (2002) World report on violence and health Geneva: WHO.

Where to now?

- Neglect is a complex problem
- Not just the responsibility of child protection system – public health model of the National Framework for Protecting Australia's children 2009-2020
- Child Aware Approaches designed to improve adult service awareness
- Real change requires an attitudinal shift – neglect isn't just about child protection services



A great resource!

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