

Understanding Neglect

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Forms of neglect

Howe identifies 4 types of neglect

- Emotional neglect
- Disorganised neglect
- Depressed or passive neglect
- Severe deprivation

Each is associated with different effects and implications for intervention

(Howe, D (2005) Child Abuse and Neglect, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan)

Emotional neglect

- Sins of commission and omission
- ‘Closure’ and ‘flight’: avoid contact, ignore advice, miss appointments, deride professionals, children unavailable
- However, may seek help with a child who needs to be ‘cured’
- Intervention often delayed
- Associated with avoidant/defended patterns of attachment

Emotional neglect: parents

- Can't cope with children's demands: avoid/disengage from child in need; dismissive or punitive response
- Children provided for materially but there is a failure to connect emotionally
- More rules; everyone has a role and knows what to do.
- Parents may feel awkward & tense when alone with their children.

Emotional neglect: children

When attachment behaviour rejected:

- Learns that caregiver's physical and emotional availability is reduced when emotional demands are made;
- Caregiver most available when child is showing positive affect, being self-sufficient, undemanding and compliant;
- Reverse roles, "false brightness" to care for/reassure parent.

Emotional neglect: children

- Frightened, unhappy, anxious, low self-esteem
- Withdrawn, isolated, fear intimacy and dependence
- Precocious, 'streetwise', self-reliant

Emotional neglect: children

- May show compliance to dominant caregivers but anger and aggression in situations where they feel more dominant.
- May learn that power and aggression are how relationships work and you get your needs met
- Behaviour increasingly anti-social and oppositional
- Brain development affected: difficulties in processing and regulating emotional arousal

Disorganised neglect

- Classic 'problem families'
- Thick case files
- Can annoy and frustrate but endear and amuse
- Chaos and disruption
- Reasoning minimised, affect is dominant
- Feelings drive behaviour and social interaction
- Worker may feel agenda co-opted by family's immediate needs

Disorganised neglect: carers

- Feelings of being undervalued or emotionally deprived in childhood so need to be centre of attention/affection
- Demanding and dependant with respect to professionals
- May be regarded as overwhelmed but amenable to services
- Crisis is a necessary not a contingent state
- Associated with ambivalent/coercive patterns of attachment

Disorganised neglect: carers

- Cope with babies (babies need them) but then...
- Parental responses to children
 - unpredictable and insensitive (though not necessarily hostile or rejecting).
 - driven by how the parent is feeling, not the needs of the child
- Lack of 'attunement' and 'synchronicity'

Disorganised neglect: children

- Anxious and demanding
- Infants: fractious, fretful, clinging, hard to soothe
- Young children: attention seeking; exaggerated affect; poor confidence and concentration; jealous; show off; go to far
- Teens: immature, impulsive; need to be noticed leads to trouble at school and in community
- Neglectful parents feel angry and helpless: reject the child; to grandparents, care or gangs

Depressed neglect

- Classic neglect
- Material and emotional poverty
- Homes and children dirty and smelly
- Urine soaked mattresses, dog faeces, filthy plates, rags at the windows
- A sense of hopelessness and despair (can be reflected in workers)

Depressed neglect: carers

- Often severely abused/neglected: own parents depressed or sexually or physically abusive
- May seem unmotivated, mild learning disability
- Learned helplessness in response to demands of family life;
- Stubborn negativism; passive-aggressive
- Have given up both thinking and feeling

Depressed neglect: carers

- Listless and unresponsive to children's needs and demands, limited interaction
- Lack of pleasure or anger in dealings with children and professionals
- No smacks, no shouting, no deliberate harm but no hugs, no warmth, no emotional involvement
- No structure; poor supervision, care and food

Depressed neglect: children

- Younger the child, more debilitating the effects
- Lack interaction with parents required for mental and emotional development
- Infant: Incurious and unresponsive; moan and whimper but don't cry or laugh
- At school: isolated, aimless, lacking in concentration, drive, confidence and self-esteem but do not show anti-social behaviour

Severe deprivation

- Eastern European orphanages, parents with serious issues of depression, learning disabilities, drug addiction, care system at its worst
- Children left in cot or 'serial caregiving'
- Combination of severe neglect and absence of selective attachment: child is essentially alone

Severe deprivation: children

- Infants: lack pre-attachment behaviours of smiling, crying, eye contact
- Children: impulsivity, hyperactivity, attention deficits, cognitive impairment and developmental delay, aggressive and coercive behaviour, eating problems, poor relationships
- Inhibited: withdrawn passive, rarely smile, autistic-type behaviour and self-soothing
- Disinhibited: attention-seeking, clingy, over-friendly; relationships shallow, lack reciprocity



A final thought



“We are guilty of many errors and many faults but the worst of our crimes is abandoning our children, neglecting the fountain of life. Many of the things we need can wait. The child cannot. Right now is the time his bones are being formed, his blood is being made, and his senses are being developed. To him we cannot answer 'Tomorrow.' His name is 'Today.'”

Gabriela Mistral (Chilean poet, 1889-1957)

