

The Child as Object of Neglect

This small scale study by Horwath and Tarr (2015) explores planning and social work practice in cases of child neglect with a focus on conferences and core groups in England and Wales, looking at active cases of chronic neglect where a child was subject to a child protection plan for two years or more because of neglect, or was on a plan, taken off it and subject to a further plan within a two-year period.

Almost 30 years ago Butler-Sloss in her report on the Cleveland inquiry expressed disquiet that children were not recognised as people, but rather as 'objects of concern'. Understanding the views and experiences of the child is particularly important for social workers in cases of child neglect because the cause of harm is rarely linked to one specific incident; rather, it is the cumulative, day-to-day adverse effect of poor parenting on the child that is so damaging and if the child's day-to-day experiences, their perceptions of that experience and their wishes and feelings are not properly explored then it is hard to identify effective interventions. Practitioners need also to be mindful that seemingly identical behaviours by carers can affect individual children differently and they need to separately consider the effects of these parenting behaviours on each child in the family.

The definition of neglect included in the Working Together guidance (HM Government, 2015; Welsh Assembly Government, 2007) centres on the failure by parents to meet the needs of the child and focuses on tangible examples such as failing to provide food, to protect the child from danger or lack of supervision. Using this as a definition encourages practitioners to focus on evidence indicating signs and indicators of neglect leading, Horwath suggests, to the construction of a 'neglected child' as little more than a collection of indicators of neglect with the priority for interventions focused on parental problems and behaviours. When a child becomes over identified as the object of neglect it becomes less likely that their individuality and that of any siblings is properly explored and considered.

This could explain why plans often include general actions for parents where success is measured by their completion of tasks with little consideration as to whether this leads to child-focused outcomes and why some parents are given too many chances to change, even though children cannot afford to wait.

Findings

The study found that social workers struggle to be child-centred during the assessment and planning process, with a lack of insight into the day to day experience of the child and a limited understanding about the impact of neglect. Social workers often find it difficult to keep a focus on individual children who are members of large sibling groups.

Practice that is child-centred means that workers need to maintain a focus on the child and their needs throughout the assessment and interventions; this is not just about giving the child a voice, but also observing their behaviour, their interactions with others and understanding how neglectful care is having an effect on their lives. All of these interlinking strands provide a benchmark for measuring progress.

Children's Involvement in the Child Protection Process

Although most practitioners agree that they and the child's parents can benefit from hearing directly about the child's experience and in spite of efforts over the last twenty years, it is still rare for children to attend conferences or core groups and their views are generally gathered, interpreted and presented by professionals. There are a number of reasons why this does not happen; concern that the child may find it hard to listen to difficult discussions, timings, venues and agendas that are not child friendly, professionals who feel uncomfortable in their presence and finally, few children express a wish to attend, although research highlights the enabling role of advocacy in helping children choose and to contribute. This makes it crucial for practitioners with direct experience of the child to attend core groups, as this is more likely to make sure the focus stays on the impact of changes in parenting behaviour as experienced by the child.

Needs of the Child

There is little time available prior to the conference to establish a relationship with the child and involve them in the assessment and, as a consequence, discussions with children remain superficial. It is clear that case conferences also find it difficult to identify the individual needs of large sibling groups. Some workers use a range of tools to try and get to know a child.

The importance of seeing the child is clear, but it is often not obvious from the files what this actually means and how it is implemented. For example, case records do not always describe whether children are seen alone, where they are seen and what they talk about. Getting to know a child who is subject to section 47 enquiries or on a child protection plan is a challenge and even more so when there are siblings; in these situations, the focus can become the sibling group. While each child in the family has their own file and individual report for conference, there is often a lack of awareness of the different needs of children in the family and the same statements are often used by workers to describe the impact of parenting capacity on their developmental needs. This means social workers can find it hard to know and describe how the child feels about themselves and others around them.

The study found that the needs of children in the family are often described in general rather than specific terms, for example, under both parenting capacity and development, social workers may write 'parent fails to send child to school or child does not attend school' rather than considering the consequence of not attending school, such as lack of social skills and friendships, poor writing skills, low self esteem and so on. Or, under social presentation, 'child is dirty and unkempt' is a commonly used term and it is then left to case conference members to consider how this affects a thirteen-year-old differently to a two-year-old. There is very little evidence of practitioners going beyond the stated wishes and feelings by, for example, trying to find out what it is like for this child living with this mother who is misusing alcohol, and understanding their particular concerns and fears about the drinking, rather than recording that 'this child would like mother to stop drinking'.

Planning and Outcomes

Over half of participants in the survey felt that some plans were more a list of actions for parents with no child-focused outcomes; this focus on parenting in isolation is often evident all the way through the process. Many indicators of progress focus almost exclusively on tangible and easily measurable actions taken by the family or the professionals such as better home conditions, improved school attendance, keeping health appointments, parents engaging with services and attending parenting courses, as if these results inevitably lead to reduced levels of risk and better outcomes for the children involved. Plans often fail to separate out the actions needed for individual children in sibling groups.

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Actions or outcomes in the plan are often described vaguely with generalised statements such as 'everything going well; drinking at an acceptable level; no issues arising; engaged with services'. Most practitioners accept that this does not measure or reflect any improvement in the child's experience and can contribute to confusion amongst parents regarding exactly what is expected of them.

The study found that most social workers measure the success of plans in terms of task compliance by the parents with a drive to remove children from plans at the first sign of improvement, in other words actions completed rather than improvements in the day to day experience of the child. As a consequence professionals can become too dependent on the views and behaviour of the adults rather than those of the child.

Practice Pointers

Start with a focus on each child's lived experience and their immediate needs and then work out a time frame based on their longer term needs. Do the same for the parents.

Ask yourself:

- What are the needs of this child?
- What does it feel like to stand in their shoes?
- Do the parents understand their child's needs?
- Are the parents able and willing to meet the child's needs and what is their capacity for change?
- How does the child assess their own safety and well-being? What are their hopes, worries and fears?

Use information about the family's past history, their relationships and functioning to help you make decisions and analyse the inter-relationships between strengths and protective factors and vulnerabilities and risk factors. This will help you to assess significant harm and the child's resilience.

Work with the Family in a Way Which:

- Breaks down the problem areas into very specific components and sets a baseline to measure progress;
- Is very clear with parents, carers and colleagues about outcomes for children, adequate day to day care and what this looks like;
- Stays consistent even when outside factors change;
- Gets parents to describe what success will look like and how to get there;
- Keeps contact with the family, with regular updates;
- Clearly identifies and records responsibility for who does what.

Neglect as a form of child abuse does not lend itself to quick or easy investigation; there needs to be reflection and observation over time. Working with neglect is unpredictable and making judgements about when the bad days seriously outweigh the good days is a skilled and multi-disciplinary task. Keeping the focus on the child requires an ability to step into their lives.

References

Horwath, J & Tarr, S; Child Visibility in Cases of Chronic Neglect: Implications for Social Work Practice British Journal of Social Work (2015) 45, 1379–1394

Working Together to Safeguard Children 2015
<http://www.workingtogetheronline.co.uk>

Safeguarding Children - Working Together Under the Children Act 2004 Wales
<http://gov.wales/topics/health/publications/socialcare/circular/nafwc1207/?lang=en>

Further Reading

Neglect: Research Evidence to Inform Practice: Dr Patricia Moran, Action for Children 2009
http://www.actionforchildren.org.uk/media/143188/neglectc_research_evidence_to_inform_practice.pdf

Safeguarding Children Across Services: Messages from Research on Identifying and Responding to Child Maltreatment; Carolyn Davies and Harriet Ward 2012
<https://www.education.gov.uk/publications/RSG/PopularRsgPublications/Page1/DFE-RBX-10-09>

Child Neglect in 2011: An Annual Review. Action for Children
<https://www.actionforchildren.org.uk/media/3219/childneglectin2011summary.pdf>

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