The different types of neglect

A guide for professionals

Tameside Safeguarding Children Partnership

J009704

Introduction

Neglect can be hard to detect as it can present in many different ways. Some signs are more visible, such as unwashed clothes or poor hygiene, while others are less obvious and can go unnoticed, such as a lack of emotional warmth and supervision.

Neglect is also rarely a single incident and is more often a pattern of repeated behaviours that cause gradual harm to a child over time. Professionals must consider the cumulative impact of repeated low-level concerns over time and should be alert to patterns, frequency and duration of concerns and assess the impact on the child's daily lived experience.

The different types of neglect are:

- Educational
- Emotional
- Physical
- Environmental
- Supervisory safety
- Medical
- Adolescent

Each type of neglect is explained throughout this guide.

Educational neglect

Definition

Educational neglect is the ongoing failure to support a child's education, resulting in them being unable to fully access, engage in or benefit from learning. This may include persistent absence, poor engagement with school, unmet SEND or additional needs or a lack of support for learning at home.

Key indicators	Impact on the child
• Persistent, unexplained school absences and/or chronic lateness • Not being enrolled in school or receiving alternative education • Limited parental engagement with child's learning and progress • Failure to access or respond to support offered by education services • Lack of support for identified educational, developmental or additional needs	• Social isolation from peers • Behavioural difficulties • Poor emotional wellbeing/mental health • Greater risk of harm, abuse or exploitation • Low aspirations and disengagement from learning • Increased risk of becoming NEET (Not in Employment, Education or Training) • Reduced attainment and life chances
Contributing factors	**Professional response**
• Parents negative past experiences of education • Inconsistent/lack of home routines • Parental substance misuse (drugs, alcohol or other substances) • Financial pressures • Domestic abuse • Unmet special educational needs • Bullying or school anxiety • Lack of transport or practical challenges/barriers • Parental mental health difficulties • Language/cultural barriers • Being a young carer	• Understand family barriers to distinguish between lack of capacity and lack of engagement • Demonstrate professional curiosity in relation to children not in school, including those not on a school roll • Consider completing an Early Help Assessment with consent from parents/carers to identify needs at the earliest opportunity • Seek advice from the child's school and the Education Welfare Service • Ensure SEN assessments and support plans are in place

Emotional neglect

Definition

Emotional neglect is the persistent failure to meet a child's emotional needs for love, security, stability and responsiveness. It is often less visible but deeply harmful.

Key indicators	Impact on the child
• Lack of warmth, praise or affection • Child appears withdrawn, anxious or overly compliant • Persistent low self esteem • Difficulty forming relationships • Exposure to chronic hostility, rejection or indifference • Parent consistently unresponsive to child's distress or achievements	• Attachment difficulties • Anxiety, depression or emotional dysregulation • Behavioural issues or aggression • Difficulty trusting adults • Long term mental health challenges • Poor resilience and coping skills
Contributing factors	**Professional response**
• Parental trauma or unresolved emotional needs • Parental mental health difficulties • Domestic abuse • Parental substance misuse (drugs, alcohol or other substances) • Financial struggles • Lack of understanding of children's emotional development	• Build a holistic picture through observations and multi-agency information • Explore family relationships and emotional climate • Offer parenting support and emotional literacy programmes • Refer to mental health or therapeutic services where needed • Monitor emotional wellbeing over time

Physical neglect

Definition

Physical neglect occurs when a child's basic physical needs are not met, placing them at risk of harm. This includes inadequate food, clothing, hygiene, supervision or safe living conditions.

Key indicators	Impact on the child
• Consistently poor hygiene or strong odour • Inappropriate or insufficient clothing for weather • Hunger, hoarding food or poor nutrition (obesity or underweight). • Untreated medical or dental issues • Unsafe or unsanitary home environment • Frequent accidental injuries due to lack of supervision • Developmental delays linked to unmet physical needs	• Poor physical health and increased illness • Delayed growth or failure to thrive • Reduced concentration and school engagement • Low self esteem linked to appearance or unmet needs • Increased risk of accidents or exploitation
Contributing factors	**Professional response**
• Parental mental health difficulties • Parental substance misuse (drugs, alcohol or other substances) • Financial struggles • Domestic abuse • Reduced parenting skills or capacity, which could be due to financial stress, past trauma or a lack of awareness • Chaotic or transient lifestyles	• Assess the child's immediate safety and physical environment • Use early help pathways to address practical needs • Work with families to build routines and capacity • Coordinate with health, housing and community services • Monitor improvements through regular review • Escalate to safeguarding procedures if needs remain unmet

Environmental neglect

Definition

Environmental neglect occurs when a child lives in an unsafe or hazardous environment. This may include a home that is dirty, damp, mouldy, inadequately heated or situations where a child is exposed to violence, substance misuse or criminal activity in the home or neighbourhood without appropriate protection.

Environmental neglect is closely connected to physical neglect, as living in unsafe conditions can mean a child's basic needs are not adequately met.

Key indicators	Impact on the child
• Exposed wiring, broken glass or sharp objects within reach • Excessive dirt or clutter throughout the home • Strong odours from waste, spiled food or animals • Limited space for the child to eat, sleep and play • Evidence of substance misuse • Exposure to violence and criminal activity	• Poor physical health and increased illness • Injuries or accidents due to hazards in the home • Poor sleep due to unsuitable living conditions • Chronic stress or anxiety • Feelings of fear, shame or embarrassment • Delayed physical or cognitive development
Contributing factors	**Professional response**
• Parental mental health difficulties • Parental substance misuse (drugs, alcohol or other substances) • Financial struggles • Domestic abuse • Reduced parenting skills or capacity, which could be due to financial stress, past • Chaotic or transient lifestyles	• Assess immediate safety and environmental risks • Escalate concerns where children remain unsafe • Clearly document observations using factual, non-judgemental language • Support parents to reduce risks in the home • Coordinate with health, housing and community services • Regularly review progress and changes in the home environment

Supervisory safety neglect

Definition

Supervision neglect occurs when a child is left without appropriate oversight or protection, exposing them to avoidable harm, unsafe environments or risky situations.

Key indicators	Impact on the child
• Young children left alone or with unsuitable carers • Access to dangerous objects, substances or environments • Frequent accidents or injuries • Lack of boundaries around online activity • Exposure to unsafe adults or peers • Children taking on inappropriate responsibilities	• Physical injury or accidents • Exposure to exploitation or abuse • Anxiety or fear due to lack of safety • Limited awareness of risk leading to risk taking behaviours • Development of unsafe behaviours
Contributing factors	**Professional response**
• Parental substance misuse (drugs, alcohol or other substances) • Parental mental health difficulties • Chaotic routines or lack of capacity • Domestic abuse • Poor understanding of child development • Overcrowded or hazardous living conditions • Financial struggles • Reduced parenting skills or capacity, which could be due to financial stress, past	• Assess immediate safety and environmental risks • Provide guidance on age appropriate supervision • Work with families to create safe routines and boundaries • Support parents to reduce risks in the home • Escalate concerns where children remain unsafe

Medical neglect

Definition

Medical neglect is the failure to seek, obtain or follow through with necessary healthcare for a child, resulting in avoidable harm or deterioration of health. Children do not choose whether they attend healthcare appointments. Professionals should consider a non-attendance episode as 'Was Not Brought'.

Key indicators	Impact on the child
• Missed medical or dental appointments, including developmental assessments and immunisations • Untreated injuries or illnesses • Failure to follow prescribed treatment plans • Refusal of essential medical interventions • Poor management of chronic conditions (e.g., asthma, diabetes)	• Worsening health conditions • Chronic pain or discomfort • Developmental delays, including delayed speech and poor concentration and educational achievement • Increased hospital admissions • Reduced participation in school and daily activities
Contributing factors	**Professional response**
• Lack of understanding of medical needs • Fear or mistrust of healthcare services • Parental mental health difficulties • Parental substance misuse (drugs, alcohol or other substances) • Domestic abuse • Cultural or personal beliefs about treatment • Financial struggles • Language barriers	• Liaise with health professionals to understand the child's needs • Assess how not being brought to an appointment impacts the health and development of the child • Provide practical support (transport, reminders, advocacy) • Escalate concerns where health is deteriorating • Ensure clear multi agency communication

Adolescent neglect

Definition

Adolescent neglect refers to the failure to meet the developmental, emotional, educational, physical and safety needs of young people, typically aged 11-18 years. It recognises that adolescents require age-appropriate support and guidance as they progress towards adulthood. Unlike neglect in younger children, adolescent neglect can be less visible and more difficult to identify.

Key indicators

- Persistent lack of interest, engagement or involvement in the young person's life
- Lack of age-appropriate supervision, boundaries or monitoring
- Young person frequently staying out late or overnight without a clear explanation or parental concern
- Poor school attendance or exclusion with little or no parental response
- Unmet physical or mental health needs
- Young person taking on inappropriate adult responsibilities
- Exposure to unsafe peers, environments, relationships or online risks
- Breakdown of relationships within the home

Impact on the child

- Increased vulnerability to exploitation, including criminal, sexual or financial
- Increased engagement in adolescent risk behaviours, such as going missing, unsafe relationships or substance misuse
- Poor emotional wellbeing, including anxiety, low mood or depression
- Disengagement from education, training or employment opportunities
- Reduced resilience and limited coping skills when facing challenges or transitions into adulthood
- Increased risk of social isolation and emotional withdrawal

Contributing factors

- Parental stress, burnout or limited understanding of adolescent development
- Parental mental health difficulties
- Domestic abuse or persistent family conflict
- Parental substance misuse (drugs, alcohol or other substances)
- Financial struggles
- Cultural or generational differences in expectations and parenting styles
- The young person's additional needs, including SEND, neurodiversity or a history of trauma

Professional response

- Build a trusting relationship with the young person to understand their lived experience, strengths and support needs
- Assess the home environment, parenting capacity and family dynamics
- Explore patterns of dangerous behaviour and unmet needs
- Work collaboratively with relevant partners
- Provide Early Help and family support focused on communication, boundaries, routines and positive relationships
- Assess and respond to vulnerabilities of exploitation, contextual concerns and extra-familial harm
- Escalate concerns where neglect is persistent, unchanging or linked to significant safeguarding risks, including exploitation