

DESCRIPTION AND INDICATORS OF NEGLECT

Definition of Neglect

Neglect consists in persistent failure to meet a child's basic physical and/or psychological needs, which is likely to result in the serious impairment of the child's health or development. There can also be single instances of neglectful behaviour that cause significant harm. Neglect can arise in the context of systemic stresses such as poverty, and is an indicator of both support and protection needs.

'Persistent' means there is a pattern which may be continuous or intermittent which has caused, or is likely to cause significant harm. However, single instances of neglectful behaviour by a person in a position of responsibility can be significantly harmful. Early signs of neglect indicate the need for support to prevent harm.

(Scottish Government, *National Guidance for Child Protection in Scotland 2021*)

Neglect is a form of child abuse that can have serious and long-lasting impacts on a child's life. It can cause serious harm and even death (NSPCC)

Under the *United Nations Charter of Children's Rights (UNCRC)*, Children have the right to a standard of living adequate for the child's physical, mental, spiritual, moral and social development (*Article 27*).

Who is at risk of neglect?

Any child can suffer neglect but some children and young people are more at risk than others. These include children who are born prematurely, have a disability, have complex health needs, looked after children at home and children who are seeking asylum.

Research indicates that children with disabilities are more likely to be maltreated than their peers and neglect is the most common form of maltreatment they experience. A study by Sullivan and Krunston found that children with communication difficulties and behavioural disorders are between 5 or 6 times more likely to experience maltreatment than children without a disability (<https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/11075694>)

The relationship between poverty and neglect is problematic. It is important to separate material impoverishment and emotional impoverishment. It may be difficult to distinguish between neglect and material poverty. However, care should be taken to balance recognition of the constraints of the parent or carer's ability to meet their child's needs for food, clothing and shelter and appreciation of how people in similar circumstances have been able to meet those needs.

Types of Neglect

Neglect can be a lot of different things which can make it hard to recognise.

Medical neglect: The child's health needs are not met or the child is not provided with appropriate medical treatment when needed as a result of illness or accident. This can also

mean the child is not taken regularly to the dentist, for routine appointments at the GP and is not taken for routine vaccinations.

Nutritional neglect: The child is given insufficient calories to meet their physical/ developmental needs; this is sometimes associated with 'failure to thrive', though failure to thrive can occur for reasons other than neglect. The child may be given food of insufficient nutritional value (e.g. crisps, biscuits and sugary snacks in place of balanced meals); childhood obesity as a result of an unhealthy diet and lack of exercise has more recently been considered a form of neglect, given its serious long-term consequences.

Emotional neglect: This involves a carer being unresponsive to a child's basic emotional needs, including failing to interact or provide affection, and failing to develop a child's self-esteem and sense of identity. Some authors distinguish it from emotional abuse by the intention of the parent and, that while the parent might be responsive toward the child, it is not contingent to the signals from the child and not meeting child's emotional needs. This pattern of parenting is harmful to the developing attachment relationship and to the child's health and development.

Educational neglect: The child does not receive appropriate learning experiences; they may be unstimulated, denied appropriate experiences to enhance their development and/ or experience a lack of interest in their achievements. This may also include carers failing to comply with state requirements regarding school attendance, and failing to respond to any special educational needs.

Physical neglect: The child has inadequate or inappropriate clothing (e.g. for the weather conditions), they experience poor levels of hygiene and cleanliness in their living conditions, or experiences poor physical care despite the availability of sufficient resources. The child may also be abandoned or excluded from home.

Lack of supervision and guidance: The child may be exposed to hazards and risks, parents or caregivers are inattentive to avoidable dangers, the child is left with inappropriate caregivers, and/ or experiences a lack of appropriate supervision and guidance. It can include failing to provide appropriate boundaries for young people about behaviours such as under-age sex and alcohol use.

(Child Protection Committees Scotland, *Child Neglect in Scotland: Understanding Causes and Supporting Families*, 2021)

Impact of Neglect

Prenatal neglect may present in a number of different ways:

- Alcohol consumption during pregnancy can lead to foetal alcohol syndrome including learning difficulties and an inability to connect emotionally with peers.
- Drug use during pregnancy has been linked to low birth weight, premature birth, increased risk of sudden infant death syndrome (SIDS), damage to the central nervous system and physical abnormalities. Babies may also experience neonatal abstinence syndrome at birth, which can cause irritability, tremors, respiratory distress and fluctuations in temperature.
- The extent of smoking during pregnancy can restrict the baby's supply of oxygen and is linked to increased risks of premature birth and low birth weight.
- Not attending prenatal appointments or following medical advice

- Experiencing domestic abuse during pregnancy is not limited to the consequences of physical injuries sustained through assault. Coercive control is an act or a pattern of acts of assault, threats, humiliation and intimidation or other abuse that is used to harm, punish, or frighten their victim. This controlling behaviour is designed to make a person dependent by isolating them from support, exploiting them, depriving them of independence and regulating their everyday behaviour.
- Exposure to prenatal maternal stress or anxiety can affect the baby's development, as heightened maternal cortisol levels are shared through the placenta which can influence foetal brain development and have implications for the emotional, behavioural, cognitive and social functioning of children. Neglect can impact at each age and stage of development from infancy to childhood through to adolescence:

Infancy (0-2 years): Babies' growth and development is linked to their interaction with the world and their caregivers. Emotional and cognitive development can come through play, e.g. games like 'peek-a-boo' where actions are repeated for social and emotional reinforcement from the reactions of caregivers, and neural connections are 'fixed' through stimulation. Disinterest or indifference to such actions and/ or failing to offer stimulation will limit the child's development and growth, and damage infant attachments.

Pre-school (2-4 years): Most children of this age are mobile and curious, but lack understanding of danger; they need close supervision for their physical protection, which neglected children may not experience. Children may not be appropriately toilet trained if they are in neglectful families, as this process requires patient and persistent interaction and encouragement. Children's language development may be delayed if their caregivers are not interacting with them sufficiently, and physical care may be inadequate, e.g. dental decay.

Primary (5-11 years): For some neglected children, school can be a place of sanctuary. However, if their cognitive development has been delayed and they are behind their peers at school, it can also be a source of frustration and distress. Signs of neglect, e.g. dirty or ill-fitting clothing, will be apparent to peers, teachers and to the children themselves, and may cause embarrassment and difficulties in their social interactions. Children without clear and consistent boundaries at home can struggle to follow school rules and get into trouble. Educational neglect can include failing to ensure that children attend school, and high levels of absence can further impair their academic achievement.

Adolescence (12-18): Neglect is likely to have an impact on the young person's ability to form and maintain friendships and pro-social relationships, though the young person may be more reluctant to disclose their situation if they fear becoming looked after or being split up from their siblings. Whilst adolescents can find sufficient food for themselves, they are likely to be drawn to the availability of high-fat, high-sugar convenience foods if they have never learned to prepare meals. Adolescent risk-taking behaviour may be associated with, attributed to or exacerbated by a lack of parental supervision, which can expose neglected young people to the risk of harm through, for example, alcohol and substance misuse, risky sexual behaviour or criminal activity. Resilience to neglectful situations does not increase with age, and can have significant consequences for young people's emotional wellbeing including suicide.

(Child Protection Committees Scotland, *Child Neglect in Scotland: Understanding Causes and Supporting Families*, 2021)

Indicators of Neglect

The list of vulnerability and risk indicators in the table overleaf is not exhaustive, nor should one or more indicator be taken individually as definitive confirmation of neglect.

Practitioners should use these to inform wider assessment of wellbeing by gathering relevant and proportionate information to [assess the child and family’s situation holistically, using the National Practice Model Tools \(Wellbeing Indicators, My World Triangle, Resilience/Vulnerability Matrix\)](#).

Practitioners must consider that neglect may indicate that other forms of abuse are present due to the complex nature of neglect. It is important to recognise that the more indicators that are present, the more likely the case is symptomatic of cumulative neglect.

These indicators should be considered in the wider context of family circumstances, age and stage of development.

SAFE	HEALTHY
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Child under the age of 12 left unsupervised in the home for a considerable period of time. • Child left unsupervised in the community or found alone any distance from their home <i>(remember, this will depend on the age AND capacity of the child)</i> • Child not receiving adequate supervision to walk to and from school, and / or being allowed to cross busy roads without adult supervision <i>(remember, this will depend on the age AND capacity of the child)</i> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lack of appropriate food provision / child attending school or nursery hungry • Inappropriate diet i.e. excessive sugar, sweets, crisps and fizzy juice • Failure to meet special dietary needs i.e. if child has medical condition such as diabetes • Dental decay / tooth extractions (especially of baby teeth) • Child not routinely attending Dentist • Change in appearance - weight loss / gain

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Child frequently left to cook for themselves and having access to cooking equipment and dangerous items such as knives. • Frequent accidents in the home or community / lack of parental guidance. • Dangerous substances / objects inappropriately stored or left within child's reach. • Child having access to unsafe material on the television or online / lack of adult supervision. • Unhygienic home conditions (<i>please refer to Home Conditions Assessment Tool</i>) • Child locked in / out of the home • Locks on door within the home to keep the child in or out of rooms • Hazardous objects in the garden (<i>for example broken glass, needles, empty bottles</i>) • Lack of safety equipment i.e stairgates 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Child not getting enough sleep / frequently tired • Lack of appropriate clothing • Clothes unwashed / dirty • Child presenting as unkempt / unwashed • Repeated untreated head lice infections • Failure to report medical issues • Failure to respond to medical advice • Failure to attend medical appointments • Unhygienic home conditions (<i>please refer to Home Conditions Assessment Tool</i>) • Home consistently cold • Frequent school / nursery absences due to ill health
<p>ACHIEVING</p>	<p>NURTURED</p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Parent / Carer not ensuring child attends school (without a reasonable excuse) • Failure to ensure that homework is completed • Decline in academic achievement / disengagement from learning • Parent / Care unable to support child to attend school (for example due to working hours) • Child regularly withdrawn from school / nursery 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • History of abuse and trauma • Feeding baby without being held/lack of eye contact • Unhygienic home conditions (<i>please refer to home conditions assessment tool for specific examples</i>) • Inadequate heating • Child appears hungry, or failure to provide with adequate lunch / lunch money • Lack of bedding, or child not provided with appropriate clothing • Parent / Carer does not respond to child's behaviour sensitively and consistently

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Parent / Carer does frequently fails to respond to correspondence from school • Parent / Carer fails to attend school meetings • Parent / Carer disinterested in child's achievements 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Parent / Carer does not respond to child presenting distressed behaviour • Poor eye contact between parent/carer and child • Child doesn't notice/react when parent/carer leaves the room (<i>depending on age of child</i>) • Child appears withdrawn, clingy or anxious • Parent / Carer does not show child physical affection or does not respond to child's attempts to seek out physical affection • Failure to interact with the child appropriately, according to age and stage of development • Child shows indiscriminate affection towards strangers / unfamiliar adults • Child witnesses violence between parents/ carers • Parent / Carer threatens to leave child • Child aware of inappropriate adult information or inappropriate discussion with/in front of the child
<p>ACTIVE</p>	<p>RESPECTED & RESPONSIBLE</p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lack of access to age appropriate sport and leisure activities • Lack of age appropriate stimulation • Lack of opportunities to engage in active play with peers 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Parent / Carer's bedroom in much better condition that the child's bedroom • Failure to provide toothpaste, soap, toilet roll • Lack of appropriate clothing • Child's clothes are smelly / dirty • Failure to provide appropriate guidance / boundaries • Parent / Carer expects child to look after themselves beyond their capacity

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Inappropriate use of the Internet and / or forming relations with adults via the Internet
INCLUDED	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lack of opportunities for child to form friendships and develop sense of belonging in the community • Lack of appropriate clothing / presentation causing child to be bullied • Home conditions prevent child peer socialisation within the home • Difficulties managing peer relationships • Lack of ability to regulate emotional and behavioural responses • Missing for long periods of time before parent / carer reports concerns 	