

## Neglect

Neglect is the ongoing failure to meet a child's basic needs and is the most common form of child abuse. A child may be left hungry or dirty, without adequate clothing, shelter, supervision, medical or health care.

A child may be put in danger or not protected from physical or emotional harm. They may not get the love, care and attention they need from their parents.

A child who's neglected will often suffer from other abuse as well. Neglect is dangerous and can cause serious, long-term damage - even death.

### **Types of neglect**

#### *Physical neglect*

Failing to provide for a child's basic needs such as food, clothing or shelter. Failing to adequately supervise a child, or provide for their safety.

#### *Educational neglect*

Failing to ensure a child receives an education.

#### *Emotional neglect*

Failing to meet a child's needs for nurture and stimulation, perhaps by ignoring, humiliating, intimidating or isolating them. It's often the most difficult to prove.

#### *Medical neglect*

Failing to provide appropriate health care, including dental care and refusal of care or ignoring medical recommendations.

Source: [Horwath, 2007](#)

### **NSPCC statistics**

- 1 in 10 children have experienced neglect
- Over 24,100 children were identified as needing protection from neglect last year
- Neglect is the most common reason for taking child protection action
- The NSPCC's helpline responded to over 16,000 contacts about neglect last year
- 36% of the concerns that the NSPCC's helpline referred to police or children's services related to neglect
- Neglect is a factor in 60% of serious case reviews

Neglect can have serious and long-lasting effects. It can be anything from leaving a child home alone to the very worst cases where a child dies from malnutrition or being denied the care they need. In some cases it can cause permanent disabilities.

Neglect can be really difficult to identify, making it hard for professionals to take early action to protect a child.

Having one of the signs or symptoms below doesn't necessarily mean that a child is being neglected. But if you notice multiple, or persistent, signs then it could indicate there's a serious problem.

**Some of the following signs may be indicators of neglect**

Children who are neglected may have:

*Poor appearance and hygiene*

They may:

- be smelly or dirty
- have unwashed clothes
- have inadequate clothing, e.g. not having a winter coat
- seem hungry or turn up to school without having breakfast or any lunch money
- have frequent and untreated nappy rash in infants.

*Health and development problems*

They may have:

- untreated injuries, medical and dental issues
- repeated accidental injuries caused by lack of supervision
- recurring illnesses or infections
- not been given appropriate medicines
- missed medical appointments such as vaccinations
- poor muscle tone or prominent joints
- skin sores, rashes, flea bites, scabies or ringworm
- thin or swollen tummy
- Anaemia
- tiredness
- faltering weight or growth and not reaching developmental milestones (known as failure to thrive)
- poor language, communication or social skills.

*Housing and family issues*

They may be:

- living in an unsuitable home environment, for example, dog mess being left or not having any heating
- left alone for a long time
- taking on the role of carer for other family members.

An increased risk of neglect and emotional abuse may be more likely in homes where there is domestic abuse; substance misuse; unemployment; mental ill health; an absence or perceived absence of a helpful supportive network; lack of intimate emotional support or poverty. As with all child protection assessments, factors like this should be specifically explored when assessing the child, although their absence does not mean neglect or emotional abuse will not be present.

## The impact of neglect

Children who have been neglected may experience short-term and long-term effects that last throughout their life.

Children who don't get the love and care they need from their parents may find it difficult to maintain healthy relationships with other people later in life, including their own children.

Children who have been neglected are more likely to experience mental health problems including depression and post-traumatic stress disorder.

Young people may also take risks, such as running away from home, breaking the law, abusing drugs or alcohol, or getting involved in dangerous relationships - putting them at risk from sexual exploitation.

## Effects on relationships and attachment

A parent or carer's behaviour has a big impact on a child. It can also affect the relationship between parent and child.

This relationship, or bond, between a child and their primary caregiver - usually mum or dad, but sometimes another family member or carer - is described by attachment theory. When a child is neglected they don't usually have a good relationship or bond with their parent. Psychologists would describe this as a poor attachment.

Poor attachment can significantly affect the relationships that people have throughout their lives, including how they interact with their own children. Early intervention can change attachment patterns, reducing harm to a child and helping them to form positive attachments in adulthood.

([Howe, 2011](#))

Relationships with parents:

*One study of neglected children showed that:*

- Living in the family can be lonely for both parent and child because there is little exchange of information, and there may be a lack of emotional warmth between them.
- Some parents are more negative in comparison to non-neglecting parents.
- The parents may make more demands of their children, and are unlikely to respond to requests from their children for support. Neglected children come to expect less support from their mothers, in comparison to non-neglected children.

## Effects on brain development

The first years of a child's life have a big impact on how their brain develops. That is why neglect can be so damaging – a child's experiences can change their thought processes and neural pathways.

If a baby is malnourished, neural cells can become weak or damaged and this can cause lowered brain function.

If a child has a poor relationship, attachment or little interaction with a parent then it can change how their brain develops emotional and verbal pathways.

Neglect can severely alter the way a child's brain works. This can lead to an increased risk of depression in later life as well as dissociative disorders and memory impairments. Changes to the brain caused by neglect have also been linked to panic disorder, posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and attention deficit and hyperactivity disorder (ADHD).

([Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2009](#))

**School performance:**

Children who have been neglected may have more difficulty than their classmates carrying out complex tasks, particularly when they are required to understand and follow instructions that involve visual and motor integration; this was tested by asking the children to trace geometric shapes of increasing difficulty against the clock.

They are likely to have a lower IQ than their classmates, although results of literacy or numeracy assessments varied across studies.

Despite poor performance in some areas, neglected children may be better at problem solving, planning and abstract thinking than other children.

**Behaviour:**

The impact on behaviour is often greatest when neglect starts early in a child's life, or if the child is both neglected and emotionally abused. They may present as aggressive and hostile, for example, the child may be prone to angry outbursts or lashing out towards others.

They may be more impulsive than other children, and may show features seen in Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD), for example, poor concentration or impulsive behaviour.

Neglected children specifically, may be particularly quiet or withdrawn.

**What school staff should do if they have concerns about a child**

If staff members have any concerns about a child they will need to decide what action to take.

Any concern about a child should always trigger a conversation with the designated safeguarding lead to agree a course of action, although any staff member can make a referral to children's social care.

## Additional guidance and further reading

- **NSPCC core info leaflet** – Neglect or emotional abuse in children aged 5 -14
- **National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children**  
<https://www.nspcc.org.uk/preventing-abuse/child-abuse-and-neglect/neglect/>
- The **NSPCC Helpline** is a service for anyone concerned about the safety or welfare of a child. You can contact the helpline 24 hours a day, seven days a week by phone, email or online. 0808 800 5000
- **Keeping children safe in education –statutory guidance for schools and colleges** (September 2023)
- **What to Do If You're Worried a Child Is Being Abused** (2015)
- **Working Together to Safeguard Children** (July 2018)
- **Effective Support for Children and Families in Essex** – guidance for all practitioners in working together with children and families to provide early help and targeted and specialist support (October 2021)
- **Essex Safeguarding Children Board**  
<http://www.escb.org.uk/>  
Includes a link to the **SET procedures (Southend, Essex, Thurrock Child Protection Procedures)**
- **Childline**  
<https://www.childline.org.uk/> 0800 1111
- <https://www.nspcc.org.uk/services-and-resources/research-and-resources/pre-2013/child-abuse-and-neglect-in-the-uk-today/>