

# Calderdale Safeguarding Children Partnership

## Safeguard Guide No. 8 – Neglect (2024)

### What is it?

Neglect is a form of maltreatment and is defined in Working Together to Safeguard Children (2023) as: 'The persistent failure to meet a child's basic physical and / or psychological needs, likely to result in the serious impairment of the child's health or development. Neglect may occur during pregnancy as a result of maternal substance abuse. Once a child is born, neglect may involve a parent or carer failing to:

- provide adequate food, clothing and shelter (including exclusion from home or abandonment)
- protect a child from physical and emotional harm or danger
- ensure adequate supervision (including the use of inadequate care-givers) or
- ensure access to appropriate medical care or treatment
- provide suitable education

It may also include neglect of, or unresponsiveness to, a child's basic emotional needs. Neglect is the most common type of abuse experienced by children and young people in England; neglect is the primary need for children and young people on Child Protection Plans.

### What types of neglect might children and young people experience?

Howarth (2007) identified six different types of neglect:

- **Medical neglect** - the child's health needs are not met, or they are not provided with appropriate treatment needed as a result of illness or accidents.
- **Nutritional neglect** - the child is given insufficient calories to meet their physical / developmental needs, or they are given food of insufficient nutritional value, e.g. high fat or high sugar junk food in place of balanced meals; childhood obesity can be a sign of neglect.
- **Emotional neglect** - the carer does not respond to the child's basic emotional needs, including failing to interact or provide affection.
- **Educational neglect** - the child does not receive appropriate learning experiences; they may be under-stimulated and / or experience a lack of interest in their achievements. This may include not sending their child to school regularly, and / or failing to respond to special educational needs.
- **Physical neglect** - the child may have inadequate or inappropriate (e.g. for the weather conditions) clothing, poor levels of hygiene, lack of clean living conditions, abandonment or exclusion from home.
- **Lack of supervision and guidance** - the child may be exposed to hazards, parents or caregivers may be inattentive to avoidable dangers or may leave the child with inappropriate carers. Lack of supervision can include not providing appropriate boundaries for young people to keep them safe from harms such as under-age sex, alcohol use, online harms, and exploitation.

### What are the difficulties in working with neglect?

- Neglect is complex, often present because of a number of factors resulting in a range of consequences.
- Public and professional perceptions of neglect are often different. For example, the perceived presence – or absence – of intent can shape perceptions of the gravity of concern and influence intervention and outcomes.
- Professional understanding of thresholds and application of standards within and across services are sometimes unclear and inconsistent, as neglect is not usually a static, single event but a cumulative process that occurs over time.
- Despite high profile child deaths, neglect is often not considered to be life-threatening or fatal.

- The neglect experience may be normalised by the child/ren involved and be viewed as normal within the particular community. In some cases, it is thought that if nothing appears to have got worse then things have actually got better; when in fact initial concerns remain and little (if anything) has meaningfully changed. Professionals can become desensitised over time. Personal values and experiences can influence how we view neglect as professionals.
- Risk of Over-optimism.
- Some professionals not only struggle with exercising professional authority in circumstances where it is required, but where adult needs dominate the narrative over those of the child/ren.
- It is sometimes difficult to justify statutory intervention where the level of care at home is not quite good enough to meet the child's needs but does not meet the threshold of 'significant harm'.
- Professionals have to take into account socio-economic circumstances affecting families, and how poverty may be impacting on neglect.
- Children who are 'missing from sight' either from home, care, or educational settings may be at risk of neglect which raises difficulties in assessing risk.
- Children who are nonverbal or with impairments or [disabilities](#) may be at increased risk, with signs or indicators being inappropriately attributed to disability.
- [Faltering growth](#) (previously known as failure to thrive) in the absence of a specific underlying health condition is likely to be complex and multifactorial. This often occurs in the overall context of emotional deprivation and neglect; therefore, the child not only fails to grow but fails to develop intellectually and emotionally.

### What should practitioners do?

- Neglect is more a process than an event; there is rarely a single incident to trigger a child protection enquiry. As such it requires an understanding of the root cause of behaviours and presenting social characteristics along with insight of the potential developmental consequences (sensory, physical, communication, interaction, cognition, learning, social, mental and emotional health) for the child, both immediately and over time. [The Calderdale Child Development Tool](#), and the [Day in the Life of a Child Tool](#) may assist with this.
- Assessment of neglect is fundamentally about what constitutes "good enough" and is often dependent upon subjective values. Fundamentally, all practitioners should use available tools to inform assessments, gather information, weigh its significance, actively consider current and possible projected circumstances, as well as considering factors that may lead to the prospect of positive change for the child. The [Assessment Tools for Working with Neglect](#) will help with gaining a shared understanding of risk as would [Multi-agency Chronologies](#) and reflective safeguarding discussions or [Supervision](#).
- It is important that professionals working with neglected children intervene early and use clearly focused resources to maximise the potential for successful outcomes. Intervention in cases of neglect is likely to be long term and the need to work to agreed timescales, avoid drift or collusion with negative adult agendas and establish the criteria for and evidence of change needs to be clearly agreed at the outset. If unmet needs of the carers are identified, or if the adult is 'at risk', support from [adult services](#) may be required.

### If you are concerned...

- Unless the child is at 'significant risk of harm' follow [the Early Help Pathway guidance](#)
- If concerns relate to 'significant harm' call **MAST** (Multi-Agency Screening Team): 01422 393336 (in normal working hours). Out of hours call the **Emergency Duty Team** (EDT) on: 01422 288000
- If you are concerned about decision making in response to concerns about children you think are suffering from neglect, use the [Escalation](#) toolkit.

### Further Information

For further information on the links between poverty and neglect see the [Nuffield Foundation Evidence Review](#)

West Yorkshire Safeguarding Procedures for recognising Abuse and Neglect are found [here](#).