

Continuing Professional Development

Phil Raws* 

The Children's Society, London, UK

'Research has begun to highlight the harmful effects of neglect between the ages of 11 and 17'

Adolescent Neglect: Messages from Research for Policy and Practice

Introduction

Neglect is the most commonly experienced form of maltreatment for children of all ages (Rees *et al.*, 2011), but practice and research have tended to focus on neglect of younger children. Research has begun to highlight the harmful effects of neglect between the ages of 11 and 17, suggesting the need for improved understanding and responses for this age group (Raws, 2016). This continuing professional development paper outlines recent research findings on adolescent neglect and explains how fresh insights can support better policy and practice. It will be of interest to all professionals who have a responsibility for safeguarding young people, including those in direct practice and those with a strategic role.

Context Setting

Although the 'neglect of neglect' (Wolock and Horowitz, 1984) has begun to be redressed in relation to younger children, the same cannot be said for the neglect of adolescents, an issue which remains on the peripheries of both research and practice (Raws, 2016, 2018a; Rees *et al.*, 2011).

One fundamental difficulty for practitioners and researchers has been the challenge of defining 'neglect'. The definition in statutory guidance in England (HM Government, 2018) is open to varied interpretation, especially as applied to adolescents (Raws, 2016), and figures showing the different proportions of child protection plans registered for neglect in different areas would seem to support this (HM Government, 2017). Research has also demonstrated subjectivity in assessment (Horwath, 2007) and a higher likelihood that professionals will falsely attribute resilience to adolescents, thereby downplaying neglect (Rees *et al.*, 2010).

In contrast to other forms of child maltreatment, adolescent neglect has rarely featured as a discrete topic in research and studies have been characterised by methodological weaknesses (Rees *et al.*, 2011; Simmel *et al.*, 2016). However, even the limited evidence available on its consequences for the health, wellbeing and future prospects of 11–17-year-olds has led experts to advocate that adolescent neglect should be the 'business' of all professionals who work to safeguard young people (Hicks and Stein, 2010).

*Correspondence to: Phil Raws, The Children's Society, Edward Rudolf House, Margery Street, London WC1X 0JL, UK. E-mail phil.raws@childrenssociety.org.uk
 Contract/grant sponsor: Luton Safeguarding Children Board.

Brief Summary of the Evidence Base

Research offers an indication of the scale of adolescent neglect, the circumstances which make it more likely to happen and its consequences, and signs that a young person has been neglected.

How Many Adolescents Experience Neglect?

'Neglect' remains the most-used category for child protection plan registrations for children in England regardless of age – accounting for 37–38 per cent of plans for 11–17-year-olds between 2010 and 2012 (Raws, 2016). This pattern has remained consistent over time and is observed in many higher-income countries (Gilbert *et al.*, 2009).

Official child protection data probably under-represent the scale of neglect (Rees *et al.*, 2011), but few studies have measured prevalence. The foremost example in the UK is the NSPCC's study of child maltreatment which used computer-assisted interviews with 11–17-year-olds and found that neglect was experienced by 13.3 per cent of adolescents at some point in their lives (Radford *et al.*, 2011).

Another study using a survey-based approach with a representative sample of 14–15-year-olds in schools in England found that 15 per cent had, during the last year, experienced one or more of four types of neglect – educational, emotional, physical or supervisory (Raws, 2016).

When is Adolescent Neglect more Likely to Happen?

Young people's characteristics, the context within and around their family, and change or transitions can all contribute to a higher likelihood of their exposure to parental neglect.

Some contextual factors linked to neglect are outlined in Table 1.

Often, a confluence of factors leads to or sustains the neglect of a young person, and it is unwise for responses to focus solely on parents (Flood and Holmes, 2016). A holistic 'ecological systems approach' has been proposed

“Neglect” remains the most-used category for child protection plan registrations for children in England regardless of age’

Table 1. Contextual factors that can increase the likelihood of adolescent neglect

<i>Factor</i>	<i>Explanation</i>
Gender	Boys report more supervisory neglect than girls
Disability	Disabled young people are more likely to be neglected than non-disabled young people, although the evidence is contested
Family structure and restructure	More young people living in lone-parent, or large, families experience neglect. Neglect can also begin when parents separate or new partners and children join a family
Parents' current problems	Issues for parents or carers – including substance misuse or addiction, domestic abuse and mental or physical ill health – can contribute to neglect
Parents' own experiences of maltreatment	When parents have themselves experienced childhood maltreatment, there is a higher likelihood that they will go on to neglect their own children – although many factors can mitigate against this happening
Socio-economics	Economic deprivation has been widely linked with neglect. Detailed research on the relationship between poverty and neglect has established a 'core association' – but not a causal relationship – between the two. Affluence has also been linked to some forms of neglect, in particular to emotional neglect

For a more detailed description of the factors which can contribute to neglect, and references to research, see Raws (2016).

‘Many young people ... experience one or more forms of abuse alongside neglect’

‘Maltreatment which begins in adolescence is more harmful than maltreatment which commences then ceases in earlier childhood’

as the best way to understand and work with neglect (Rees *et al.*, 2011; originally Bronfenbrenner, 1979). This considers factors which are within or close to a family (‘proximal’) as well as those which relate to school, neighbourhood and wider social systems (‘distal’ factors).

Many young people – especially those whose neglect merits statutory intervention – experience one or more forms of abuse alongside neglect (Arata *et al.*, 2007; Mennen *et al.*, 2010; Radford *et al.*, 2011).

What are the Consequences of Adolescent Neglect?

Increasing evidence is emerging of how harmful adolescent neglect can be. Studies show a variety of possible consequences including poor mental and physical health, difficulties with relationships, problems with education and increased risk-taking behaviours (Naughton *et al.*, 2017; Rees *et al.*, 2011). Evidence from Serious Case Reviews points to the significant harm that can result from neglect during adolescence (Brandon *et al.*, 2013).

Methodological limitations have compromised much of the available research, but a notable exception is the US-based Rochester Youth Development Study (Thornberry *et al.*, 2001). This prospective cohort study retained more than 85 per cent of an original sample of 1000 14-year-olds, interviewing them regularly until their early 30s and analysing child protection, health and crime datasets. This facilitated an investigation of the chronology of events, experiences and outcomes. Key findings include:

- Maltreatment which begins in adolescence is more harmful than maltreatment which commences then ceases in earlier childhood.
- Neglect has effects which are as significant as those of other forms of maltreatment, leading to ‘increased risk for delinquency, alcohol-related problems, internalizing and externalizing problems, teen pregnancy, and multiple problems during late adolescence’ (Thornberry *et al.*, 2001, p. 975).

Fresh analyses of this dataset continue to be published, recently including an article on intergenerational cycles of maltreatment and the ameliorating effects of nurturing relationships (Thornberry *et al.*, 2013). Other studies using longitudinal datasets have linked neglect in early adolescence to higher rates of substance misuse in mid-teens (Lalayants and Prince, 2016), the onset of psychiatric disorders (Young *et al.*, 2011) and, for girls, to giving birth during their teens (Noll and Shenk, 2013). For more information on the potential consequences of adolescent neglect, see Raws (2018a).

How neglect may contribute to these outcomes is less clear. This could be through a number of routes, for example, by heightening the propensity of adolescents towards risk-taking (linked to natural changes in the brain) (Blakemore and Mills, 2014), or contributing indirectly to contexts where harm is more likely (e.g. poor parental supervision making a young person vulnerable to sexual exploitation) (Hanson, 2016).

What are the Signs that a Young Person has been Neglected?

It is difficult to give a definitive list of signs of adolescent neglect but they can include:

- Becoming isolated from peers; being bullied
- Being non-communicative, tiredness, depression, self-harm and suicide ideation
- Anger, aggression and violence
- A young person being outside/away from home late at night; being involved in antisocial behaviour, substance misuse and other risk-taking
- Early 'consensual' sexual activity; teen pregnancy and birth
- Hunger, lack of personal hygiene, etc. (signs of physical neglect, although these may also indicate poverty) (NSPCC, 2014; Raws, 2018b)

Researchers have suggested that professionals often have good 'radar' for neglect and should trust their instincts and be proactive in raising their concerns (Daniel, 2015).

Summary of the Key Learning Points for Practice

Research has shown that adolescent neglect is widespread, it can occur in many different contexts, and it can have life-changing and life-limiting consequences (Raws, 2018a). Studies suggest that practitioners struggle with the challenges that neglect in general can present (Daniel, 2015), challenges which are exacerbated when an adolescent is involved (e.g. because of a misinformed view that adolescents develop a 'natural resilience' as they age) (Rees *et al.*, 2010).

Better knowledge of the scale, contexts and impacts of neglect can improve the effectiveness of responses, especially when complemented by an understanding of adolescents' need for ongoing care and support throughout the extended transition from childhood dependence to adulthood.

In addition, the messages from research include:

- *Adolescents should be asked about their experiences and included in decisions on interventions to address their neglect.* Young people should be consulted about their experiences: 'what is neglectful depends on how that [parenting] behaviour feels and affects each individual young person' (Rees *et al.*, 2011, p. 63). They also want to be listened to and respected, and have an authentic stake in decision-making about their lives. Professionals should work with them as 'assets and resources' (Hanson and Holmes, 2014, p. 33).
- *Adolescents may downplay neglect.* Protectiveness towards their family, awareness of the potential consequences of disclosing neglect and a lack of understanding of its impact on them are among the reasons why adolescents may not readily reveal neglect. Professionals who have a trusting relationship with young people – or who can build one – are well placed to uncover adolescent neglect, though this will often involve piecing information together rather than a direct 'disclosure' (Rees *et al.*, 2011).
- *Typologies can be helpful.* Cognisance of the different forms of neglect (see Table 2) can support professionals in identifying, assessing and developing holistic responses (Raws, 2018a).
- *Not all neglect is chronic.* Neglect is usually seen as being an ongoing failure to provide adequate care and support. This has been challenged by researchers (e.g. a young person being forced to leave home is an acute episode that is also neglectful) (Rees *et al.*, 2011). Some countries in the UK (Wales and Northern Ireland) have now amended the definitions in their statutory guidance to acknowledge this.
- *Successful interventions require a sustained focus on the young person within the family and an agreed plan for improvements in parental care.* Practitioners working

'Researchers have suggested that professionals often have good 'radar' for neglect and should trust their instincts and be proactive in raising their concerns'

'Professionals who have a trusting relationship with young people... are well-placed to uncover adolescent neglect'

‘The complexities of adolescent neglect are unlikely to be addressed adequately through the efforts of one worker’

Table 2. Research typologies of neglect

<i>Form of neglect</i>	<i>Features include...</i>
Educational	The absence of stimulation; poor/no support around school
Emotional	Lack of responsiveness, affection or interaction
Medical	Illness/health needs minimised or denied; a failure to seek professional care
Physical	Homelessness/poor living conditions (unhygienic or unsafe); lack of appropriate clothing or food
Supervisory	Failure to protect a child from physical or other harm; absence of rules and boundaries for behaviour; abandonment or subcontracting of care to inappropriate carers

See Horwath (2007), Mennen *et al.* (2010) and Raws (2016).

with families can lose sight of the neglected young person, perhaps distracted by other problems in the household, or not recognising the signs of ‘disguised compliance’. They may also become desensitised to neglect. A keen focus on (a) the lived experience of the young person concerned, (b) agreement of the level of professional support and (c) how parents can demonstrate improvements in the care that they provide (including a time frame for this and what will happen if the situation does not progress) are all important in preventing drift (abridged from Daniel, 2015).

- *Multiagency collaboration is essential.* The complexities of adolescent neglect are unlikely to be addressed adequately through the efforts of one worker. Establishing clarity around which other agencies will contribute – how and when – is vital to ensuring good outcomes (Hicks and Stein, 2010).
- *Researchers have advocated a three-tiered framework for responses to adolescent neglect.* The framework comprises: a tier targeting prevention (e.g. through public health campaigns, parenting classes, etc.); a tier that prioritises early intervention; and another which includes more intense statutory interventions and longer-term work with young people who have suffered severe neglect (Rees *et al.*, 2011).

Test your Knowledge

1. What proportion of registrations of child protection plans in England for adolescents were for ‘neglect’ between 2010 and 2012?
 - a. 27–28%
 - b. 37–38%
 - c. 47–48%
2. According to research, what proportion of 14–15-year-olds in England have experienced at least one form of parental neglect during the last year?
 - a. 10%
 - b. 12%
 - c. 15%
3. Which of the following can be signs of neglect?
 - a. Isolation from peers
 - b. Anger, aggression and violence
 - c. Depression, self-harm and suicidal thoughts
 - d. Risk-taking including substance misuse, offending and early sexual activity

4. What form of neglect has been linked to affluence?
 - a. Educational
 - b. Emotional
 - c. Physical
 - d. Supervisory

5. Who is most likely to suffer poor outcomes when they are older as a result of being maltreated?
 - a. A child whose experiences of maltreatment ceased before adolescence
 - b. A young person whose maltreatment commenced after they were 12 years old
 - c. It's the same regardless of the age of the child or young person when he/she was maltreated

The answers can be found at the end of the article.

Reflection

Researchers have begun to tackle the complexities which adolescent neglect poses and which are mirrored in the challenges faced by practitioners and policymakers. I hope that this short paper has been informative with regard to developments in this field and has provided you with a better understanding of this issue and offered useful insights. Please identify one main message for yourself and something that you will incorporate in your practice or to inform your work.

Acknowledgements

This paper was informed by research for the Understanding Adolescent Neglect research programme, a collaboration between The Children's Society and the University of York. I would like to convey my sincere gratitude to colleagues at the University of York – Dr Gwyther Rees and Emeritus Professor Mike Stein – for their ongoing support with this work. I would also like to thank the Luton Safeguarding Children Board for funding that it contributed towards the Thinking About Adolescent Neglect project.

References

- Arata C, Langhinrichsen-Rolling J, Boiwers D, O'Brien N. 2007. Differential correlates of multi-type maltreatment among urban youth. *Child Abuse & Neglect* **31**: 393–415.
- Blakemore S-J, Mills KL. 2014. Is Adolescence a Sensitive Period for Sociocultural Processing? *Annual Review of Psychology* **2014**(65): 9.1–9.21.
- Brandon M, Bailey S, Belderson P, Larsson B. 2013. *Neglect and Serious Case Reviews: A report from the University of East Anglia commissioned by NSPCC*. NSPCC: London. Available: <https://learning.nspcc.org.uk/research-resources/2013/neglect-serious-case-reviews/> [3 February 2019]
- Bronfenbrenner U. 1979. *The Ecology of Human Development*. Harvard University Press: Cambridge, MA.
- Daniel B. 2015. Why Have We Made Neglect So Complicated? Taking a Fresh Look at Noticing and Helping the Neglected Child. *Child Abuse Review* **24**(2): 82–94. <https://doi.org/10.1002/car.2296>.

‘Please identify one main message for yourself and something that you will incorporate in your practice or to inform your work’

- Flood S, Holmes D. 2016. *Child neglect and its relationship to other forms of harm - responding effectively to children's needs: Executive summary*. Research in Practice: Totnes. Available: https://www.actionforchildren.org.uk/media/6762/child_neglect_evidence_scope_executive_summary_july16-1.pdf [30 January 2019].
- Gilbert R, Spatz Widom C, Browne K, Fergusson D, Webb E, Janson S. 2009. Child Maltreatment 1: Burden and consequences of child maltreatment in high-income countries. *The Lancet* **373**: 68–81 Available: <http://citeseerx.ist.psu.edu/viewdoc/download?doi=10.1.1.413.4690&rep=rep1&type=pdf> [30 January 2019].
- Hanson E. 2016. *The relationship between neglect and child sexual exploitation: An evidence scope*. Research in Practice: Totnes.
- Hanson E, Holmes D. 2014. *That Difficult Age: Developing a more effective response to risks in adolescence*. Research in Practice: Dartington. Available: http://cdn.basw.co.uk/upload/basw_24144-4.pdf [30 January 2019].
- Hicks L, Stein M. 2010. *Neglect Matters: A multi-agency guide for professionals working together on behalf of teenagers*. HM Government: London. Available: <http://www.york.ac.uk/inst/spru/research/pdf/NeglectMatters.pdf> [30 January 2019].
- HM Government. 2017. *Characteristics of children in need: 2016–2017 England. SFR 61/2017*. Department for Education: London. Available: https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/656395/SFR61-2017_Main_text.pdf [30 January 2019].
- HM Government. 2018. *Working together to safeguard children: A guide to inter-agency working to safeguard and promote the welfare of children*. Department for Education: London.
- Horwath J. 2007. The missing assessment domain: Personal, professional and organisational factors influencing professional judgements when identifying and referring child neglect. *British Journal of Social Work* **37**: 1285–1303.
- Lalayants M, Prince JD. 2016. Child Neglect and Onset of Substance Misuse Disorders among Welfare-Involved Adolescents. *Child Abuse Review* **25**(6): 469–478. <https://doi.org/10.1002/car.2372>.
- Mennen FE, Kim K, Sang J, Trickett PK. 2010. Child neglect: Definition and identification of youth's experiences in official reports of maltreatment. *Child Abuse & Neglect* **34**: 647–658. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chiabu.2010.02.007>.
- Naughton AM, Cowley LE, Tempest V, Maguire SA, Mann MK, Kemp AM. 2017. Ask Me! Self-reported features of adolescents experiencing neglect or emotional maltreatment: A rapid systematic review. *Child: Care, Health and Development* **43**(3): 348–360.
- Noll JG, Shenk CE. 2013. Teen Birth Rates in Sexually Abused and Neglected Females. *Pediatrics* **131**(4): e1181–e1187. <https://doi.org/10.1542/peds.2012-3072>.
- NSPCC. 2014. *CORE INFO: Neglect or emotional abuse in teenagers aged 13–18*. Available: <https://learning.nspcc.org.uk/media/1058/core-info-neglect-emotional-abuse-teenagers-13-18.pdf> [30 January 2019].
- Radford L, Corral S, Bradley C, Fisher H, Bassett C, Howat N, Collishaw S. 2011. *Child abuse and neglect in the UK today*. NSPCC: London. Available: http://www.crin.org/en/docs/1323_child_abuse_neglect_research_PDF_wdf84181_original.pdf%20 [30 January 2019].
- Raws P. 2016. *Troubled Teens: A study of the links between parenting and adolescent neglect*. The Children's Society: London. Available: <https://www.childrensociety.org.uk/sites/default/files/troubled-teens-full-report-final.pdf> [30 January 2019].
- Raws P. 2018a. *Thinking about neglect: A review of research on identification, assessment and intervention*. The Children's Society: London. Available: https://www.childrensociety.org.uk/sites/default/files/thinking_about_adolescent_neglect_report.pdf [30 January 2019].
- Raws P. 2018b. *Adolescent neglect: Briefing for professionals*. Available: https://www.childrensociety.org.uk/sites/default/files/thinking_about_adolescent_neglect_practitioners_briefing.pdf [30 January 2019].
- Rees G, Gorin S, Jobe A, Stein M, Medforth R, Goswami H. 2010. *Safeguarding Young People: Responding to young people aged 11–17 who are maltreated*. The Children's Society: London. Available: http://www.childrensociety.org.uk/sites/default/files/tcs/research_docs/Safeguarding%20Young%20People%20-%20Responding%20to%20Young%20People%20aged%2011%20to%2017%20who%20are%20maltreated.pdf [30 January 2019].
- Rees G, Stein M, Hicks L, Gorin S. 2011. *Adolescent Neglect: Research, Policy and Practice*. Jessica Kingsley Publishers: London.

- Simmel C, Merritt D, Mi-Sung Kim H, Kim S. 2016. An Exploratory Study of Neglect and Emotional Abuse in Adolescents: Classifications of Caregiver Risk Factors. *Journal of Child and Family Studies* **25**: 2372–2386. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10826-016-0414-9>.
- Thornberry TP, Ireland TO, Smith CA. 2001. The importance of timing: The varying impact of childhood and adolescent maltreatment on multiple problem outcomes. *Development and Psychopathology* **13**: 957–979.
- Thornberry TP, Henry KL, Smith CA, Ireland TO, Greenman SJ, Lee RD. 2013. Breaking the Cycle of Maltreatment: The Role of Safe, Stable, and Nurturing Relationships. *Journal of Adolescent Health* **53**: S25–S31.
- Wolock I, Horowitz B. 1984. Child maltreatment as a social problem: The neglect of neglect. *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry* **54**(4): 530–543.
- Young R, Lennie S, Minnis H. 2011. Children's perceptions of parental emotional neglect and control and psychopathology. *The Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry* **52**(8): 889–897. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1469-7610.2011.02390.x>.

Answers: Test your Knowledge

1 b; 2 c; 3 (any of these can be signs of adolescent neglect); 4 b; 5 b.