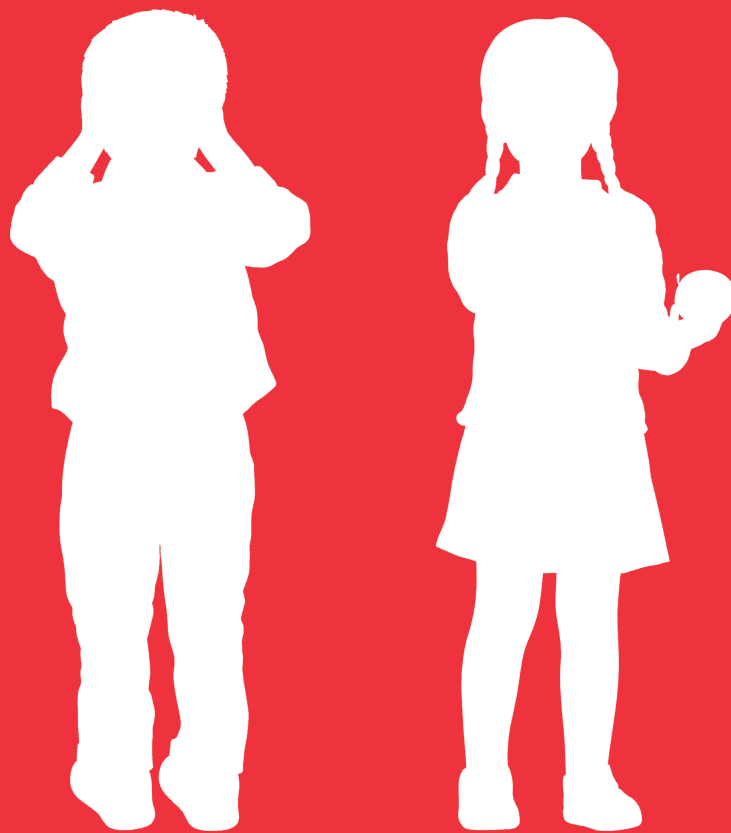


# RESEARCH BRIEFING

**MISSED OPPORTUNITIES: INDICATORS  
OF NEGLECT – WHAT IS IGNORED, WHY,  
AND WHAT CAN BE DONE?**



# MISSED OPPORTUNITIES: INDICATORS OF NEGLECT – WHAT IS IGNORED, WHY, AND WHAT CAN BE DONE?

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**FUNDER** Names Department for Education

## WHY IS THIS STUDY IMPORTANT?

This research report was commissioned by the Department for Education to help children's social care practitioners to spot early indicators of neglect in very young children. Neglect is the most common form of child maltreatment in England where almost half (43%) of child protection plans are made in response to neglect. Yet a number of high profile child deaths have shown that it is extremely difficult for professionals with safeguarding responsibilities to identify indicators of neglect, to assess whether what they have observed is sufficiently serious for them to take action, and decide on the most appropriate course of action. This report helps to strengthen existing knowledge on neglect by highlighting research and practice based evidence concerning the consequences of neglect. The research report also explores the barriers to effective action.

## AIMS OF THE STUDY?

The study aimed to help practitioners understand the research and practice related evidence concerning risk factors in the environment, the parent, and the child that are associated with a *likelihood* of actual or future harm in very young children. A further aim was to help practitioners understand the research and practice related evidence about indicators of *current* neglect in very young children. The purpose of the project was to discuss and reach a consensus on these factors.

## HOW WAS THE STUDY DONE?

The sources for the report were identified and collated using a narrative review process and method. This allowed a broad coverage and synthesis of findings from a wide range of academic and practice literature as well as policy documents. Decisions about inclusion and quality were based on expert judgement rather than a specific protocol. There was a high level of collaboration throughout the project in order to avoid individual bias.

The stages of the process were:

1. *First meeting* – after initial discussion of the topic, participants were asked to upload research articles onto a dedicated website and return to the next meeting with further suggestions of relevant literature.
2. *Second meeting* – two panel members presented a research summary: one in relation to observable indicators of neglect and one in relation to risk factors for and consequences of neglect. The group discussed the summaries to try to find a consensus about what to include and what to leave out. A preliminary framework for the report was constructed.
3. *Third meeting* – further discussions to refine and clarify the report framework.
4. *Draft report* - circulated to members of the expert group, feedback was incorporated.
5. *Revised draft* – circulated, to ensure comments from stage 4 had been incorporated.
6. *Peer review of draft* – consideration/inclusion of points raised and literature cited.

## KEY FINDINGS

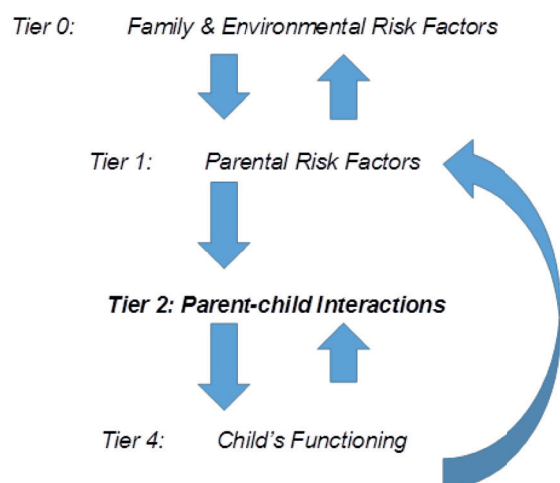
Neglect in the early years can have a long-standing impact across the whole spectrum of children's development, and throughout their life span. Early intervention and support for families where neglect is identified is therefore crucial in safeguarding children from harm, but there is considerable evidence that opportunities to take timely action are routinely missed.

- The report sets out the research and practice based evidence concerning the consequences of neglect including the cumulative impact and long-standing consequences. These can include: progressive decline in cognitive function in pre-school years, the development of insecure and disorganised attachment styles, and behavioural problems.
- The study also explores a number of barriers to effective action including, professionals underestimating the potential extent of the impact of neglect and thresholds for action being high which means that neglect indicators are ignored.
- Unhelpful mindsets which prevent indicators of neglect from being acknowledged and acted on were identified. These include: fears about being judgmental; focusing on the parent at the expense of the child (not considering the lived experience of the child); a fixed view of the family that does not change in the light of new evidence; accepting parents' superficial or false compliance; reluctance to refer particularly if professionals have previous experience of neglect referrals not being accepted; and deferring responsibility to other professionals deemed to have more expertise.
- Observable social and environmental risk factors were identified including, poverty, social isolation and severe housing difficulties. However, it is important to remember that neglect can and does occur in affluent homes, where these risk factors may not be present. Likewise the presence of poverty does not necessarily equate to the presence of neglect.
- Observable risk factors in parents' characteristics were found to be difficult to disentangle from environmental indicators, for example, social isolation may form the backdrop to many other adversities. Nevertheless, risk factors that repeatedly occur in research evidence are: maternal mental health problems; learning disabilities; drug and alcohol misuse; and living with domestic violence, particularly when they occur in combination. Most evidence of neglect relates to mothers rather than fathers and this is a significant gap in the research literature.

- Observable harmful parent and child interactions often underlie concrete manifestations of neglect. These include failing to adequately supervise children or protect them from physical danger, and failing to access appropriate medical treatment. Indicators of neglect in infants aged 0-12 months can include mothers who show a lack of sensitivity to their infants, for example, not engaging emotionally during feeding. Interaction with toddlers may show mothers to be uninvolved showing little affection and ignoring or finding fault in their child's cues for help.
- Observable concerns about the child's functioning include: speech and language delay in 0-12 month olds (neglected young babies' response to persistently neglectful caregiver behaviour is often unnaturally quiet and passive) ; aggression and hostility in toddlers; and noticeable learning delays in 3-5 year olds, for example, in understanding and constructing sentences.

**KEY RECOMMENDATIONS FOR POLICY & PRACTICE**

- Practitioners with safeguarding responsibilities need to undertake systematic assessments of: observable risk factors within the environment, the parents and the child that are associated with an increased risk of neglect; observable indications of the harmful parent-child interactions which often underlie manifestations of neglect; observable indicators of harmful parenting; and the manifestations of the impact of neglect in child functioning from birth until the age of five. This can be achieved using the, "Explanatory relationships between 4 tiers of concern" shown below.



This provides a helpful way of organising and understanding concerns about neglect at different levels and areas of concern. It also helps distinguish between risk factors for neglect and

observable indicators of actual neglect in children and within families. Tiers of concern appear in the diagram in the inter-related domains presented in the key findings. Difficulties may be apparent in all or any of these tiers. The approach considers the way risks and relationships interact and have an impact on the developing child and the physical and emotional environment in which the child's experiences occur.

**STRENGTHS & LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY**

**Strengths**

The stages of the methodology were rigorous and collaborative which helped to eliminate individual author bias.

**Limitations**

Further work is needed to translate this knowledge into practice suggestions or training materials.



**FIND OUT MORE**

**FULL REPORT** [goo.gl/MU0FvG](https://goo.gl/MU0FvG)

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