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UNIVERSITY
BELFAST**

Implications of neglect for children and young people

Dr Mandi MacDonald
m.macdonald@qub.ac.uk

The problem with neglect

- ▶ “abuse is defined as the commission of a behaviour while neglect is characterized by the omission of caregiver behaviours, making it more difficult to identify” (Cohen et al, 2017)
- ▶ “the cause of harm is rarely linked to one specific incident; rather, it is the cumulative, day-to-day adverse effect of poor parenting on the child that is so damaging” (Howarth and Tarr, 2015)
- ▶ Radford et al 2011 – neglect the most prevalent type of maltreatment UK



What do we mean by neglect?

- ▶ **Supervisory neglect**

- ▶ e.g. “How often did your parents or other adult care-givers leave you home alone when an adult should have been with you?” (Austin et al, 2018)

- ▶ **Physical neglect**

- ▶ e.g. “How often did your parents or other adult caregivers not take care of your basic needs, such as keeping you clean or providing food or clothing?” (Austin et al, 2018)
- ▶ “my parents were too drunk or high to take care of the family” (Cecil et al 2017)

- ▶ **Deprivation – withholding of food, water, medical treatment**

- ▶ **Emotional neglect**

- ▶ e.g. “my family was a source of strength and support”(reversed) (Cecil et al 2017)



Disentangling the specific effects of neglect

- ▶ Cecil et al 2017
- ▶ Identified the unique effects of maltreatment types on psychiatric symptoms
- ▶ Community sample of high-risk youth (n = 204)
- ▶ Maltreatment types were highly interrelated and frequently co-occurred
- ▶ Symptom severity increased with the number of maltreatment types experienced
- ▶ Emotional abuse - the main independent predictor of psychiatric symptoms
- ▶ Neglect is likely to instil in the child a belief that they are worthless or unloved, both of which meet definitional criteria for emotional abuse



Life course and developmental perspectives

- ▶ Proximal effects
- ▶ Distal effects
- ▶ Different effects at different ages



Neglect in Serious Case Reviews

- ▶ Brandon et al 2014
- ▶ Re-analysis of neglect in serious case reviews in England 2003-11
- ▶ Extreme Deprivation - 6 Deaths, 2 Near Fatalities
- ▶ Medical Neglect - 5 Deaths
- ▶ Accidents with Some Elements of Forewarning - 7 Deaths, 2 Near Fatalities
- ▶ SUDI in Context of Neglectful Care - (10 Deaths)
- ▶ Neglect Combined with Physical Abuse (6 Deaths, 1 Near Fatality)
- ▶ Suicide – A Long-Term History of Neglect Having a Catastrophic Impact on the Young Person's Mental Wellbeing (7 Deaths)



Effects in emerging adulthood

- ▶ Cohen et al 2017
- ▶ Focused on developmental stage between adolescence and adulthood
- ▶ 580 adolescents (Mean Age = 18yrs) followed up over 3 yrs
- ▶ early physical and emotional neglect poses a risk for development of anxiety, depression, PTSD, and substance misuse among emerging adults



Childhood neglect and prescription opioid misuse

- ▶ Austin et al 2018
- ▶ association of childhood abuse and neglect with prescription opioid misuse in early adulthood
- ▶ neglect associated with depressive symptoms, pain and prescription opioid misuse
- ▶ The self-medication hypothesis
- ▶ Younger adolescents with less fully developed emotional awareness may express negative affect in terms of physical complaints such as headaches and stomach aches



Adult attachment style and self-harm

- ▶ Martin et al 2017
- ▶ 164 individuals followed from birth up to age 26
- ▶ insecure and/or disorganized attachment representations of maltreating caregivers might account for associations between childhood maltreatment and later NSSI (non-suicidal self-injury) behaviour



Implications for attachment

- ▶ Rees 2012
- ▶ Implications of emotional neglect for attachment:
- ▶ No secure base for learning and skills development
- ▶ Distorted internal working model for relationships
- ▶ Impairs how children 'use' relationships for support, friendship, learning



Implications for brain development

▶ **Plasticity**

- ▶ The brain develops in response to environmental stimuli
- ▶ Environment – good or bad – has most impact age 0-3 years

▶ **Sequencing**

- ▶ Brain development follows a set sequence - each stage building on the one before - but needs environmental triggers

▶ **Executive function**

- ▶ Necessary for reasoning, planning, regulating stress, coping with difficult situations
- ▶ Window of development age 3-5 years



Practitioner responses to neglect

- ▶ Horwarth and Tarr 2015
- ▶ qualitative study of child protection planning in cases of chronic child neglect
- ▶ 3 Key issues:
 - ▶ a narrow interpretation of the identity of a child;
 - ▶ superficial engagement with the wishes and feelings of the child;
 - ▶ lack of awareness of the different needs of siblings.
- ▶ focus on evidence leads to the construction of a 'neglected child' as little more than a collection of indicators of neglect – strips away the identity of the individual child.



Young peoples' views on effects of neglect

- ▶ Hicks and Stein 2015
- ▶ Ten focus groups with vulnerable young people aged between 12 and 24 years
- ▶ How to recognize if a young person is being neglected:
 - ▶ physical and emotional signs;
 - ▶ the way the young person interacts with others;
 - ▶ feeling sad, lonely, scared, angry, lacking in confidence, embarrassed, insecure;
 - ▶ not being able to look after oneself;
 - ▶ missing school;
 - ▶ not being able to talk to people;
 - ▶ selling possessions to buy food;
 - ▶ depression; self-harm;
 - ▶ being bullied and bullying.



Perspectives of children and young people

- ▶ Gorin 2016 – review of research with CYP re neglect
- ▶ How young people perceive their world differs from perceptions of adults
- ▶ Those experiencing neglect may find it hard to recognise in themselves
- ▶ From age 11/12 increasingly able to compare self with peers
- ▶ Barriers to talking about neglect: fear of consequences; shame; sense of blame; unsure if adults trustworthy; not recognising it as a problem
- ▶ Disabled children find it particularly hard to recognise and disclose
- ▶ What is regarded as neglectful is dependent upon how that behaviour feels to, and affects, each individual young person (Hicks and Stein, 2015)





- ▶ “ I didn’t tell anyone about my parents’ substance misuse before the NSPCC got involved. I had tried to speak to schools but they thought that because I was the good kid there wasn’t really that much going on. “It’s normal for people in my situation to pretend that everything is OK but the NSPCC didn’t just accept “I’m OK” as an answer. They looked at my body language and realised that I wasn’t OK and they encouraged me to open up....
- ▶ The NSPCC said that what I was experiencing wasn’t normal, that it wasn’t OK. It was someone being honest with me, and listening....
- ▶ I used to think that it was my fault that my mum used drugs but the NSPCC made me realise that wasn’t actually my fault and that I wasn’t to blame.”
- ▶ <https://www.nspcc.org.uk/what-we-do/childrens-stories-about-abuse/sophies-story/>



Conclusions

- ▶ Don't just focus on parental behaviour as means of defining neglect
- ▶ Need to observe children's cues, behaviour and interactions
- ▶ need to be attuned to the relationship between parents and children
- ▶ Thinking about the meaning of the child to (each) parent and the meaning of the parent(s) to understand relationships (Brandon et al, 2014)
- ▶ Need to gain insight into child's day-to-day life and individual lived reality
- ▶ Consider the separate, developmentally specific, needs of siblings
- ▶ Help children express (in)formed views



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