

Reducing the Impact of Child Neglect: Professional Connections with Families

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When considering connections, one of the most basic and primal human connections is the attachment between a caregiver and child. Evidence indicates that secure attachment motivates caregivers to meet the physical and emotional needs of their child. When, for whatever reason, a child's needs are not met to the extent that their health, wellbeing or development is impacted, the child is considered to be neglected.

A literature review, exploring child neglect from a Scottish perspective, highlighted that for families and professionals alike, neglect remains a contentious topic. Evidence suggests that despite neglect being the most common reason in 2019 for a child in Scotland to be placed on the child protection register, and lack of parental care being the most common ground of referral to the Children's Reporter, professionals find it complex. The literature highlights that professionals find it difficult to both evidence their concerns and effectively discuss concerns with families, which leads to potential for disconnect between family and professional perspective on neglect.

This article summarises and critiques the multidisciplinary evidence base around child neglect and scrutinises how professional assessment, within Scotland, of child neglect fits with the Getting It Right for Every Child (GIRFEC) framework. The article then discusses how this supports the move within Scottish policy to a more attachment and connection-based system to reduce the impact of child neglect and enable children to attain their maximum potential.

Child Neglect

In the UK as well as globally, there is an extensive and growing body of evidence on both the short- and long-term effects of child neglect (Teicher and Samson 2016, Stoltenborgh et al. 2013, Dubowitz et al. 2018), with more recent findings clearly defining child neglect as an adverse childhood experience (ACE) (Bellis et al. 2014). The Scottish Government defines child neglect 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” (Scottish Government 2014 p12).

Within legal systems, it is argued that neglect is, by definition, abuse by omission rather than commission (Taylor & Hoyano 2012 and Gill 2014) which mirrors the Scottish Government definition noted above outlining neglect as failure to meet the needs of a child or young person. It can be argued therefore that neglect is more heavily dependent on, or influenced by, external factors than other forms of abuse which are considered acts of commission. The Scottish Government appear to have acknowledged this, as within the updated draft version of the Child Protection guidance for Scotland, which is being reviewed at the time of writing, the updated definition of child neglect may be more comprehensive and acknowledge that neglect arguably more so than other types of child abuse can be influenced by social and community factors and ‘can arise in the context of systemic stresses such as poverty and is an indicator of support needs’ (Scottish Government 2020 p208).

When considering the ecological systems theory (Bronfenbrenner 1979), it is clear that, although children’s health and wellbeing is influenced by community and social factors, the dyad of child and parent/caregiver is at the core of any assessment of a child’s wellbeing. Therefore, the connections between parents/caregivers can be considered the building blocks of child wellbeing.

Connections between parents/caregivers and children

Bowlby (1969) hypothesised that infants are intrinsically highly vulnerable, as they are entirely dependent on others to meet their needs and maximise their chances of survival by maintaining closeness and developing a safe, reciprocal relationship with one caregiver. In its simplest terms, love motivates care givers to provide food, shelter and love which are the basic requirements required for an infant to grow, develop, and thrive (Howe 2005).

When considering what underpins how a person develops into their role as a parent or caregiver, we must explore the theory of social learning. This reminds us that experiences shape behaviour and expectations. So, it is easy to generalise that people may be likely to parent their own children similarly to how they were themselves parented. Bandura (1977) suggested that most human behaviour is learned by observation, specifically suggesting that adolescents imitate and copy both the physical actions and emotional reactions of adults around them. Considering the context of attachment theory, it follows that they are more likely to do this with adults with whom they have a secure attachment and feel safe around. This may provide some underpinning explanation of why Madigan et al. (2019) suggest that child neglect is cyclical and intergenerational.

Evidence however also argues that parents' beliefs about their children and how best to meet their needs can be fluid and changeable and are influenced by a variety of factors. Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory considers the impact of both the environment and social context on parenting and outcomes (Bronfenbrenner 1979). This would suggest that how a person functions is not only shaped by observation but is in fact underpinned by a combination of intrinsic personal factors and environmental factors. Modern day life, however, is highly complex, and evidence highlights a correlation between poverty and child neglect (Morris et al. 2018). It can be argued that poverty and lack of access to money makes it more difficult to meet a child's needs effectively even when the secure attachment and

motivation to meet the child's needs is present (Bywaters et al 2016). Rutter (1989) suggested that parenting is the mechanism or 'common pathway' through which these social and contextual factors impinge on children. Woods-Jaeger et al. 2018 argue that nurturing and responsive parenting appears to be able to offer some protection by promoting emotional wellbeing and resilience for children in the face of these social and community stresses which lead to adversity.

Interventions to address child neglect are underpinned by the ultimate goal of GIRFEC which is that each child in Scotland should attain their maximum potential (Aldgate & Rose 2008). With the exception of adolescents, however, the bulk of any professional intervention will be based on interactions between professionals and parents/caregivers with the goal of empowering parents to make and crucially, sustain behaviour change to enable them to more effectively meet the needs of their children, therefore the connections between caregivers and professionals are also fundamentally important.

Connections between parents/care givers and professionals

Scott & Daniel (2018) emphasise that in order for interventions to address neglect to have the greatest impact, professionals need to engage effectively with families. Trust and respect are highlighted as fundamental features of effective engagement (Ingram et al. 2015; Pecora et al. 2012). It can be argued that without a shared understanding between families and professionals about what neglect is and how it affects children and young people, a trusting relationship cannot truly exist. And without trust, potential for tokenistic engagement with interventions or disguised compliance remains (NSPCC 2019). Davis et al. (2015) suggest when considering behaviour change, trust in both the intervention and the professional delivering it are essential.

The complex ontogenetic development process of health and social care professionals mirrors that of parents and caregivers. The intrinsic value base and belief systems of professionals are shaped by their own upbringing and experiences which has the potential to contribute to the expansive evidence base outlining differences in professional thresholds, which are particularly relevant when considering assessment of risk in an area as subjective and fluid as child neglect.

In any profession which is based on connecting with children, young people, parents, or caregivers there are very clear professional standards and values highlighted in an attempt to ensure that these connections are safe with clear boundaries. Through training and development as a professional there is an expectation that these standards will be adopted. Consideration, however, must be given to any potential conflict or dissonance between intrinsic personal values which have been formed and shaped through experience and upbringing and which are unique and fluid, in contrast to a generic set of professional values which are taught via educational and in practice learning (McDaid 2016). While it can be hypothesised that there will be some crossover between professional and personal values and they will co-exist comfortably, it must be acknowledged that for some professionals it is their own early experiences of trauma that motivates them to engage in a public service career (Stevens et al 2012). Although this may have less impact on assessing risk in cases like physical abuse where evidence of the abuse is present assisting professional assessment (Stokes & Taylor 2014), in assessing more complex phenomena like neglect, it can be hypothesised that a professional's personal values are just as influential, if not more so.

Hughes (2011) carried out a study exploring the impact on student social workers' wellbeing of social work education challenging their beliefs, values, and behaviours. Although a small-scale study, it did indicate that all five participants acknowledged that their education had shifted their outlook to increased acceptance and tolerance, which is indicative

of the relational ethos of social work education. Although Furness (2007) highlights that in the process of recruiting social work students' consideration is given to evidencing personal traits during the process, it is slightly different for health visitors as this is an intensive post nursing registration training course. While the Nursing and Midwifery Council (NMC) has clear expectations of the need for registrants to have 'good character', it can be argued that the skills required to work as a nurse are very different in an acute ward under continuous clear direction from senior staff compared to those skills required to work autonomously, forming effective connections and professional relationships with children and families, sometimes in very difficult social situations. These situations and disconnects between training, expectations and skillsets can result in high attrition rates or difficult transitions from student to autonomous professional (Whittaker et al. 2013).

A full discussion and exploration of professional thresholds around identifying and assessing child neglect is out with the scope of this paper, however the impact of variable professional thresholds on the efficacy of work with child neglect is well evidenced within forums promoting analysis and learning from practice. Although dated, Brandon et al. (2008) highlighted in their review of child death or significant injury due to abuse or neglect that in cases where chronic neglect was the area of concern, the threshold of child protection was rarely met. One of the professional factors they identified was challenges around professional understanding of neglect and what they labelled as 'start again syndrome' (Brandon et al. 2008, p313), which can be explained as a series of professional interventions without evidencing any improvement in outcomes for the child, but no significant incident which would trigger the child protection threshold or the threshold for referral into the Children's Hearings System for consideration of a legal underpinning securing social work intervention via compulsory measures. Effectively the child protection threshold and corresponding child protection plan incorporating both family and professional obligations within the plan to

reduce risk and improve outcomes is never reached, yet the child's needs are also never met thereby potentially exposing them to significant harm as a result of chronic neglect. Brandon et al define this as "displacement practices" (p324), which results in a systemic failure to address the underlying parenting issues and most importantly the impact of these on the child. It can be hypothesised that acknowledgement of these concerns is crucial when considering thresholds in relation to child neglect. Furthermore, Allnock (2016) acknowledges that the system within the UK has historically been more focused on cases of 'proven harm' or 'significant harm' rather than 'potential harm'. Arguably this has significant implications when considering child neglect as the evidence base demonstrates that effective professional work with child neglect focuses on improving care received to reduce the risk of harm, and the ethos of early intervention goes against the idea of waiting until harm has been demonstrated before implementing support.

Thinking specifically around child neglect, both the most recent learning from Significant Case Reviews carried out when failings in care are suggested (Care Inspectorate, 2016, Care Inspectorate, 2019) highlighted a theme that children living with neglect are not identified early enough and have been described as 'hidden'. Research conducted by Barnardo's (James 2020) shows that significant challenges facing vulnerable children are not visible to those out with the child's immediate family, thereby rendering the harm as hidden.

There is a lack of primary research findings in the UK around parental views and experiences of neglect. Sykes (2010) provides research evidence around the stigma that mothers accused of neglecting their children experience in the USA. The methodology employed comprised interviews with sixteen mothers and sixteen child protective service caseworkers. It was emphasised that the mothers in the study tended to be vulnerable themselves due to social disadvantage. Sykes argued that this immediately creates a social distance between the professional and caregivers which could represent a power imbalance

and apply a sense of greater authority to the professional, as the professional will be well educated and likely more financially stable than the caregiver. It is noted that this creates issues with a caregiver's sense of identity, as Marshall et al. (2014) assert that all parents and caregivers have a desire to be perceived as 'good'. Forrester et al. (2019) agree that the concept of authority in the relationship between professionals and families can create tension because the sense of authority can lead to professionals expecting deference from families. When this happens, it has the potential to lead to the professional interpreting the family's behaviour as lacking in meaningful engagement. Interestingly, Sykes (2010) noted that few mothers acknowledged the findings of the professional assessment that they had neglected their children as legitimate judgments of their parenting. This may suggest that initial connections may be influenced immediately by disagreement.

The theme of authority is highlighted again by Smithson and Gibson (2015) in their study around parental experiences of involvement in the child protection system. While not specific to neglect, it is relevant that 6 out of 19 participants specifically noted the impact of the power imbalance between the professionals and themselves resulting in parental feelings of lack of influence into the plan devised by professionals to improve outcomes. Reimer (2013) challenges this viewpoint, however, and argues that parental resistance to professionals' attempts to build relationships, particularly in the context of authority imbalances, could in some cases be viewed as a positive, protective response by parents. In addition, this could represent an appropriate challenge to the professional expectation that they should submissively build relationships with strangers who then have the potential to hold great influence over their lives, and the lives of their children. The findings from this study echo the theme of trust, as data from interviews with parents and professionals noted that parents described becoming more attentive and responsive to what the professional was saying once a trusting professional relationship was established. Eight out of nine parent

participants described an increased readiness to engage openly and honestly with the professionals about deeper issues underpinning the child neglect.

In a UK context Jackson et al. (2016) carried out a study in Scotland to explore parental views on their involvement in the CP process with all 11 parents had caring responsibilities for children whose names were placed on a local authority child protection register. A theme from their data, which is relevant to the context of child neglect, is lack of understanding or agreement with the professional assessment of the concerns. Given the debate about the challenges in professional assessment of neglect, and in particular about the threshold of significant harm in relation to child neglect, it can be extrapolated that it is reasonable to assume parents would find this very difficult when neglect is the presenting concern. The researchers concluded that where a parent had identified an intervention as positive or successful, it was underpinned by development of an effective therapeutic professional relationship; again, highlighting the crucial nature of connections.

Within the Care Inspectorate summary of joint inspections carried out across Scotland between 2012 and 2017 (Care Inspectorate, 2019), some of the findings mirrored those themes noted within Significant Case Reviews. For example, the Care Inspectorate acknowledged that they consistently came across a small number of children and young people who had been exposed to neglect for long periods of time before professional intervention. This does not correlate with the GIRFEC ethos of early intervention, and it was highlighted that, in some circumstances where there were multiple factors contributing to the neglect or where parents were noted to be highly resistant to working with professionals, this had led to challenges for the professionals in both identifying and responding to neglect which had demonstrable poor outcomes for the child or young person in some instances.

Considering the scope of work between parents/caregivers and professionals, approaches differ throughout Scotland. Currently each of Scotland's 30 Child Protection

Committee's has its own unique approach to working with child neglect. Some have invested in specific 'tools' or 'frameworks' to support professionals in identifying and evidencing child neglect. The Signs of Safety framework, which is described as a relationship-grounded, safety-organised approach to child protection practice (Turnell and Edwards 1999) is being adopted by more local authorities and health and social care partnerships, and the Graded Care Profile 2, which is a practitioner tool to bring objectiveness and standardisation to practitioner assessment of neglect (Johnson and Cotmore 2015) is being increasingly adopted across some areas. While some evaluations of their efficacy have been positive (Johnson and Cotmore 2015, Stanley and Mills 2014). Horwath and Tarr (2014) warn that use of generalised assessments can result in professionals having and maintaining only a limited understanding of the impact of neglect on each individual child. They argue that use of such tools rather than increasing a child-centred approach, are instead focused on making parenting more effective without acknowledging that the impact of the poor parenting and neglect has the potential to be different for each individual child.

There is a growing body of critics questioning the fundamental fairness and efficacy of use of simplistic tools to 'score' a phenomenon as complex as neglect (Eubank 2018, Gillingham 2020). Although these tools have been developed to bring objectiveness and clear thresholds to assess the impact on children living with neglect (Johnson & Fisher 2018), this appears at odds with the more holistic GIRFEC approach. Also, the value of scores given could be questioned due to factors including poverty and rurality as it is argued that while a family living in poverty may find it inherently more difficult to meet basic needs by providing a healthy diet due to food poverty and furthermore, the effort in terms of parental time and financial cost for a family living rurally in poverty (Featherstone 2016, Gupta 2017), compared to a wealthier, urban family does not appear to be reflected or considered within such assessment tools

Connections between professionals working with child neglect

Bullock et al. (2019) discuss some challenges of multi-agency working from an educational perspective, including the different definitions used by different professionals to identify child neglect, the different knowledge and training underpinning practice, and varying priorities and interventions. They emphasise that child neglect is often found to coexist and overlap with other vulnerabilities including domestic violence, substance misuse and poor parental mental health. Due to this, various professionals are therefore likely to be involved with families where children are experiencing neglect and that this results in potential for all professionals to have differing focuses and priorities, which can be a significant barrier to the development of shared goals and objectives from a multi-agency perspective.

As the topic for consideration is child neglect, the literature explored has predominantly focused on multi-agency working within children's services, however as child neglect is underpinned by parental behaviours which compromise and mask parenting capacity, Gardner & Cuthbert (2016) recognise that the involvement of services for adults is absolutely vital to success in efforts to deal with child neglect. However, they note an absence of research on the success of collaborative working across child and adult services. Stanley and Mills (2014) argue strongly that effective use of an assessment tool supports multi-agency working, in particular around assessment and analysis of risk, leading to more purposeful interventions which are delivered by the most appropriate professional and the most appropriate level in order to be proportionate to the risk identified. They argue cohesively that universal services should hold more cases where risk has been identified and suggest that use of assessment tools can reduce professional anxiety thereby ensuring that cases are not escalated to a higher level of intervention due to professional anxiety leading to a more ethical approach to risk assessment and management.

Challenges in improving outcomes around child neglect

In Scotland the GIRFEC framework is clear that children and young people must be at the heart of all work with families. It can be argued that it is difficult to do this effectively without professionals being proactive in seeking the views and opinions of children and young people. The Munro (2011) report highlighted the distinction between “doing the right thing” for the child (i.e. checking whether children and young people are being helped) rather than “doing things right” (i.e. following procedures). It is difficult to understand how this can be done effectively without direct input from children and young people.

There is little UK or Scottish research specific to children and young people’s views and experiences of neglect, but the literature below outlines their views and experiences of being involved in child protection processes. It must be acknowledged though that the level and urgency of professional input and intervention in child protection processes may be very different to professional work and intervention around child neglect, so the findings presented below may not be generalisable in this context.

Raws (2019) highlights concern that adolescents may downplay neglect because of protectiveness towards their family and awareness of the potential consequences of disclosing neglect. Meunch et al (2016) studied child participation in child protection processes within one local authority in England. The study sample was 22 participants aged between 8 and 18. Of the children, neglect was the category of the child protection plan for 8. One finding relevant to this context is that none of the children or young people within the study were aware of the goals or outcomes that professionals hoped to achieve on their behalf which highlights a lack of shared goal setting and may indicate that the relational aspect of the professional relationship would benefit from being strengthened. Within the study relationships between the child or young person and their social worker were analysed. They concluded that children’s views of their social worker were often influenced by their parents’

interactions with the worker and notably most parents in the study did not feel that they had a positive relationship with the social worker. There is a wide evidence base which highlights that where professional relationships are not felt to be positive, the potential for resistance increases, which then has a negative impact on progress towards reducing the impact of child neglect (Ingram et al. 2016).

Cossar et al. (2016) explored the theme of trust in a similar methodology and drew conclusions that mirrored those by Meunch et al. (2016) but they also highlighted challenges like lack of direct contact with social workers. Their conclusion was that the professional's ability to build a trusting relationship with the child or young person is crucial in improving both their understanding of the process and outcomes in general.

As Scotland has embedded the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) into Scots Law, article 12 reminds us that that the perspective of children and young people must be considered at all points during the assessment process and should be clearly heard throughout any reports and multi-agency meetings which follow. Analysis of themes arising from significant case reviews suggests this practice is poorly embedded in Scotland, despite the National Risk Framework being published a significant length of time ago in 2012. Horwath & Tarr (2014) highlight that in the case of child neglect, professionals developing and maintaining an understanding of the experiences and opinions of the child is vital, because the harm caused by neglect is cumulative leading to potential difficulties in identifying a suitable intervention to improve outcomes by addressing the neglect, therefore incorporating the wishes of the child and family around their priorities and what is important to them is essential. It is evidenced therefore that for professionals identifying child neglect remains challenging. Reflecting on the difficulties highlighted above around establishing and maintaining a respectful and effective connection with parents and caregivers to support and

sustain behaviour change, it is clear that neglect is indeed more chronic in nature than other forms of abuse.

Finally, Parton (2014) highlighted that social work interventions with parents/caregivers and children had become increasingly dominated by child protection procedures. Within Scotland in particular, where the Children's Hearings System is in use, this high threshold for professional intervention has the potential to result in measures of compulsion underpinning professional input and therefore professional relationships. Wright (2019) concluded that parents/caregivers still view social work systems, processes, and workers as punitive, disempowering and unsupportive. Despite a focus on child centred practice, the evidence is clear that systems in place to protect children can be adversarial in nature which conflicts with the fundamental ethos of establishing the safe and respectful professional relationships and partnerships which as highlighted above underpin potential for parents/caregivers to make meaningful and sustained changes which may reduce the impact of child neglect (Mellon 2017).

A shift in Scottish policy focus?

By commissioning the Independent Care Review in October 2016, the Scottish Government made a commitment to learn from those with lived experience of Scotland's Care System with a view to finding the best way to 'love Scotland's most vulnerable children and give them the childhood they deserve' (The Promise 2020). Over 5500 children, young people, carers, and professional's experiences shaped the findings and outcomes of the review (Independent Care Review Evidence Framework 2020). The importance of connections was heard clearly within the review, and it was noted that when participants described their most positive experiences of the care system, trusting, caring connections

almost universally underpinned these. This is clear evidence of the importance of connections and relationships in improving outcomes.

Although the Care Review obviously focuses on experiences within the Care system, the outcomes and findings are fundamentally important when considering the importance of positive connections underpinning professional intervention, which is a transferrable concept to interventions around reducing the impact of child neglect. The findings emphasise for professionals, the concept of providing scaffolding via supports, help and professional accountability to enable families to remain together wherever possible (Independent Care Review Evidence Framework 2020). This is achieved by offering longer term, consistent, relationship-based supports, with the aim of maintaining family connections, which supports and protects the crucially important parent-child attachments outlined above.

Conclusions

To summarise, this article suggests that improving outcomes for children who have been subject to neglect is heavily dependent on the establishment of safe and respectful connections and relationships between professionals and caregivers, as this offers potential to empower and effect meaningful behaviour change.

Horwath & Tarr (2014) argue comprehensively that professionals working with child neglect, more so than other types of abuse, are at greater risk of losing sight of the experiences of the individual child thereby resulting in assessment and intervention that are not child-focused. They argue that this is due to how professionals relate to the social construction of the 'neglected child' as opposed to a more holistic ethos of a child who has experienced neglect and has been impacted by this. As the Scottish government moves towards emphasising a more relationship focused approach to work with children and families, it is evidenced that in working with families where effecting behaviour change is so

crucial to improving outcomes, the importance of connections in establishing and building professional relationships cannot be underestimated.

Research suggests that while short term interventions can be effective in producing small but important changes in behaviour (Lawrence et al. 2016), their success in improving outcomes is underpinned by the belief that increasing knowledge is not enough to result in behaviour as motivation to change must also be present. For practitioners this requires a strength based and motivational approach which may be somewhat at odds with the adversarial child protection processes and systems. Within Scotland, analysis of findings from the Independent Care Review (2020) cements the importance of connections by emphasising the need for a more relationship-based culture within work with children and families. Although the ultimate focus of the report is around children and young people who may need to be cared for out with their immediate family, the work streams have a focus on maximising professional supports and scaffolding to reduce the requirement for corporate parenting. This aims to result in an ethos of enabling longer term, caring and nurturing professional supports for families has huge potential in transforming work across Scotland to reduce the impact of child neglect by focussing on supporting nurturing connections between parents/caregivers and children and when needed establishing respectful and trusting connections between parents/care givers and professionals to empower and enable effective behaviour change to reduce the impact of child neglect.

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