Childhood Neglect

Supervising neglect cases

Produced by Carla Thomas

Childhood Neglect: A resource for multi-agency training is available to download from the Child and Family Training website www.childandfamilytraining.org.uk and on DVD-ROM from Bill Joyce, National Training Director, bill.joyce@childandfamilytraining.org.uk

Terms of use

Acknowledgements

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To understand the barriers to recognition and response to neglect

Child maltreatment is such a difficult and sensitive issue that in order not to accuse innocent people the respondents wanted to be as sure as possible about a maltreatment case before they intervened. It is also such a distressing issue that it may be easier just to 'close one's eyes' to it than to investigate the case more thoroughly.

The respondents were also doubtful about how to act and whether their interpretation was 'right' or whether suspicion was merely based on differing policy guidelines or cultural differences.

Rareness and sensitivity of the phenomenon make it hard to intervene in child maltreatment cases – family is seen as something 'private' and it is largely thought that the way families raise their children is their own affair – the fear of offending families was great.(Paavilainen et al. 2002, p.293)

Challenges for recognition and response

1. Missing a child who is or may be being neglected - failing to recognise or respond in time.
2. Difficulties with interagency working.
3. Missing indirect signs that a parent may neglect their child, or that the child is being neglected.
4. Importance of maintaining a relationship with parents.

Missing a child who is or may be being neglected - issues

- Lack of focus on the child.
- Errors of human reasoning.
- Working with hostile/resistant families.
- Feelings of helplessness.
- Dual role: support vs surveillance.
- Anxieties about parental culpability and intent.
- Confusions about whether there need to be direct signs of neglect and evident impact on the child's development.
- Professionals' fears of getting it wrong.

Not missing a child who is or may be being neglected – skills

- Skills in assessment.
- Skills in identifying when a child's needs are not being met.
- Appropriate use of intuition.

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- Recognising and raising difficult issues.
- 'Forceful curiosity' (Scott 2003).

Interagency working - issues

- Failure to challenge colleagues.
- Different professionals have different foci.
- Role confusion.
- Insufficient skepticism.
- Fear that the 'cure' might be worse than the problem.
- Possibility that no resources will follow referral to children's social care.
- Previous experience of not being taken seriously by children's social care.

Interagency working - skills

- Seeing perspective of others.
- Role clarification.
- Challenging other professionals' views.
- Assertiveness.
- Building trust – showing respect, helping, negotiating and compromising

Missing indirect signs - issues

- There is little evidence about how and whether parents and children are able to recognise that they need help in relation to neglect.
- For many reasons parents and neglected children are unlikely to directly seek either informal or formal help.

Neglect is associated with:

- impoverished home environments, fewer parental resources, receipt of welfare assistance, problems accessing childcare
- previous history of maltreatment, previous removal of a child
- parental substance misuse, severity of drug use, a drug-using social network
- domestic abuse
- parental mental health problems, depressive symptoms
- parental childhood sexual abuse
- young parent, 2 or more children.

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In children various forms of neglect are associated with:

- increased levels of internalising and externalising behaviour in children at age three
- peer relationships and externalising behaviour at age six
- impaired socialisation and problems with daily living skills at age eight.
(Dubowitz 2002 and 2004)

Seeing indirect signs - skills

Professional capacity to:

- provide a clear, factual account of the factors that may be affecting parenting
- describe the circumstances within which the child is living
- delineate potential effects on the child
- describe actual signs of neglect in the child.
- Confidence in ones own professional judgement
- Skills in communicating that judgement to others
- Capacity to communicate with others about the concerns for the child

Maintaining a relationship with parents – issues

- Support vs surveillance creates role conflict.
- The basis of contact may not always be clear (for example, support coupled with monitoring).
- Parents often find it difficult to ask directly for help.
- Parents who neglect their children often have low self-efficacy.
- They are likely to fearful of losing their children.

Maintaining a relationship with parents – skills

- Enabling a parent can be *key* to protecting a child.
- Open and honest practice.
- Listening.
- Conveying empathy.
- Finding common ground .
- Role clarification:
- at outset of working relationship
- be supportive first
- convey in honest, jargon free terms, the reason for involvement.
- Pro-social modelling.

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What can practitioners do?

- Recognise direct, and indirect, indications of the need for help.
- Operate as part of a protective network that actively helps children.
- Recognise and assess aspects of behaviour and lifestyle that may impact on parenting.
- Work closely with parents in determining what aspects of neglect parents themselves can identify in their parenting.
- Be proactive in seeking creative and supportive ways to ask people about their parenting concerns.
- Reflect on the skills that can make a real difference to children and young people.
- Identify skills for further development.

Support to practitioners

'All those working with children in need or at risk of significant harm, whatever their agency or role, need someone who is not directly involved in the case to help them deal with the complexities and challenges of the work and to make sense of what they are seeing, hearing and feeling.' (Gordon and Hendry 2010, p8)

Important role of 'critical friend'/supervisor/ clinical supervisor/manager/mentor/ peer to:

- support practitioners
- help maintain focus on the needs of the child
- support process of analysis

Guidance on supervision

'Working to ensure children are protected from harm requires sound professional judgments to be made. It is demanding work that can be distressing and stressful.

All of those involved should have access to advice and support from, for example, peers, managers, named and designated professionals.' (HM Government 2010, p123)

Supervision should:

- help to ensure that practice is soundly based and consistent with LSCB and organisational procedures;
- ensure that practitioners fully understand their roles, responsibilities and the scope of their professional discretion and authority; and
- help identify the training and development needs of practitioners, so that each has the skills to provide an effective service. (HM Government 2010, p123)

The role of supervision – messages from research

- Definitions and experiences of supervision vary across, and between, different professionals.
- Supervision is not common to all professionals.
- For those professionals where supervision is built-in, the quality and quantity may be variable.
- Role of both formal and informal supervision.

Definition of supervision

Supervision is a process by which one worker is given responsibility by the organisation to work with another worker(s) in order to meet certain organisational, professional and personal objectives. These objectives or functions are:

- competent, accountable performance/practice
- continuing professional development
- personal support
- engaging the individual with the organisation.

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- engaging the individual with the organisation. (Morrison 2005, p 32)

Purpose of supervision

Good quality supervision can help to:

- keep the focus on the child
- avoid drift
- maintain a degree of objectivity and challenge fixed views
- test and assess the evidence base for assessment and decisions; and
- address the emotional impact of work. (HM Government 2010, p123)
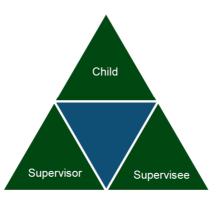
Good supervision should…

- Ensure supervisee is clear about roles, responsibilities and accountabilities.
- Ensure best interests of user are promoted.
- Ensure worker meets agency's objectives and standards.
- Ensure worker has appropriate and manageable workload.
- Develop a supportive and positive climate for practice and performance.
- Enhance the worker's professional development
- Support the worker in managing the demands (task and emotional) of their work.
- Promote clear communication between the organisation and the worker. (Morrison 2005, p30)

Child neglect: the role of supervision

Supervision is an integral element of social work practice, not an add-on. Through it workers review their day to day practice and decision making, plan their learning and development as professionals, and work through the considerable emotional and personal demands the job often places on them.' (HM Government 2010, p29)

Effective and accessible supervision is essential to help staff to put in to practice the critical thinking required to understand cases holistically, complete analytical assessments, and weigh up interacting risk and protective factors.' (Brandon *et al.* 2008, p326)

Child neglect: the purpose of supervision

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Keeping the child at the centre: the role of supervision

'Possibly the single most significant practice failing throughout the majority of the serious case reviews was the failure of all professionals to see the situation from the child's perspective and experience; to listen to what they said; to observe how they were and to take serious account of their views in supporting their needs.' (Ofsted 2008, p18)

'There is plenty of evidence that front line staff who are in daily contact with parents often find it hard to sustain their suspicions about them. There is a vital role for managers to hold this awareness and to challenge and support staff to constantly review and update their opinion of children's safety.' (Social Work Inspection Agency 2005, p126)

hearing what children and young people say

'Listening to children is central to recognising and respecting their worth as human beings…It cannot be taken for granted that more listening means more hearing.' (Christensen and James 2008, p264)

Appendix 1 – Guarding against bias

Introduction

Once a person has decided on their favoured explanation they are likely to selectively seek evidence which confirms their preferred explanation and unlikely to select information which might challenge their explanation (Snyder cited in Arkes and Hammond 1986). This is now recognised to be one of the most important human failings to be aware of in assessment. It is often referred to as 'verificationism' (Scott 1998; Sheppard 1995) or 'confirmatory bias (Munro 2008; Plous 1993). We have a tendency to form our views fairly early on in proceedings and then unconsciously select and weigh the information emerging in a way that ensures that our early beliefs will be supported rather than tested (Munro 2008).

Inquiries and serious case reviews have highlighted some of the ways in which this confirmatory bias can feed into ineffective and damaging judgements and decision making in child welfare. In terms of neglect, verificationism may result in agencies not taking action when they should. Brandon et al. (2008) commented on the management of caseloads under pressure and noted that in one instance 'the current climate in (local authority) would have put pressure on staff to keep as low as possible the numbers of children looked after' (p. 87). In a climate of limited resources and high caseloads, confirmatory bias may allow practitioners to conclude that a neglected child or young person is not at risk or does not met a threshold for intervention when, in fact, a more balanced examination of the evidence would reveal evidence which disconfirms this initial belief that no further action is required.

Munro (2008) advises that we may unconsciously use a number of techniques to avoid seeing challenging evidence:

- **avoidance;**
- **forgetting;**
- **rejecting;**
- **reinterpreting.**

Guarding against confirmational bias

There is little psychological research in the literature on decision-making on how to avoid such confirmational errors (Plous 1993). However, one strategy shown to be effective in research is to focus on motivational factors (Snyder et al. 1982 cited in Plous 1993). In practice we may benefit from approaching all interviews and discussions with clients and other professionals with the belief or mind-set that whoever we are speaking to may think that we have already made our minds up and are just going through the motions. Deliberately concentrating on open-minded and

non-judgemental questioning may result in practitioners gaining more balanced views.

To avoid confirmatory bias (i.e. only seeing the evidence that supports your explanation and not the evidence which challenges you) it should be embedded in practice that you should always consider the opposite and try to seek evidence which disconfirms your favourite explanation (i.e. if your main explanation is that the child's difficult behaviour is linked to the parent's volatile nature then you need to explore the possibility that the difficult behaviour is not linked to the parent's temperament). For example, instead of carrying on questioning about anger and irascibility, explore the possibility that the parent is patient and calm when feeding the child.

Reframing our hypotheses and seeking disconfirming evidence does not come easy and simply considering that you may be wrong is not in itself enough to overcome tendencies toward confirmatory bias (Plous 1993). However, techniques can be learned and this way of questioning judgement needs to become ingrained in practice.

Simply saying to yourself "I must not be biased" is simply not enough. Being aware of a tendency towards bias can help avoid it; it has been shown that overconfidence in decision making can be reduced if decision makers can consider why their judgements might be wrong (Koriat et al 1980; Lord et al 1984). However, the confirmatory bias is such a strong tendency that it needs attention at all levels.

Strategies for Avoiding Verificationism

be aware of tendency, accept that your judgement may be wrong, seek disconfirming evidence.

demand good quality supervision, come prepared to supervision to explore judgement, seek "devil's advocates" and "critical friends" to help see other perspectives and test your thinking.

accept the uncertainty in practice and teach the skills required to think in this environment, create and maintain supervision policy, build checks for conformational bias into points of review.

Individual – be aware of tendency, accept that your judgement may be wrong, seek disconfirming evidence.

Agency – demand good quality supervision, come prepared to supervision to explore judgement, seek "devil's advocates" and "critical friends" to help see other perspectives and test your thinking.

Organisations – accept the uncertainty in practice and teach the skills required to think in this environment, create and maintain supervision policy, build checks for conformational bias into points of review**.**

Appendix 2 – **Childhood neglect and supporting workers**

The significant role supervision and management plays in child welfare and protection has been commented on by a number of reports in the UK including Messages from Inquiry Reports (1980-89), Laming (2003, 2009), O' Brien (2003), Social Work Inspection Agency (2005).

In his Inquiry report in to the death of Victoria Climbié, Lord Laming (2003) commented: 'Effective Supervision is the cornerstone of safe social work practice. There is no substitute for it' (p. 211). The Eilean Siar (SWIA 2005) report considered the ongoing neglect and sexual abuse experienced by children within one family and highlighted the key role that managers have in enabling staff who are in direct contact with children and their families to maintain a focus on the needs of the child, and the capacity of parents to meet their children's needs. It stated '...there is plenty of evidence from previous child abuse inquiries that front line staff who are in daily contact with parents often find it hard to sustain their suspicions about them. There is a vital role for managers to hold this awareness and to challenge and support staff to constantly review and update their opinion of the children's safety in the home' (p.126).

Following the death of Peter Connelly in Haringey and the publication of Lord Laming's 2009 report *The Protection of Children in England: A Progress Report* a Social Work Task Force was set up by the Secretaries of State for Health, and Children, Schools and Families to advise the government on social work reform. The Task Force reported in November 2009. Amongst their recommendations about pre- and post-qualifying social work education and training, they also considered the key role supervision played in contributing to high quality social work practice and improved outcomes for service users and carers. The Task force commented that:

Supervision is an integral element of social work practice not an add-on. Through it social workers review their day to day practice and decision making, plan their learning and development as professionals, and work through the considerable emotional and personal demands the job often places on them (2009, p.29).

In their interim report the Task Force had identified three main functions of supervision. These were:

- line management- including managing team resources, workload management, performance appraisal, duty of care, support;
- professional (or case) supervision - reflecting on and responding to the challenging questions thrown up by practice, including implications for

the practitioner's welfare or safety; reviewing roles; evaluating the impact of actions and decisions; learning from day to day practice;

- continuing professional development - ensuring social workers are developing the skills, knowledge and experience necessary to do their job well and progress in their careers. Observation of practice and constructive feedback should be part of the process.

Following the publication of the interim report over 1000 social workers were surveyed, and one of the findings was that many did not get access to the full range of supervision types, rather supervision tended to focus on case management (Baginsky et al. 2010). The Task Force (2009) recommended that there should be a 'clear national standard for the support social workers should expect from their employers in order to do their jobs effectively' (p. 32). The Laming report (2009) had also recommended that guidelines should be established to guarantee supervision times for social workers, and that the then Department of Children, Schools and Families should set out the elements of high quality supervision. Laming recommended that this needed to include case planning, constructive challenge and professional development.

Relevant Models

The definition (and functions) of supervision varies within the literature and within different policy documents and inquiry reports. Morrison (2005) defined supervision as the process by which one worker is given responsibility by the organisation to work with another worker(s) in order to meet certain organisational, professional and personal objectives. These are:

- competent accountable practice;
- continuing professional development;
- personal support;
- engaging the individual with the organisation.

Pritchard (1995) identified 6 tasks of supervision:

- maintaining and developing unit operations;
- clarifying staff roles and responsibilities;
- facilitating a climate for good and imaginative practice;
- help people cope with stress;
- assisting creative professional development;
- providing feedback to organisation on policy and practice.

How supervision should look is a subject of ongoing debate. Some commentators have suggested that the supportive and management functions of supervision can be separated (Stanley and Goddard 2002) while others (Hughes and Pengelly 2002) highlight some of the difficulties of doing this in terms of accountability. Dependant on the organisation in which practitioners work, it may be that the different functions

of supervision are carried out by one person, or that the different tasks are performed by different individuals. If the tasks are separated one area which practitioners and those who have supervisory responsibility will want to consider is the potential that this may cause tasks to be replicated, or alternatively for assumptions to be made that 'someone else is taking responsibility' and consequently that things can fall down the middle. Practitioners are likely to work to different thresholds which affect when and how they intervene with or on behalf of children and young people who are experiencing neglect. Where case management rests with more than one individual, there is the potential that each may hold a different threshold for intervention. Dalgleish (2003) developed a model that enables workers to reflect on the difference between the threshold for assessment, and their personal threshold for action. Practitioners and supervisors may want to look at this in more depth within the supervisory relationships to help explore where there are differences / similarities in thresholds for intervention, why these differences exist, and what the potential impact is for the child and young person who is experiencing neglect.

Keeping the Child at the Centre

Those in a supervisory role can keep the child at the centre throughout their assessment and intervention particularly given concerns that at times the needs of parents and carers can obscure the needs of children and young people.

Ofsted (2008) carried out an evaluation of serious case reviews from April 2007-March 2008.The report commented that 'Possibly the single most significant practice failing throughout the majority of the serious case reviews was the failure of all professionals to see the situation from the child's perspective and experience; to see and speak to the children; to listen to what they said, to observe how they were and to take serious account of their views in supporting their needs' (p. 18).

Ofsted's findings are mirrored by much of the literature on child welfare and protection which highlights that children's experiences are not always at the centre of assessment and intervention, despite good intentions and legislative and policy drivers (Holland 2004; Cleaver and Walker 2004; McLeod 2008; Munro 2010 and 2011). One of the reasons for this may be that in order to keep children and their needs at the centre professionals have to engage with children and young people about difficult or uncomfortable subjects.

There is some evidence that professionals avoid talking about difficult areas to protect themselves, and that child and young people avoid sensitive or difficult subjects because they know workers will find it difficult to hear them (Killen 1996; Mudaly and Goddard 2006; Morrison 2007). There is also some evidence to suggest that an unintended consequence of professional efforts to work in partnership with parents is that the needs of children can become secondary (Stanley and Goddard 2002; Laming 2003; SWIA 2005). Where there is a concern that children and young

people are experiencing neglect, supervision (informal and formal) can play a key role in helping workers unpack and unpick their engagement to help them to ensure that the child/ young person remains at the centre. One model that can assist supervisors to focus on the needs of the child and ensure that the child is' brought in to' supervision, is the supervision triangle (Hughes and Pengelly 2002).

One exercise practitioners and supervisors may want to complete is to look at how they could 'bring' the child in to supervision to think about what neglect might mean for the child. For instance, is there an empty chair which symbolises the child or young person? Does the supervisor ask the practitioner to look at the chronology from the perspective of the child? In the chronology a professional might note that the child has had untreated head lice for 3 months. However, if a child were to write about the impact of on her/him this s/he might mention how itchy it is, how it makes it difficult to concentrate, how no other child wants to sit next to her/him and that s/he was the only person not invited to a classmate's bithday party.

Within supervision, one area which should be explored is how the practitioner is applying relevant theory to practice. For neglect, it will be relevant for practitioner and supervisor to consider the attachment strategies a child may have developed to try and ensure that his or her needs were met, and whether these might prove maladaptive in the longer terms. Here practitioners can be encouraged to consider what children and young people may have missed as a consequence of neglect. Hughes (1998) coined the term the ' trauma of absence' to describe the impact of children missing day to day experiences that children and young people who are not experiencing neglect might take for granted. Another area which should be explored in supervision is how professionals can build on resilience. If resilience is understood as both an outcome and a process, the impact of neglect can be seen as significant (Davies 2004).

The three building blocks of resilience are having a secure base, self-esteem and self-efficacy (Gilligan 2009) and within supervision practitioners can be encouraged to reflect on the impact neglect has on each of these building blocks. For instance, self-esteem can be described as appreciating one's own worth, and being able to be act responsibly towards others. Daniel and Wassell (2002) identify that the roots of self esteem are based on early experiences of being and feeling loved within attachment relationships. Garbarino (1980) argued that a focus on the physical aspects of neglect, and practical interventions misses the real significance of neglect for the child or young person's developing sense of self, and that neglect always carries an emotional message. When considering neglect within supervision, the 'meaning' of neglect for the child needs to be the focus, and the link made to feelings of self esteem. There is some evidence (Brandon et al. 2008, Hicks and Stein 2010) that practitioners can experience difficulty engaging with teenagers who are experiencing neglect, and that the impact of neglect on teenagers has been underestimated.

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Hart (in Daniel and Wassell 2002) identified that for adolescents their feelings of self esteem and self worth can be linked to five different areas, all of which can be affected by neglect. These are:

- scholastic competence;
- athletic competence; social acceptance;
- physical appearance;
- behavioural conduct.

Within supervision, practitioners can be encouraged to think critically about the impact of neglect on these five areas.

Research and links

Publications

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