

One minute guide

Recognising Neglect of Older Children

July 2020

What is Neglect

Neglect is: '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.'

Neglect may involve a parent or carer failing to:

- provide adequate food, clothing and shelter (including exclusion from home or abandonment)
- protect a child from physical and emotional harm or danger
- ensure adequate supervision (including the use of inadequate caregivers)
- ensure access to appropriate medical care or treatment.
- be responsive to a child's emotional needs.
- ensure educational needs are met

During adolescence, the child's brain goes through neurobiological remodelling, strengthening some connections and 'pruning' others:

- This is a critical period for the development of emotional regulation and higher executive functioning (including decision-making, cognition, impulse control, and attention span)
- This is as important as the first two years of life are for attachment.

Neglect in older children adversely affects this process and can compound the developmental harms of earlier life neglect.

Conversely, *good care* in this period of brain remodelling can lessen the effects of previous adverse experience.

An NSPCC study found that 4% of under 11s and 11% of 11- to 17-year-olds had experienced neglect. This suggests that older children are almost **three times more likely** to have suffered neglect than younger children.



Key Points

- Neglect of older children sometimes goes unseen.
- Older children still need parental care and support.
- Neglect may present as challenging behaviour; often the child is seen as 'the problem'.
- Older children who experience neglect may have suffered years of neglect and adverse experiences
- The behaviour of such older children must be understood in the context of this trauma.

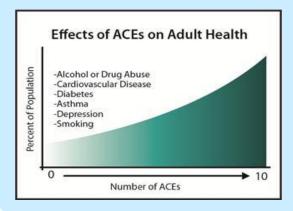
Neglect is a risk factor for sexual and criminal child exploitation

Consider Neglect when an older child:

- is truanting or being persistently kept out of school
- is persistently not brought to health appointments
- goes missing from home
- is showing offending or challenging behaviour
- has poor hygiene or inappropriate clothing
- is misusing substances or alcohol
- is showing emotional distress including self-harming
- is spending time with inappropriate adults to meet basic & emotional needs

Why Neglect Matters

Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) affect lifelong health and wellbeing.



- Neglect is a factor in 48% of all Serious Case Reviews where the child died. Causes of death included suicide, drug overdose, and risk-taking behaviour, as well as concurrent maltreatment
- Neglected older children are vulnerable to criminal and/or sexual exploitation, substance misuse, and mental health difficulties including self-harm.





Top Tips for Professionals

Recognising Neglect

- Family chronologies are essential: neglect is a pattern not a 'snapshot'. Think about patterns across all family members, and over time.
- See the child: recognise challenging teenage behaviour as a possible effect of neglect, not a cause of it.
- Be clear in your own mind about what the concerns are. Good-enough care has multiple
 dimensions; therefore, it can be helpful to think about which aspects are lacking where neglect is
 a concern: such as physical needs, hygiene, medical needs, boundaries, education, ageappropriate developmental opportunities, emotional needs, social & life skills modelling. Use
 danger statements about the specific harm risks.

Supporting families & breaking cycles

- Early intervention is the key to best outcomes; neglect is unlikely to change without a significant change in parent circumstances, understanding and coping abilities.
- There is usually a saw-tooth pattern of improvement with support, and deterioration in care after support-step-down. Plans and help offers need to recognise this. Consider tail-end observation periods before step-down and agree emergency next steps with families as an advanced contingency plan to help them cope with life events at could otherwise stress parent's coping resources.

Key Contacts and Further Information

Coventry Safeguarding Children Partnership website

Growing up neglected: a multi-agency response to older children: https://www.unicef-irc.org/publications/pdf/adolescent_brain_a_second_window_of_opportunity_a_compendium.pdf

NSPCC website