

Neglect study: Summary of findings

June 2010

Introduction

In 2009, Community Services undertook the first major research study in NSW on neglect of children. The overarching aim of the neglect study was to investigate childhood neglect in order to gain a better understanding of the characteristics of neglecting families, the system response to them compared with children suffering other types of maltreatment, and the impact of neglect on child outcomes.

Definition

Neglect has been defined as behaviour by those responsible that constitutes a failure to act in ways that are presumed to be necessary to meet the developmental needs of a child, within the social and cultural norms of that society (Straus & Kantor, 2005, p.20).

A precise definition is elusive as neglect frequently comprises an act or acts of omission rather than acts of commission, and often no single incident is serious enough to cause harm in itself but an accumulation of incidents causes cumulative harm. Perceptions of what is neglectful vary as a function of social and cultural norms and it is often difficult to disentangle the effects of poverty and other parental limitations, such as intellectual disability, which may result in developmental needs not being met despite parents' best efforts.

Research context

The first component of the neglect project was a [review of the national and international literature](#) which examined the prevalence of neglect, identified the main family risk factors, investigated patterns of system response and explored intervention strategies (Watson, 2005).

In addition there are also two Research to Practice Notes; [Neglect: Key intervention strategies](#) and [Neglect: Key issues](#).

The second component using focus groups focussed on examining the formal and informal frameworks employed by caseworkers to recognise and assess neglect, the criteria on which their decisions were based and their perceptions of the most effective interventions with neglecting families.

The third component was a case file review which this note focuses on. Using the family as the unit of analysis it examined 524 case file histories from the point of first contact with child protection to the time of review in 2008/2009. It aimed to investigate:

- whether neglect had a more detrimental impact on developmental outcomes than more active forms of abuse
- the degree to which decision making regarding follow-up of notifications is influenced by the type, severity and chronicity of maltreatment
- the child, parent and family risk factors associated with neglect as opposed to other types of maltreatment the relative contribution of decision-making within the system and familial risk factors to these developmental outcomes.

Outcomes from the file review

The cases of 524 children were reviewed. 51 per cent were male and 49 per cent were female. Their mean age at time of report was 8 years 6 months (2004/2005). At the time of review (2008/2009) their average age was 11 years 9 months.

- 23 per cent of children lived with both biological parents
- 43 per cent lived in single parent families (37 per cent with a single parent mother and 6 per cent live with a single parent father)
- 15 per cent lived with their mother and her partner, 2 per cent lived with their father and his partner
- 11 per cent lived with their grandparents, 2 per cent with another related adult
- 2 per cent lived with an unrelated adult, 1 per cent with foster parents and 1 per cent in supported accommodation
- 77 per cent lived in a household with their biological mother, but 21 per cent did not.
- 32 per cent had their biological father in the house but 65 per cent did not.
- 83 per cent had siblings – 13 per cent were only children. The numbers of siblings ranged from 1 to 11 with the average numbers of children in the family being 3.2.

The total number of reports for these families was 6,704 with a mean per family of 12.5 (truncated at 65) and a median of seven reports. Each report represented an incident although several children in the family may have been involved. Ten percent of families had only one report.

Reports for neglect, physical abuse, sexual abuse or psychological abuse were categorised as child maltreatment reports. A primary reason for report, such as 'alcohol use by carer' or 'emotional state of carer' was seen as a parent issue and not categorised as a type of maltreatment. As well, reports of a child for misusing drugs or attempting suicide were considered child distress reactions rather than a type of maltreatment.

Of these reports:

22 per cent were for neglect	15 per cent were for domestic violence
21 per cent were for physical abuse	15 per cent were for parent issues
8 per cent were for sexual abuse	8 per cent were for child outcomes
11 per cent were for psychological abuse	

The results were examined by looking at chronicity, severity and type of maltreatment with a focus on neglect.

Do neglected children have poorer developmental outcomes?

In sum, the more reports the worse the child outcomes. The 'tipping point' where children are over represented in the 15 per cent worst outcomes was represented by a cut-off point of more than six reports. Neglected children have poorer outcomes, especially those with at least three reports of neglect. Although neglect is more likely to be chronic and this alone predicts negative outcomes, where neglect is the predominant form of maltreatment in a family, child outcomes are still significantly worse, regardless of numbers of reports.

Does the child protection system respond differently to neglect?

Given that chronicity, severity (as rated by speed of response rather than risk of harm) and type of maltreatment are related to poorer outcomes, specific characteristics of these variables might be expected to trigger a system response. A system response was defined as (i) an initial assessment, (ii) a more comprehensive assessment, or (iii) an offer of appropriate services.

This was to some extent borne out. By family as the proportion of reports with an initial assessment increased, poor child outcomes decreased. The proportion of notifications followed up with a more comprehensive assessment was not associated with child outcomes but those attracting a more comprehensive assessment are likely to be more at risk in the first place.

What triggers a system response?

Chronicity ~ There was no relationship between increasing number of notifications and the proportion of reports that were followed up.

Severity of incident ~ A greater risk of harm rating was significantly more likely to receive a more comprehensive assessment than either medium or low levels, which did not differ from each other. The speed of response was strongly related to whether a more comprehensive assessment was undertaken. Although there was a strong positive correlation between ratings of risk of harm and the speed of response allocated to reports, the speed of response was a far better predictor of follow-up.

Type of maltreatment report ~ If analysed by report type, neglect reports were neither given a lower level of risk of harm nor a lower level of speed of response than other forms of maltreatment. Neglect reports were followed up with an initial assessment and a more comprehensive assessment as often as reports of other forms of abuse.

Nor were more comprehensive assessments based on neglect reports significantly more difficult to substantiate compared with physical reports with 54 per cent of reports of neglect 59 per cent of reports of physical abuse that attracted a more comprehensive report being substantiated. This refutes the idea that these families suffer 'case drift' because neglect is more difficult than other types of maltreatment to substantiate. 'Case drift' as discussed below may occur for other reasons.

As the number of neglect reports increased in a family there was no corresponding increase in the rating of speed of response although there was a slight increase in the rating of risk of harm.

Chronic neglect ~ With each further report of neglect in families, it became significantly less likely that an initial assessment stage was carried out. With each further report of neglect in families, it became much less likely it was that they would receive a more comprehensive assessment. Where families were receiving on-going support this was reduced slightly ($r = -.66$).

This was not the case, for instance, for physical abuse. This suggests that taken on an incident by incident basis neglect notifications are followed up at the same rate as other notifications, but as neglect becomes chronic the rate of follow-up slows down. Research in other jurisdictions, including South Australia, has similarly found that neglected children suffer greater 'case drift' for this reason.

International researchers suggest that this slow down may be because caseworkers do not notice the incremental change and so become inured to the neglect in some families. As well both caseworkers and overseas researchers argue that it is particularly difficult to bring about change in neglectful families as parents often lack insight. For logistical reasons alone attending services can be daunting if there are many children and the family are reliant on public transport. Long waiting lists for services (for instance, six months for family services ascertained from caseworker focus groups was commonly cited) make it difficult to offer a quick response to an immediate crisis when parents are perhaps more motivated to attend them, and also harder to ensure families access them in the longer term.

Conclusion

The hypotheses for this study were that for children, who predominantly suffered from neglect as opposed to other types of maltreatment, would differ in relation to their outcomes, the system response to them, and number and type of risk factors that characterise their parents and family.

For neglecting families these findings may provide a useful guide as to when to refer a family on for a fuller assessment. These are as follows:

- there have been six maltreatment reports
- there have been three reports of neglect

- there are more than three risk factors (including structural risk factors accompanied one individual risk factor). Families who are young, living in poverty with large numbers of children may be as, or more important, to target than those with mental health issues, domestic violence and single parenthood
- there has been a consistently higher risk of harm rating than speed of response (or current equivalent)
- it should be noted that neglected children are more likely to be referred by concerned friends, family and neighbours. Although this group sometimes appear more likely to make unfounded reports, most are not and caseworkers should not wait until a report from a professional before considering a full assessment
- where possible reports should be verified through contacting a third party (most often the school). Risk of harm can be reduced by making more informed decisions – even just phoning up and finding out more about the maltreatment and verifying if the report has any basis
- services can be seen as helpful. Offering services that are directed to both parent and child may be most beneficial.

References

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