

NSPCC Safeguarding in Education Service

Briefing: The role of schools, academies and colleges in addressing neglect

April 2013

Introduction

Schools, academies and colleges have a statutory responsibility for “*safeguarding and promoting the welfare of children and young people*” (Education Act 2002). Their staff regularly see pupils/students and are well positioned to recognise when a child may be subject to maltreatment or neglect.

It is essential that more is done to understand neglect, the area of abuse that remains so highly unreported in the UK. The overall complexity of the concerns in neglect cases are frequently identified and can often be a reason why neglect is under reported.

“Child Cruelty in the UK: An NSPCC study into childhood abuse and neglect over the past 30 years” published in 2011 reported that:

- Almost one in nine (9%) of 18 – 24 year olds interviewed reported that they had been severely neglected by parents or guardians.
- One in ten (9.8%) of 11 – 16 year olds interviewed reported suffering severe emotional neglect or lack of care or supervision that would place a child at risk: physical neglect was reported by 1.4%

Action for Children “*Review of Child Neglect*” 2011 conducted by the University of Stirling reported from its focus groups that:

“ --- *professionals including primary school teachers reported sleepless nights wondering what to do in cases of suspected child neglect.*”

What is neglect?

The 'Working Together to Safeguard Children' 2013 definition is:

"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 can often fit into six forms which are:

- Medical – the withholding of medical care including health and dental.
- Emotional – lack of emotional warmth, touch and nurture.
- Nutritional – either through lack of access to a proper diet which can affect in their development.
- Educational – failing to ensure regular school attendance that prevents the child reaching their full potential academically.
- Physical – failure to meet the child's physical needs.
- Lack of supervision and guidance – meaning the child is in dangerous situations without the ability to risk assess the danger.

Horwath, J (2007): Child neglect: identification and assessment: Palgrave Macmillan

Thinking about neglect under these headings can often help school staff to start to gain a full picture of what life is like for a particular young person experiencing neglect and if all of these are a factor it is referred to as global neglect.

With regard to the child, some of the regular concerns are:

- The child's development in all areas including educational attainment.
- Cleanliness.
- Health.
- Children left at home alone and accidents related to this.
- Taking on unreasonable care for others.
- Young carers.

In the medical field neglect is often referred to in the terms organic failure to thrive, which often relates to a congenital and genetic causes that may cause the child to develop at a slower rate or not at all and non-organic failure to thrive which results from accidental, neglectful or deliberate action on the parent's/carer's part. Both these terms are used when children are underweight or malnourished compared to the standards of children their age.

Neglect makes up half of all child protection plans and up to three quarters of all plans where there is a joint category for registration.

Ruth Gardner of the NSPCC in her report 'Developing an effective response to neglect and emotional harm to children' (2008) identified that *"Neglect is associated with future maltreatment and the most serious and life-threatening abuse is often found to follow a history of increasing neglect"*.

Neglect can often be an indicator of further maltreatment and is often identified as an issue in serious case reviews as being present in the lead up to the death of the child or young person.

It is important to recognise that the most frequent issues and concerns regarding the family in relation to neglect relate to parental capability. This can be a consequence of:

- Poor health, including mental health or mental illness
- Disability, including learning difficulties
- Substance misuse and addiction
- Domestic violence

Schools need to consider both acts of commission (where a parent/carer deliberately neglects the child) and acts of omission (where a parents failure to act is causing the neglect). This is a key consideration with regard to school attendance where parents are not ensuring their child attend school regularly.

Impact of neglect

Neglect affects the child's perception of themselves and how others behave towards them. They find it difficult to form relationships and particularly in school this can lead to bullying. They often have poor attendance, and consequently low attainment.

The chief executive for Action for Children, Dame Clare Tickell, at the launch of the review said that:

“Neglect corrodes childhoods, robbing the most vulnerable children of hope, happiness and life chances.”

Identifying neglect - what should schools be doing?

Many of the signs of neglect are visible, however school staff may not instinctively know how to recognise signs of neglect or know how to respond effectively when they suspect a pupil is being neglected. Children spend considerable time in school so staff have opportunities to identify patterns over time and recognise and respond to concerns about their safety and welfare. Munro in her final reports *“A child-centred system”* states:

“Schools are particularly well placed to notice children and young people in need of help and also to notice those where there are more serious concerns about their safety. Supporting children so that they get the very best education is only possible when they are safe and well cared for.”

Staff need regular quality training and support so that they understand its nature and effects, and so that they have the confidence to respond when they have concerns. The statutory guidance *“Safeguarding Children and Safer Recruitment in Education”* DfES 2007 states that all those who work with children in education need to:

“--- undertake training that equips them with the knowledge and skills necessary to carry out their responsibilities for child protection that is kept up to date by refresher training at three yearly intervals.”

All staff should have easy access to a checklist for the signs that a child could be being neglected. Some schools display these in the staffroom, others include them in their staff handbook.

Neglect in particular, is often found alongside other forms of abuse and maltreatment and it is key that school staff are aware of this so that they are mindful to not focus on the name of the maltreatment, in this case neglect, and stop seeing the child as a whole.

Where there are concerns about a pupil/student all staff that teach or are in contact with the child need to be briefed and to be asked to observe and report what is happening. Some schools may engage peer supporters in this. However, this must be done within clear boundaries and all must be aware of the importance of confidentiality.

This information will help to provide the crucial evidence needed in these cases. All school staff need to know the importance of evidence and have an awareness of what the school needs to be able to contribute to a core assessment.

To ensure that staff can continue to identify concerns and act on them it is essential that their feelings are understood. Staff can often experience high levels of frustration when working with children who are experiencing neglect. This is often the result of the effect of poor or irregular attendance on school work. For staff to be able to continually work well with these issues it is important that the school regularly spends time looking at the values within the school in relation to neglect and about the feelings that this may bring up.

This can be done by using case studies to encourage discussions between staff as to where their values are and to help school staff to be clear about what is acceptable and what is not.

Responding to neglect – what should schools be doing?

It should be expected that the [Designated Senior Person \(DSP\)](#) and all those in school with responsibility for safeguarding and pupil/student welfare should have additional training with regard to neglect.

The NSPCC offer bespoke training on [child neglect](#) and has worked with [EduCare](#) to create on-line training specifically on this area and covers sections on understanding the issues of neglect, causes and the signs and what to do if you have a concern. This can be particularly helpful to ensure midday supervisors and volunteer staff access training.

It is important when there are concerns that a pupil/student may be experiencing neglect that the Designated Senior Person knows how to act. This is covered in:

HM Government 2013 *'Working Together to Safeguard Children: a guide to inter-agency working to safeguard and promote the welfare of children'*. Chapter 2 describes the role of schools and colleges (including independent schools, academies and free schools) in recognising the needs of children and the role of the designated professional for safeguarding.

- Local arrangements – neglect
- Local Safeguarding Children Board (LSCB).
- The Designated Senior Person should contact their local authority children's social care team to report concerns regarding neglect. An initial assessment will decide whether a child is either:
 - A child in need but that there are no substantiated concerns that the child may be suffering, or is likely to suffer, significant harm (Section 17)or
 - A child suffering, or is likely to suffer, significant harm, and if so if the child in need of immediate protection (Section 47)

If a child is believed to be in immediate danger, the Police should be contacted immediately.

Neglect, as well as abuse, can result in a child suffering significant harm to the extent that urgent protective action is necessary.

In many cases of neglect the initial decision will be that it is a "child in need" and /or that further evidence is needed. Schools need to recognise that they are often best placed to work with the child and the parents/carers and that there may be an expectation that school staff will do this. It is really important that any changes that schools notice, either

positive or negative, are fed back to the agencies working alongside them and the family themselves. Schools need to decide who the appropriate members of staff are and recognising the sensitivity of this to ensure that they are trained to and supported in doing this.

When considering neglect it is important to take the age of the child into account particularly around adolescents and some assessment needs to take place as to what is the concern and whether it is about the teenager not caring or bothering about themselves or whether they have not been taught the basic skills around hygiene, safety or their own future. This is not easy to do and is an area that is quite unexplored in terms of research. It is important that it is not assumed and the conversations are had with the young person in a sensitive fashion to find out the reason for their presentation.

In cases of neglect the school is often best placed to provide the necessary evidence and it is important that the Designated Senior Person is fully engaged with the process at all stages. In some cases it is appropriate that a member of the school staff takes the role of Lead Professional.

The success of this for a school relies heavily on high quality reporting, recording and reviewing procedures. It is imperative that information is shared and not just placed in a folder and not reflected upon. Unfortunately it is often a high profile event involving a pupil that forces a school to look into the number of instances and it is only then that the pattern is identified which may have prevented the incident in the first place. It is valuable to remember that although looking at patterns is important that does not mean there should be a delay in intervention so that the situation becomes more serious.

This is often due to the fact that schools feel the reported abuse and in particular neglect is minimised by other professionals particularly when they have reported concerns to social care. As an organisation it is imperative that this is recognised and supported and that the anger and frustration the member of staff may be feeling does not get in the way of intervening and the continued reporting in cases where neglect is present.

A number of schools have established links with organisations that can provide advice, support and services to parents and families, including offering parenting programmes.

In some cases this support is provided in-school with school staff involved. Schools need to be able to signpost and help parents to access support.

Schools need a strong child protection policy and procedures that are reviewed and affirmed regularly.

NSPCC resources and services:

The NSPCC has produced a number of resources that will help schools to give their staff an awareness of abuse and neglect.

The NSPCC resource [Safety in Learning: essentials in safeguarding training for the education community](#) and EduCare [Child Protection Awareness in Education](#) cover the different forms of abuse and neglect and Safety in Learning has relevant case studies.

The NSPCC has produced two checklists that can help members of staff focus on the whole picture around a child. One is a childcare and development checklist that includes education, supervision and health care and can help build a better view of what life is like for the child, and the other is an initial outline of risk factors and possible interventions. Both of these could be adapted to suit the individual setting and the processes that they adhere to in identifying and dealing with cases of neglect. These can be found on pages 123-125 of [Developing an effective response to neglect and emotional harm to children.](#)

Details of NSPCC Resources for Education can be found on [NSPCC Inform](#)

The NSPCC can provide advice, consultancy and training for schools. For further information please contact: 0808 800 5000 or help@nspcc.org.uk

Useful leaflets and information for schools:

[Home Alone – your guide to keeping a child safe leaflet](#)

[Guidance on being home alone and babysitters](#)

[Out Alone – looking how to keep children safe](#)

References:

- “Working together to safeguard children: March 2013. A guide to inter-agency working to safeguard and promote the welfare of children”, DfE 2013
- Education Act 2002, Office of Public Sector Information.
- Child Cruelty in the UK: An NSPCC study into childhood abuse and neglect over the past 30 years, NSPCC 2011
- Action for Children “Review of Child Neglect” 2011, Action for Children. 2011
- ‘Developing an effective response to neglect and emotional harm to children’ (2008), Ruth Gardner, NSPCC
- “Safeguarding Children and Safer Recruitment in Education” DfES 2007
- Horwath J (2007) Child neglect: identification and assessment. Palgrave Macmillan.

National Helplines

[ChildLine](#) – 0800 1111

[NSPCC](#) – 0808 800 5000

[Family Lives](#) – 0808 800 2222