

Child Neglect Prevention and Intervention: Navigating Complexity and Ensuring Effective Responses

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1.0. Understanding The Different Domains of Neglect

Despite being one of the most common forms of child maltreatment, neglect is often underestimated and underreported¹, and it frequently co-occurs with other forms of maltreatment. Neglect can involve both isolated incidents and patterns of failure in meeting a child's basic developmental needs. Meeting a child's needs is crucial, and doing so means providing sufficient care to prevent harm or the likelihood of significant harm. Neglect can be broadly classified into three domains: physical, medical, education, emotional and health domains.

1.1. Physical neglect

Physical neglect is placing a child in a situation or failing to remove a child from a situation that could result in bodily injury or risk of harm. It includes neglect of arrangements for the care of the child or leaving a child in someone else care with the intention of not returning, ignoring a child's welfare, or failing to provide food, clothing,

¹ Scannapieco & Connell-Carrick, 2015, p. 133

or shelter. Poverty-related circumstances are excluded unless aid was offered to the child's caregiver and was turned down.

1.2. Medical neglect

Medical neglect is defined as the failure to seek, obtain, or provide necessary medical or mental treatment for the child (including the implementation of prescribed medical treatment or care) that results in, or has the potential to result in, death, physical harm, illness, developmental delays, or endangering the child's life.

1.3. Emotional neglect

Child emotional neglect (CEN) is defined as a parent's failure to meet their child's emotional needs during childhood. It involves being unresponsive, unavailable, and having limited emotional interactions with the child. It can cause a child to fail to thrive and develop normally.

1.4. Educational neglect

Education neglect includes failing to educate a child, failing to address special education needs, and interfering with a child's ability to receive appropriate care and attention in education, all of which can hurt the child's academic and social development.

2.0. Challenges That Compound Response and Prevention of Child Neglect

Neglect is more problematic in determining than other forms of abuse, due to its nature; it is a multi-dimensional phenomenon with many correlations at the individual, family, community, and societal levels.² Further, neglect tends to: co-occur with other forms of abuse and presents a similar indication as other abuses.

No set pattern can be used to identify neglect at the onset, other than observing over time that a child's basic needs are not being met. Neglect is characterized by a recurring, persistent pattern of negligent conduct that causes cumulative harm. Other forms of abuse may present indications of discrete incidents or crises. When determining neglect, the cumulative harm of all past incidents on the child should be considered rather than just the most recent one. Neglect will typically involve the absence of certain actions, provisions, or conditions rather than their presence.

Neglect is a socially constructed phenomenon³; reflecting the values and opinions of a specific culture at a particular time, which makes it difficult to:

- (a) determine when or whether a caregiver's action or inaction constitutes neglectful behaviour⁴

² de Jong, "Do we neglect child neglect," 1992.

³ NSPCC, "Child neglect practitioners' perspective" (1998).

⁴ Socially constructed phenomena are concepts, ideas, beliefs, or categories defined by society, rather than inherent or natural aspects. These phenomena are shaped by cultural, historical, and social factors, and can vary across societies and time periods. They are not universal truths but products of human interpretation, perception, and interaction.

- (b) determine when at what point a caregiver will have crossed the boundary of 'acceptable' to 'unacceptable,' /at what point caregiver actions or lack of them constitute neglect.
- (c) neglect is multidimensional determining who should bear responsibility, and to what extent. For example, determining neglectful actions between the child's primary caregiver (parent) and the child's secondary caregivers (institutions and service providers) or among other stakeholders.
- (d) determining if a neglectful behaviour or a caregiver is due to an inability to provide and whether some help was offered to the caregiver and rejected⁵ or the caregiver cannot seek help and whether that inability to seek help constitutes a neglectful behaviour

Despite the above complexities, to determine that child neglect has occurred, the bare minimum is the observation that the child's basic needs are not being met, including food, clothing, shelter, medical care, and education, as well as the lack of supervision and failure to provide emotional support and attention. It is essential to consider the context of the situation and the cumulative effect of all past incidents on the child and to seek input from various professionals trained in child welfare and protection.

3.0. Instances of Neglect: Recognizing the Spectrum of Severity

Child neglect manifests in varying degrees, encompassing a spectrum that demands careful consideration and differentiated responses. This section delves into the different instances of neglect, from mild to severe, highlighting the significance of tailored interventions for each category.

3.1. Mild Neglect:

This category encompasses neglect instances that generally do not warrant immediate reporting to authorities but call for community-based interventions. Mild neglect may involve circumstances where a child's needs are marginally unmet, possibly due to temporary challenges or parental oversight. While these situations may not pose an imminent threat, they still require attention to prevent potential escalation.

3.2. Moderate Neglect:

Mild neglect can transition into the moderate category when initial community interventions prove insufficient or when the child experiences moderate harm. This stage marks a critical juncture where proactive measures should be taken. Child protection agencies may collaborate with the community to seek comprehensive, sustainable solutions. Recognizing signs of escalating neglect and addressing them at this stage can prevent further harm to the child's well-being.

⁵ DePanfilis et al. 2006

3.3. Severe Neglect:

The most concerning category, severe neglect, comes into play when a child undergoes extensive or prolonged harm due to neglectful circumstances. In these instances, immediate and often legal intervention by government agencies becomes imperative. Severe neglect reflects a significant breakdown or failure in the parent-child relationship. The gravity of harm necessitates swift and assertive measures to safeguard the child's safety and well-being.

Navigating the distinctions between these instances of neglect is pivotal for effective responses. Addressing neglect with an appropriate level of intervention ensures the best interests of the child are upheld, providing the necessary support and protection for their growth and development.

4.0. Indicators of Neglect

Children's workers should always be on the lookout for indicators of neglect, but there are no absolutes when it comes to determining whether a child is being neglected. The list below is of possible indicators, but any one of the indicators taken in isolation is not necessarily clear proof. It is important to couple this information with other evidence from different professional viewpoints, such as educators, and medical care providers. Child neglect can have various physical, social/psychological, and parental/family indicators. Some common indicators of child neglect are:

4.1. Physical Indicators:

- Poor hygiene: Neglected children may have poor hygiene and may appear dirty or unkempt. They may also have untreated medical conditions.
- Malnourishment: Neglected children may appear thin, pale, and underweight. They may also have growth delays.
- Lack of supervision: Neglected children may be left unsupervised for long periods, which can put them at risk of accidents or injuries.
- Inadequate clothing: Neglected children may have ill-fitting or inappropriate clothing for the weather.
- Untreated health issues: Neglected children may have untreated injuries or illnesses that can result in chronic pain or discomfort.

4.2. Social/Psychological Indicators:

- (Poor school attendance: Neglected children may frequently miss school, arrive late or be picked up late, or be left unsupervised after school.
- Lack of social connections: Neglected children may not have friends or may struggle to form relationships with others.
- Behavioral issues: Neglected children may exhibit challenging behaviours, such as aggression, disobedience, or withdrawal.
- Poor academic performance: Neglected children may struggle academically and have difficulty concentrating in school.

- Mental health issues: Neglected children may have mental health issues, such as anxiety, depression, or post-traumatic stress disorder.

4.3. Parental/Family Indicators:

- Substance abuse: Parents who neglect their children may struggle with substance abuse issues.
- Domestic violence: Neglect can occur in homes where there is domestic violence or other forms of abuse.
- Mental health issues: Parents who neglect their children may have untreated mental health issues.
- Financial issues: Neglect can occur in families struggling with poverty or financial instability.
- Inappropriate caregiving: Parents who neglect their children may leave them in the care of inappropriate or unreliable caregivers.

These indicators are not definitive evidence of child neglect, but rather potential signs that further investigation may be warranted.

5.0. A Biblical Perspective of Child Neglect

Child neglect prevention and intervention align with several key principles of compassion, stewardship, and social justice that are central to the teachings of Christianity.

5.1. Compassion and Love for Children

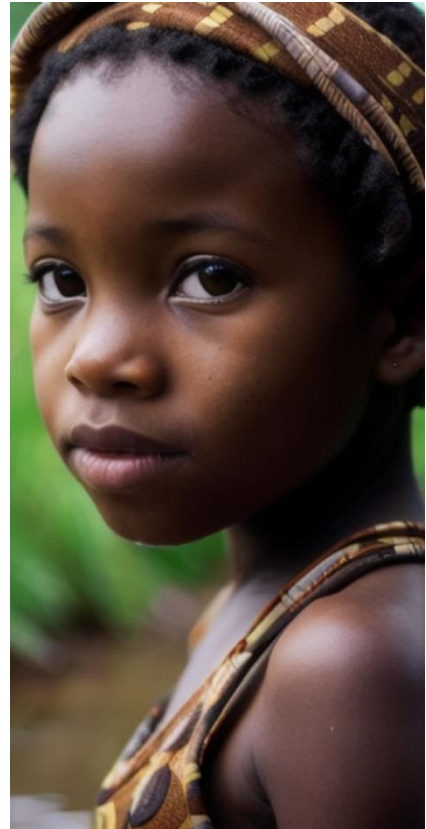
Jesus Christ's teachings emphasize the importance of showing love, care, and compassion to the most vulnerable members of society, including children. Neglected children are undoubtedly among the most vulnerable, as they lack proper care and attention. In the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus said,

"Let the little children come to me and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of heaven belongs to such as these" (Matthew 19:14, NIV).

This teaches Christians the responsibility of ensuring that children are protected and provided for.

5.2. Stewardship of Children

Christians believe that children are a gift from God, and as stewards of these gifts, they must nurture, protect, and guide them. Neglect goes against the principle of responsible stewardship. The Apostle Paul admonishes parents in Ephesians 6:4 (NIV):



"Fathers, do not exasperate your children; instead, bring them up in the training and instruction of the Lord."

This implies not only providing for children's physical needs but also nurturing their emotional, social, and spiritual well-being.

5.3. Social Justice and Advocacy

Christianity places a strong emphasis on social justice and advocating for those who are marginalized or oppressed. Neglected children fall into this category, as they are often voiceless and unable to advocate for themselves. The Old Testament is filled with calls for justice and protection for the vulnerable, such as orphans and widows. In Isaiah 1:17 (NIV), God calls for justice:

"Learn to do right; seek justice. Defend the oppressed. Take up the cause of the fatherless; plead the case of the widow."

Christians are therefore called to actively engage in the prevention and intervention of child neglect as an expression of their commitment to social justice.

5.4. Forgiveness and Restoration

Christians need to approach the issue of neglect with a spirit of forgiveness and restoration. Often, the caregivers themselves might be struggling due to various challenges, such as poverty, substance abuse, or mental health issues. While the safety and well-being of the child are of paramount importance, Christians are also called to extend grace and offer opportunities for rehabilitation and transformation. The Parable of the Prodigal Son (Luke 15:11-32, NIV) illustrates the concept of redemption and forgiveness, which can guide Christians in responding to neglectful caregivers with compassion.

5.5. Community Responsibility

Christianity places a strong emphasis on community and the interconnectedness of individuals. Preventing and addressing child neglect requires a collective effort from the church, local communities, and society as a whole. Christians can play a role in creating supportive networks that offer resources, guidance, and assistance to struggling families. Galatians 6:2 (NIV) instructs believers to

"Carry each other's burdens, and in this way, you will fulfill the law of Christ,"

which can be applied to the shared responsibility of ensuring the well-being of neglected children.

In consideration of the above biblical principles, addressing then Child neglect for Christians is not solely a moral imperative⁶, but also a reflection of Christian principles. Christians are exhorted to actively safeguard and nurture the well-being of neglected children, drawing

⁶ A "moral imperative" refers to a principle or belief that compels individuals/groups to take certain actions based on their moral or ethical values. It suggests a strong ethical obligation or duty to act in a particular way because it is considered right or just from a moral standpoint. Moral imperatives often stem from deeply held convictions about what is morally right or wrong, guiding individuals in making decisions and taking actions that align with their ethical beliefs.

guidance from the teachings of Jesus Christ and the overarching biblical theme of extending love and care to those who are vulnerable.

Biography

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