

Special issue on child neglect – research, policy and practice across a devolved United Kingdom – an overview of the field

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Abstract

This special issue of Research, Policy and Planning takes a fresh look at the enduring challenges that child neglect still presents to practitioners, researchers and policy-makers across the four nations of the United Kingdom, even in this, the second decade of the twenty first century. Although constitutional or political differences may arise, there remains a richly creative knowledge exchange within public services and research across the UK, exemplified in this publication. The four papers that follow, written by experts on the subject, bring together data and insights on neglect that reflect the diverse heritages and social contexts of Scotland, Northern Ireland, Wales and England. In this overview of the field we aim to identify some common threads and points of divergence in the papers, and set out some questions to provoke reflection and debate.

Keywords: Neglect, prevention, research, policy, practice, trends

How neglect is defined and described – research challenges and achievements

Internationally, child neglect is defined by the World Health Organization (see Butchart & Finney, 2006, p.10) in the following way:

Neglect includes both isolated incidents, as well as a pattern of failure over time on the part of a parent or other family member to provide for the development and wellbeing of the child – where the parent is in a position to do so – in one or more of the following areas:

- *health*
- *education*
- *emotional development*
- *nutrition*
- *shelter and safe living conditions.*

While definitions of neglect vary across the four countries of the UK, they retain key phrases:

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 occur during pregnancy as a result of maternal substance abuse. Once a child is born, 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 care-givers), or*
- *ensure access to appropriate medical care or treatment.*

It may also include neglect of, or unresponsiveness to, a child's basic emotional needs (see Working Together to Safeguard Children, HM Government, 2015, p.93).

However, the Welsh Government has recently removed the reference to 'persistence' within the Social Services and Wellbeing (Wales) Act 2014 and the following definition now applies to a child or an adult:

'neglect' ('esgeulustod') means a failure to meet a person's basic physical, emotional, social or psychological needs, which is likely to result in an impairment of the person's wellbeing (for example, an impairment of the person's health or, in the case of a child, an impairment of the child's development. (Social Services and Wellbeing (Wales) Act, 2014, p.1)

This change is profoundly important in recognising that severity and persistence are not necessarily the same and that, as with other forms of harm, single instances of neglect can be lethal. Scotland and Northern Ireland have their own slight variants, with mention of 'non-organic failure to thrive' (although 'faltering growth' is now a more frequently used term across UK and other administrations such as Australia). Norway and other jurisdictions use categories of concern rather than a single definition (see Horwath, 2013). Other definitions, such as that used by the National Institute for Clinical Excellence (NICE, 2009), refer to the cumulative nature of neglect.

While these definitions offer pragmatic guidance for practitioners, typologies of neglect are also used that reflect theories of its aetiology. Crittenden (2016, p.184) for instance, on the basis of clinical practice, says that 'in cases of child neglect, normal parenting and care-giving fail to occur. When nothing the child does makes any difference, learning cannot occur'. She describes the primary carer's mental state in such cases as typically either depressed, dangerously unpredictable, or disoriented.

Definitions of neglect include various deficits of care. However, the challenge described here is how to access and use the evidence to identify and remedy parenting that is not meeting children's needs and to do this through an asset and strengths-based collaborative approach, boosting family and community resources to lower the future incidence of neglect. In this endeavour, the four papers that follow provide many important reference points and, collectively, stand as something of a benchmark of current progress in addressing neglect across the devolved countries of the UK. By way of introduction to these essays we first set out key demographic and conceptual features of child neglect and then consider the efforts made to tackle this highly damaging and costly form of maltreatment.

Trends across the United Kingdom

Radford *et al.* (2011) found that nine per cent of 18 to 24 year olds across the UK reported severe neglect while under the age of 18. While we do not know the prevalence trend since then, measures of reported neglect show no real abatement. For example, neglect was by far the highest proportion of contacts to the NSPCC Adult Helpline in the year 2015/16, with over 16,000 related calls (an average of 45 every day of the year); on the other hand, neglect was one of the *least frequent* concerns for which children received Child Line counselling (Bentley *et al.*, 2016). This could be due to children not recognising the care they receive as neglectful and/or instead seeking help with an underlying problem behaviour such as a parent's substance misuse (as described by Gorin, 2016).

The four papers in this issue endorse the evidence (Bentley *et al.*, 2016) that numbers of children within the child protection system have increased across the UK since 2002, and that neglect and emotional abuse (or in Northern Ireland, physical abuse) are the two highest categories of harm. As we shall see, categories of child protection concern recorded in Scotland usefully reveal that a combination of (any or all of) parental substance misuse and domestic abuse and emotional abuse and neglect of the children affect between nearly 4 in 10 of all families that come to notice. This complexity is entirely consistent with findings in the other nations and with research into the exponential severity with which multiple adversities impact on outcomes in childhood and far into adulthood (Brown *et al.*, 2009). Parental issues (such as substance misuse, mental health needs) can compromise and mask parenting capacity, making the involvement of services for adults absolutely vital to success in efforts to deal with child neglect. However, we see as yet little published evidence of success in joint working across child and adult services.

Research responses

Measurement approaches to child neglect are inconsistent, partly because there are differing notions of what aspect of neglect is most significant – some researchers suggest that three distinctive types of neglect – physical, psychological and environmental – should be studied separately (Dubowitz *et al.*, 2004). We still struggle to measure many constructs with precision. It is very important for service developers and practitioners to seek, and researchers to provide, accessible accounts of methodologies and their limitations. In the papers that follow there are useful references to evidence on neglect from a variety of sources – practice inspections and individual case reviews, service evaluations, national reviews of policy and practice in Wales and Scotland, and Action for Children’s UK-wide review (see also Burgess *et al.*, 2014). In addition to these sources, features of child development such as emotional control, cognition and neurobiology, have been studied in depth and longitudinally with clear evidence emerging of harms associated with parental neglect (see, for example, www.cardiff.ac.uk/coreinfo). Indeed, we are starting to see research that is highly relevant to the prevention and treatment of child neglect (but not always labelled as such) emerging from a variety of other disciplines and acting as a catalyst for new understanding (Gardner, 2016).

In this context, it is encouraging to note that the authors of the four papers (based in six research centres across the UK) have extensive policy and practice links, and with multiple partners have formed a consortium to seek funding for a UK-wide Neglect Observatory and associated Neglect Improvement Project. The consortium initiative, led by Professor Brigid Daniel in Stirling, is based upon the premise that child neglect is a major public health crisis requiring transformational change to improve responses to currently neglected children, to develop more effective ways to intervene much earlier where there are signs of neglect and ultimately to prevent it. The aims of the consortium (Daniel, 2016, p.1) are to:

...drive comprehensive improvement in the experience of, and outcomes for children in the UK who are vulnerable to the neglect of their developmental needs for any reason by:

- *leading a three year, large-scale action research project, informed by improvement science, focused on establishing and overcoming the current barriers to the implementation of the evidence-base about what can help neglected children;*
- *creating a multi-professional hub with a unique lens upon neglected children that would be a national repository, analytic body and interpretive centre on child neglect for strategic leaders, practitioners, researchers and interested public.*

Such an initiative is both timely and welcome; were it to be successful it would have considerable potential to enhance practice, shared learning and help generate better outcomes for children.

Policy responses

The authors in this special issue are agreed that dealing with severe or recurrent neglect places a high, and growing, demand upon resources in the community in terms of the skills and services required to identify and respond to concerns. This includes family support workers, teachers, social workers, health professionals and the police. Yet the cost of a ‘wait and see’ approach to child neglect is surely much higher in human and economic terms than a preventive and proactive one. Loman & Siegel (2004) calculated that the costs associated with families in the US who chronically neglect their children to be seven times those associated with non-chronic families, and there is no reason to think that the UK is any different (see also Gilbert *et al.*, 2009; Holmes *et al.*, 2010). As always, economic stringency tends to create a reductionist approach to research and development with single lines of enquiry into single issues and, potentially, loss of deeper contextual data that could offer preventive solutions (Hardiker *et al.*, 1991). For instance, Barton & Welbourne (2005, p.191), concluded that ‘a major weakness with the ‘what works’ culture... is that an explicit consideration of the impact of the *context* for joint working is not built into the evaluation of its performance’.

The papers that follow show that, in different ways and with more or less strategic leadership, all four nations are working towards a more systemic understanding of neglect and a better coordinated response at both national and local levels, with some real progress to report. The differences seem to be in the degree to which there is effort to create a wholly 'balanced system' that is fully coordinated (Gascoigne, 2015), as opposed to initiatives insulated in discrete parts of the system such as 'child protection' and 'early intervention'. In this regard Andy Pithouse and Anne Crowley argue convincingly that Wales, with its strong anti-poverty drive and a national focus on improved data on risk indices, has successfully raised the policy profile of neglect (see also Stevens & Laing, 2015). They describe a range of Wales-wide family support initiatives across the age-range together with a new government sponsored strategic partnership framework focused on child neglect as the driver of change over the decade ahead. Similarly, in Scotland, Brigid Daniel, Jane Scott, Cheryl Burgess and Kate Mulley report on the strategic levers of government policy that shape the supportive and protective responses required of those working in both universal and targeted services with the aspiration of providing seamless services for children. Their paper examines the success of these initiatives and provides fascinating insights from a review of neglect in Scotland which draws on the views of children (gathered as part of a wider study in the UK) to better grasp the nature of the response to neglected children in Scotland. Their paper suggests that Scotland is in a strong position to develop a holistic framework to tackle neglect but that a number of tensions need to be addressed to ensure this direction of travel.

John Devaney and Paul McConville describe how, despite the challenging history of sectarian conflict in Northern Ireland, the issue of children's protection from abuse and neglect has remained at the forefront of public and professional concerns. They outline how the system for promoting the welfare of children, and addressing the issue of neglect, has evolved over recent years. In particular they discuss major events that have shaped the child welfare landscape and the reforms that have been implemented following the devolution of political powers to Northern Ireland in 1998. A recent example that comes to prominence is the introduction of Family Support Hubs, or collectives of services (to which families can self-refer or be referred), set up in 29 local areas, covering every household in Northern Ireland, and bringing together local statutory, voluntary and community organisations.

In England, the scene is set by Marian Brandon, Alice Haynes, Dawn Hodson and Julie Taylor, who examine the pervasive and intractable nature of neglect which scars so many children's lives. While the authors recognise how austerity measures and funding cuts exacerbate the problem, they nonetheless identify a number of promising initiatives and models that help neglected children and families and an emerging evidence-base that illuminates those areas where most ground can be gained. They note that the role of place and community in neglect is increasingly being seen as the new frontier for intervention. They argue persuasively that sustained involvement with some families over the long term may be required. Interpersonal, supportive but firm interactions that keep children central are costly to deliver and are not crowd-pleasers, but they continue to make all the difference for neglected children.

The authors suggest that in England, despite the periodic media glare that follows high profile Serious Case Reviews, policy on child neglect has not dramatically moved forwards over recent years. Welcome calls to support professional judgement (Munro, 2011), to mobilise civic society and for a wider role for universal services in early intervention (Action for Children, 2014; Haynes, 2015; Haynes *et al.*, 2015) have as yet failed to translate into wholesale change on the ground. This is probably unsurprising given the impacts of austerity policies. More encouragingly, local campaigns and place-based change programmes such as the Big Lottery Fund's *A Better Start* are applying the principles of early intervention and seeking to develop and test new ways of working in localities. The Local Authority Research Consortium (LARC) has produced two informative pieces of research on local awareness raising and preventive work on neglect (Easton *et al.*, 2013; Buchanan *et al.*, 2015).

The practice response

Practice, typically, still tends to respond to bad news rather than good, and all the contributors report on lessons from inspections and case reviews in relation to child neglect. Yet, forward looking changes are also being made. In the voluntary sector, Action for Children, the Big Lottery Fund and NSPCC, amongst others, have funded and evaluated innovative practice, and some statutory agencies have defied cuts to trial promising or tested approaches to neglect. Examples of all of these are described in this issue and begin to demonstrate ways in which we can tackle neglect with greater determination and impact.

Hurdles that remain

While organisations such as the Early Intervention Foundation (www.eif.org.uk) encourage evidential rigour, the lack of longitudinal outcome research across the UK means that we still know disappointingly little about what works with whom, why some families engage with services while others drop out and with what results, and how interventions compare. Continued and increased investment in outcomes-based research remains vital. Poverty and environmental neglect (poor housing, lack of infrastructure and crime) still place a heavy strain on many families and create unacceptable barriers to parenting capacity and to children developing their full potential. There is no causal connection between poverty and maltreatment (including neglect) and the parents of neglected children may be financially well-off (Butchart & Finney, 2006). But the stressors and stigma associated with aspects of poverty are often overlooked by practitioners (Hooper *et al.*, 2007). Many programmes described in later papers aim to address inequalities of access and offset disadvantage.

In the policy arena, despite the positive tone of these papers, unremitting pressure on public services has meant an increasingly residual approach to service development with some communities remaining relatively neglected. The context of austerity and crisis management can create a drain on creativity and brake the drive to find solutions.

The vision of prevention is almost universally accepted and endorsed, and yet remains a distant prospect in practice. In regard to the latter, the practice arena, the selection and retention of skilled staff and their post-qualifying supervision, training and professional growth in work with child neglect are all key areas that are subject to considerable reform and call for scrutiny (and another journal issue). Where there have been successes to celebrate, we must disseminate these and transfer that knowledge for adaptation and replication.

Conclusion – questions for reflection

- How can services for adults and children achieve a genuine 'whole family' perspective when jointly working with families?
- Can we successfully demonstrate a strengths and asset-based, collaborative approach to neglect that boosts family and community capabilities, whilst picking up the warning signs effectively when things may be going awry?
- Can we use population data more effectively to identify groups and areas where children may be vulnerable, and better allocate scarce resources such as specialist assessments?
- How can we fund longitudinal outcome research to build evidence about the factors that best help to resolve family stress, support optimal parenting and child development outcomes, using some of the initiatives described here as a starting point?

These are critical questions that if addressed with vigour can surely start to change the ways we tackle neglect and, together with the sorts of initiatives outlined in the papers that follow, can help build a better platform for interventions, evaluation and learning. We commend this special issue to the RPP readership and beyond and thank the editorial board for this opportunity to contribute to what we believe is an important repository of key developments in practice,

research and policy in child neglect across the UK. This overview is scarcely the last word on this very complex and corrosive social harm but hopefully it will serve as a statement of progress made and, more importantly, a waymark to the lengthy journey ahead in making all our children safer from neglect.

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