
NEGLECTED ADOLESCENTS - LITERATURE REVIEW

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Introduction

This literature review is one of a series of projects jointly commissioned by DCSF and DH to improve the evidence base on recognition, effective intervention and inter-agency working in child abuse and explores the concept of 'neglect' as it applies to adolescents. This is a significant under-explored area in the UK. The literature review draws together information from research in other countries on this topic, and also considers a range of other relevant UK and international literature. The review considers the practice, policy and research implications of the literature, and has also informed other products of this project - a guide for multi-disciplinary teams who work with young people and a young person's guide on neglect.

Key Findings

- **Definitions:** The review highlights important differences in the way neglect might be conceptualised at different stages of childhood, but a relative lack of attention to this within the literature on definitions. There is a risk that definitions may therefore exclude some issues of neglect which are pertinent. This points to the need for the development of more age-sensitive definitions for research and practice purposes.
- **Measurement:** Statistics on officially recorded cases of maltreatment, and findings of self-report studies, both in the UK and other countries, indicates a fairly consistent picture that neglect is the most common form of maltreatment, and this appears to apply across all age groups. Therefore, even within existing definitions there is a substantial incidence of neglect of adolescents.
- **Background:** The evidence on child neglect in general suggests links between neglect and the range of family and structural factors identified in the *Assessment Framework*. It supports the use of an ecological approach to understanding neglect. However at this stage we know relatively little about the distinctive background factors which may be associated with adolescent neglect.
- **Outcomes:** There is a substantial amount of evidence of links between experiences of neglect during adolescence and a range of negative outcomes, although this evidence generally indicates correlations rather than causal links. The review discusses these with particular reference to the *Every Child Matters* outcomes framework.
- **Practice:** The review was not able to identify interventions aimed specifically at adolescent neglect. However, it provides examples of some more generic approaches, based on an ecological or multi-systemic approach, which may be of relevance to thinking about interventions on adolescent neglect.

Background

The rationale for the review stems from the relative lack of attention in UK research and policy literature of two phenomena - the maltreatment¹ of adolescents; and the issue of neglect as a sub-category of child maltreatment. Child maltreatment is often considered something that only happens to young children. However, there are substantial numbers of 10- to 15-year-olds who are the subject of child protection plans in England. Adolescent maltreatment has received very little attention in UK literature or policy - research on maltreatment has tended to treat all children up to the age of 18 as a homogeneous group.

In the UK, neglect is the most common reason for becoming the subject of a child protection plan. However it is an issue which receives relatively little attention in comparison to other forms of maltreatment. Moreover the 'neglect of neglect' has been a well-recognised tendency in international child maltreatment reviews and there is broad agreement about the need for further exploration of the definition, nature and contextual factors related to neglect.

The review therefore addresses a topic which has been under-explored in both the above senses.

Aims

The aims of the review were:

1. To provide an accessible summary of relevant literature on adolescent neglect and to draw out the implications for further developments on this topic.
2. To inform the preparation of guides for multi-disciplinary teams and for young people.

Methodology

An initial literature search was conducted using search terms which were intended to identify references in the child maltreatment literature which referred to adolescents (or teenagers) and which referred to neglect. The search included bibliographic databases, library catalogues and other relevant sources. The searches covered the period from 1997 to 2006. This search generated a total of over 3,500 references.

An initial categorisation of the references using titles and abstracts identified over 450 which were potentially relevant. Full texts were then obtained wherever possible and key points from each reference were compiled to form the basis of the content of the report.

Due to the sparseness of the literature in some areas, some further searching was subsequently undertaken on specific topics, including the literature on parenting.

Findings

Quality of research

Although a large range of potentially relevant literature was identified through the search process, this included very few pieces of work which specifically focus on the topic of adolescent neglect.

This confirmed the original rationale for the review which was that this topic is a major under-researched area within the literature on child maltreatment.

Due to the limited amount of specific literature identified, the review draws on a range of relevant literature on child neglect, adolescent maltreatment, parenting, and issues and problems faced by teenagers which may inform thinking on adolescent neglect.

Defining adolescent neglect

The child neglect literature contains a number of key definitional themes relevant to the consideration of adolescent neglect, including:

- the recognition that, as for other forms of maltreatment, neglect is a culturally and temporally specific phenomenon, and there is a need to consider definitions in relation to normative standards of care
- the distinction and overlap between definitions of emotional abuse and neglect
- the issue of whether neglect can be defined solely as an act of omission or whether it may also include some acts of commission
- the contested issue of whether neglect should be defined primarily in terms of behaviours or acts or in terms of experiences and needs

¹ The term 'maltreatment' is used to refer to physical abuse, sexual abuse, emotional abuse and neglect.

- the evidence that there may be substantial differences in concepts and definitions of neglect amongst different key groups including practitioners, researchers and young people themselves
- the recognition that neglect can encapsulate persistent states and/or ongoing behaviour, as well as isolated incidents
- the extent of overlap between different forms of maltreatment
- the fundamental question as to whether neglect can be regarded as a unified phenomenon and some of the proposed categorisations of different forms of neglect.

Literature on child development, and on parenting styles, was also found to be potentially helpful in informing the development of definitions of adolescent neglect. Both strands of literature have a close connection with concepts within the Assessment Framework.

Official UK descriptions and guidance relevant to neglect are also reviewed. Materials developed to support the implementation of the Assessment Framework contain some helpful distinctions between basic needs and parenting capacities for children and young people of different ages. This material has considerable value in supporting the development of an understanding of the distinctive elements which may need to be included in operational definitions of adolescent neglect.

The review also provides examples of the diverse range of measures which have been developed for child and adolescent neglect, for research and assessment purposes. There is a lack of uniformity in this area which is an additional barrier to developing a coherent picture of adolescent neglect.

Measuring adolescent neglect

Official statistics in England indicate that neglect is the most common recorded reason for children to be the subject of a child protection plan and also suggests that this holds true across all the age groups covered by the statistics. There is, however, substantial variation in the relative rates of recorded neglect in different geographical areas which may indicate a diversity of operational definitions and practices.

The prominence of neglect as a recorded form of maltreatment is also a feature of official statistics in the US and Canada.

Research which has attempted to estimate the prevalence of different forms of maltreatment through self-report surveys (either retrospective or contemporaneous) has also tended to indicate a substantial prevalence of neglect both absolutely and in comparison with other forms of maltreatment.

Overall the evidence suggests that neglect is a significant category of maltreatment both during childhood and adolescence.

The background to adolescent neglect

The review explores evidence on the background and context to adolescent neglect including family and environmental factors. Very little evidence was found specifically on the background to adolescent neglect. Therefore the review summarises key points from some of the literature on child neglect in general and also provides information about the limited research evidence which discusses adolescent neglect in particular.

The child neglect research suggests significant links between neglect and all of the structural factors identified in the Assessment Framework:

- Family history and functioning
- Wider family
- Housing
- Employment
- Income
- Family's social integration
- Community resources

The specific issues around neglect for disabled children and looked after children are also discussed.

In general, the evidence on child neglect supports the use of an ecological approach to understanding neglect. However at this stage we know relatively little about the distinctive background factors which may be associated with adolescent neglect.

The potential consequences of adolescent neglect

Much more is known about the potential consequences of child neglect and specifically of neglect during adolescence. There are some limitations to this body of evidence however, most notably that it generally indicates correlations rather than causality.

However, bearing this limitation in mind, there is a wide-ranging body of evidence which suggests links between neglect and/or neglectful parenting and negative outcomes in relation to the *Every Child Matters* outcomes:

- *'Be healthy'*: There is evidence of an association with young people's mental health and well-being, and with risky health behaviours.
- *'Stay safe'*: there is some evidence of a link with running away and bullying.
- *'Enjoy and achieve'*: children and young people who experience neglect have poorer educational engagement, conduct and achievement.
- *'Make a positive contribution'*: there is evidence of an association between neglect and anti-social behaviours.

In addition, negative outcomes in the above areas are also likely to contribute to a cumulative risk of poorer economic well-being in adulthood.

This evidence is sufficient to establish the case for concern about the potential negative consequences of neglect of adolescents both in the short-term and the longer term.

Working with adolescent neglect

The initial literature search generated very little on social work and therapeutic interventions specifically in relation to adolescent neglect. This is perhaps not surprising in the sense that neglect may be one of a range of issues being tackled by interventions rather than a specific or primary focus.

The review therefore considers a broader range of interventions literature which may be relevant to this topic.

This includes some literature on working with child neglect in general and some interventions focused on maltreated adolescents and on 'troubled' adolescents in general which appears to carry important messages in terms of interventions on adolescent neglect.

In general this tends to support an ecological or multi-systemic approach to interventions which fits well with the Assessment Framework and also the evidence on background factors of child neglect discussed earlier.

Implications for practice, policy and research Young people

The review suggests the need to raise awareness amongst young people about the meaning of neglect and the potential consequences, so that young people who may be experiencing neglect feel able to seek appropriate support. The guide for young people being produced as part of this project will be one means of pursuing this objective.

Practitioners and practice managers

Similarly, there is a need to raise professional awareness of definitional issues, and of the scale and outcomes of adolescent neglect, in order to promote more effective responses to the needs of this group of young people. The guide for professionals will contribute to this objective.

Senior managers and policy makers

At a management and policy level, the review suggests a need for additional documentation to support age-specific assessments in cases of potential neglect; potential improvements to official definitions and measurement of maltreatment; and the need for more dedicated funding to undertake further research and to pilot new interventions in this area.

Researchers

Finally the review presents a major challenge to the research community to pay more attention to neglect and to issues affecting adolescents within the field of maltreatment research. The lack of previous work presents an opportunity to develop a consistent set of definitions and measurements which can support a coherent strand of UK research on this topic.

Additional Information

Further information about this research can be obtained from Isabella Craig, 4FL-ARD, DCSF, Sanctuary Buildings, Great Smith Street, London SW1P 3BT

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The views expressed in this report are those of the authors' and do not necessarily reflect those of the Department for Children, Schools and Families.

Information about other studies which are part of the Safeguarding Children Research Initiative can be found at <http://tcru.ioe.ac.uk/scri/>