

**Growing Up Neglected: A multi-agency response to older children**

**Briefing paper for professionals**

Produced by Sarah Stokoe and Hayley Smith On behalf of the neglect Partnership Steering Group based on the full report Growing Up Neglected : A multi-agency response to older children <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/growing-up-neglected-a-multi-agency-response-to-older-children>

This briefing paper is aimed at all professionals supporting children, young people, families and those who care for them. Professionals may use this to reflect on current practice and seek to extend learning on working with neglect.

**Introduction**

Published in July 2018 Growing Up Neglected: A multi-agency response to older children, examines the multi-agency response to older children who are living with neglect following 6 inspections of local authority areas. Older children in this report are classed as between the ages of 7 to 15 years of age.

The report examined how well agencies are working together in local areas to help and protect children, and highlights the following:

* Older children are, in fact, still children.
* Older children who are being neglected are often perceived simply as perpetrators of offences.
* Often parents are resistant to professional involvement with themselves and their children, and do not always recognise the neglect their children are subject to.
* Older children often have little trust in adults, because of their experience of poor parenting.
* For older children - there is a higher risk of exploitation and other forms of abuse outside of the home, including sexual exploitation, criminal exploitation, gang-related activity or violence.
* Children did not always recognise that they were being abused and could not therefore recognise that they needed help.

**What is older children neglect?**

There is no agreed Neglect definition of the age of an older child. The Children Act 1989 sets out a definition of neglect that has been expanded on in government safeguarding guidelines:

‘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)

• Ensure access to appropriate medical care or treatment.

When older children suffer long-term neglect, the impact may be less evident that in younger in children, and the problems they present with may not be recognised as being the result of neglect. An important part of child development in adolescence is that children develop the skills to gain independence and become increasingly responsible for their behaviour. However, older children still need guidance and support from their parents or appropriate adults. In particular, they need a secure base from which to explore the world.

**Why is Neglect important?**

An NSPCC study found that 4% of under 11s and 11% of 11- to 17-year-olds had experienced neglect at some point during their lives. This suggests that older children are almost three times more likely to have suffered neglect than younger children.

Understanding the relationship between neglect in the home, and abuse and exploitation outside of the home is crucial if older children are to be more consistently and effectively helped. We are becoming increasingly aware of risks of exploitation, including the risk of county lines and this very vulnerable group of older children are at particular risk of being exploited. Where older children do become involved with gang-related activity, criminal behaviour or violence (such as knife crime), we need to get better at understanding those behaviours in the context of the potential risks they may be exposed to in their local areas and/or the neglect or abuse they may be suffering at home.

Unless all agencies work together to address the underlying neglect of older children who are experiencing multi-layered problems and risks, the experiences of these children are unlikely to improve. To achieve this, all professionals need to understand how neglect within the home may have an impact on a child’s behaviour and emotional well-being and how this may increase their vulnerability to risks outside of the home.

**Presenting behaviours and risks in the context of neglect**

When neglected children present to agencies with a range of problems, such as exhibiting offending behaviour, having suffered exploitation and/or misusing substances or having mental health difficulties or a combination of these many issues, professionals sometimes lose focus on the underlying causes of these problems.

The report found that professionals did not always look at the whole child, their history and home circumstances in order to understand presenting behaviours and risks in the context of neglect.

Professionals sometimes focused on the behaviour of the child and lost sight of them as a vulnerable child in need of appropriate parenting including affection and support, as well as clear boundaries.

The impact of this is that agencies focus on the presenting issues without either addressing neglect in the home or the impact of neglect on the child. Decision-making then becomes reactive to the child’s behaviour or particular events in their life rather than being proactive in tackling the underlying cause – neglect.

**Main practice findings:**

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| Theme | General findings | Impact  |
| Neglect of older children sometimes goes unseen**.** | The way agencies understand and deal with older children’s problems means that the neglect they are experiencing can sometimes go unseen. | Without understanding and addressing the underlying impact of neglect, the effectiveness of any work to support these children will be limited. The benefits of school nursing in some places is making a big difference to older children by identifying neglect that had previously gone unseen, as well as working with children and parents to address it. |
| Work with parents to address the neglect of older children does not always happen. | Children are not the problem. Older children still need parental care and support. Professionals are not always doing the work to tackle neglectful parenting. | Good practice includes agencies in some areas providing holistic support for the child and their family, as well as appropriate challenge to parents to address their neglectful parenting. |
| Adult services in most areas are not effective in identifying potential neglect of older children. | Adult services in most areas, including adult mental health and substance misuse services, the National Probation Service (NPS) and Community Rehabilitation Companies (CRCs) are not effective in identifying older children at risk of neglect.A significant finding is that not all partners are challenging each other when multi-agency work with older children is not making progress. | Too often, none of the partners ‘owned’ a child’s plan.School staff knowledge of children and their families in the community was seen in cases to support a wider understanding by partners of the range of risk and need of older children.The behaviour of older children must be understood in the context of trauma. |
| The behaviour of older children must be understood in the context of trauma. | Many children reviewed during these inspections had experienced multiple forms of abuse, both within the home and outside the home. Early childhood or chronic trauma will most likely affect a child’s mental and emotional well-being and behaviour into adolescence and beyond. When young children present with these problems, professionals are much more likely to look beyond the child to understand why they are missing milestones. | When older children suffer long-term neglect, the impact may be less evident and the problems they present with may not be recognised as being the result of neglect. |
| Tackling neglect of older children requires a coordinated strategic approach across all agencies | The GP role in safeguarding children who are or may be neglected is underpinned in some practices by alert systems that provide good oversight and tracking of risks to children who fail to attend hospital appointments, miss their immunisations or are not brought to routine appointments. Such events are logged and promptly followed up by the practice to ensure that children’s needs are being effectively met.Dental practitioners are were well aware of the importance of dental health as an indicator of potential neglect and most were clear how to report safeguarding concerns about children. Not all were clear, however, about thresholds and when they should refer the children to children’s services.Despite a clear determination by police leaders that officers should routinely identify children who are vulnerable, police officers were not consistently identifying older children as potentially vulnerable to neglect or abuse. Often, police officers focused on other complex factors such as drug offences and anti-social behaviour. | Where there is a coordinated strategic approach across agencies to support a shared understanding of the needs of neglected older children, we observed a significant difference to the quality of practice and experiences of older children suffering neglect.Areas where staff are trained have a more consistent and considered way of working that was having a positive impact on many children.Children’s offending behaviour needs to be addressed but also understood in the context of their experience of neglect. Offending or behaviour that is putting children at risk may, for example, result from a lack of boundaries at home. |

**Responding to and reducing neglect of older children**

The report calls for:

* A ‘whole system’ approach to identifying and preventing neglect, including from adult services working with parents;
* Better training for professionals in identifying the signs of neglect in order children;
* A more co-ordinated, strategic approach across all agencies working with children and parents; and
* The behaviour of older children to be understood in the context of the trauma they have experienced.

Some older neglected children face a great deal of risk in their lives, both in and outside the home. But ultimately, they are still children and they need our care and affection as much as very young children and babies. And it goes without saying that parents have a crucial role to play in providing clear boundaries and support in their journey to adulthood.

**In summary,** this is a complex area and one in which many individual agencies and partnerships can play a significant role in identifying and supporting older neglected children. Partnerships are at different stages in developing good and best practice to address the range of risks that older children face and are developing approaches and an evidence base about what works.

Local safeguarding partners are encouraged to ensure sustained mutual challenge to: secure the very best local practice; develop responses informed by what older children tell you about what works; and adopt a continuous learning and improvement culture in local responses to this challenging area of multi-agency practice.

**Further information and actions moving forward**

* All professionals must be confident with the legal definition of Neglect and be fully familiar with how to access the DSCB Tri-X Neglect procedures for Doncaster and the use of the Neglect toolkit.
* Professionals must use chronologies – The report recognises when agencies do not use chronologies they are unable to identify a history of patterns of neglect that older children
* The use of specific tools to identify neglect, by staff who were well-trained was seen to make a difference. (see DSCP website for neglect training and toolkit)
* Professionals need to ensure that Plans take into account of children’s wider vulnerabilities, such as social isolation within their community or strengths such as sources of support in the wider community.
* This professional curiosity should also involve an investigation of parents’ understanding of the effect of their behaviour and neglect on their children they were working with had experienced.
* LSCB escalation procedures need to be clear, all staff should understand escalation procedures.