CORE-INFO:

Emotional neglect and emotional abuse in pre-school children

CORE INFO
Cardiff Child Protection Systematic Reviews

NSPCC
Cruelty to children must stop. FULL STOP.

Introduction

This leaflet summarises what is currently known about children aged less than six years who have been emotionally neglected or emotionally abused. It considers the behaviour that can be observed in these children and in the interactions between them and their parents.

We would have liked to explore this subject in relation to both mothers and fathers but, unfortunately, there are insufficient scientific studies of emotional neglect and emotional abuse of pre-school children by fathers. The points here, therefore, relate to mother-child interactions.

At a time when there is increased concern about the damaging impact of emotional neglect and emotional abuse, this leaflet will help a wide range of professionals in different disciplines who work with babies, young children and their families, including:

- health visitors
- general practitioners
- paediatricians
- nursery nurses
- pre-school workers and reception teachers
- social workers
- infant and child mental health professionals.

This leaflet is based on a systematic review of worldwide research into the features of emotional neglect or abuse on young children less than six years old.

Full details are available at: **www.core-info.cardiff.ac.uk**

Why we are doing this work

The NSPCC's own research has shown that one in 10 children are experiencing severe neglect in childhood. We have therefore conducted the first comprehensive systematic review of scientific evidence relating to the recognition of emotional neglect or emotional abuse of pre-school children to assist in recognising these children at a young age, and provide appropriate interventions to minimise the damage done.

Although children may experience child abuse or neglect at all ages, this piece of work focuses on the youngest infants and children, aged 0-6 years, as many practitioners lack confidence in identifying emotional neglect or abuse at this age.

Emotional neglect or abuse has a profound effect in early infancy. Exposing an infant or young child to chronic stress has been shown to be associated with post-traumatic stress disorder, depression and antisocial behaviour later in life. Emotional neglect or abuse of children in the first two years of life has a strong association with later aggression.

What we mean by emotional neglect and emotional abuse

Definitions of emotional neglect and emotional abuse vary, but all include **persistent**, harmful interactions with the child by the caregiver.

Examples of emotional neglect include:

- ignoring the child's need to interact
- failing to express positive feelings to the child, showing no emotion in interactions with the child
- denying the child opportunities for interacting and communicating with peers or adults.

Examples of emotional abuse include:

- persistently telling a child they are worthless or unloved
- bullying a child or frequently making them frightened
- persistently ridiculing, making fun of or criticising a child.

We have used the World Health Organisation (WHO) definitions of emotional neglect and emotional abuse. We use the terms emotional neglect and emotional abuse throughout as both have similar consequences for the child.

Signs to look out for in parent-child interactions

There are key features in identifying emotional neglect or emotional abuse. We have set these out below. The age bands chosen reflect published literature.

What you might notice in the mother-child interaction in infants (less than 12 months old)

The mother may not seem to be tuned in to their child's needs, or sensitive to their child's feelings. They speak little to them, and when they do it is often in the form of orders, with very little positive feedback. They describe their babies as irritating and demanding. Even within the first few days of life, you may observe that the mother fails to engage with their child emotionally during feeds.

What you might notice in the mother-child interaction among toddlers (1-3 years)

As the child becomes older, it may be obvious that the parent remains unresponsive and uninvolved with their child, or fails to respond to them appropriately (known as 'lacking attunement'). They are often critical of the child, and ignore their child's signals for help. In some instances they even seem comfortable when their child is struggling to complete a task. When the parents are critical or verbally aggressive, the child shows more anxiety.

What you might notice in the mother-child interaction among older children (age 3-6)

In this age group, it may be evident that the parents are not engaged in playing with the child, they show little affection and are unlikely to reach out to the child to relieve their distress. The mothers may offer less praise, and show less positive contact. They speak little to the child, which may contribute to language delay that is evident in emotionally neglected or abused children of this age. Neglectful mothers are more likely to resort to physical punishment than other mothers.

Signs to look out for in the child

What behaviour in a child aged 0-18 months might concern you?

A young baby or toddler may be unnaturally quiet and passive, gradually becoming more angry or aggressive as they reach two years of age. You may notice that when the mother is separated from the child, the child does not seem upset and when the mother returns, the child either avoids them or is not comforted by them, or instead seems preoccupied with their toys.

In contrast, secure infants are often upset on separation, but are easily soothed by the mother on her return, greeting her with smiles and positive gestures. Emotionally neglected and abused infants may demonstrate developmental delay within the first year, particularly in the area of speech and language.

What behaviour in a child aged 1-3 years might concern you?

As emotionally neglected or abused children grow older, they become less passive and more aggressive and hostile, particularly with other children. They may become angry when trying to solve puzzles or problems, and are noticeably angry or avoidant of their mother, perceiving them as unavailable to meet their needs.

What behaviour in a child aged 3-6 years might concern you?

When playing, the older child can be angry or disinterested and show little creativity. They may also become more socially isolated, having poor interactions with other children. They may be disinterested, hostile, have poor attention, and have difficulty correctly interpreting emotions in others. They also tend to be less likely to help others or expect others to help them.

When tested with 'story stem battery' (see glossary) they perceive others as being sad or fearful and tend to have poor self-esteem. Play leaders can find that these children are disruptive, that they act out, demand attention and require more discipline than other children.

As they get older, they may have a noticeable learning delay, in particular a delay in both understanding and constructing sentences.

Implications for practice

Record precisely what you see

It's of vital importance to record your observations of the child and the interaction of their parents or care givers with them. Obtain information about the child from all of those involved, including nursery staff to gain as full a picture as possible.

See things from the child's point of view

It is important to try and understand what the child's view of their parents is, as the mother's interaction with the child, and the child's perception of their parents, is a key element of emotional neglect or abuse. Explore how the child feels towards their parent, and what help or support a child might expect from their parent. Assess the parent's views of the child in relation to this. Do they find the child difficult or demanding? Do they enjoy playing with their child?

Consider a formal developmental assessment

Developmental delay may be a feature of emotional neglect or abuse, particularly delays in language. It is important to have a formal developmental assessment if emotional neglect or abuse is suspected.

Many of the features found in emotionally neglected or abused children may also be observed in those with Autistic Spectrum Disorder or ADHD. An infant mental health specialist may need to assess the child, in order to distinguish which children are suffering emotional neglect or abuse, and which have a medical explanation for their difficulties.

Consider the risk factors

This systematic review did not encompass 'risk factors' for emotional neglect or abuse, but it is clear that many of these children live in homes where certain risk factors are present. These may include domestic abuse, maternal substance misuse, parental unemployment or mental health issues, an absence of a helpful supportive social network, lack of intimate emotional support and poverty.

As with all child protection assessments, factors like this should be specifically explored when assessing the child.

Be aware of emotional neglect and abuse during all assessments of children

The longer that the child is left in an emotionally neglectful or emotionally abusive environment, the greater the damage. However, intensive work with these families, specifically to increase parental sensitivity to their child's needs, can lead to an improvement in the child's emotional development.

While early recognition and intervention is vital, it is never too late to help the child. All practitioners need to consider emotional neglect and abuse when assessing a child's welfare.

Glossary

Systematic review

A review of a clearly formulated question that uses systematic and explicit methods to identify, select, and critically appraise relevant research, and to collect and analyse data from the studies that are included in the review. Statistical methods (meta-analysis) may or may not be used to analyse and summarise the results of the included studies.

Definitions: Emotional neglect/ emotional abuse

The World Health Organisation (WHO) defines neglect (including emotional neglect) as:

"The failure of a parent to provide for the development 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. Neglect is distinguished from circumstances of poverty in that neglect can occur only in cases where reasonable resources are available to the family or caregiver." (World report on violence and health [2002] page 60. Edited by Etienne G. Krug, Linda L. Dahlberg, James A. Mercy, Anthony B. Zwi and Rafael Lozano.)

Emotional abuse is defined as:

"Emotional abuse includes the failure of a caregiver to provide an appropriate and supportive environment, and includes acts that have an adverse effect on the emotional health and development of a child. Such acts include restricting a child's movements, denigration, ridicule, threats and intimidation, discrimination, rejection and other non-physical forms of hostile treatment." (World report on violence and health (2002) page 60. Edited by Etienne G. Krug, Linda L. Dahlberg, James A. Mercy, Anthony B. Zwi and Rafael Lozano.)

The UK definition of 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 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.

It may also include neglect of, or unresponsiveness to, a child's basic emotional needs."

Taken from the Department of Education website **www.education.gov.uk/publications**

Story stem battery testing

This is used with children aged 3-8 years to assess their attachment relationships. It relies on the assessor using dolls or a story, where they give the child the beginning of the story, and the child then enacts the rest. Within this the child and family members are identified, and it allows the assessor to see how the child views themselves, their family, friends and their relationships with others.

Further support from the NSPCC

If you are worried about a child, the NSPCC is here to help, 24 hours a day, seven days a week, free of charge.

Phone 0808 800 5000
Email help@nspcc.org.uk
Text 88858 (Text 07786 200001 in Channel Islands, standard call rates apply)
Or visit www.nspcc.org.uk/help

NSPCC information service

The NSPCC's library is the most comprehensive collection of specialist resources relating to child protection in the UK. It contains over 40,000 records and you can access it online at **www.nspcc.org.uk/inform**

You can also subscribe to CASPAR, a news service that signposts you to the latest policy, practice, and research in child protection.

Sign up at www.nspcc.org.uk/inform

To download this leaflet for free, or for printed copies of this leaflet, please go to **www.nspcc.org.uk/core-info** for price details.

The information in this leaflet was current at May 2012.
For the most up to date information on this review and the project's other systematic reviews visit the Core info website **www.core-info.cardiff.ac.uk**

Further details of this review can be found by scanning the QR code below.

This is a collaborative project between the Early Years Research Programme, Cochrane Institute of Primary Care & Public Health, School of Medicine, Cardiff University and the NSPCC.

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