Bitesize Briefing: Physical Neglect

GATESHEAD safeguarding children partnership

1 What is Physical Neglect?

Physical neglect occurs when a caregiver fails to provide for a child's basic physical needs:

- Nutritious food;
- Adequate clothing;
- Good hygiene;
- Adequate shelter and a safe living environment;
- Adequate sleep/rest;
- Appropriate supervision;
- Medical/dental care when required.

2 Signs of Physical Neglect

Nutrition and Health

- Underweight or signs of constant hunger/dehydration;
- Stealing food;
- Untreated medical or dental issues, e.g.: tooth decay, missed immunisations;
- Fatigue or listlessness.

Appearance and Hygiene

- Consistently dirty or unwashed skin, hair or clothing;
- Strong body odour;
- Inappropriate or ill-fitting clothing for the weather;
- Persistent nappy rash, skin sores or rashes;
- Persistent infestations, e.g.: lice.

Living Conditions

- Unsanitary environments and unsafe surroundings, e.g.: extremely cluttered spaces, presence of mould or pests, strong odours, exposed wires, sharp objects;
- Lack of basic necessities, e.g.: heating, electricity, running water;
- Overcrowded living spaces;
- Inadequate or unsafe sleeping arrangements, e.g.: no bed or bedding, sleeping on the floor, cluttered beds/cots.

Behaviour and Development

- Missed or delayed developmental milestones;
- Frequent absences or lateness to school;
- Struggling to engage at school, lower academic achievement;
- Withdrawn or passive presentation, aggression or disruptive behaviour.

3 The Impact of Physical Neglect

Physical
Malnutrition and poor growth, frequent or recurring illnesses due to weakened immune system, chronic health conditions, hygiene-related infections.

Emotional
Anxiety and/or depression, low self-esteem, insecure attachments to others.

Social
Difficulties making friends, isolation, inappropriate social behaviour.

Cognitive and Developmental
Delayed speech and language, poor concentration and memory, delayed motor skills and coordination.



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4 Responding to Physical Neglect

Context is Key

Context is key when identifying and assessing physical neglect. Context helps practitioners to distinguish between genuine neglect and situations influenced by other factors. For example...

Cultural and Socioeconomic Factors

- Some families may live in poverty but still provide loving, attentive care. Cultural norms around hygiene, clothing or food may also differ and should not be mistaken for neglect without further understanding.

Temporary vs. Ongoing Situations

- A child appearing unkempt once may be due to a temporary family crisis (e.g. illness), whereas patterns noticed over time are more likely to be indicative of neglect.

Children's Individual Needs

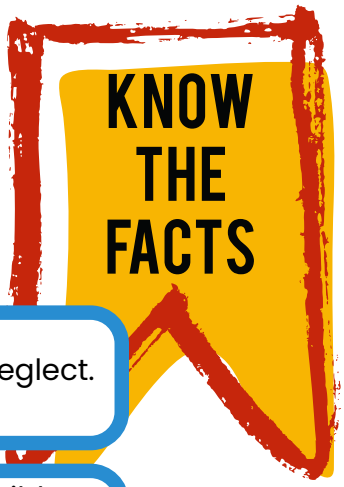
- A child with disabilities or health conditions may have different hygiene or health needs - what appears to be neglect could be the result of a caregiver struggling to meet complex needs without the right support.

Family Circumstances

- Mental health issues, domestic abuse, or substance misuse in the home can contribute to neglect. Understanding the broader family context helps practitioners to support, not just intervene.

5 Learning & Development: Reflection Questions and Discussion Points for Practitioners

There are a lot of misconceptions about neglect. Of the following four statements, **only two are facts.** They can be discussed in team meetings or reflected on independently.



- Poverty always equates to neglect.
- In 2023, **more than** 25,000 children were on a Child Protection plan under the sole category of neglect.[1]
- Historical information is <u>not</u> relevant when responding to a suspected case of neglect.
- Physical neglect can be invisible and is sometimes harmfully misinterpreted as 'parenting style'.

Statements 2 and 4 are factual.



How do you accurately distinguish between poverty and neglect in your practice?

How can you approach potentially difficult conversations with families about physical neglect?



What biases might affect my interpretation of a child's physical presentation?

How might signs of physical neglect differ across age groups?

[1]NSPCC: Statistics Briefing – Neglect (August 2024)