**Learning Outcomes**
To understand the barriers to recognition and response of neglect.

**Audience**  Groups 2-6 (Working Together 2010)  
**Time**  30 minutes

**Key Reading**


**Links to Common Core**
Common Core 3  Safeguarding the welfare of the child (skills: personal skills). Understand the different forms and extent of abuse and their impact on children’s development.
This presentation would work best as part of an interactive discussion about some of the issues and factors that can affect recognition and response to neglect.

Learning outcomes.

Paavilainen et al. (2002) gathered the views of 513 nurses and physicians in a children’s hospital in Finland. 86% of the hospital-based staff study said that when they suspect maltreatment they discuss it with the team of colleagues; 5% that they refer to an outside agency (despite there being mandatory reporting legislation in Finland), 13% that they discuss the concerns with the parents or child and 1% that they do nothing.

This quote is long, but it aptly sums up the range of concerns that many people have about intervening with neglect.

The issues are grouped under 4 main headings, but all are interconnected and inter-linked. Some are underpinned by the research study on recognition and response (Daniel, Taylor and Scott 2010) for which the briefing is available in the pack.
Discussion point: Why do people miss a child who is being neglected?

These factors that can be associated with missing a child, who is or may be being neglected should be recognisable to practitioners from all professions. A lack of focus on a child is not confined to those working with adults only. Health visitors and children’s services workers can become too focused on the parent and their concerns and can overlook the needs of children (Davies and Ward 2011). Teachers and other education professionals have an explicit focus on the child, but can also overlook the social and emotional issues indicative of neglect if they are overly focused on issues of learning and/or behaviour.

The issue of errors of human reasoning was highlighted by Munro (1999) and refers to a range of common errors such as looking for evidence to confirm one’s initial snap judgement and overlooking evidence that challenges a settled view. Her work highlights the need for all professionals to have the opportunity to stand back from situations and to check that they are not influenced by such errors. Munro’s work also reminds people of the importance of seeking out all available information about the parent and child’s circumstances because different people in different parts of the system may hold vital nuggets of information that could be available if sought.

Lawrence (2002) identified ‘professional inaction’ in the face of hostile and/or resistant families. This is a theme that comes up in many serious case reviews (Brandon et al. 2009, 2010) and can be a factor in preventing effective responses to neglected children. Sometimes professionals also feel rather helpless when faced with the chaotic or complex nature of the families where children are neglected. And the problems of balancing support and surveillance were identified over two decades ago (Department of Health 1991) but remain an ongoing issue for many practitioners such as health visitors, family support workers, voluntary agency practitioners. Finding a way to raise concerns and then to take them further by referring to statutory agencies remains a challenge.
Practitioners can find it difficult to disentangle issues of parental culpability and intent. Frequently it is very clear that parents are not deliberately neglecting their children’s needs and that they are facing many challenges in their own lives. Participants can be reminded, though, that the starting point has to be the impact or potential impact upon the child, and that issues of intent do not need to affect the initial recognition that the child may need additional help – as stated in Taylor and Daniel (2005):

‘…the establishment of intent is not necessary to determine that neglect is occurring, nor is it necessary as a precursor to a decision that protective intervention is needed. It is, however, essential in reaching a decision about the nature of that intervention and the extent to which legal authority will be required to back it up’ (pp.14-15).

Glaser and Prior (2003) make it very clear that the definition of neglect should not depend on the existence of indications of current harm to the child. Intervention should not be delayed until there are actual signs of compromised development but should aim to prevent signs of harm. As stated in Working Together:

‘Neglect is the persistent failure to meet a child’s basic physical and/or psychological needs, likely [our emphasis] to result in the serious impairment of the child’s health or development.’

Practitioners from professions other than children’s social work may have a range of anxieties about jumping to conclusions and may also have fears about catapulting families into section 47 enquiries on the basis of insufficient evidence. They therefore need to consider what professional advice they can access within their agency to discuss and check their concerns.

This list of skills to help overcome the challenges has been derived from the following authors:

- **Skills in assessment** (Cleaver, Walker with Meadows 2004).
- **Skills in identifying when a child’s needs are not being met** (Scott 2003).
- **Use of intuition** (Ling and Luker 2000).
- **Recognising and raising difficult issues** (Peckover 2003).
- **Forceful curiosity’** (Scott 2003).

Participants can be asked to discuss their confidence in their own skills.
Practitioners from a range of universal services often do not have problems with recognising a neglected child, and participants may well be able to describe experiences of being worried about a child and suspecting a backdrop of neglect.

However, practitioners can feel it is sometimes a challenge to convey these concerns to local authority children’s social care services and for those concerns to be taken seriously and acted upon.

The evidence for the benefits of role clarification, being able to challenge other views and assertiveness comes from literature that indicates where lack of these skills has led to difficulties.

Darlington has undertaken research into the potential for children to fall between the gaps of adult and child services – especially adult mental health services and services focused on child protection – and she has identified the importance of trust, respect, helping, negotiating and compromising (Darlington and Feeney 2008).

The messages on indirect signs are drawn from a systematic literature review on recognising and responding to neglect (Daniel, Taylor and Scott 2010). The research questions underpinning the review were:

- What is known about the ways in which children and families directly and indirectly signal their need for help?
- To what extent are practitioners equipped to recognise and respond to the indications that a child’s needs are likely to be, or are being neglected, whatever the cause?
- Does the evidence suggest that professional response could be swifter?

The briefing from the study is available in the pack as background reading.

The study examined the existing empirical evidence about how parents and children directly and indirectly signal their need for support.

A key finding is that there is little research into direct help-seeking – the indications are that parents and children do find it difficult to identify that they need help and ask for it, but more research is needed on this issue. On the other hand, there was a lot of evidence about the parenting factors likely to be associated with neglect that should alert practitioners to potential concerns. The factors would confirm the practice experience and wisdom of participants.
Researchers have attempted to disentangle the interactions between factors which may contribute to neglect and, to date, have not found it possible to develop a clear causal pathway – instead the research confirms that there are associations, but that the interactions are complex. The key message is that an accumulation of stressors elevates the likelihood of a child being neglected:

- when poverty is controlled for, risk of neglect was found to be associated with an impoverished home environment, fewer parental resources and a previous history of maltreatment (Scannapieco and Connell, 2003) and parental substance misuse (Ondersma, 2002)
- when tracking families considered to be ‘at risk’ the likelihood of neglect was elevated by domestic abuse (McGuigan and Pratt, 2001)
- when examining cases of substantiated neglect, substantiation was shown to be predicted by parental mental health or substance misuse problems (Carter and Myers, 2007)
- in the context of confirmed maternal substance misuse, risk of neglect was elevated by factors including childhood sexual abuse, severity of drug use, a drug-using social network, receipt of welfare assistance and problems accessing childcare (Cash and Wilke, 2003) and youth of parent, 2 or more children, previous child removal and depressive symptoms (Nair et al., 1997).

In relation to children, there is evidence from the USA to suggest that there are likely to be indirect signs of neglect in compromised development at a young age:

- psychological neglect is associated with increased levels of internalising and externalising behaviour in children at age 3 (Dubowitz et al. 2002)
- psychological neglect is associated with teacher report of problems in peer relationships and externalising behaviour at age 6 (Dubowitz et al. 2004)
- general neglect as identified by child protective services (i.e. children’s social care in the UK) is associated with behaviour problems, impaired socialisation and problems with daily living skills at age 8 as is the specific neglect of medical needs (Dubowitz et al. 2005).
Research based around the rating of vignettes shows that the general public tend to give higher ratings of concern than professionals, and that professionals working in universal services give higher ratings of concern than those working in child protection settings.

Discussion point: What might be the skills needs to identify the indirect signs of neglect?

It is likely that the term ‘threshold’ will be brought up in discussion because issues of ‘thresholds’ are a frequent source of anxiety. Buckley has depicted the problem as an ‘egg-timer’ where there are needs that are perceived to have to be squeezed through a narrow isthmus to get at the services below – and the isthmus is guarded by statutory child protection processes (Buckley 2005).

The aspiration is that access to services should not depend on attaining a system label – in this instance ‘neglect’ and that there should not be a concept of moving the child from ‘outside’ to ‘inside’ a system to get a service. The ‘longing for clear thresholds’ as Stevenson puts it (2007) is as in vain as the search for one settled definition. Practitioners therefore need to be able to coalesce around a clear focus on the needs of the child. The skills of describing the circumstances and delineating the actual, or likely impact, on the child’s development are vital.

Skills continued.

Support vs surveillance creates role conflict (Oberle and Tenove 2000). Practitioners in settings such as children’s centres may be ostensibly offering support whilst being expected to ‘monitor’ the quality of parenting. In effect they may be expected to undergo a form of covert assessment of parenting capacity. van Nijnatten, Hoogstede and Suurmond (2001) found that workers ‘pretended’ to form a team with parent and were not really demonstrating honest and open practice. Coupled with parental concerns about the powers of the system and parental low self-efficacy and self-esteem the development and maintenance of good relationships with parents whilst simultaneously identifying and acting on concerns about neglect can be highly challenging.
The skills are drawn from a range of authors:

- listening (Gray 2002)
- conveying empathy (Shulman 1991; Forrester et al. 2008)
- finding common ground (Jack et al. 2002)
- role clarification (Trotter 2002)
  - at outset of working relationship (Jack et al. 2002)
  - not necessarily – be supportive first (Peckover 2002)
  - convey in honest, jargon free terms, the reason for involvement (Shulman 1991)
- pro-social modelling (Trotter 2004; Ferguson 2001).

The points here and on the next slide aim to encourage participants to communicate effectively with parents and to encourage parental involvement in the discussions about concerns – research suggests that parents may well be able to identify their own concerns if they are asked the right questions and are supported.

Encourage participants to identify their own skills and the skills they would like to develop.