

Childhood Neglect: Improving Outcomes for Children

Learning Outcomes

To meet a child's developmental needs and support strengths.

Audience Groups 1-8 (Working Together 2010)

Time 30 minutes

Key Reading

Brandon, M., Dodsworth, J., and Rumball, D. (2005) 'Serious Case Reviews: Learning to Use Expertise' *Child Abuse Review* 14(176): 160-176.

Dickens, J., Howell, D., Thoburn, J. and Schofield, G. (2007) 'Children starting to be looked after by local authorities in England: an analysis of inter-authority variation and case-centred decision-making.' *British Journal of Social Work* 37(4): 597-617.

Farmer, E. and Lutman, E. (2010) *Case Management and Outcomes for Neglected Children Returned to their Parents: A Five Year Follow-Up Study (Research Brief)*. London: Department for Education.

Sinclair, I., Baker, C., Wilson, K., and Gibbs, I. (2005) *Foster Children: Where They Go and How They Get On*, Jessica Kingsley Publishers, London.

Wade, J., Biehal, N., Farrelly, N. and Sinclair, I. (2010) *Maltreated children in the looked after system: a comparison of outcomes for those who go home and those who do not*. London: Department for Education.

Ward, H., Brown, R., Westlake, D. and Munro, E. R. (2010) *Infants suffering, or likely to suffer, significant harm: A prospective longitudinal study: Research Brief*. London: Department for Education, <https://www.education.gov.uk/publications/eOrderingDownload/DFE-RB053.pdf>.

Links to Common Core

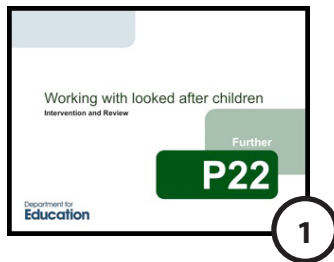
Common Core 6 Information sharing (skill: information handling). Make good use of available information, for example whether a common assessment has been completed – appraise content and assess what else might be needed.

Common Core 6 Information sharing (skill: information handling). Be able to assess the relevance and status of information (for example, whether it is observation or opinion) and to pass it on when appropriate.

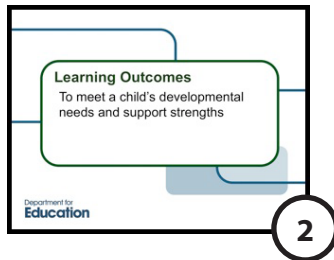
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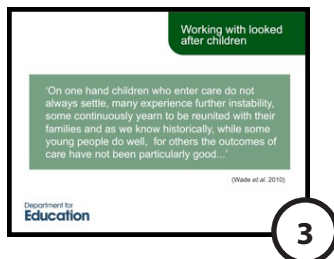


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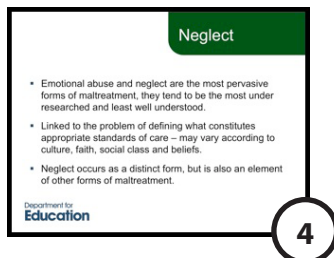
Learning outcomes.



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This presentation seeks to offer comparisons in outcomes against pathways for neglected children and young people, and to help support improved decision-making in this area.

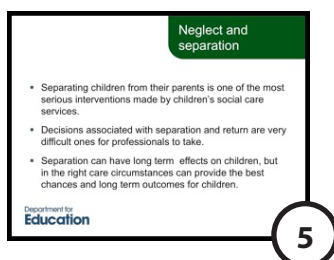
This quote is taken from Wade et al. (2010).



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Neglect and the impact of separation are under researched and poorly understood (Iwaniec 2006; Horwath 2007). Decisions are difficult even when made in consultation with other agencies. This presentation seeks to offer comparisons in outcomes against pathways for neglected children and young people.

It also seeks to improve decision making in this area.



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Decision making

- Co-occurrence of different forms of maltreatment are quite common.
- Often neglect is interwoven with a complex range of deep-seated family difficulties.
- Complex nature of family difficulties often divert attention away from child's needs.

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Howe (2005) and Stevenson (2007) both concluded that it is common for physical, psychological, sexual abuse and neglect to go hand in hand (Rutter et al. 1998 and 2000).

Neglect does not sit comfortably with a 'forensic model' of investigation based on discrete incidents and episodes (Stevenson 2007). There is evidence that section 47 enquiries are less likely to be conducted without the presence of an event or injury and where this is lacking, cases are more likely to be closed without provision of services (Buckley 2000; Platt 2006).

Decision making

- Often there is no clearly identifiable 'incident' or 'episode' in neglect cases upon which to focus.
- The constellation of difficulties may confuse and overwhelm practitioners attempting to identify, assess and develop intervention strategies.
- Interaction of these multiple adversities may increase risk of poor outcomes for children and young people.

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Thresholds

- Thresholds for admission to the looked after system tend to be high.
- Children subject to care proceedings have usually been known to children's social care services for a number of years.
- Applications are often rejected by courts and cases continue to be managed via family support (section 17 of the Children Act 1989).

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The majority of children, who are the subject of care proceedings, are known to children's social care for over one year and 45% have been known for five or more years (Masson 2008).

Threshold differences across local authorities were identified by Dickens et al. (2007) and Sinclair et al. (2007). The same studies concluded that pathway differences – re-unification, fostering, kinship care, adoption routes – are heavily influenced by which local authority looks after the child, rather than the characteristics of the child or family.

Thresholds

- Significant variance in thresholds between local authorities.
- Significant variance in use of placement resources once a child becomes looked after, resulting in different pathways.
- Decisions affected by commonly held beliefs about relatively poor outcomes attained by looked after children – often viewed as a 'last resort'.
- In maltreatment cases, children who return home following a period in care tend to fare worse in comparison to those who remained in care.

(Wade et al. 2010)

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Reunification

- Key principle of Children Act (1989) - supporting children within their family, and following separation, returning them to their families as soon as it is safe to do so.
- This philosophy has resulted in fewer children becoming looked after.
- However, increased looked after children population is a result of children staying longer in the system.
- Studies found that if children do go home, it is usually quite quickly – usually within 2 years.

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The explanation for children staying longer in the looked after children system is that higher proportions have entered the system in response to abuse or neglect, making it difficult for them to be returned home safely (Gibbs, Sinclair and Stein 2005; Beihal 2006).

Reunification is often heavily dependent upon the social worker's assessment of the chance of success, and in neglect cases the assessment is often bleak (Farmer and Parker 1991).

Reunification

- Neglected children typically remain looked after longer than those who are physically or sexually abused, and are less likely to be reunified.
- Reunification is less likely if they have been looked after for a long time, have accepted the need for them to be looked after, have a disability or come from families with problems of substance misuse or domestic violence.
- Although neglected children go home at a slower rate, most do go home at some stage.

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Most neglected children do go home at some stage (Wade et al. 2010).

Reunification

- Decision to reunify is usually influenced, to some extent, by the child's wishes and feelings.
- Studies have found that reunification should not be viewed automatically as a safe policy – risks of recurrence of maltreatment and outcomes for the child should be carefully considered.
- Reunifications frequently do not last – most re-enter the looked after system at some stage.

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Strongest predictors of return home

- Whether risks to the safety of the child were assessed as being acceptable.
- Whether the problems that had led to the child's admission were seen as having improved during the child's period of being looked after.

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Found in Wade et al.'s study 2010.

Oscillation

- Danger of children 'oscillating' in and out of the care system as repeated attempts at reunification are made.
- Historically, literature has highlighted the tendency for poor reunification planning.
- Often occurs as a result of direct actions of parent, child or placement breakdown rather than good planning.

(Farmer & Lutan 2010)

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The oscillation of children in and out of care was recognised by Bullock (1993), back in the early 1990s. More recently, a study by Farmer (2009) of a sample of 180 children who had been looked after away from home but then reunified with their families found that only 36% of children had not experienced a disruption at home and that 35% had experienced 2 or more disruptions.

Oscillation

- Reunification often results in further neglect through poor parenting and worsening of children's mental health.
- Children who remain looked after tend to be assessed as 'more settled'.
- Some children who remain looked after experience moves but these are more likely to be planned rather than unplanned.

(Farmer & Lutan 2010)

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Often the outcomes for children include worsening of mental health (Sinclair et al. 2005) and further maltreatment after reunification was also found (Brandon et al. 2005; Sinclair et al. 2005; Farmer et al. 2008).

Oscillation

- Recent studies indicate that almost half of children in reunified samples were thought to have been exposed to further maltreatment.
- Reunified children also fare worse in relation to a wide range of outcomes when compared with those who remain looked after. For example – poor emotional wellbeing or 'disturbance', self-harming, risky behaviours, substance misuse, offending and lower educational performance.

(Farmer & Lutan 2010)

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Discussion point: Explore this further with the participants. Once children have returned home, what measures are put in place to ensure that changes in parenting, which precipitated the return home, are maintained. How long might this process take?

Do those in the room agree with the view that once returned home, the pressures of current workload can mean that these children sometimes stay longer in reunified families than they should?

This can also be linked with the evidence about the impact of neglect upon brain development and some of the possible consequences upon behaviour. Children who have experienced chronic neglect may need additional parenting skill because of the impact of that neglect.

Oscillation

- Studies show increased frequency of social work visits following reunification due to social work concerns about children's welfare.
- In cases where there is strong evidence of pre-admission neglect, children tend to 'do better' if they remain looked after.

(Farmer & Lutzman 2010)

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Neglected children 'do better' when looked after (Wade et al. 2010).

Positive reunification practice

- Detailed assessments.
- Purposeful and inclusive planning.
- Clear goals and targets in relation to changes needed.
- Agreed timescales for change.
- Support to achieve change.

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Features of successful home placements

- Children go home slowly.
- Planning is purposeful and inclusive.
- Problems that led to the child's admission have improved.
- Family focused social work interventions have been provided.
- Parent(s) have accessed more services.

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More services – for example housing services, parenting guidance, financial assistance. In overall terms, provision of services is associated with home placements lasting, although research in this area is patchy (Ward et al. 2004; Sinclair et al. 2005; Farmer 2009).

Conclusions

- Evidence does not conclude that neglected children should not return home if the issues are addressed properly.
- Where children and parents strongly want this, it may be difficult to resist.
- Reunification does involve high risk of failure and decisions should be taken with caution.
- There are long-term risks to children arising from further maltreatment, breakdown and disruption.
- Most neglected children have a relatively long exposure to risk before becoming looked after.

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Conclusions

- They have often experienced multiple adversities as a result of neglect.
- Although in most cases, family support services have been offered, services tend to be intermittent and insufficient to prevent the separation.
- High thresholds for access to preventative services and becoming looked after are influenced by resources, public and professional attitudes towards the looked after system and by local authority policy and practice.
- Typically, where rates of looked after children are low, the difficulties of children within the looked after system will be higher.

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Conclusions

- Where children have experienced chronic neglect, evidence suggests that reunification is likely to fail and those who stay in care longest do best.
- Reunification should not occur without careful assessment and evidence that sustainable change has taken place.
- Returns home to parental care should be slow, well managed and inclusive.
- Sufficient services should be made available to support parents to make positive change.
- Repeated attempts at reunification should be avoided to prevent children oscillating between being looked after and home.

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Conclusions

- Where there are multiple failed attempts at reunification, these children and young people have the worst overall outcomes.
- Children that fall within this group, are denied the opportunity for alternative pathways into permanence.
- Where changes in the parents or families of reunified children are not sustained, early action should be taken to prevent drift and further deterioration.
- Substitute care can be successful for some children and some express relief at being removed from families marked by violence, addiction and chaos.

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'The care system has not always managed to compensate children adequately for their past disadvantages and in comparison to their wider non-care population of children and young people, outcomes on leaving care have been relatively poor...

However, for many maltreated children the care system provides an important shelter and an opportunity for children to re-fashion their lives and take advantage of opportunities that had erstwhile been closed to them.'

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Notes

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