



CHILD

NEGLECT

Dr Samir Parikh

Child abuse is a much spoken-about topic today; horror stories of child abuse flood television and print reports every day. What often goes unnoticed is a quieter, more insidious kind of abuse—child neglect. Abuse is active, characterized by aggression and exploitation, making it easier to identify and easier to capture. Neglect, on the other hand, is more passive, and often very difficult to recognize. Unfortunately, child neglect has become one of the most pervasive forms of child abuse in the world these days; it's as prevalent as physical abuse, if not more, and its long-term consequences can be equally damaging. Knowing about the symptoms of neglect is important—for the teacher and parent community to be able to recognize symptoms of neglect can go a long way in identifying such children and ensuring that they receive timely help.

Understanding neglect

Child neglect is characterized by a pattern of repeated failure to provide for a child's basic needs. A child's basic needs are not simply food, clothing and shelter. What is equally important is a caring and nurturing environment. Child neglect is therefore found in many different forms, it can be physical, educational, or emotional – each of which can be detrimental to the healthy growth and development of the child.

Neglect can occur when a parent abandons the child or simply does not have enough time to spend with the child leaving the child all to itself. Physical neglect is the failure to provide food, shelter, clothing, medical care and supervision. It's important, however, to distinguish between a failure to meet these needs due to poverty and a lack of resources or neglect. Parents who physically neglect their children do have the resources to care for them but are still either unable to do so, or choose not to do so. Educational neglect involves permitting regular absenteeism from school, failure to provide basic educational opportunities and not paying attention to a child's special educational needs. Of all the various forms of neglect, emotional or psychological neglect is the most difficult to identify. These are children who are constantly being threatened, ignored, belittled or insulted, isolated and rejected by their care-givers. Ignoring a child who is feeling anxious, stressed or fearful after they experience a quarrel is one such example of emotional neglect.

There can be no keener revelation of a society's soul than the way in which it treats its children. ~ Nelson Mandela



Why it happens

Child neglect can happen in any kind of family, even one that looks prosperous and happy from the outside. Child neglect is a complex issue, and no one factor can completely explain why it happens. Parenting is not an easy task; especially in today's fast paced socioeconomic and cultural environment. Bringing up a child is a hands-on, time intensive, and difficult job. Additional challenges such as financial difficulties, relationship problems and inadequate social support from friends and family can lead to a parent neglecting some, if not all, basic needs of their child.

Living with an alcoholic parent can lead to neglect as well. Parents who are inebriated can have a tumultuous home environment with frequent domestic disputes and incidences of rage. Such parents are often unable to care for their children, spend quality time with them, or make appropriate parenting decisions. Substance abuse is particularly dangerous because it can lead not only to neglect but physical abuse as well.

Parents who suffer from a mental illness such as depression or anxiety may appear to be distant and withdrawn from their children. Over the years it has also been seen that very often, parents who neglect their children may have experienced neglect or some other form of abuse themselves. In such cases, parents may simply perpetuate the cycle of child neglect, not having learned the skills necessary for parenting. They may have incorrect or inadequate information about the kind of care that babies need, along with inappropriate expectations from their children. They may be overwhelmed by parental responsibilities and see the child as a burden. Within a society like ours, unfortunately, gender attitudes and stereotypes also play a role wherein the girl child, deemed unworthy, is often the victim of neglect.

What neglect can do

We are all aware of the dangers of physical neglect and its adverse impact on brain development. If a baby is malnourished then neural cells in the brain can become weak or damaged causing lowered brain function, thus effecting their intellectual and academic functioning. Essential deficiencies can lead to a myriad of physical and psychological difficulties such as tiredness, weakness and emotional mood swings. Medical neglect can lead to persistent infections and lifelong ailments.

The most severe case of development is when it begins early in a child's life. The impact of neglect is not very easy to notice at an early stage but this neglect can have harmful and long-term effects on children and may even get worse as the child grows older. Common physical and psychological reactions to neglect include stunted growth, chronic medical problems, inadequate bone and muscle growth, and lack of neurological development that negatively affects normal brain functioning and information processing. Neglected children might have poor language abilities and may lead to difficulties in attention and concentration. Such difficulties arise when children are not provided exposure to languages and are given fewer opportunities for their cognitive growth. Where there is no medical or health reason for faltering growth and development, neglect should be looked into as a potential factor.

The consequences of emotional neglect on a child are as detrimental, if not more. Neglect has can have severe consequences for the child – both short-term as well as long-term. It can affect all domains of development, be it physical, psychological, intellectual, behavioural or social.



Emotionally, neglect can have far-reaching consequences on the well-being of the child. Children are extremely sensitive to both verbal and non-verbal cues in their environment. Healthy development requires for the child to be able to form a secure relationship with the care-giver. Doing so allows the child to form a secure base from which he can then explore his environment. The first two years of life are also when children establish a basic sense of trust. A lack of this basic trust is bound to create a sense of insecurity, anxiety and primal fearfulness within children. In the formative years, neglect conveys to the child that he or she is worthless, flawed, unloved, and unwanted. It depicts a sense of emotional unavailability, unresponsiveness, and withdrawal of attention. Children growing up this way therefore tend to have a poor self-image, cognitive delays and difficulties, problems with coping, and difficulty forming meaningful relationships, or connecting with others.

In fact, studies have shown that children as young as three years of age can suffer from depression and withdrawal symptoms as a result of neglect. Although the visible signs of neglect in children can be difficult to detect, the hidden scars resulting from it manifest in numerous behavioural ways, including destructive behaviour, angry acts (such as fire setting and animal cruelty), withdrawal and poor development of basic skills.

Neglect is also likely to influence the manner in which these children form relationships with other people throughout their life, alter the way they behave and perform at school and interact with other children, and how they would parent their own children. When children grow up in an environment where their needs are not met, they have not acquired effective parenting skills from their caregivers. They may not develop appropriate social skills and may feel hopeless, helpless and mistrustful. They may even have substance abuse problems, experience domestic violence and engage in criminal behaviour. Neglected children may experience attachment problems, regressive behaviour, learning difficulties, somatic symptoms, bedwetting, and juvenile delinquency in later years.

Troublesome behaviours may persist long after the neglectful environment has changed. As children grow older, feelings of being unloved and unwanted can lead to running away, antisocial behaviour, self-harm and suicide. Neglect in the early years also has consequences for later life – many young adults who have been neglected suffer from a recognizable psychiatric illness by the age of 21. They exhibit many problems, including depression, anxiety, eating disorders, and suicide attempts. Other

psychological conditions associated with abuse and neglect include panic disorder, dissociative disorders, attention-deficit hyperactivity disorder, and reactive attachment disorder. Even through their adult lives, they may have difficulty forming secure and healthy relationships and unstable job histories. Where neglect is chronic, the effects of it on the mental health of a child can be drastic.

Recognizing the Signs

Teachers are perhaps in the best position to identify children suffering from neglect at home. Recognizing the signs is important to ensure that such children receive early intervention in order to minimize the damage. It's important to keep in mind that neglect is not the same as poverty. It's not only the poor who get neglected; even children who have all their material needs met can feel psychological neglect if their basic emotional needs for care remain unmet.

Children who are physically neglected might appear to be perennially tired or listless, often falling asleep in class. Remaining consistently hungry and malnourished, these children might steal food or beg for it from their classmates. They would typically be dressed in ill-fitting clothes with poor physical hygiene and frequent illnesses. They might skip school frequently and in the adolescent years, might drop out altogether. Engaging in self-destructive behaviour is also a warning sign of physical neglect.

Emotional neglect is a little less obvious to identify, but even emotional neglect can manifest in physical indicators. Difficulty in expressive language, speech disorders, delayed physical growth, and frequent illnesses are all indicators of emotional neglect. Habits such as sucking and rocking, disruptive and aggressive behaviours, lack of remorse, and difficulties in sleeping might also hint towards emotional neglect. Such children might also harbour a pervasive sense of distrust of adults and might express reluctance to go home. These children experience difficulties forming friendships and relationships and often assume the parental role themselves. Substance abuse is also common amongst emotionally neglected children.

Summary

As a parent, it's not easy to bring up a child. Facing the crunch of both time and resources, parents are caught in a dilemma of whether to provide for their family or to spend quality time with them. Parents might compensate for their absence at home by showering their child with gifts and yielding to their every material wish. Chronic stress at work, or interpersonal difficulties at home might cause a parent to be irritable and dismissive of the child's emotions. Striking the right balance is not always easy.

It's important, therefore, to keep in mind that a child's emotional needs for warmth and attachment are as important as their need for safety and nutrition. Neither can be compromised for the sake of the other. All children need acceptance, love, encouragement, discipline, consistency, stability and positive attention. Parents might not always even realize that their child is being neglected in some way. Recognizing this neglect is the first step. Get help. Support is available for families at risk of emotional abuse through child welfare associations, NGOs, physicians, mental health practitioners and schools.

