

# CORE-INFO:

Neglect or emotional  
abuse in children  
aged 5-14





## Introduction

**This leaflet summarises what is currently known about children aged 5-14 years who have been neglected or emotionally abused (some children may experience both forms of maltreatment). It considers the children's behaviour, school performance, and their interaction with others.**

Most of the studies that inform this leaflet compared children<sup>1</sup> who were being neglected or emotionally abused (or both) with a similar group of children, who were not suffering from these forms of abuse. The studies were conducted either in the community, at school or at home.

At a time when there is increased concern about the damaging impact of neglect and emotional abuse, this leaflet will help a wide range of professionals in different disciplines who work with children, young people, and their families. These include: education staff such as teachers, teaching assistants and education welfare officers; general practitioners; health visitors; paediatricians; psychologists; social workers; youth and play workers; family support workers and sports coaches.

This leaflet is based on a collaborative project by the NSPCC and Core Info Cardiff Child Protection Systematic Reviews at Cardiff University.

Full details are available at [core-info.cardiff.ac.uk](http://core-info.cardiff.ac.uk)

## Why we are doing this work



Neglect of any type (physical, supervisory, medical, educational or emotional) remains the most common reason for a child to be the subject of a child protection plan or on a child protection register in the UK.

Emotional abuse is an extremely damaging form of abuse, which may occur in isolation, or may co-exist with neglect. Many research studies combine these two forms of abuse together under the term 'psychological maltreatment'. Both neglect and emotional abuse can have long-term consequences for children and lead to a wide range of problems in adulthood. Early intervention can prevent the long-term consequences of neglect or emotional abuse and improve the outcome for these children.

We have therefore conducted a systematic review of the research literature, to identify the features that may be observed in children aged 5-14 years who are experiencing neglect or emotional abuse. Other features may be observed in individual children, which have not been identified in the research, but all concerning features should be recorded.

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<sup>1</sup> Unless otherwise stated, the descriptions apply to children who are being neglected, and/or emotionally abused. Details of what constitutes neglect or emotional abuse are given in the glossary at the end of this leaflet.

# Signs to look out for in children aged 5-14 years<sup>2</sup>

The key features in identifying neglect and emotional abuse are set out below.

## **Behaviour:**

- The impact on behaviour is often greatest when neglect starts early in a child's life, or if the child is both neglected and emotionally abused.
- They may present as aggressive and hostile, for example, the child may be prone to angry outbursts or lashing out towards others.
- They may be more impulsive than other children, and may show features seen in Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD), for example, poor concentration or impulsive behaviour.
- Neglected children specifically, may be particularly quiet or withdrawn.

## **Relationships with other children:**

- The children may have difficulty with friendships and have more problems socialising, than other children do. They may describe another child as their 'best friend' but the other child does not reciprocate this.
- The child may have few friends, and be perceived by other children as more likely to be aggressive or disruptive.

## **Emotional or self-perception issues:**

- They may have little self-confidence, and the more severe neglect they experience, the lower their self esteem.
- They are more likely than their classmates to experience symptoms of depression.
- They have difficulty interpreting emotions, such as anger or sadness.
- They may also experience more mood swings than would be expected for their age, or show levels of affection towards others, which are inappropriate for the situation.
- Neglected children may see themselves as being worthless to others. They often believe that what happens is beyond their control, which leads to anxiety and helplessness to do anything to improve their situation. Many of these children give up on tasks before they have even started, because they simply do not see the point in trying.

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<sup>2</sup> While this age band covers a wide range of children, the current literature does not allow for narrower age bands to be separated out. The majority of literature addresses children aged 7-11 years.

- They have fewer effective coping skills than other children. When they become upset they are less likely to distract themselves through play, or talk it over with someone else. They may become angry, or restrict their emotional displays.
- Some children may think about, plan or attempt suicide.

### **School performance:**

- They often have more difficulty than their classmates carrying out complex tasks, particularly when they are required to understand and follow instructions that involve visual and motor integration; this was tested by asking the children to trace geometric shapes of increasing difficulty against the clock.
- They are likely to have a lower IQ than their classmates, although results of literacy or numeracy assessments varied across studies.
- Despite poor performance in some areas, neglected children may be better at problem solving, planning and abstract thinking than other children.

### **Relationships with parents:**

*One study of neglected children showed that:*

- Living in the family can be lonely for both parent and child because there is little exchange of information, and there may be a lack of emotional warmth between them.
- Some parents are more negative in comparison to non-neglecting parents.
- The parents may make more demands of their children, and are unlikely to respond to requests from their children for support. Neglected children come to expect less support from their mothers, in comparison to non-neglected children.

Full details of the studies from which these points are drawn are detailed at **[core-info.cardiff.ac.uk](http://core-info.cardiff.ac.uk)**



## Implications for practice

Practitioners working with children aged 5-14 years may observe some of the key features described in the previous section. Getting help for the child and family as early as possible gives the best chance of a good outcome.

Children who experience neglect or emotional abuse in childhood are more likely to have mental health problems, poor physical health, difficulties with relationships and reduced employment in their adult life.

If your observations lead you to have concerns about a child you may (depending on your role and responsibilities) seek advice from a colleague or manager, speak to the parent or speak to the child. You should familiarise yourself with child protection procedures and guidance on sharing information and follow them if you think a child is at risk of harm:

- Make a written record of your observations, concerns and any conversations that you have, as soon as possible.
- Don't forget that neglect rarely occurs in isolation, and it is more common that neglect co-exists with other forms of abuse. Therefore, when exploring for abuse of any type, consider whether neglect or emotional abuse may also be present, and vice versa.
- Speak to a senior colleague or to someone who works with the child and knows them and may also know their family situation. Clearly identify who needs to take what action, and by when. If you are still worried, do not let your concerns go assuming that someone else will take action.
- Find out who has spoken to the child or, where you can do this in a sensitive and appropriate way, speak to the child yourself. See things from the child's point of view – ask the child in an open and sensitive way about their view of themselves, their relationships with their parents and their friendships. While ensuring that these discussions are non-intrusive, let them know that you are there for them if they wish to speak with you. Ensure the child understands that you may have to report your concerns.
- If you have concerns about the child, make sure that you talk to other professionals who may have contact with the child, eg school teacher, GP, hospital staff, etc.
- The longer a child is living in a neglectful or emotionally abusive environment, the greater the damage and likelihood of other abuse. Therefore, it is essential not to be put off; make sure you make your concerns known and that action is taken.





- This systematic review did not include 'risk factors' for neglect and emotional abuse. However, increased risk of neglect and emotional abuse may be more likely in homes where there is domestic abuse; substance misuse; unemployment; mental ill health; an absence or perceived absence of a helpful supportive network; lack of intimate emotional support or poverty. As with all child protection assessments, factors like this should be specifically explored when assessing the child, although their absence does not mean neglect or emotional abuse will not be present.
- Child protection is everyone's responsibility; if you have a concern about any child, you can call the police, social services or the NSPCC (0808 800 5000). And remember that children can contact ChildLine 24/7 (0800 1111; [childline.org.uk](http://childline.org.uk)).

While early recognition and intervention are vital, it is never too late to help a child or young person. If concerns about possible neglect or emotional abuse arise it is important you take action as soon as possible.



# Glossary

## Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD):

This is a neurodevelopmental disorder associated with problems of attention or concentration, hyperactivity and impulsivity.

## 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 of neglect and emotional abuse across the UK:

Government guidance on safeguarding varies across England, Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland and slightly different definitions of neglect and emotional neglect apply to each jurisdiction. For the definition applying to your country, readers are advised to consult the online guidance for your jurisdiction.

The definitions contain common elements as outlined below:

**Neglect** is the persistent failure to meet a child's basic physical and/or psychological needs, and is likely to result in the serious impairment of the child's health or development. Examples of neglect include: failing to provide adequate food, clothing and shelter; failing to protect a child from physical and emotional harm or danger; failing to ensure adequate supervision; failing to ensure access to appropriate medical care or treatment; disregard or unresponsiveness to a child's basic emotional needs.

**Emotional abuse** is the persistent emotional maltreatment of a child, causing severe and adverse effects on the child's emotional development. It may involve conveying to a child that they are worthless or unloved, inadequate, or valued only because they meet the needs of another person; not giving the child opportunities to express their views; making fun of what they say or how they communicate; age or developmentally inappropriate expectations being imposed on children; interactions beyond a child's developmental capability; overprotection and limitation of exploration and learning, or preventing the child participating in normal social interaction; seeing or hearing the ill treatment of another; serious bullying (including cyber bullying), causing children to feel frightened or in danger; the exploitation or corruption of children.

Some degree of emotional abuse is involved in all types of ill treatment, but it may also occur alone.



## 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](mailto:help@nspcc.org.uk)**

**Text 88858 (Text 07786 200001 in Channel Islands, standard call rates apply)**

**Or visit [nspcc.org.uk/help](http://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 [nspcc.org.uk/inform](http://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 [nspcc.org.uk/inform](http://nspcc.org.uk/inform)

To download this leaflet for free, or for printed copies of this leaflet, please go to [nspcc.org.uk/core-info](http://nspcc.org.uk/core-info) for price details.

The information in this leaflet was current at August 2014.

For the most up to date information on this review and the project's other systematic reviews visit the Core info website [core-info.cardiff.ac.uk](http://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.

