



UPDATES ON DATA, EDUCATION AND POLICY

Center for Urban Child Policy

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NEGLECT DURING INFANCY AND EARLY CHILDHOOD ENDANGERS EARLY BRAIN DEVELOPMENT AND CAN HAVE CONSEQUENCES WHICH PERSIST INTO ADULTHOOD.

Young children need access to secure, supportive relationships and resources in order to achieve healthy physical, social, emotional and cognitive development. When young children are neglected, their brain development may be threatened. This policy brief reviews our understanding of child neglect and its implications for children and families.

Some highlights of the brief:

- » Child neglect is the most common form of child maltreatment. In Shelby County, over half of child maltreatment referrals for children under 6 include reports of child neglect.
- » There are many public and private community resources in Memphis designed to respond to child neglect and offer help to families struggling to meet their children's developmental needs.

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CHILD NEGLECT THREATENS EARLY BRAIN DEVELOPMENT

Children who lack access to stable, nurturing relationships and basic resources during their earliest years are at greater risk for adverse social, emotional, cognitive and physical developmental outcomes. Child neglect is the failure to meet a child's fundamental needs for nutrition, shelter and security. Neglect can also mean a failure to meet a child's intellectual, social and emotional requirements (American Humane, 2007).

For a young child to develop to her full potential and to gain the skills she needs to be prepared for school and life, she needs attention, reassurance and recognition from her caregivers. If this type of nurturing and stimulation is missing when a child is very young, that child is at greater risk of failing to develop the social, emotional and cognitive abilities that are the foundation for future learning (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2001). Young children who are ignored, left alone for long periods of time, left in the care of only slightly older brothers or sisters, or cared for by grown-ups who fail to understand or meet their developmental needs, are at higher risk for failure to develop a secure attachment to a principal caregiver. In this situation, the child's brain becomes wired to meet everyday survival needs, rather than lay the groundwork for lifelong learning and positive growth (Hawley, 1996).

Child Neglect Threatens The Welfare and Development of Young Children

When we think of child maltreatment, we usually think of newspaper headlines concerning physical or sexual abuse. However, child neglect is the most common form of maltreatment. It is often unrecorded and ignored (Erikson & Egeland, 2002).

- » In 2008, there were 1,020 DCS-identified cases of maltreatment in very young children (< 6 years of age) in Shelby County. Over half (55%) of child maltreatment cases included reports of child neglect. These statistics may underestimate the true extent of neglect, since it is the least studied and most poorly characterized form of child maltreatment (Perry, Colwell, & Schick, 2002).

Neglect often means a chronic lack of parent care and comfort. In turn, this lack of care poses a significant threat to the welfare and development of young children (Hilyard & Wolfe, 2002). When parents are neglectful, emotionally detached, or uninvolved, they are less likely to perceive or respond to signals that their children are attempting to send.

Understanding Physical and Emotional Neglect

- » Caregivers are neglectful when they fail to act in a socially acceptable way "to meet the developmental needs of a child and which are the responsibility of a caregiver to provide"

(Straus & Kantor, 2005, p. 20).

Physical neglect¹ is a failure to provide basic and necessary supports, such as adequate food and shelter or medical care.

Physical child neglect becomes entangled with families in dire poverty - the poorest of the poor. Families who lose their source of income or governmental support are over-represented in child neglect reports. These parents are often unable to find acceptable, affordable child care. Some critics argue that in a society with immense resources, the very existence of child and family poverty constitutes child neglect (Dubowitz et al., 1993, p. 22, cited in Watson, 2005).

The association between poverty and child neglect may be explained by stressors such as job insecurity, housing instability and crowding, and single parenthood. Impoverished families are more likely to live in high crime neighborhoods and in homes that contain environmental risks such as uncovered wiring and lead paint (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2001). Since neglect is defined by the failure to provide adequate shelter, nourishment, clothing, supervision and hygiene, poor families may simply not be able to afford basic necessities for their children.

» In 2007, almost half (45%) of very young Memphis children (younger than six) lived in poverty, with about half of these living in extreme poverty - defined as a family with an annual income at or less than 50% of the federal poverty line (American Community Survey, 2007, B17024).

Emotional neglect is typically harder to assess and identify than physical neglect, but this type of maltreatment can also have a severe and lasting impact on child victims (Erikson & Egeland, 2002). Emotional neglect includes insufficient nurturing and attention - continuous, unrelenting disregard of a young child's requirements for approval, emotional support and affection (DePanfilis, 2006). The absence of parental care and support, the hallmarks of neglect, are thought to present one of the greatest risks to child well-being and brain development (Rutter & Sroufe, 2000; Sameroff, 2000).

Stable, nurturing and responsive care from a primary caregiver is a key to developing optimal social, emotional and cognitive skills. To be ready to engage the world, children need to develop self-confidence and self-control in their first three years of life. Having a caregiver who routinely responds appropriately to his needs teaches a child that people are trustworthy, and that there is a relationship between his actions and the outcomes he experiences. When

1. According to the Tennessee Department of Children's Services, "Physical Neglect is the failure to provide for a child's physical survival needs to the extent that there is harm or risk of harm to the child's health or safety. This may include, but is not limited to abandonment, lack of supervision, life endangering physical hygiene, lack of adequate nutrition that places the child below the normal growth curve, lack of shelter, lack of medical or dental that results in health threatening conditions, and the inability to meet basic needs of a child" (TN DCS, 2009, p. 1).

children can't count on nurturing, responsive care, they are at risk for lower levels of self-confidence and self-control (Miller, 2008; Onunaku, 2005).

NEGLECT DURING INFANCY AND EARLY CHILDHOOD CAN HAVE CONSEQUENCES WHICH PERSIST INTO ADULTHOOD.

- » Children who are physically neglected have lower IQ scores at 24 and 36 months and have lower scores on standardized tests of academic achievement at school entry than do children with no history of maltreatment (DePanfilis, 2006).
- » Children who were neglected when they were very young are much more likely to be diagnosed as mentally retarded later on, which may be due to lack of the care and stimulation required for healthy brain development (DePanfilis, 2006).
- » At 28 years of age, individuals who suffered from childhood neglect scored lower on IQ and reading ability tests than those who were not neglected as children (Weinstein, J., & Weinstein, R., 2000).

Abused and neglected children tend to perform far below their peers in the classroom, leading to poor grades, low test scores, and being held back.

- » **As a group, neglected children fare worse on these academic markers than abused children** (Eckenrode, Laird and Doris, 1991 as cited in Chlak, Gibbons, & Scarupa, 2002).
- » Neglect may have a more severe impact than other forms of maltreatment because it impacts primary physical and cognitive foundations needed for future development and adjustment (CWIG, 2001).

Early childhood neglect can have a powerful effect on a child's emotional, psychosocial and behavioral development.

- » In the preschool years, neglected children are often more socially detached and more disinterested than either abused children or children who are not mistreated (Crittenden, 1992).
- » Neglected young children are more likely to be perplexed by the emotional cues of others and are less able to differentiate emotions. They often demonstrate significant problems in personality growth and emotion management (Pollack, Cicchetti, Hornung, & Reed, 2000).
- » In preschool, neglected children have poorer coping skills than other maltreated children. They receive the lowest ratings on measures of self-esteem and are likely to be the most needy and unhappy (Egeland et al., 1983; Erickson et al., 1989).

Studies have linked early childhood neglect to higher rates of arrest for violent crimes in adolescence and adulthood. Neglect also is associated with adult problems such as depression, antisocial personality disorder and alcohol abuse (Watson, 2005).

Both informal and formal access to community services can decrease family stress that can contribute to child neglect.

Education and awareness matter: one part of doing the right thing is knowing the right thing to do. At the same time, it's no surprise that there is a strong relationship between family vulnerability and child neglect. It is difficult for parents to meet their child's needs when those parents lack the financial means to provide for their children.

If child neglect is related to financial struggle (for example, a family that is evicted and unable to find a safe place to stay), an effective strategy may be to deal with the resource issue. One means to alleviate family stress before it escalates - potentially leading to child neglect - is to provide families with material supports (such as transportation and emergency financial aid). Earlier intervention is better, and programs that intervene early to dampen the effects of poverty, unemployment, and residential transience, serve to reduce rates of child neglect as well (Watson, 2005).

Examples of public service approaches include:

- » Children's basic physical needs are most likely to be met when parents have sufficient incomes. Job training, sponsored child care assistance and nutritional support services help families to meet the basic physical needs of their children.
- » Similarly, church and community groups offer a broad array of emergency services to vulnerable families. These services may include soup kitchens, food banks, and homeless shelters.

Vulnerable families frequently need emotional and relational supports as well. Programs that inform parents about child developmental needs have been shown to diminish child abuse and neglect. Effective programs also offer parents social and emotional support through group activities and support networks (See Strengthening Families and NFP).

Most of the negative developmental consequences that occur to children growing up in fragile families occur because of a lack of physical and relationship resources (Menning, 2002). Programs that help provide families, both in poverty and out of poverty, with emotional support to children and families who are at risk for developmental problems resulting from child abuse, neglect and other family crisis situations. The Lebonheur Parent Pathway Program offers home visitation services to families with newborns to promote positive parenting interaction and to

and a social network help support parents' abilities to provide sensitive, nurturing and responsive caregiving to their children.

Local Social Support Programs For Low-Income Families With Young Children

The safety net for low-income families with children in Shelby County includes an array of public and private programs. These include the **Women, Infants and Children (WIC) Program**, a special supplemental nutrition program that provides participants with vouchers to purchase food packages tailored to their nutritional needs. For more details regarding this program, call the WIC administrative office at (901) 528-0044, Monday-Friday, 8:00 a.m. until 4:30 p.m.

Additionally, the **Families First** temporary assistance program (TANF) offers access to a wide range of benefits to assist families including: food assistance, health care, childcare, transportation assistance, dental care, optical care, vehicle repair, and employment assistance. For more details regarding this program, call the Shelby County Department of Human Services at (901) 543-7351.

High quality early care may shield at risk children from some of the effects of neglect.

For children living in impoverished households, the resources required for optimal development are often priced out of reach. These same children would be most likely to benefit from high-quality preschool environments, such as Early Head Start* and Head Start. When children are in high-quality center-based care, parents have the opportunity to work or go to school and children learn key problem-solving and conversational skills that may shield them from some of the effects of neglect (Wasik, 1998).

*For more information on the benefits of Early Head Start for vulnerable children and families, please see "Learning, Flourishing, and Ready To Achieve: Expanding Access To Early Head Start In Shelby County".

For more information on Head Start and Early Head Start, please contact Shelby County Head Start at (901) 922-0700.

Local Programs That Support Positive Parenting

The Exchange Club Family Center of Memphis works to break the cycle of child abuse and neglect by replacing maladaptive behavior with effective parenting skills. The Exchange Club's parent education program teaches the importance of balancing love and discipline, building self-esteem and preventing parent burnout. For more information, please call (901) 276-2200.

The Lebonheur Center for Children and Parents is dedicated to providing services to children

and families who are at risk for developmental problems resulting from child abuse, neglect and other family crisis situations. The Lebonheur Parent Pathway Program offers home visitation services to families with newborns to promote positive parenting interaction and healthy child growth and development. For more information, please call (901) 287-KIDS.

Tennessee law requires all persons to make a report when they suspect the abuse, neglect or exploitation of a child. If you are worried about possible child maltreatment, please call the Tennessee Central Intake Child Abuse Hotline at 1-877-237-0004 or visit <https://reportabuse.state.tn.us/>. Contact 911 if the situation is a life-threatening emergency.

For more information on the well-being of children in Memphis and Shelby County, please visit [The Urban Child Institute](#), and [The State of Children in Memphis & Shelby County: Data Book](#).

[The Urban Child Institute \(TUCI\)](#) promotes optimal brain development for children from conception to age three. The Institute's [Center for Urban Child Policy](#) supports that mission by building our understanding of inputs to - and implications of - early brain development in our community.

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