

Preventing Child Neglect

Child neglect is the most common form of maltreatment and, although pervasive and sometimes life threatening, is often difficult to identify. Child neglect can lead to depression, apathy, lack of empathy, and, too frequently, to criminal behavior and in some instances death.

We, as a nation and as individuals, have the collective responsibility to promote strong and healthy families, thereby preventing neglect. To accomplish this, we must strengthen services that prevent child abuse and neglect and support children and families. And we must promote research, training, and public education to address the risk factors that can lead to child neglect and to foster the factors that protect against it.

Prevent Child Abuse America Advocates for:

● **Increasing services to families such as home visiting, early childhood education, parent education, and family planning.** Child neglect often occurs because parents are overwhelmed with an array of stressors, including the difficulties of coping with poverty and its many associated burdens, single parenthood, limited parenting skills, depression, substance abuse, interpersonal violence, not to mention the daily stressors all parents face.¹ Services such as home visiting, early childhood education, and parent education, provide emotional support, knowledge, and guidance on how to be a good parent. Family planning helps parents determine whether they are ready to have a child, the number of children they wish to have, and helps parents effectively manage the children they already have.

● **Providing mental health services to parents who need and want such services, and making mental health services available to victims of child neglect as early as possible to prevent the future perpetuation of neglect.** Many cases of chronic neglect involve emotionally unstable and depressed parents - those who experienced poor attachment to their primary caregivers when they themselves were children.² Mental health services may help such parents become more emotionally stable and less depressed, and better able to adequately care for their children.

In addition, children often face severe and potentially long-term psychological consequences as a result of child neglect. Mental health services, especially in the early stages of neglect, can help mitigate some of these consequences and can help ensure that neglect is not perpetuated in the future.

● **Increasing efforts to address social problems such as poverty, substance abuse, and family violence which are related to child neglect.** Child neglect does not exist in a vacuum. It comes part and parcel with other social problems, particularly poverty, substance abuse, and family violence. As such, it is crucial that greater public and private resources be allocated to reduce such related social problems. Such efforts must include the prevention of child neglect as an explicit goal. as an explicit goal.

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● **Increasing public awareness efforts to educate the public about child neglect and how it can help to prevent it.**

Raising public awareness of the serious and pervasive nature of child neglect is essential in order for real change to occur. Wide societal recognition of child neglect can help mobilize significant financial and human resources to address the problem.

Background

Definition of Child Neglect

Child neglect is the deprivation of such basic needs as food, clothing, education, and nurturing. Unlike physical abuse or sexual abuse, which are often identified by specific, discrete acts, neglect is usually typified by an ongoing pattern of inadequate care.³ Child neglect is frequently broken down into four categories:

- **Physical neglect:** This form of neglect accounts for the majority of cases of maltreatment. The definition includes child abandonment, inadequate supervision, rejection of a child leading to expulsion from the home, and a failure to adequately provide for the child's safety and physical needs.
- **Educational neglect:** This form of neglect occurs when a child is allowed to engage in chronic truancy, is of mandatory school age but not enrolled in school or receiving school training, and/or is not receiving needed special education services.
- **Emotional Neglect:** This form of neglect occurs when a child does not receive adequate emotional support, care, or affection.
- **Medical Neglect:** This form of neglect is the failure to provide for appropriate health care for a child.

Scope of Child Neglect

In 2001, approximately 534,300 children (59.2 percent of all substantiated cases of child maltreatment) were officially counted as victims of child neglect,⁴ making it the most prevalent form of child maltreatment. Moreover, child neglect is the leading cause of child abuse and neglect (CA/N) fatalities. In 2001, child neglect alone was responsible for 463 fatalities (35.6 percent of all CA/N fatalities), while a combination of child neglect and physical abuse accounted for an additional 285 fatalities (21.9 percent of all CA/N fatalities).⁵

Nature of Child Neglect

Neglectful parents often suffer from feelings of depression, apathy, futility, and lack of initiative.⁶ These characteristics greatly contribute to the intractability of the problem.⁶ Research indicates that regardless of the level of stress or the availability of support, the emotional stability of the mother was the most significant predictor of child neglect.⁷ Other characteristics of neglectful caretakers include low educational attainment, unemployment, social isolation, low-incomes, and substance abuse.⁸

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Consequences of Child Neglect

Physical consequences of child neglect include illness and impaired growth. Lack of pediatric care can lead to health problems not being detected and possible complications. Lack of supervision can lead to injuries, burns, and poisonings. Lack of supervision in older children can increase risk for delinquent behavior, early sexual activity, and experimentation with drugs and alcohol.⁹

Long-term consequences include developmental problems such as difficulty in concentration and problem solving. Such consequences are particularly conspicuous in the area of academic functioning. One study indicates neglected children's raw scores on math and reading were much lower than even the scores of physically abused children. In the same study, 60 percent of neglected children had repeated one or more grades compared to 24 percent of non-abused children.¹⁰

Other long-term consequences of child neglect include irreversible brain damage resulting from a lack of parental affection and stimulation in the early years; juvenile delinquency; the blunting of creative processes; passivity and poor social skills; and lack of initiative and enthusiasm.¹¹ Finally, as mentioned above, child neglect is the leading cause of child abuse and neglect fatalities.¹²

Additional Resources

¹Gaudin, J. M. (1993). *Child Neglect: A Guide for Intervention*. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration of Children and Families.

²Ibid.

³Drotar, D. (1992). "Prevention of neglect and nonorganic failure to thrive". In D. J. Willis, E. W. Holden and M. Rosenberg (Eds), *Prevention of Child Maltreatment: Developmental and Ecological Perspectives*. New York: John Wiley & Sons.

⁴U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. (2003). *Child Maltreatment 2001*. Available online at <http://www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/cb/publications/cm01/outcover.htm>.

⁵Ibid.

⁶Ibid.

⁷Grayson, J. (Ed.) (1998). Chronic Child Neglect. *Virginia Child Protection Newsletter*, 54.

⁸Gaudin, J. M. (1993). *Child Neglect: A Guide for Intervention*. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration of Children and Families.

⁹Ibid.

¹⁰Ibid.

¹¹Ibid.

¹²U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. (2003). *Child Maltreatment 2001*. Available online at <http://www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/cb/publications/cm01/outcover.htm>

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