



# Information sheet 2

## Neglect is a Child Protection issue

### Definition

Neglect is when a child is not provided with adequate food or shelter, effective medical, therapeutic or remedial treatment, and/or care, nurturance or supervision to a severe and/or persistent extent. The harm experienced by a child is, or is likely to be, detrimental in effect and significant in nature on the child's wellbeing. Neglect can be reactive, acute, chronic, cumulative or episodic, and can result in detrimental effects on the child or young person's social, psychological, educational or physical development and/or in physical injury <sup>1</sup>. Neglect includes behaviour by a caregiver that constitutes a failure to act in ways that are presumed by the culture of a society to be necessary to meet the developmental needs of a child, and which are the responsibility of a caregiver to provide <sup>2</sup>.

### Neglect is traumatic.

Repeated trauma in adult life erodes the structure of the personality already formed whereas repeated trauma in childhood forms and deforms the developing personality. The child trapped in a neglectful environment is trapped in a life of repeated trauma. The potential impact on the developing child of growing up in a neglectful environment with no available adult to keep them safe and secure cannot be overstated, and is usually understated and under-reported.

### Some facts on neglect

- is the most prevalent form of child maltreatment in Australia
- is, along with emotional abuse, the most commonly assessed form of child maltreatment in Western Australia, comprising one quarter of concerns assessed by Department for Child Protection and Family Support in 2013/14 and 34% (1,299) of all child protection substantiations in this period <sup>3</sup>
- Aboriginal children are vastly over-represented in these statistics
- is different from other forms of abuse in that neglect is more likely to be the result of acts of omission (failing to provide adequately for the child), rather than acts of commission (purposefully harming or abusing a child)
- more than for other forms of abuse it relies on a subjective determination by the health worker that there is a deficit in child rearing practices that could result in harm to a child.

### Contentious Issues concerning the understanding and identification of neglect

- **Presence or absence of malevolent intent.** If a parental intent to purposefully harm is absent, this can further complicate matters for the health worker seeking to determine whether or not a child needs protection. Measurement of neglectful behaviour should be based on the principle that failing to provide for a child's needs by a caretaker who has an obligation to do so is neglectful behaviour, regardless of the motive, reason (such as parental ill-health), or circumstance (such as poverty, homelessness or other environmental factors).

<sup>1</sup> Department for Child Protection and Family Support Policy on Neglect 2012, Western Australia

<sup>2</sup> Straus, M. A., & Kaufman Kantor, G. (2005). "Definition and measurement of neglectful behavior: Some principles and guidelines". *Child Abuse and Neglect*, 29(1), 19-29

<sup>3</sup> Department for Child Protection and Family Support Annual Report 2013/14

- **Neglect versus harm.** If the measure of neglect is based on harm to the child then this prevalence may be under-estimated because a large percent of neglected children show no measurable harm as a consequence. For example, in most instances where a child is left unsupervised the child will not come to physical harm and any psychological harm will be dependant on a large number of other parenting, familial, societal, cultural and individual child variables. Ongoing patterns of neglectful parenting are always harmful.
- **Cultural norms** concerning neglectful behaviour vary from society to society and within any given society they may change over time. For instance, Aboriginal children are vastly over-represented in allegations and substantiations of neglect by the Department for Child Protection and Family Support in Western Australia. Such allegations are, in the main, raised by non-Aboriginal people who might not necessarily understand, or agree with, differing styles of parenting and child-rearing practices between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal families. However the 'normalisation' and subsequent excusing of neglect, as the result of accepting a sub-standard norm of child care in any community must be avoided.
- **Determining the threshold for establishing harm.** Some neglectful behaviours, such as abandoning a child, may be more serious or dangerous to a child than others, such as not keeping an eye on a child. A child can be temporarily abandoned and then rescued without coming to any psychological or physical harm. However, abandonment through, for instance, the parent being drunk and incapacitated on a regular basis, is more likely to result in harmful outcomes as it is unlikely to be confined to a single episode. Therefore, the child is likely to be psychologically harmed as a result of feeling uncared for on an ongoing basis. The potential for physical harm and having unmet nutritional, schooling and other needs are also likely to be consistent features.
- **Indicators may vary according to the age of the child.** Any assessment intended to measure neglectful behaviour across the entire span of childhood must consider the child's age and developmental stage. As a general rule, the greater the dependency of the child on the adult for care, protection and nurturing – which itself has a direct correlation with the child's age - the greater the potential for harm if the adult consistently fails to adequately meet those needs.

### Remember:

- Deprivation of a child's basic needs should be considered within the context of neglect and of potential physical, emotional or psychological harm.
- The intent of a caregiver to do their best can still result in negative consequences for the child.
- Every child has two parents; whilst the parent who is present may have neglected to attend to the primary needs of the child, they may still have been more committed to trying to achieve this than an absent parent.
- The focus needs to be on assessing the neglectful behaviours and the impact on the child, rather than on focussing on what may have been the intent behind the actions of the adult/parent.
- Any single indicator should not necessarily be interpreted as positive confirmation of neglect.

**Whenever a health professional has clear concerns of physical, emotional, sexual abuse and/or neglect happening to the child they are seeing, or any other child in the family, they have a responsibility to take action to ensure that protective measures are put in place.**

**Refer to *Guidelines for Protecting Children 2015* for further information and guidance.**