



U.S. DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH AND HUMAN SERVICES

Office of Human Development Services
Administration for Children, Youth and Families
Children's Bureau
National Center on Child Abuse and Neglect

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Perspectives on Child Maltreatment in the Mid '80s

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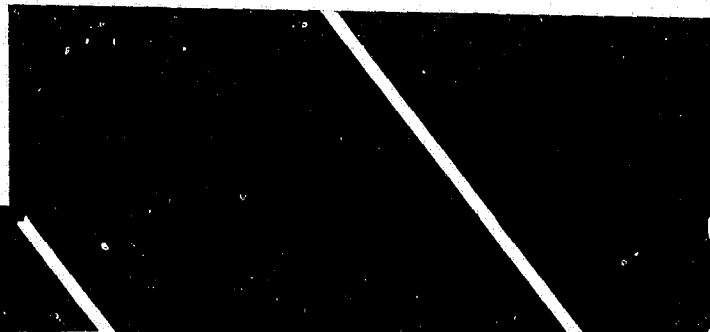
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Child Neglect: An Overview

by Aeolian M. Jackson

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Since the passage of Public Law 93-247 in 1974, which established the National Center on Child Abuse and Neglect (NCCAN), child abuse has received substantially more attention and resources from legislators, researchers, program planners, the media and the public than child neglect. However, as the following statistics indicate, child neglect is the most pervasive, costly and intractable child maltreatment problem encountered by child protective service workers.

Scope of the Problem

- Child neglect is substantiated following child protective services investigations twice as frequently as all forms of abuse combined, according to data collected by the American Human Association (See Table 1).
- Child fatalities and more severe injury and/or impairment are more frequently associated with neglect than with abuse. While not all states provide information on child fatalities to the national reporting system, the pattern of higher death risk associated with neglect is evident (see Table 2). Furthermore, in a national study of the incidence of child maltreatment, which described the severity of child maltreatment as recognized by local child protective services agencies, investigatory agencies and community service agencies, 32 percent of child neglect cases, but only 12 percent of child abuse cases, were found to cause the child serious injury or impairment.¹
- Children placed in foster care are twice as likely to be neglected as abused, and neglected children tend to remain in foster care twice as long as abused children. A 1977 study of a sample of the 1.8 million children receiving public social service showed that 16 percent of the children in foster care were receiving services primarily because of neglect and five percent primarily because of abuse.² An analysis of 1977 national public social

services data revealed that children in foster care because of abuse had been in placement an average of 26 months while those in foster care for reason of neglect had spent an average of 46 months in placement—or 77 percent longer.³ More recently, a study conducted by the American Public Welfare Association found that in 1982, in 17 states with comparable data, neglect was cited as the reason for a child's placement more than twice as frequently as abuse (38,840 cases vs. 17,077 cases).⁴

- The substitute placement costs for neglected children may be four times as great as those for abused children. This estimate is based on the evidence, cited previously, that more than twice as many neglected as abused children are in foster care and that neglected children tend to remain in care almost twice as long.
- The personal and social costs of the diminished lifetime potential of neglected children are only now being gleaned. In a longitudinal study of maltreated children, B. Egland and colleagues found neglected children to be disadvantaged when compared with other maltreated children:

"Neglected children in our sample appeared to have difficulty pulling themselves together to deal with tasks. They were distractible, impulsive, low in ego control, and were the least flexible and creative of all groups in their attempts to solve the barrier task. . . . These children appeared to lack the self-esteem and agency necessary to cope effectively with the environment. In fact, children in the neglect without physical abuse group received the lowest ratings of all groups in both self-esteem and agency at 42 months. This is an unhappy group of children, presenting the least positive and the most negative affect of all groups. These same children were also the most dependent and demonstrated the lowest ego control in the preschool, and, in general, they did not have the skills necessary to cope with various situations."⁵

Demonstration Programs

Little literature is devoted to treating child neglect. A recent article by D. Austin, which provides succinct guidance for CPS staff who work with neglectful families, is one of few on the subject.⁶

In Fiscal 1978, NCCAN funded 19 demonstration projects in five areas: sex abuse, adolescent abuse, maltreatment associated with substance abuse, child neglect and remedial services to maltreated children. In addition, an evaluation contract was awarded to explore client characteristics, services and outcomes within and between the projects. The final evaluation report included information on 986 families. In assessing the severity of maltreatment patterns across all projects, the evaluators concluded that "child neglect and emotional maltreatment result in far more severe damage to a larger percentage of its victims than either physical or sexual abuse. Fifty-five percent of all the cases which resulted in severe harm to the children involved child neglect as the primary type of maltreatment."⁷

In evaluating service effectiveness, they concluded that engagement and retention of maltreating families in treatment programs is a major problem, and that the optimal length of time for successful service to adolescents and adults is between seven and 18 months. Infants and children require longer periods of treatment for successful outcomes. The evaluators also noted that group counseling and education and skill development classes appear to be the most successful methods of achieving positive outcomes with adult clients.⁸

The projects that provided remedial services to maltreated children included a substantial number of neglected children. The final report on this sub-cluster of projects makes a needed contribution to the literature on treating maltreated children (as opposed to adult caretakers).⁹ In addition to providing prescriptions for classroom treatment of specified developmental deficits, it describes the desirable characteristics of therapeutic child care settings, including physical arrangements, staff characteristics, and training, program philosophy and service elements. A number of issues papers written by project staff members are appended to the report.

Research On Child Neglect

In 1981, NCCAN funded two projects, now in their third and final year, to conduct field-initiated research on child neglect.

N. Polansky has investigated loneliness (subjective) and isolation (objective) as experienced by neglectful parents when compared with non-neglectful parents in similar circumstances.¹⁰ His findings to date indicate that neglectful mothers perceived themselves to be significantly more lonely than non-neglectful mothers do; they had fewer "significant others" to turn to for either practical or emotional support. There was also evidence that they were rejected in their own communities—they were unlikely to be sought out for assistance and were more likely to be excluded from mutual help networks. These findings were consistent across ethnic groups and in both rural and urban settings.

P. Crittenden's research examined the quality of relationships formed by neglectful parents as compared with those formed by adequate parents and parents who presented other childrearing problems (abuse, marginal maltreatment and abuse/neglect).¹¹ She reports that the groups did not differ in terms of the number of network members, but that the quality of the network exchanges differed markedly for neglectful parents. Although these parents received more material support—housing, child care and financial assistance than the other groups, they were more dissatisfied with the help they received.

Three distinct network patterns were discerned. The neglectful mothers were immersed in stable but closed networks. They embraced few new relationships, were exposed to few new influences. By comparison, the other three problem groups were involved in open and unstable groups. They saw their friends more often but had more transient relationships. Finally, mothers who provided adequate child care tended to have relationships that were both open and stable.

An important finding with practical implications is the different pattern of relationships between parents and professionals reported for these three groups of mothers. Neglectful mothers tended to withdraw from professionals; they made the interviewer feel rejected as they passively warded off the relationship. The three other groups of mothers tended to manipulate the interviewer, inciting feelings of weariness and guilt as they actively warded off the relationship. The mothers who provided adequate child care tended to be cooperative in their exchanges with the interviewer and aroused the interviewer's interest in continued contact.

Together, these research studies underscore the relative inaccessibility of neglectful mothers, who challenge professionals and volunteers to provide the special, long-term and consistent support they need. Both final project reports will describe the effects of neglect on children and offer recommendations for treatment approaches to neglectful families.

**TABLE 1 SUBSTANTIATED
MALTREATMENT—PERCENT**

(Compiled from *Highlights of Official Child Neglect and Abuse Reporting, Annual Reports, 1976-1980, American Humane Association*)

Type	1979	1980	1981	1982
Major Physical Injury	4	4	4	2
Minor Physical Injury	15	20	20	17
Physical Injury (Unspecified)	3	3	3	5
Sex Abuse	6	7	7	7
Deprivation of Necessities*	63	61	59	62
Emotional Maltreatment	15	13	12	10
Other	9	8	12	10
Number of cases (in thousands)	226	268	236	332

*failure to provide shelter, nourishment, health care, education, supervision, clothing and failure to thrive, as defined by the states.

**TABLE 2 FATALITIES ASSOCIATED
WITH CHILD MALTREATMENT**

(American Humane Association, 1979-82 data)

Year	Total # Reported	# States Reporting	# With Maltreatment Type Known	Cases As- sociated With Neglect	
				#	%
1979	350	25	261	142	54
1980	421	27	288	123	43
1981	585	25	381	212	56
1982	484	24	282	144	51

Future NCCAN Activities

The Fiscal 1984 grant program includes several priority areas that address special issues in child neglect. The priority statement invited proposals to test innovative program designs and to develop staff training and decision-making guidelines to address the general problem of child neglect.

The category of neglect includes a subcategory, lack of supervision, which accounted for 26 percent of all substantiated child maltreatment in 1982. The 1984 statement also invited proposals to investigate the characteristics and attitudes of parents reported for leaving children unsupervised and to investigate the CPS agencies' response to such reports.

A third priority area focuses on prevention of child abuse and neglect in minority communities. Minority families are overrepresented in abuse and neglect statistics, primarily in the area of neglect. For example, while neglect accounts for three out of five substantiated child maltreatment cases, it represents four out of five cases among black families. Thus, successful programs to reduce child maltreatment in minority communities will have a major impact on the reduction of child neglect.

It is clear that a high priority must be assigned to the prevention, identification and treatment of child neglect. Recent and planned NCCAN-funded efforts, including data collection and demonstration and research

grants and contracts, are providing the impetus for increased attention to this special childrearing problem.

¹National Center on Child Abuse and Neglect, *Study Findings: National Study of the Incidence and Severity of Child Abuse and Neglect*, DHHS Publication No. (OHDS) 81-30325.

²A. W. Shyne and A. G. Schroeder, *National Study of Social Services to Children and Their Families*, DHEW Publication No. (OHDS) 78-30150.

³E. V. Mech, *Public Social Services to Minority Children and Their Families, Final Report*, ACYF grant number 90-C-2042, 1980.

⁴American Public Welfare Association, *Voluntary Cooperative Information System National Child Welfare Data Base, Item No. 10*, 1983.

⁵B. Eglund, L. A. Sroufe and M. Erickson, "The Development Consequence of Different Patterns of Maltreatment," *International Journal of Child Abuse and Neglect* (in press).

⁶D. J. Austin, "Treating Neglect: Learning How to See, Feel and Touch It," in C.M. Trainor (ed.), *The Dilemma of Child Neglect: Identification and Treatment*, Denver, American Humane Association, 1983.

⁷Berkeley Planning Associates, *The Exploration of Client Characteristics, Services and Outcomes*, draft final report, HEW contract number 105-78-1108, 1982.

⁸Ibid.

⁹Berkeley Planning Associates, *Therapeutic Child Care: Approaches to Remedialing the Effects of Child Abuse and Neglect*, cluster substudy, HEW contract number 105-78-1108.

¹⁰N. A. Polansky, P. W. Ammons and J. M. Gaudin, Jr., "Loneliness and Isolation in Child Neglect," *Social Casework* (in press).

¹¹P. Crittenden, "The Relationship of Quality of Network Support to Quality of Child-rearing and Child Development," paper presented at the Second Annual Forum for Developmental Research, Virginia Commonwealth University, Richmond, Nov. 1983.