An attachment perspective on social work with neglected children and their families

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Outline

• Introduction
• Attachment and Neglect: Theory
• Attachment and Neglect: Practice Issues
  - Assessment
  - Intervention
• Conclusions
Introduction

• Defining the problem: features of neglect

• Effects of neglect on children’s development and capacity for resilience

• A relationship-based approach
Features of neglect

Neglect is typically identified by lack of one or a combination of features:

- Physical care
- Parenting knowledge/skills
- Social contact/networks AND
- Breakdown or absence of a relationship of care
The importance of care

• Care is a form of active engagement with an other, where the other’s needs set the terms for the carer’s involvement

• ‘Care is a multi-dimensional concept that includes within it an attitude of sympathy and compassion as well as the discharge of specific duties’. (Clark, 2000:41)

• Importance of attachment in care-giving relationships
Effects

CHILD
Safeguarding and promoting welfare

FAMILY & ENVIRONMENTAL FACTORS
- Selfcare Skills
- Social Presentation
- Family & Social Relationships
- Community Resources
- Integration
- Income
- Employment
- Housing
- Wider Family
- History & Functioning

PARENTING CAPACITY
- Health
- Basic Care
- Ensuring Safety
- Emotional Warmth
- Stimulation
- Guidance & Boundaries
- Stability

CHILD'S DEVELOPMENTAL NEEDS
- Education
- Emotional & Behavioural Development
- Identity
Effects

- Health
- Education
- Emotional and behavioural development
- Identity
- Family and social relationships
- Social presentation
- Self-care skills
Factors that promote resilience and provide some protection in adversity, namely

- a secure base,
- good self esteem and
- a sense of self-efficacy

are undermined by chronic neglect
A relationship-based approach

• A way of working that sees relationship as the central process through which practice is mediated.

• Understanding and working with both the relationship between parent and child and the relationship between practitioner and family member
Attachment difficulties and neglect - theory

• The enduring impact of internal working models
• Linking attachment difficulties and neglect
• Faulty attachments and parental ‘non-response’
• An integrated approach
Family characteristics

Neglecting families are typically characterised by:

- Poverty
- Social isolation
- Lack of support
- Lack of trust in people outside the family
Patterns of family functioning

- Family functioning generally less ‘healthy’
- Pervading sense of helplessness or powerlessness
- Mothers typically affectless, unmotivated, isolated, immature
- Fathers/male partners often tangential to neglectful families
- Less frequent, more negative, fewer positive interactions between parent & child
Attachment difficulties and neglect: practice issues

• Assessment

• Intervention
Assessment

• The importance of assessment being underpinned by an attachment perspective
• Recognising and working with causes not symptoms
• Accessing current and historical patterns of relating in families
• The contribution of observation
Intervention: parallel relationships, parallel processes

• Partnership working with families
  - working with parents
  - working with children

• The partnership between agency and practitioner
Working with parents or working with mothers? Care and gender

- Relationships of care have been characterised by an association with the feminine
- Some authors have endorsed the care perspective and celebrated women’s connection with caring
- But these accounts do not address the social context of care and the impact of unequal power relationships
Mothers and neglect

• Home alone mum is arrested at airport (4 March 2003, *The Mirror*)

• Mother arrested over 'home alone' children (31 October 2005, *The Guardian*) A mother reported to have left her two children at home while she went on a Caribbean holiday has been arrested …

• Home alone holiday mum arrested (29 June 2005, *The Mirror*) Mother who left her three children at home while she had boozy 16-day holiday in Turkey …
Women and neglect: why does it matter?

- It leads to the personalising or individualising of the very complex problem of neglect and to the pathologising of women
- A gender-biased approach runs the risk of producing only partial assessments
- It reflects a failure to recognise the complexity of caring/mothering and the relational basis of neglect
Working with parents

• Being in and working on the relationship
• Pivotal role of the caseworker constructed in therapeutic terms
• Early intervention in the parent/child relationship
• Long term intensive work
• ‘Managed’ dependency
Working with children

• Importance of direct work with children
• Developing skills for practice
• Resilience research: the importance for the child of a relationship with a trusted adult
Working within the agency

- Quality of thinking
- Dealing with powerful emotions
- A challenge to ‘short-termism’ and managerialism
- Supervision that parallels the work it supports
Conclusions

• Neglect is a significant issue for social work
• Importance of addressing underlying attachment difficulties
• Using a relationship-based approach to practice
• Working to effect change in internal working model - being in and working on the relationship
• Implications for family, practitioner and organisation