

Learning from the Partnership Learning Review: Neglect

Summary of the case reviewed:

Oxfordshire Safeguarding Children Board undertook a Partnership Learning Review (PLR) to identify strengths in practice, and areas for improvement, in relation to partnership working and the multi-agency response to neglect.

The review considered a 14-year old who was severely neglected, and their 3-year old sibling who showed signs of basic needs not being persistently met by parents. During the period reviewed, the children experienced cumulative harm, likely to be due to parental low mood. Universal services were involved with the family.

The review concluded that the physical and emotional neglect of both children might have been prevented if Threshold of Needs Guidance had been understood and used to identify and name neglect, and to provide targeted early help. Findings highlight the difficulties when working with neglect and how this can result in missed opportunities to see the whole picture for children. The review identifies a number of learning points and areas for improvement.

Key Findings

- **Understanding, identifying and working with neglect**
Signs and symptoms of neglect were not identified, named, or responded to at an early help level.
- **Understanding and applying the use of thresholds**
Agencies involved with the family noted concerns, for example professionals who visited the family at home, noted 'dirty' and unhygienic' conditions and school staff identified concerns on a number of occasions regarding head lice and personal hygiene. This information was not shared with other professionals involved, to better understand the lived experience of the children and their parents, and assess the level of need and intervention required.
- **Professional curiosity to consider a range of behaviours in children and young people**
Professionals demonstrated a limited understanding of the impact the home situation had on the children's day to day lives. Their health and development, appearance and behaviours were not recognised as them 'voicing' that all was not well at home.

Strengths in practice:

- The older child felt supported in school by key teaching staff
- Imaginative approaches were used by Health Visiting Professionals to engage parents

Themes in common with other Oxfordshire case reviews:

- Understanding the child's world
- Professional curiosity and analytical thinking
- Understanding the impact of parental mental ill health on parenting capacity
- Effective multi-agency working to see the full picture
- The importance of involving the wider family in assessment and planning

Learning points for practitioners:

- **Effective relationship building alongside saying it “as it is”**
Families tell us they want simple, jargon-free explanations, clarity and honesty. Strike a balance which builds trust and also clearly names professional worries when identifying and assessing neglectful situations at an early help level with families. Remember to use the OSCB Neglect webpages to support your Practice – there are many tested tools and approaches to identifying and assessing neglect at all levels of need, e.g. [the childcare and development checklist \(2019\)](#) – commonly referred to as the Neglect toolkit.
- **Understanding the causes and effects with neglect**
Practitioners working in areas where many families are struggling with poverty and parenting, may be less sensitive to warning signs such as poor physical care, dirty, smelly clothes and recurring head lice. Any level of assessment should include the signs and symptoms, causes and effects, and parental capacity to change. Refer to the [Threshold of Needs](#) and [Neglect: Guide for Practitioners](#).
- **Use of chronologies when working with neglect**
Chronologies help to identify patterns and events in a child’s life early on. They are particularly useful when working with neglect, help practitioners understand the impact of events and changes on the child and when a multi-agency response may be required.
- **Whole family thinking**
Practitioners working with the children and family focused on the needs of a particular child or family member, rather than thinking about the family as a whole and asking the question “how are the needs and behaviour of the individual family member impacting on other members of the family?”.
- **Professional curiosity**
Look, listen, ask direct questions, check out and reflect on information received. This means not taking a single source of information and accepting it at face value and testing out your professional assumptions about what is going on for a family. Work closely and form positive relationships with other professionals to enable you to get a full assessment of the child’s lived experience. Professional Curiosity and critical thinking with other professionals help to explore differing views and hypothesis when trying to understand a child’s world. Use the Early Help Assessment to gather more information from other agencies to see a fuller picture.
- **The role of housing professionals in identifying neglect**
Housing staff have a key safeguarding role to play, alongside colleagues in social care, health, education, the police and other agencies working with children and families, in keeping people safe. They are well placed to identify people with support needs or at risk, to share information and work in partnership to coordinate responses. When doing home visits, think about what you see, hear, smell and feel inside the home, e.g. is it in a poor condition, dirty, smelly, does it make you uncomfortable? If so, think about the impact on the children living there.

Learning point for managers:

- **Knowing the whole family’s support system**
Use [Family Group Conferencing](#) earlier in the pathway for children and young people in need of support in their families via Early Help and Child in Need arrangements.
- **Supervision & 1:1 discussion**
Prioritise and provide a safe space to support and enable practitioners to be curious in their thinking about what else might be going on in this family? [OSCB Safeguarding Conversations poster](#) has been developed to help focus safeguarding conversations on better understanding a child’s lived experience.

- **Promote the use of tools**
Promote the use of tools to support early identification and intervention in neglect, to improve outcomes for children, e.g. OSCB [neglect webpages](#) and [multi-agency toolkit](#), Oxfordshire County Council's [practitioner toolkit](#) and [the social workers toolbox](#) (range of free tools and resources).
- **Prevention**
Promote the use of the early help pathways and assessments to understand a family's story and what support is needed from which agencies (not always Children's Social Care).

Learning points for the safeguarding system:

The OSCB Neglect Subgroup, in its leadership role within the safeguarding children partnership, should:

- At every opportunity promote a cultural shift across universal services so that Early Help Assessments are seen as a helpful multi-agency tool to use to understand a family's story/provision of support services.
- Ensure that adolescent neglect, and the link with adolescent behaviours and personal issues, is understood across the multi-agency safeguarding network
- Ensure that housing colleagues have sound knowledge and skills in identifying neglect
- Raise awareness of the impact increasing numbers of children living in poverty has on children's health, wellbeing and outcomes, and on demand for services

Take the time to reflect

On the power of professionals spoken & written language when identifying and assessing neglect

- Is it clear & jargon free?
- Do the family understand what you mean?
- Do you feel confident in saying it or explaining it?
- What evidence have you and what change is needed and by when?

Did you know? The following links offer useful further information and guidance:

- [OSCB neglect webpages](#)
- [NSPCC: Learning from case review briefing on neglect](#)
- [Children's Society: Adolescent neglect, practitioners briefing](#)
- [Children's Society: Troubled teens, policy and practice briefing](#)
- [Joseph Rowntree Foundation: The relationship between poverty, child abuse and neglect, an evidence review](#)
- [Research in Practice: Neglect in the context of poverty and austerity \(available to purchase\)](#)
- [OFSTED guidance for joint targeted area inspection on the theme: children living with neglect](#)

If you do one thing.....Talk with children and families about the many benefits of working with early help support (Universal, Universal Plus and Targeted Early Help). Pick up the phone/meet your multi-agency colleagues to think together with the family about what support and help is needed.

REMEMBER it is never too early to have a conversation with families and each other!