

## Behavioral and Emotional Indicators of Neglect

Neglect is the result of parenting which fails to meet the child's basic physical, nutritional, safety, medical, and emotional needs. The risks of neglect are serious injury, pervasive developmental delay and disability, and in serious circumstances, death. Neglect is often more subtle, less obvious to an untrained observer and, therefore, may be less often identified and receive less intervention than abuse.

### Neglected children include:

- Children who are **abandoned** by their parents - This includes children who have been left by their parents with other people, including strangers, for extended periods of time without parental contact or support.
- Children who have been **expelled** from their homes without having reasonable care and supervision arranged
- Children who are **malnourished and dehydrated** - Such children are either not fed or are fed improperly. In infants, severe malnutrition results in failure to thrive. In older children, the symptoms may not be as pronounced, but the affects of long-term malnutrition can be as serious. These children are recognizable by their poor weight gain for height and age, thin extremities, a sallow or pale, pasty appearance, and, in young children, protruding abdomen. The failure to provide adequate nutrition puts children at risk of brain damage and death.
- Children who are **not provided reasonable medical** care as recommended by health care professionals
- Children who are **ill and injured and who do not receive medical care** - The failure to provide medical care can result in chronic illness and disabling conditions. In addition, the failure to provide medical care exacerbates the process of normal diseases. For example, untreated colds and flu can result in pneumonia, which can be fatal.
- Children who live in a **dangerous physical environment** - While a dirty house does not by itself create risk for children, children can be seriously harmed when the living environment is unsanitary or

dangerous. Excessive filth, including exposed garbage, rotting food, animal and human excrement, and other unsanitary conditions can expose a child to disease and illness. Dangerous conditions in the home and immediate environment create risk of serious injury, including broken glass, sharp exposed edges, exposed electrical wires, flaking lead-based paint, the presence of rats or other vermin in the living environment, and unprotected areas from which children could fall.

- Children who are left **unsupervised** - Children who are not old enough to care for themselves and are left unattended; who are inadequately supervised because of the parent's drunkenness, drug abuse, psychiatric disorder; or who are supervised by someone who is not competent to meet their needs are at risk of injury and death. Many children have died in fires they have started by playing with matches while unattended.
- Children who lack basic **physical care and hygiene** - Again, a dirty child is not necessarily a child at risk. However, the chronic lack of physical care can create risk of disease or illness. Examples are ulcerative diaper rash from unchanged diapers and localized or systemic bacterial infections from skin abrasions or other injuries.
- Children who are **inadequately clothed** - The child who is not provided proper clothing for the weather is at risk of illness from exposure.
- In some states, failure to send the child to school and to assure the child acquires a basic education or failure to obtain recommended special education services is considered **educational neglect**.

The degree of permanent harm from neglect is variable, but in general, **the younger the child or the more developmentally delayed, the higher the risk to the child from neglect**. Young children are more vulnerable to the effects of neglect for the same reasons they are more vulnerable to abuse.

In situations of severe neglect, the outcomes are often easy to identify by physical indicators of malnutrition, illness, or injury.

In situations where neglect is less serious, the indicators may not be as immediately visible. However, the long-term effects of chronic neglect

can be very serious. The potential for these effects to be present and the types of services that may be provided to reduce the risk are what the worker must evaluate in the family risk assessment process.

### Behavioral and Emotional Indicators

Behavioral and emotional indicators can alert a caseworker to the presence of neglect in a family when there are no clear physical indicators of illness or injury:

- A very large percentage of neglected children are **developmentally delayed** in all developmental domains. One can determine the degree of delay by comparing the child's developmental level with expected developmental achievements for the child's chronological age. Neglected children may display from mild to serious delays in physical/motor development, cognitive ability and school achievement, social skill and interpersonal relationships, and emotional development. Severely neglected children may develop mental retardation as a result.
- Neglected children are often characterized as **unresponsive**, placid, apathetic, dull, as lacking in curiosity and uninterested in their surroundings. They do not approach other people, nor do they exhibit a normal degree of exuberance in their interactions. They may not play, or they may play half-heartedly. In cases of serious neglect, the child may exhibit signs of depression.
- The child may appear to be **hungry or always tired**. Some older children who are inadequately fed use their own resources by scrounging for or stealing food.
- Some neglected children may be **out of control** due to an absence of limits from adult caretakers. They may exhibit a variety of behavior problems, anxiety, and other signs of emotional distress. At times a false bravado can be seen.
- **School failure** may be an indicator of neglect, particularly when combined with an inability to concentrate, falling to sleep in class, and a lack of interest in the school environment. School failure by itself cannot be considered the result of neglect but can support a diagnosis of neglect when other indicators are also present.