

Child Neglect

Child neglect is the most frequently identified type of child maltreatment in the United States. 64 percent of child maltreatment in the United States are cases of child neglect. It is estimated 917,200 cases of child neglect or an estimated incidence rate of 14.6 per 1,000 children.

Definition

A condition in which a caretaker responsible for the child, either deliberately or by extraordinary inattentiveness, permits the child to experience avoidable present suffering and/or fails to provide one or more of the ingredients generally deemed essential for developing a person's physical, intellectual, and emotional capacities

Types of Neglect

Physical neglect -- accounts for the majority of cases of maltreatment. The definition includes the refusal of or extreme delay in seeking necessary health care, child abandonment, inadequate supervision, rejection of a child leading to expulsion from the home, and failing to adequately provide for the child's safety and physical and emotional needs. Physical neglect can severely impact a child's development by causing failure to thrive, malnutrition; serious illnesses; physical harm in the form of cuts, bruises and burns due to lack of supervision and a lifetime of low self-esteem.

Educational neglect -- occurs when a child is allowed to engage in chronic truancy, is of mandatory school age but not enrolled in school or receiving needed special educational training. Educational neglect can lead to underachievement in acquiring necessary basic skills, dropping out of school and/or continually disruptive behavior.

Emotional neglect -- includes such actions as chronic or extreme spousal abuse in the child's presence, allowing a child to use drugs or alcohol, refusal or failure to provide needed psychological care, constant belittling and withholding of affection. This pattern of behavior can lead to poor self-image, alcohol or drug abuse, destructive behavior and even suicide. Severe neglect of infants can result in the infant failing to grow and thrive and may even lead to infant death.

Medical neglect -- is the failure to provide appropriate health care for a child although financially able to do so. In some cases, a parent or caretaker will withhold traditional medical care during the practice of religious beliefs. These cases generally do not fall under the definition of medical neglect, however, some states will obtain a court order forcing medical treatment of a child in order to save a child's life or prevent life-threatening injury resulting from the lack of treatment. Medical neglect can result in poor overall health and compounded medical problems.

43 percent of the identified neglect was physical neglect, which included children living in unsafe housing, not being fed nutritionally adequate meals, being consistently without adequate clothing, and receiving grossly inadequate care for personal hygiene. The second largest category of neglect was inadequate supervision of children (36.6 percent) and failure or delay in providing health care (20.8 percent).

Causes and Characteristics

- **Depression**
Depressed Mothers are more likely than non-depressed mothers to be hostile, rejecting, and indifferent toward their children and to be neglectful especially with respect to feeding and supervision. 60 percent of neglectful mothers versus only 33 percent of a comparison group of low-income non-neglecting mothers had a "clinically significant" problem with depression.
- **Substance Abuse**
Abuse of alcohol or drugs is often present in cases of child neglect. 80 to 90 percent of the children removed from their homes for severe child abuse or neglect had at least one parent with a history of alcoholism.
- **Family Composition**
Most neglectful families are single-parent families. The absence of the father in the majority of neglectful families means lower income and less tangible resources to provide for children's needs.
- **Family Size**
Chronic neglectful families tend to be *large* families with fewer resources to meet basic needs than other families. Numerous studies have discovered that neglectful families on the average have more children than non-neglecting families.
- **Family Interaction Patterns**
Patterns of verbal and nonverbal communication between neglectful parents and children have been characterized as infrequent and predominantly negative.

Unemployment, which causes psychological and economic stress, is frequent in neglectful families. Neglectful families are less likely to be involved in church or other formal organizations that might be sources of tangible or psychological support. Neglectful families tend to live in impoverished neighborhoods and view their neighborhoods as less helpful and less supportive than do non-neglectful parents. Chronically neglecting families are viewed as deviant, even by their similarly impoverished neighbors, who avoid social contacts with them. Families of color, who are over represented in child neglect statistics, must also cope with the stress of racial prejudice in many communities.

Interestingly the ethnic and cultural differences in child maltreatment are small or nonexistent when families have adequate economic and social resources, but the combination of racial discrimination and poverty places unusual stresses on families of color that frequently overwhelm their coping resources

Impact

Child victims of neglect fail to develop secure psychological attachments as infants, and this seriously handicaps their subsequent development. Neglected preschool children demonstrate lack of readiness for learning, behavior problems, and less active interaction with peers. School-aged neglected children do poorly in school, but the connection between delinquency and abuse is less clear. Neglected children under age 3 are at high risk for child fatalities.