The National Alliance of Children’s Trust and Prevention Funds launched an initiative in 2011 to increase national focus on prevention of child neglect, with funding from the Doris Duke Charitable Foundation. As one of the first steps in that initiative, the Alliance conducted a preliminary review of the literature on child neglect. The following is a brief summary of the literature review so far, focusing on risk and protective factors for neglect. With more neglect-specific research focusing on risk factors than protective factors, the picture painted is not as strength-based as the Alliance would like it to be. Over the next three years, the Alliance intends to seek out and promote more research into protective factors and enhance our collective understanding of what we can do to ensure that families are able to meet their children’s needs. That work will look at research, policies, programs, and practices that hold promise for the primary prevention of child neglect.

Neglect is less understood, yet more prevalent, than other forms of child maltreatment. For a variety of reasons, including lack of a clear and accepted definition, it has been less studied than physical, sexual, and emotional abuse. Notably, as rates of other forms of maltreatment appear to have decreased in recent years, rates of neglect have remained constant. Neglect is the most prevalent form of maltreatment reported to and confirmed by child protective services (CPS) agencies in America – often co-occurring with other forms of maltreatment. In 2010, 78% of child victims were neglected. Nearly one-third (32%) of child maltreatment fatalities in 2010 were attributed exclusively to neglect. In one study, families that were re-referred to CPS were referred for neglect more often than any other form of maltreatment, regardless of what form of maltreatment had been confirmed in their initial CPS contact. This pattern suggests that neglect may be occurring “below the radar” in many families before they come into contact with CPS, even as they are reported for other forms of maltreatment.

DEFINING NEGLECT

Definitions and typologies of neglect vary, both among states and among researchers who study the phenomenon. Most definitions include the following types of neglect, grouped together in various ways: physical neglect, psychological or emotional neglect, educational neglect, supervisory neglect, medical neglect, and environmental neglect, which refers to serious hazards in the neighborhood or community that threaten a child’s safety. Crittenden has proposed a typology focused on the mental processes of the neglecting parent: disorganized, emotionally neglecting, and depressed.  

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In addition to how they categorize types of neglect, definitions also vary in whether they emphasize a parent or caregiver’s action or inaction, or the child’s experience and unmet needs. For example, some parental actions may put a child at risk without any harm actually coming to the child – which would meet some, but not all, definitions of neglect. With a focus on the child’s unmet needs, the threshold for neglectful behavior can vary greatly depending on the child’s age and medical or mental health needs.

Some state statutes specify that neglect only occurs when a family has the resources or capacity to meet the child’s needs, but fails to do so. In other words, caregivers cannot be deemed neglectful if the child’s needs are unmet due to poverty or lack of resources. However, legal ramifications aside, if we define neglect in terms of the unmet needs of a child, the presence or absence of resources to meet those needs becomes less relevant.

Finally, caregiving behavior can be said to fall on a spectrum. It is difficult to pinpoint exactly where on that spectrum sub-optimal parenting crosses over into neglect. Behaviors that have the potential to damage children’s immediate or long-term well-being do not always reach the threshold for CPS intervention, particularly if they do not threaten the child’s immediate physical safety. In many families, children’s needs may go unmet and their physical and emotional well-being may be threatened due to neglectful behaviors that never come to the attention of CPS and would not be confirmed as neglect even if they were investigated. There is a great need for preventive services that target neglectful behaviors among families outside of CPS.

RISK FACTORS FOR CHILD NEGLECT

While most research on risk and protective factors has focused on child maltreatment in general (or on child sexual abuse in particular), some more recent work has focused specifically on which factors are related to neglect. The majority of the available neglect-specific research is related to risk factors, but protective factors will also be discussed to the extent that they have been studied. Very little research has focused on characteristics of caregivers who parent well and do not neglect their children despite difficult circumstances. The Alliance will continue to search for more information in this area.

Belsky’s developmental-ecological model of child maltreatment delineates four levels at which risk and protective factors can be identified. (This model is based on Bronfenbrenner’s ecological model of human development, as is the CDC’s social-ecological model.) At the individual level, we consider characteristics of parents and caregivers that make them more or less likely to neglect the children in their care; this level can also include child characteristics that influence the likelihood of neglect. At the microsystem level, family dynamics and interactions between parent and child characteristics define the immediate family context in which a child develops and the likelihood of neglect occurring. The next level, the exosystem, includes neighborhoods and other contexts in which the family members spend time, such as work, school, and extended family. Finally, the macrosystem encompasses the larger culture, including values and policies that relate to children.
and families. We will consider risk and protective factors at each level of the ecology. See the sidebar for descriptions of some of the studies referred to below.

**INDIVIDUAL LEVEL – PARENT AND CHILD CHARACTERISTICS**

Looking across three rigorous studies, Slack and colleagues identified a cluster of risk factors for child neglect at the level of parent characteristics. These factors, which were significant predictors of neglect in at least two of the three studies included in the analysis, include parental depression, substance abuse, health problems, social isolation, and high levels of parenting stress. Higher levels of maternal self-efficacy and involvement in child’s activities emerged as protective factors that decreased the odds of neglect. Other studies have also identified maternal history of being neglected, young maternal age at first birth, low socioeconomic status, and limited maternal education as risk factors for neglect. Primary caregivers’ mental health and substance abuse problems have also been found to be highly predictive of substantiated physical neglect.

Note that the majority of this research focuses on maternal characteristics. Very little research has focused on paternal characteristics related to maltreatment in general, and even less on neglect. One study did consider both parents’ substance abuse and psychiatric disorders and their impact on child neglect. In the two-parent families studied, paternal substance abuse and psychopathology were related to paternal neglect of the child. However, mothers’ psychopathology, particularly antisocial personality disorder, was more strongly correlated with fathers’ neglect of children than was fathers’ own psychopathology. There is a need for more research on the role of fathers in child neglect.

Crittenden’s work focuses on parental mental processes that lead to what she calls “inadequate parenting,” including neglect. In this theoretical approach, informed by clinical experience, the focus is on the parent’s history, attachment style, and information processing patterns that lead him or her to misinterpret children’s behavior and threats to their safety. In the case of neglect, Crittenden describes parents whose own needs skew their perception of their children’s needs, leading to a lack of protection of the children.

Research has also pointed to certain child characteristics that have been shown to influence the likelihood of neglect. Children who have greater needs – including those with medical problems and cognitive or developmental delays – are at heightened risk for neglect.

**FAMILY LEVEL – FAMILY CHARACTERISTICS AND INTERACTIONS BETWEEN FAMILY MEMBERS**

Family characteristics are also important determinants of child neglect. We categorize family economic circumstances here in the microsystem, although they could be construed as parental characteristics or reflections of community and neighborhood context. Slack and colleagues found that indicators of family poverty were strongly correlated with involvement in CPS for neglect, and correlated, though less strongly, with parents’ self-report of neglectful behavior on the Conflict Tactics Scale. Indicators such as public benefit receipt, difficulty paying rent, unemployment, having utilities shut off, and inability to see a doctor due to cost were found to be related to neglect.
Another study led by Slack found that perceived material hardship and infrequent employment were strongly associated with neglect, as were parenting characteristics including low parental warmth, use of physical discipline, and allowing frequent television viewing by the child. Parenting characteristics were not found to mediate the link between material hardship and neglect, although they did partially explain the link between employment and neglect.\(^{22}\)

However, a study of physical neglect in particular found that, while poverty was correlated with substantiated cases of physical neglect, other factors were more important. Logistical regression revealed certain child and caregiver characteristics – including parental substance abuse and mental health issues, as well as the age of the child – as predictors of substantiated physical neglect. The poverty indicators were no longer significant predictors when those child and parent characteristics were taken into account.\(^{23}\)

Paxson and Waldfogel examined rates of types of maltreatment as states implemented welfare reform in the 1990’s.\(^{24}\) They found decreases in neglect in states that received waivers from the federal government allowing families to keep more of their benefits when their income went up due to work. They also found increases in neglect in states that introduced time limits, meaning that some families were removed from public benefit rolls despite continued lack of income. These findings, while based only on the early years of welfare reform, reinforce the connection between poverty and neglect and the impact that policies can have on child neglect.

Once again, Crittenden brings another perspective. She argues that the relationship between poverty and neglect is not causal, but that something else – namely, distortions of mental processing – make some parents more likely both to live in poverty and to neglect their children.\(^{25}\) This theory also helps to explain those cases where we see intergenerational transmission of poverty and/or parenting styles, as children raised by parents with these distorted mental processes are likely to develop their own distorted mental processes.\(^{26}\)

Also at the microsystem or family level, the quality of maternal-child interaction has been found to be predictive of potentially neglectful behavior.\(^{27}\) In addition, Slack et al. found that domestic violence, spanking, and low levels of parental involvement in child’s activities were related to neglect in at least two of the three studies analyzed.\(^{28}\) A higher number of children in the household is also correlated with neglect, though that may be explained by the correlation between poverty and family size.\(^{29}\)

NEIGHBORHOOD, COMMUNITY, CULTURAL, AND POLICY INFLUENCES ON NEGLECT

Not as much research has focused on the exosystem and macrosystem and how they influence the likelihood of child neglect. However, there are some interesting research findings related to perceptions of neglect and community and cultural differences.
Goodvin and colleagues developed and tested a Community Norms of Child Neglect Scale, and found that community members could distinguish between types of neglect and severity of neglect. There were slight differences between rural and urban community members in how they perceived neglect. Professionals who had contact with children through their work had somewhat higher thresholds for neglect than other community members.³⁰

Some research has revealed important differences in patterns and perceptions of neglect among different ethnic groups in the United States. A survey of American Indian/Alaska Native (AIAN) parents living in Los Angeles found that they ranked the seriousness of neglectful behaviors in a different order than most child protective services workers, and that perceptions within this group differed depending on gender, education, marital status, and indirect experience with CPS.³¹

Another study found that Cambodian refugee families were more often reported to the Los Angeles County Department of Children and Family Services for neglect, whereas members of other Asian Pacific ethnic groups were more often reported for physical abuse.³² This difference was attributed to higher rates of parental substance abuse and mental illness, related to the trauma experienced by Cambodian refugees.

Several researchers and authors have called for a greater focus on structural failures in our society that neglect the needs of children and families, which make it difficult for some parents to meet the needs of their children. Rather than punishing those parents or trying to teach them better parenting skills, authors like Hearn argue, we should address social injustice and improve families’ living situations so that children’s needs can be met.³³

STATE SPOTLIGHT: RESEARCH ON NEGLECT PREVENTION IN WISCONSIN

The Wisconsin Children’s Trust Fund is working with Dr. Kristen Shook Slack at the University of Wisconsin–Madison and a large human service agency in Milwaukee to test whether economic supports can reduce child maltreatment. Because of the relationship between poverty and neglect in particular, this study promises to shed light on a potential mechanism for preventing neglect.

Project GAIN (Getting Access to Income Now) is a voluntary intervention for families who were referred to Child Protective Services for any type of maltreatment, and whose cases were closed following investigation. Families whose cases are closed with the Bureau of Milwaukee Child Welfare are randomized to participate in either Project GAIN or a control group. Project GAIN participants can receive support in three ways: linking with public benefits and economic or material resources; assistance with financial planning; and one-time emergency assistance with economic needs. For example, a family might receive emergency assistance to get a vehicle repaired, get help signing up for public benefit programs for which they are eligible, get connected to job seeking support, and receive coaching on financial planning. They may also be referred to other community programs for non-economic needs, but those services are not part of Project GAIN. Participants receive services for about six weeks, with the opportunity to re-engage for additional assistance if necessary.
By comparing rates of re-referral among Project GAIN participants to that of the control group, the researchers hope to find out how much prevention can be attained by intervening only around economic issues with at-risk families. This will also add to our understanding of what role poverty and economic issues play in creating the conditions for child maltreatment, and neglect in particular. “We don’t think that economic interventions can replace other types of family support services, but this study will show us how much of a role they can play,” says Mary Anne Snyder, Executive Director of the Wisconsin Children’s Trust Fund. “We may find that family support services need to pay much more attention to economic issues than they currently do.”

REFERENCES


3. Ibid.


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21. Slack et al. (2011)


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