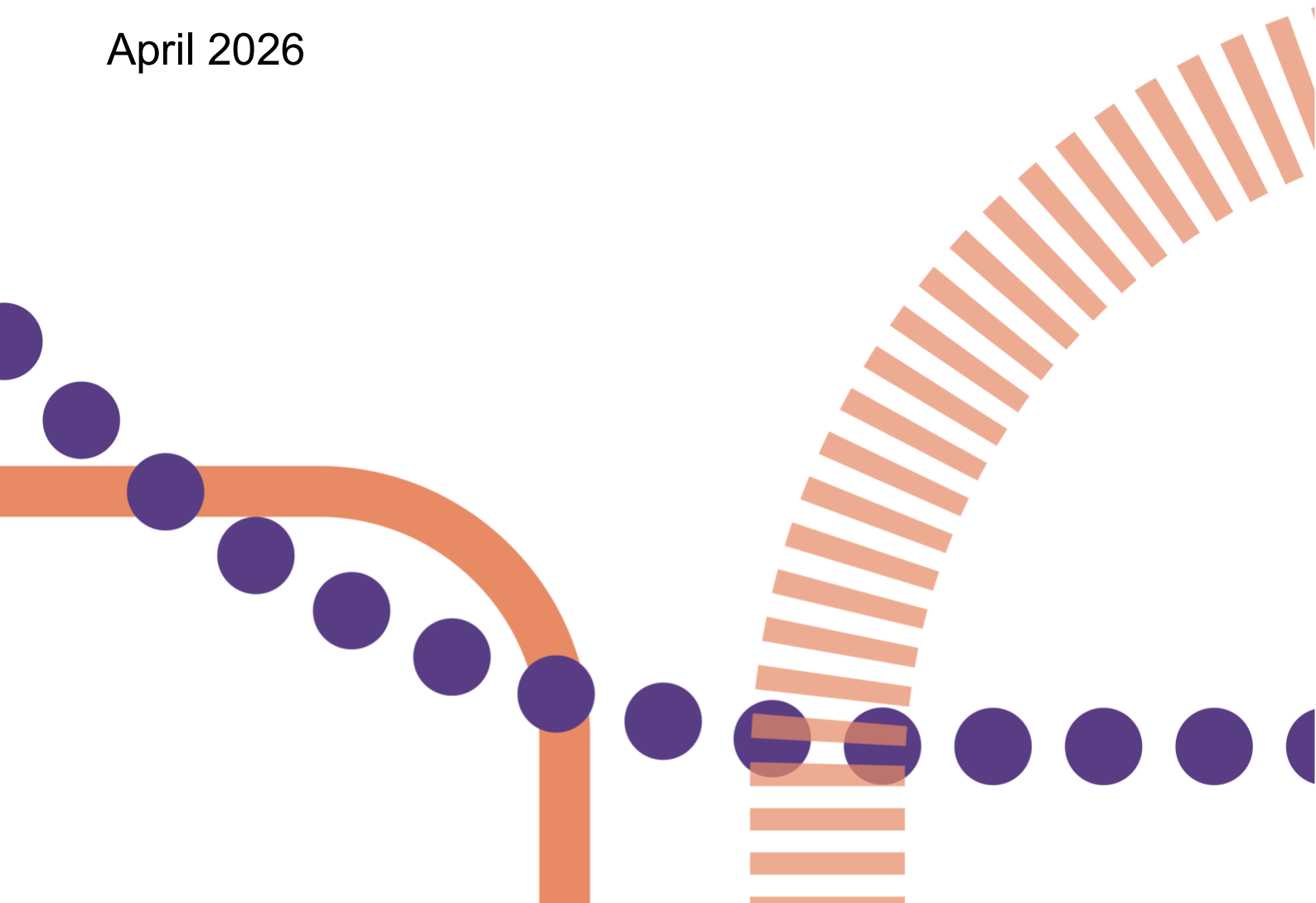


THE CHILD **SAFEGUARDING**
PRACTICE REVIEW PANEL

Child neglect literature review

Abridged version: Introduction, summaries
and conclusion

April 2026



This document

This is an abridged version of the Child Safeguarding Practice Review Panel (CSPRP) literature review on child neglect. It brings together the introduction, chapter summaries and conclusion from the full literature review, providing an accessible overview of the key findings and themes.

Those who wish to explore the evidence and analysis in greater depth are encouraged to read the [Child neglect literature review in full](#).

For more resources, visit the [CSPRP website page on child neglect](#).

Introduction

The Child Safeguarding Practice Review Panel has commissioned the National Centre for Social Research (NatCen) to conduct a literature review on the nature and impacts of child neglect. The review was guided by the following research questions:

- What is neglect?
- How do manifestations and impacts of neglect differ according to the age of the child?
- What do we know about children who suffer neglect in relation to strengths, vulnerabilities and risks pertaining to:
 - the children themselves ¹
 - the families they live in ²
 - the places they live ³

In this review of the literature, we first discuss the evidence on understandings and definitions of child neglect. We then move to an exploration of studies which present evidence on the experiences of children of different ages: early years; school-age; adolescence. We then synthesise evidence on children's strengths, vulnerabilities and risks, framed in the literature as 'risk and protective factors'.

We highlight some of the gaps in the published literature on child neglect as well as present a discussion of some of the key points of contention within the body of literature: especially the conflation of neglect within broader understandings of maltreatment and neglect as an act of commission or omission. We review literature which looks at the

¹ This included differences between groups of children on the basis of age, race, ethnicity, religious background, socioeconomic background, sexual orientation, gender identity and special educational needs or disability.

² This included factors such as parental substance misuse, domestic violence, mental health needs, inadequate housing need, poverty and deprivation.

³ This included the geographical location of children across different parts of England, including any differences between urban or rural areas.

impacts of neglect starting with developmental delays in early childhood leading to externalising and internalising behaviours in adolescence. Risk and protective factors are considered at the child-, family- and system-levels, and we draw on the considerable body of literature which discusses the relationships between poverty/deprivation and neglect. We also consider the experiences of children and young people with certain characteristics, although we acknowledge that the literature is limited here.

Our methodological approach to the review is included at Appendix A of the full [Child neglect literature review](#). We included a total of 41 papers for review: 30 because of our initial screening and shortlisting and a further 11 on the recommendation of panel members.

Definitions and understandings of neglect - in summary

Much of the existing research literature considers child neglect under the broader understanding of ‘maltreatment’, making it challenging to disaggregate the experiences and impacts of child neglect from other forms of abuse or to make sense of neglect as a different form of harm/abuse. The UK-based literature devotes considerable discussion to the extent to which neglect is an act of ‘omission or commission’, and the resulting classification (or not) as neglect as a form of intentional abuse. Some studies however also highlight that irrespective of whether neglect is intended, the impacts are still significantly damaging to children’s wellbeing and outcomes. Forms of neglect can include care or physical neglect, environmental, medical, educational, supervisory, and emotional. Of the other forms of maltreatment, neglect is most commonly discussed in the literature as being linked with emotional abuse. Much of the literature discusses the impact of neglect within the context of Bronfenbrenner’s ecological systems theory (or adapted versions thereof). There is no one agreed tool to measure neglect in use in the UK and social workers are working in a context of, by necessity, significant subjectivity for screening, identification, and assessment.

Neglect across the childhood spectrum - in summary

There is limited available evidence on the experiences of children with certain characteristics, including children with SEND, young people who are LGBTQ+ and the experiences of families of different religions/faiths. The discussion of the relationship between ethnicity and neglect is not always clear and is sometimes retrospectively fitted as a lens through which to view conclusions of a study as opposed to being a key research question from the outset. In practice reviews, ethnicity is often disregarded as part of the analysis and understanding of the child and family circumstances. The impacts of neglect start in the early years with key development milestones being missed, leading to lower

levels of 'social competence' and difficulties making and maintaining friendships as neglected children progress through school. Across the childhood age spectrum, but especially in adolescence, neglect can result in both internalising and externalising behaviours, including depression, symptoms associated with PTSD, aggressive and violent behaviour, substance misuse and risk-taking behaviour.

Profiling of neglect: protective and risk factors - in summary

The literature is not always clear on a causal relationship between certain characteristics, features and the risk of neglect taking place. Some of the literature discusses responses to neglect through the lens of children and young people's resilience. However, it has also been highlighted that a focus on resilience risks placing an inappropriate expectation on the young person to develop a strength response to their experiences of neglect as opposed to focussing on the act of neglect and how to prevent it from taking place. Risk and protective factors are discussed at the child-, family-, and system-levels. There is a hyper focus in some of the literature on the role of the mother (sometimes in the context of abuse perpetrated by a father or father figure), which can sometimes risk minimising wider social determinants of neglect. Peer social support was considered a key protective factor across all levels, from individual children (especially in adolescence) through to the role of the community. At the child- and family-levels, it is not always possible to distinguish from *impacts* of experiencing neglect and *risks* of neglect taking place, especially related to mental health difficulties, for example. At the system-level, the relationship between poverty/deprivation and neglect is much discussed. Much of the literature emphasises that whilst neglect is certainly not inevitable in a family experiencing poverty (and that neglect, especially emotional neglect can also occur in more affluent families), the impact of hardship and financial stress can result in high levels of stress and an environment where abuse and neglect are more likely to occur.

Conclusion

Neglect is the most common reason children are involved with children's social care, and the impacts of neglect are clear across the childhood age spectrum. Impact begins with development delays in the early years and can reach far into adulthood, becoming more pervasive the longer a young person is exposed to neglect; the importance of understanding cumulative harm is therefore clear. However, the dearth of research literature, especially in a UK context, has been described as a 'neglect of neglect'. Some researchers attribute this to the challenges for social work practice to effectively respond to behaviours which are so prevalent and overwhelming as to be close to impossible to

mitigate against.⁴ This combined with wider systemic challenges such as poverty and deprivation can mean that the task ahead for social care practitioners and multi-agency partners can seem enormous.

Understandings of neglect differ according to the extent to which the act of neglect is considered to be an intentional act of abuse, or a response to systemic circumstances ('omission vs commission'). In the UK, the impact of harm in definitional understandings includes a focus on the *likelihood* of (as well as *actual*) harm. The conflation of neglect under the more umbrella term of 'maltreatment' can make it difficult to focus on risk and protective factors, as well as impacts of neglect. And the causal relationship between risk and protective factors and neglect is not always clear.

Possibly because of the focus on mothers in birth cohort studies, studies undertaken using secondary data analysis tend to highlight the role of the mother at the expense of shedding light on a father's input and behaviour. This however can also be true in studies which *do* present evidence of a father's harmful behaviour, and which still focus on the role of the mother, for example highlighting a mother's lack of action to prevent a father's abuse. This can lead to a sense of 'mother blaming' in studies on child neglect.

Lived experience, the voices of parents, and especially the voices of children and young people are noticeably absent from the literature.⁵ The length of time necessary for the academic publication process can mean that academic studies can seem out of step with the reality of practice. The literature is under-developed around the experiences of children and young people with SEND, young people who are LGBTQ+, families of different religions, families who are at the more affluent end of the wealth spectrum, and families of different ethnicities. Ethnicity can sometimes be an invisible factor in case reviews and developing understandings of a family's experiences. Whilst an RCT-style study would not be appropriate for obvious ethical reasons, secondary data analysis of a cohort of children across the childhood spectrum and/or a longitudinal survey on child neglect would go some way towards a) developing an understanding of the experiences of children, young people, and families with certain characteristics and b) understanding the impacts of neglect across the life course.

⁴ This finding was reinforced by an NSPCC study which was published as this literature review was being finalised: McKay E (2024) 'Too little, too late: The multi-agency response to identifying and tackling neglect'.

⁵ One notable exception to this is a 2024 NSPCC study: Dutton A & Sisyak K (2024) 'Exploring what young people in Together for Childhood know, think, and do about child abuse'.