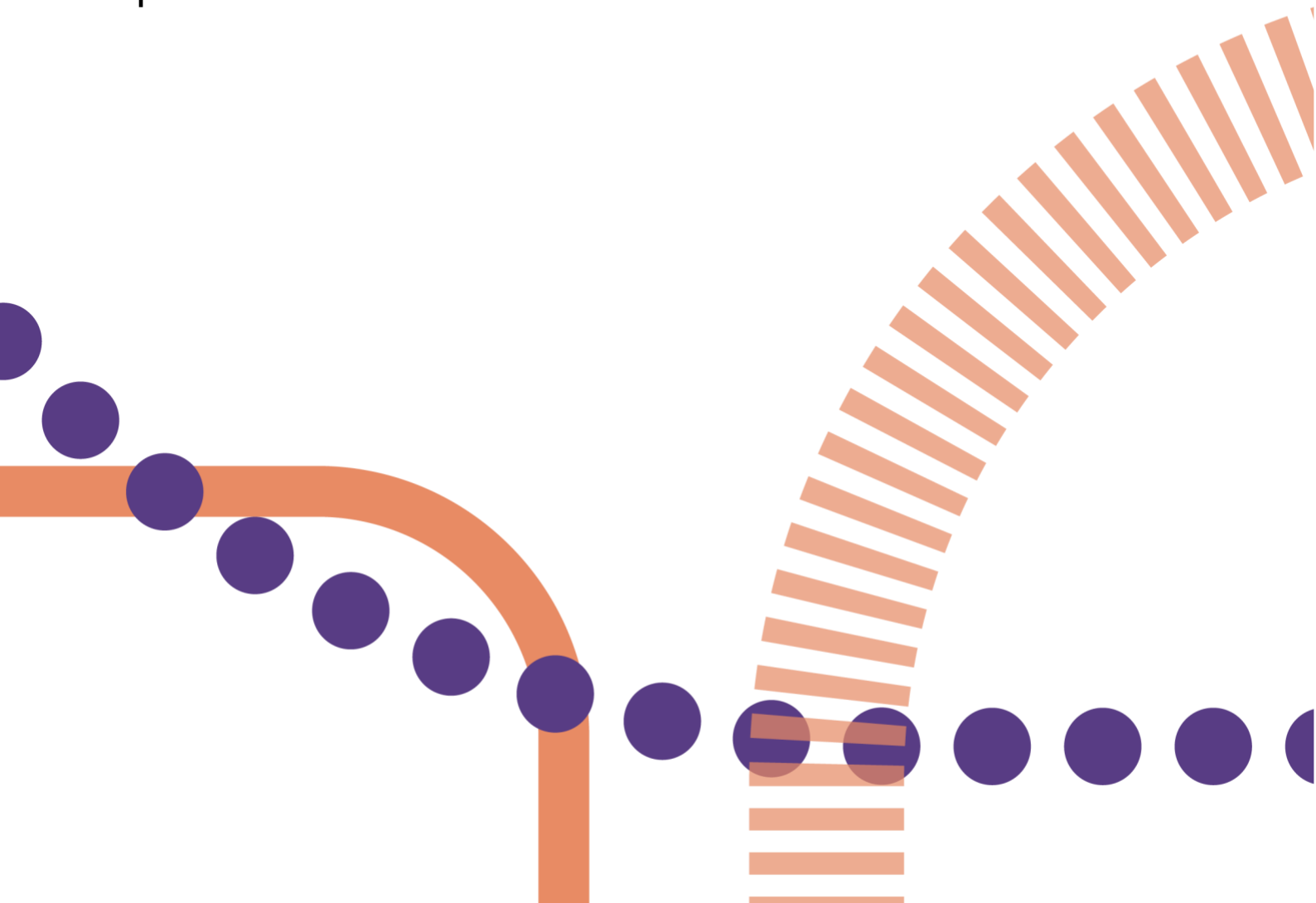


# Child neglect literature review

Neglect across the childhood spectrum

April 2026



## This document

This document is an extract from the Child Safeguarding Practice Review Panel (CSPRP) literature review on child neglect to help practitioners to understand how neglect both presents and impacts at each stage of childhood.

Read the [Child neglect literature review in full](#).

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

## Introduction

The range and disparity of data on reported neglect in the literature makes it difficult to draw any meaningful conclusions on prevalence across the different age groups. Haslam and Taylor (2022) state that neglect is estimated to affect almost one in five children and adolescents in community samples (Cohen, Menon, Shorey, Le, & Temple, 2017; Stoltenborgh, Bakermans-Kranenburg, & Van Ijzendoorn, 2013), and up to 92% of maltreated young people (Shields & Cicchetti, 2001).

In determining whether maltreatment should be considered 'severe', the researchers applied definitions in use in child protection practice, based on frequency, multiplicity of forms, if it was defined by the victim as being abuse or if it would fall into a category of abuse under criminal law. Radford and others (2011) built on a previous NSPCC child maltreatment study and reported on the differences between their primary data collection on child maltreatment between 1998 and 2008. They found that reported childhood experiences of physical and sexual abuse had declined over the ten years but found no significant changes in reported prevalence of neglect between their 1998 and 2008 studies.

Through their secondary data analysis of two linked datasets (questionnaires administered to mothers as part of a UK-based birth cohort study and an administrative dataset of child welfare records) DeBelle and others (2022) found that out of 157 cases of neglect, 41 were medical neglect (failing to secure medical attention when necessary or refusal to take the child to a medical appointment). Neglect was also found to be a contributory factor in another 101 referrals, mainly for burns (spill scalds, contact burns, flame burns) and dog bites. They also cite James-Ellison and others (2009) who report that children aged under 3 presenting with burns of any kind are at risk of abuse or neglect recurrence before the age of 6.

Radford and others (2011:18) reviewed prevalence of abuse and neglect in 28 studies. This body of literature reported a wide range of prevalence for all types of abuse.

However, the range for reported neglect was the largest: prevalence for reported neglect at any time of childhood ranged from 6% to 41.5%. Radford and others attribute this to differentiated child experiences by geography, and conceptual and methodological disparities. Both prevalence and reported qualitative experience will differ depending on data sources. For example, some studies base their findings on secondary analysis of welfare reports or case reviews whereas others use primary data methods with adults on their recalled experience of abuse and neglect, with children of different ages or with parents/carers (where we might expect a degree of under-reporting). We might also expect different prevalence rates depending on whether participants were based on a random probability sample<sup>1</sup> or on a self-selecting opt-in sample<sup>2</sup> (Radford and others, 2011). Measures used to assess prevalence also have an impact on results. Radford and others draw on Hamby and Finkelhor (2000) who highlight the differences in reported prevalence depending on whether studies are using validated measures<sup>3</sup>, questions differentiated by age using behavioural descriptions, questions which are using legal terminology, or questions which ask participants to self-label their experiences as constituting ‘abuse’.

Haslam & Taylor (2022) also draw on O'Hara and others (2015) who found unique effects of neglect on child cognitive development (vocabulary test scores) compared to that of other forms of maltreatment. They also cite Geoffroy and others (2016) study which evidences the impact of neglect on cognition across the life-course. Maguire and others (2015) cite Fishbein and others (2009) who found that the impact on children of experiencing emotional or physical neglect was lower general intelligence and poorer executive decision in comparison with children who had not experienced neglect. Kaufman and others (1994) (1994) found an association between the severity of neglect and an impact on intelligence quotient (IQ), with those suffering the most severe form of neglect experiencing the biggest impact on their IQ. Likewise, Kantor and colleagues (2004) found that children who had been neglected had lower academic overall scores than non-neglected children, with the physically neglected children being the most impacted and thus having the lowest intellectual performance. Allnock (2016) draws on Brandon and others (2014) who evidence the cumulative impact of harm, i.e. the longer a child is exposed to neglect, the greater the impact will be.

In reviewing the literature on the relationship between child neglect (and abuse) and poverty and deprivation, Bywaters and others (2022) highlight the association between children's ages and the poverty-neglect relationship. They also cite Raissian and Bullinger (2017) who found that the impact of an increase in the minimum wage on neglect was

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<sup>1</sup> Where participants are invited to take part based on certain demographic criteria imposed by a researcher.

<sup>2</sup> Where participants choose whether or not to take part based on whether or not they think they match the profile of the study's population of interest.

<sup>3</sup> Factors which match criteria around what is considered to be ‘neglect’.

greatest in pre-school aged children and not significant in adolescents, potentially attributable to differences in type and intensity of parenting necessity for different ages. They suggest that parental socio-economic circumstances are key to younger children, but young people's behaviour is the key driver for older children. Other sources (including Hood and others, 2020) provide evidence that poverty is a greater risk factor for abuse and neglect in the early years than in adolescence. Bywaters and others (2022) have hypothesised that this may reflect the fact that in the early years children are more reliant on adults and under closer supervision compared to the teenage years.

We present here the evidence according to age group (early years, school-aged, adolescence) and the limited available evidence around non-age-related characteristics.

## Early years

The RCPCH (2022b) reviewed studies on neglect and the early years. They report that in infants aged 0-20 months, neglect was associated with avoidant and insecure attachment and passive or withdrawn behaviour. Children aged 20-30 months who had experienced neglect demonstrated less positive social interaction than non-neglected children. Neglected children aged 3-4 years were delayed in both receptive and expressive language development. As children grow older (aged 4-6 years), neglect was found to have an impact on their executive function, self-esteem, cognitive skills and language skills.

In observational studies of children aged 20-30 months, neglected children were found to demonstrate greater negativity, less positive social interaction, to be more passive and spend more time alone than control groups. In children aged 3-4 years, neglected children had not been enabled to use language appropriately in social situations when compared with non-neglected children. They were also found to have greater likelihood of experiencing developmental delay, particularly language delay. In children aged 4-6, children who are neglected demonstrated lower levels of executive function and significantly less developed language skills. The RCPCH (2022b) review found that the impact on language delay in young children becomes more evident as children grow older, with children who are neglected having more syntactic delays, producing less complex language and showing reduced vocabulary than control groups. Regarding emotional attachment, observations of neglected children's perceptions found that they were less likely to expect parents to relieve distress (either in themselves or others) than abused or non-neglected children. In attachment assessments (Stronach and others, 2011), neglected children were also found to depict their mother as less emotionally available to them than non-neglected children and to perceive their relationship with their mother to be less fulfilling, safe and reliable.

The RCPCH review also found that children experiencing neglect had cognitive delays, had not been supported to emotionally regulate and so demonstrate disruptive behaviour and higher levels of conduct problems (as rated by mothers) in comparison to both children who had experienced abuse and non-maltreated children. Teachers also recognised the impact of neglect on children, noting that they struggled to manage their behaviour. The review also reported that children who had experienced neglect were more likely to perceive others as feeling hurt, sad or anxious when compared with abused or non-maltreated children. Neglected children were also more likely to describe themselves as angry towards others, anxious, and ashamed. By the age of 42 months, neglected children also demonstrated more apathy / withdrawal and hyperactivity / distractibility.

## School age

Maguire and others (2015) reviewed studies which explored the social behaviour and friendships of children experiencing neglect<sup>4</sup>:

- Manly and others (1994, 2001) found that the impact for children aged 5–11 years of physical neglect was greater difficulties in social competence than children who had not experienced neglect. Children in control groups rated those children who had experienced neglect as being 'more aggressive'.
- De Paúl and Arruabarrena (1995) found that physically neglected children (5–11 years) had greater difficulties in establishing and maintaining relationships with their peers than non-neglected children.
- Bolger and others. (1998) found that children who had experienced more chronic maltreatment were perceived to be less popular and gained fewer friends over time in comparison with control groups.
- Three studies (Kaufman & Cicchetti 1989; Lynch & Cicchetti 1998; Kim & Cicchetti 2006) found neglected children had lower self-esteem. Lynch and Cicchetti (1998) (7- to 12-year-olds) reported an association between severity of neglect and self-esteem: the more severe the neglect, the lower the child's self-esteem. They also found evidence that those from 'violent neighbourhoods' experienced more severe forms of neglect.

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<sup>4</sup> Kaufman & Cicchetti 1989; Manly and others 1994, 2001; De Paúl & Arruabarrena 1995; Bolger and others 1998; Kinard 1999; Finzi and others 2002, 2003; Kim & Cicchetti 2010

RCPCH (2022c) also undertook a review of the literature on school-aged children (aged 5-14, although they acknowledge that the majority of studies refer to children aged 7-11). Their review found mixed evidence of the impact on disciplinary behaviour and school suspensions between neglected children and non-maltreated children. They reported that the impact on older children of experiencing neglect within the 5-14 age bracket was severe behavioural problems when compared with children who had not been neglected. Most common externalised features for those experiencing emotional abuse and neglect were antagonism and aggression. Internalising effects saw a higher frequency for anxiety and depression. Children who were neglected exhibit difficulties in being accepted by other children, making friends and developing reciprocated friendships.

The RCPCH review also found that neglected children demonstrated difficulties in completing domestic skills or personal care skills when compared with non-maltreated children. Children who had experienced neglect had lower self-esteem than non-maltreated children with a clear association between the severity of neglect and the level of self-esteem (the more severe the level of neglect, the lower the self-esteem). Depression was associated with physical neglect and neglected children with an insecure attachment to their mother showed more depressive symptoms. RCPCH reviewed one study which found that neglected children had less effective coping strategies, as a result of the neglect they had experienced, and were more likely to inhibit the expression of negative emotions than non-maltreated children.

Maguire and others (2015) reviewed studies which explored the social behaviour and friendships of children experiencing neglect (Kaufman & Cicchetti 1989; Manly and others. 1994, 2001; De Paúl & Arruabarrena 1995; Bolger and others. 1998; Kinard 1999; Finzi and others. 2002, 2003; Kim & Cicchetti 2010). Manly and others (1994, 2001) found that the impact for children aged 5–11 years of physical neglect was greater difficulties in social competence than children who had not experienced neglect. Children in control groups rated those children who had experienced neglect as being 'more aggressive'. De Paúl and Arruabarrena (1995) found that the impact of physical on neglected children (5–11 years) was greater difficulties in establishing and maintaining relationships with their peers than non-neglected children. Children who had experienced more chronic maltreatment were perceived to be less popular and gained fewer friends over time in comparison with control groups (Bolger and others. 1998). Three studies (Kaufman & Cicchetti 1989; Lynch & Cicchetti 1998; Kim & Cicchetti 2006) found neglected children had lower self-esteem. Lynch and Cicchetti (1998) (7- to 12-year-olds) reported an association between severity of neglect and self-esteem: the more severe the neglect, the lower the child's self-esteem. They also found evidence that those from 'violent neighbourhoods' experienced more severe forms of neglect.

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## Adolescence

Maguire and others (2015) cite Kantor and others (2004) who identified that neglected younger people in the older age category had significantly more behavioural difficulties than children who had not experienced neglect. Maguire and others (2015) also draw on literature which evidences that the most commonly recorded behavioural issue among young people of this age group was 'externalising behaviour'. This is defined as aggressive, assaultive, destructive, anti-social/delinquent behaviour (Reidy 1977; Reyome 1993; Manly and others. 1994, 2001; De Paúl & Arruabarrena 1995; Cullerton-Sen and others. 2008). Allnock (2016), Hackett (2016) and Hanson (2016) in their presentation of the impacts of neglect across the life course draw on literature which also highlights the externalising nature of behaviour in adolescence, because of neglect (for example, anti-social behaviour, violence and conflict. Another study (Kendall-Tackett & Eckenrode 1996) found that neglected children aged 11-14 years displayed more behavioural problems and had more suspensions than non-neglected young people of the same age in the same school. Maguire and others (2015) also review the literature on internalising features, defined as being withdrawn, demonstrating somatic complaints and anxiety/depression. Three studies (Reyome 1993; Bolger & Patterson 2001; Valentino and others, 2008) showed more internalising behaviour demonstrated by neglected young people than young

people who had not experienced neglect. Bolger and Patterson (2001) highlighted that for these children this was characterised by a feeling of 'external control', i.e. those children who were more withdrawn felt that they had little influence over what happened to them in life. Haslam and Taylor (2022) reviewed 21 articles which explored five different indicators of adolescent interpersonal functioning. Around half of the papers investigating quality of peer relationships found that neglect, particularly emotional neglect, is associated with reduced relationship quality.

Naughton and others (2017) also report on internalising features of neglected adolescents. They found that neglect was associated with alcohol related problems (3 studies), substance misuse (2 studies), delinquency for boys (1 study), and teenage pregnancy (1 study). Dating violence victimization was also associated with neglect. They found that neglected boys showed greater school engagement than neglected girls (1 study). They draw on Tyler and others (2008) who hypothesized that the girls became more depressed and withdrawn, thus becoming less involved with school. They go on to suggest that as society places greater emphasis on male independence, the impact on neglect on boys' school involvement may be less than that for girls. Allnock (2016), Hackett (2016) and Hanson (2016) associate depression, ADHD symptoms, social withdrawal and social isolation in adolescence with exposure to neglect. In line with other studies, Raws (2016) draws on a systematic review by (Cardiff Child Protection Systematic Reviews/NSPCC, 2014) which found the impact of neglect on adolescents was both internalising (depression, symptoms associated with PTSD) and externalising features (aggression delinquency, substance misuse, risk-taking behaviours). Raws (2016) also draws on the Rochester Youth Development Study, a longitudinal study, which has shown that maltreatment which begins during adolescence causes more damage than neglect which started and ceased at an earlier point in childhood.

RCPCH (2022a) reviewed the literature on neglect in adolescents aged 13-17, experiencing any form of neglect, including physical, emotional, supervisory, medical, educational, nutritional and/or emotional maltreatment. They reported on the following 'internalising features' associated with neglect: depression, anxiety, withdrawal, somatic complaints, self-esteem, symptoms associated with PTSD, and suicidality. The majority of studies they reviewed reported an association between internalising features and neglect. Depression and symptoms associated with PTSD featured particularly strongly with experiences of neglect either in adolescence or as a response in adolescence to earlier (and ongoing) neglect.

RCPCH also reviewed the effects of neglect on externalising behaviours, defined as aggression, hostility and delinquent behaviour. One study found a positive association between neglect and delinquent behaviour whereas another study found an association for boys but not girls. Two studies found no association between delinquent behaviours and

neglect. Regarding risk-taking behaviours, two comparative studies found associations between substance use (marijuana, cocaine, heroin, amphetamines, multiple drug use) and neglected adolescents when compared with non-maltreated control groups. One comparative study also found that neglected adolescents were more likely to demonstrate alcohol related problems than control groups. In other comparative studies showing no associations, the control groups were adolescents experiencing other forms of maltreatment as opposed to non-maltreated young people. The RCPCH review also cites another study which combined gang activity, arrest, physical assault, substance misuse and unprotected sex into 'risky behaviour' and found a positive association between neglect or emotional maltreatment and 'risky behaviour'.

Raws (2016) in their study on adolescent neglect reviewed literature which found there to be a higher risk of neglect where a family is headed by a lone parent (Swift, 1995; Daniel and Taylor, 2006). They also found there to be a risk associated with family restructuring, for example, a tendency for older adolescents to be forced out of the family home when a step-parent joins the family (Rees and Rutherford, 2001; Rees and Siakeu, 2004). Parental risk factors include alcohol or drug misuse (Advisory Council on the Misuse of Drugs, 2003; Tunnard, 2004); parental mental ill health (Ethier and others, 2000); domestic abuse (Cleaver and others, 2011). Hooper and others (2007) found that one potential protective factor can be the neglected young person's own peer-support. One study found that sudden, unexpected life events experienced by parents/carers can precipitate a period of (temporary) neglect (Evans, 2022) but that, in contrast to chronic neglect, neglect associated with temporary life events then pass over time.