



**The
Children's
Society**

Understanding Adolescent Neglect: Troubled Teens

A study of the links between parenting and adolescent neglect

Executive Summary

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By Phil Raws

The Children’s Society has recently begun a comprehensive research programme to explore adolescent neglect. This summary outlines the context for the programme and focuses on the first study on adolescent neglect and parenting.

The significance of adolescent neglect

Neglect is the form of maltreatment most often recorded in official safeguarding data, regardless of the age of the children concerned, and is the most prevalent form of maltreatment young people experience according to research. Studies have shown that this is true in all developed, western countries^{1,2,3}.

Neglect can lead to significant problems – including with mental ill health, substance misuse, school (attendance, behaviour and attainment), offending and early sexual activity – and can be the precursor of serious harm⁴.

Policy and practice activity around neglect has increased in England in recent years, alongside the publication of fresh research into the issue, but for the most part this has focused on neglect of young children.

This may be for many reasons. Neglect continues to be regarded as being a particularly complex and multi-faceted issue, sometimes seen as being an intractable problem – and there is evidence to suggest that many adults, including the professionals

who work with them, think that adolescents have a natural resilience to poor parenting experiences⁵.

The Children’s Society’s research programme, which is being conducted in partnership with the University of York, seeks to redress this neglect of adolescent neglect and to answer the following questions:

- What is ‘adolescent neglect’?
- How much adolescent neglect is there?
- What are the contexts for adolescent neglect?
- What are the outcomes of adolescent neglect?

Research methodology

Defining and measuring neglect has proved to be a challenge for previous studies of maltreatment, and there may be reason to question the veracity of findings on prevalence and incidence.⁶ Amongst the aims of the first study in the programme were generating initial findings on the scale of adolescent neglect in England, as well as beginning to explore the contexts for neglect and looking at the associations (eg with risky behaviours or well-being) of experiencing neglect as an adolescent.

To conduct the study a new self-report measure of experiences of parenting behaviours was devised. This was done in consultation with young people and adults – asking them what parents do, or should do, when

caring for adolescents using a framework which categorised parenting into ‘educational’, ‘emotional’, ‘physical’ and ‘supervisory’ inputs.⁷ A pilot measure was cognitively tested through interviews with ten 12–14 year olds and an online panel survey of five hundred 12–15 year olds. The measure was revised to a 16-item set⁸ which was administered to around 1,000 students in Year 10 (14–15 year olds) in a nationally-representative online survey, asking them, for example, how often during the past year their parents had supported them if they had problems (as part of ‘emotional support’)⁹.

The survey also included questions on demographics, material resources, well-being, health, experiences in school and externalising behaviours (eg smoking and drinking alcohol).

Through analysis of the associations between the frequency of parenting inputs and the other indicators in the questionnaire, it was found that lower levels of parenting were more often associated with negative reporting (eg low well-being, higher likelihood of truancy from school). Consistent links were revealed which showed that in families where parents rarely (if ever) provided care, more young people had poorer well-being and exhibited risky or harmful behaviours. On the basis of this, levels of parental inputs were identified which constituted neglect and further analysis was done to consider the contexts and

broader associations of neglectful parenting.

Key findings

The findings summarised in this section – aside from those on ‘parenting norms’ – are for 14–15 year olds who lived in one home.¹⁰ As the first use of a new measure and methodology for researching neglect they should be regarded with caution. Further research is needed to ensure the efficacy of the approach and the reliability of the findings.

Parenting norms

- The majority of 14 and 15 year olds stated that their parents ‘always’ exhibited all the behaviours that were asked about – with the largest proportions reporting high levels of physical care and supervision, but proportionally less reported the same frequency for educational or emotional support.
- Reporting of the frequency of inputs for all forms of care and support reduced marginally between the ages of 12–13 and 14–15 years old, as might be expected, but substantially fewer 14–15 year olds said they received frequent emotional support.

The complexity of parenting adolescents

- As a general ‘rule’ more parental input was found to be beneficial – ie high frequency of care and

support was associated with a lower propensity for risk-taking behaviours and with higher levels of well-being. The strongest correlations were between emotional support and well-being (eg for life satisfaction and ‘relatedness’¹¹).

- However, there were some types of parenting where less intense input had benefits – eg more young people with a high score for life satisfaction also reported medium levels of educational support and supervision than those whose parents ‘always’ monitored in and out of school activity.

The scale of neglect of 14–15 year olds

- 8% of young people reported neglectful levels of parenting in relation to emotional support. The same percentage had experienced supervisory neglect. 5% of young people reported neglect for physical care, and 4% for educational support.
- Around one in seven young people (15%) reported at least one form of neglectful parenting. Most (58%) had experienced one form in isolation, with almost half this group indicating supervisory neglect.
- Reports of all four forms of neglect co-occurring were rare among this sample (just 1%).

The contexts for neglect of 14–15 year olds

- Young people who were materially deprived (lacking a number of possessions, resources or experiences which were common to their peer group) were more likely to be neglected than their peers – though this may have been because their parents or carers elected not to spend money on them rather than because the household they lived in was deprived.¹²
- More boys reported lower levels of parental supervision than girls (11% of boys were neglected in relation to this aspect of parenting, compared to 5% of girls).
- More young people living in lone parent families were neglected in relation to educational support (though not for emotional support, physical care or supervision) than those living in other family forms.

The negative associations of neglect of 14–15 year olds

- Many neglected young people also had bad health. 28% of those whose parents had not been supportive around their education said their health was ‘bad’ or ‘very bad’ (as opposed to 3% of those who were ‘cared for’ in relation to this type of parenting), and 21% of those who had been physically neglected gave the same response (compared to

just 3% of the 'cared for' group for this parenting category).

- Neglected young people were significantly more likely to behave in ways which risked their health or jeopardised their future opportunities – eg for emotional support, 27% had truanted at least once in the past month, compared to 13% of cared for, and 46% had got really drunk in the past few months compared to 22%.
- There was an association between any experience of neglect and young people's well-being, but those who reported multiple forms of neglect (neglect in relation to two or more categories of parenting behaviour) had significantly worse levels of well-being than their counterparts who were neglected for one type of parenting in isolation

Conclusions

The scale of adolescent neglect

This study found that more than one in seven (15%) 14–15 year olds lived with adult caregivers who neglected them in one or more ways – they may have shown little or no interest in them, not offered warmth or encouragement, made no effort to monitor or protect them or failed to promote their health. Neglected young people reported low well-being and a higher propensity than their peers to

behave in ways which may jeopardise their health or their prospects.

These findings may underestimate the scale of adolescent neglect as they are based solely on the reports of young people who were attending mainstream schools – and so do not account for those in specialist provision, those without a school place or missing from the system,¹³ or those in private schools, for whom the experience of neglect may be different¹⁴.

Well-being and adolescent neglect

By linking neglect to self-reported well-being, this study exposed the more covert harms which are associated with low levels of parenting. One impediment to understanding and responding to the neglect of adolescents has been the failure to acknowledge how much a lack of care and support may be affecting a young person – unlike some other forms of maltreatment, physical symptoms are not immediately apparent, there may not be acute events, and there is a sense that teenagers have their own natural resilience¹⁵.

This study revealed that neglected teenagers tend to report doubts about their competence, have little faith that anyone cares about them, feel pessimistic about the future and are dissatisfied with their lives overall. Also, although

there was some variability in the associations between multiple forms of neglect and the externalising behaviours surveyed (eg on drinking alcohol and truanting for school), there was a consistent association between experiencing a combination of different forms of neglect and deteriorations across measures of well-being.

These findings underline the need to take adolescent neglect seriously, because young people who experience it are also likely to suffer a pernicious undermining of their well-being regardless of whether they exhibit other negative behaviours.

Supervision and adolescent neglect

Analysis of the links between the frequency of supervisory parenting inputs and young people's responses to questions on their well-being and their own behaviours indicated that there was particular complexity in the relationships between these issues.

Other research has found that context is important in understanding how these factors are interrelated – for example the area a family lives in, the influence of peers, and the effects of gender and ethnicity. Studies suggest that reductions in parental supervision during adolescence (referred to as 'premature adolescent autonomy') could heighten the risks of substance

misuse and antisocial behaviour for 'high risk youth', and that interventions to maintain levels of supervision by parents led to reductions in risk¹⁶. But this assertion has been challenged in other studies, which have found that the effectiveness of supervisory behaviours is determined by the willingness of the young person to disclose information (eg on where they are going/what they are doing)¹⁷. This brings young people's own agency into the picture, challenging an assumption of some research that the effects of parenting of adolescents are one-way (from the parent to the young person) and that parental control is key to successful development¹⁸.

In this research, a high level of supervision was found not to be linked to high well-being – in contrast to the general finding that more parenting was better. Other research on well-being has shown that young people particularly value autonomy, freedom and choice, but that they feel that this decreases as they become older¹⁹. This might suggest that increasingly throughout adolescence young people will find inquiries about their life away from home to be intrusive – and equate this with attempts to restrict their behaviour, which they find unwelcome²⁰.

This aspect of adolescents' lives – of control, rules, sanctions and curfews – is one where the parent-adolescent relationship may be tested, and where

young people themselves will have expectations and a desire to see change as they mature and want to have a stake in negotiating. These issues will be explored further as the research programme develops.

Material deprivation and adolescent neglect

Using a young person-centred measure of material deprivation, this study found that adolescents who were deprived were more likely to experience neglect. However, it is important to note that this finding related to how deprived the young people themselves were – ie how few of a set of possessions, experiences or resources a young person who completed the questionnaire had (things which most young people would say they need for 'a normal kind of life'²¹) – rather than necessarily to how poor their family was. Other questions in the survey which might link to household deprivation (eg whether a young person had their own bedroom) did not show the same links.

This could mean that, at least for some of these young people, their material deprivation was because parents were not electing to spend money on them, rather than because their family was too poor to afford these things. A choice by neglectful parents to allocate household resources in ways which do not benefit their children could be regarded as one facet of adolescent neglect.

A recent review of relevant research studies found no evidence of a causal link between poverty and parenting capacity. The authors instead asserted that the majority of parents who live in poverty have adequate parenting capacity, but that those who are poor and also fail to parent well do so for reasons other than the deprivation they are experiencing (eg because of personal characteristics, their own backgrounds etc) – that 'the way parents relate to their children does not simply arise out of economic adversity or advantage²²'.

Poverty may increase the stresses felt by parents, in turn disrupting their parenting – and these are issues that will be explored further as the research programme develops.

Key references

A full listing of references for this briefing is available in the research report

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¹eg As the category used for registering child protection plans more frequently than emotional, physical or sexual abuse [see Department for Education, 2015 <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/characteristics-of-children-in-need-2014-to-2015> (Accessed 11/03/16)].

²eg See Radford et al (2011).

³Gilbert et al (2009)

⁴Cardiff University / NSPCC (2014); Thornberry et al (2001); Smith et al (2005); Brandon et al (2013).

⁵Rees et al, 2010.

⁶Interestingly no studies have solely focused on neglect – it has only been researched as a 'bi-product' in more general research into maltreatment (Stoltenborg, 2013).

⁷This was derived from other research – see Straus and Kaufman Kantor (2005).

⁸This was subsequently refined to a more robust 12-item scale for analysis of the full dataset.

⁹A shorter, eight item set was administered to Year 8 students (aged 12-13 years old) in a separate survey.

¹⁰Around 20% of the sample lived regularly in two homes and it was not possible to confidently interpret their responses on experiences of parental inputs.

¹¹'Relatedness' measures the degree to which someone thinks those around them will be supportive.

¹²Material deprivation was assessed using a young person-centred scale (Main and Pople, 2011).

¹³It has been estimated that around 10,000 young people were missing from education in England in 2013 (Ofsted, 2013).

¹⁴There is relatively little published research around parenting in more affluent families, although some researchers have begun to study the factors around 'isolation from parents (literal and emotional)' that may manifest within high income families (eg see Luthar, 2003; Luthar & Latendresse, 2005).

¹⁵Baginsky, 2007; Rees et al, 2010.

¹⁶Dishion et al, 2003; Dishion et al 2004.

¹⁷Kerr and Stattin, 2000.

¹⁸See Smetana, 2006.

¹⁹See in particular Rees et al, 2013. Interestingly young people also reported in this study a sense that their autonomy decreases as they get older.

²⁰Recent studies of this topic have concluded that controlling behaviour / suppressing autonomy tends to be bad for young people's well-being and to lead to poor outcomes (Soenens and Beyers, 2012), and also highlighted the importance of 'family harmony' and 'parental support' alongside parental autonomy granting as key contributors to high life satisfaction (Rees et al, 2013).

²¹Main and Pople, 2011.

²²Katz et al, 2007.

It is a painful fact that many children and young people in Britain today are still suffering extreme hardship, abuse and neglect.

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For more information on this report, please contact:

Phil Raws

Senior Researcher

e: phil.raws@childrensociety.org.uk

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