

How Social Workers Engage Neglectful Parents from Affluent Backgrounds in the Child Protection System

KTP Seminar
31st January 2018

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Background

- Scoping Review *(Bernard, 2016)*
- Children of affluent parents are often excluded in debates about child neglect as they are considered to be at “low risk”; however, research is beginning to suggest that this previously under-studied population may be at risk of neglect but their needs may be overlooked *(Bellis et al 2014; Felitti et al 1998)*

Key issues concerning neglect and socio-economic background

- Where social class is addressed in the research literature on neglect, the focus is primarily on families from lower socioeconomic strata.
- Adverse Childhood Experiences' (ACEs) studies highlight that children from affluent families suffer hidden harm in less visible ways (Felitti *et al* 1998).
- Neglectful parents from privileged groups slip under the radar, and are thus less likely to come under close scrutiny by child protection agencies, so they do not show up in official reported statistics (Bellis *et al* 2014).

Aims

This study therefore investigated what factors arise for social workers in responding to this type of child maltreatment in affluent families.

The research was framed around three questions

- How do social workers identify risk factors for vulnerable children in affluent circumstances?
- Which factors inhibit or enable social workers' engagement with affluent parents when there are child protection concerns?
- What kind of skills, knowledge and experience is necessary for frontline social workers to effectively assert their professional authority with affluent parents when there are concerns about abuse and neglect?

Definition of Neglect Used

Working Together to Safeguard Children (2015) definition of neglect:

- *“The persistent failure to meet a child’s basic physical and/or psychological needs, likely to result in the serious impairment of the child’s health and development” (DfE 2015) - (Neglect type: Educational, Emotional, Medical, Nutritional, Physical, & Supervisory)*

Methodology

- The research sites were selected using the DCLG, Open Data Communities Platform.
- Indices of deprivation (***Income, Health, Education, Housing, Crime***), by geographical areas were used to select 12 LAs, CCs & Unitary Authorities

Methodology

- A semi-structured topic guide was used in interviews and focus groups with 30 expert stakeholders.
- Frontline social workers; Team managers; PSWs; Designated safeguarding leads; Service managers; LADO

Four overarching themes emerged in the analysis:

- Recognising and addressing neglect
- Parents' sense of privilege and entitlement
- Barriers to escalating concerns
- Factors that make a difference for authoritative practice.

Recognising and addressing neglect

- *The vast majority of the cases described by the participants concerned emotional neglect, although other forms of maltreatment, such as sexual abuse, child sexual exploitation and emotional abuse, were also identified.*

Recognising and addressing neglect

- *The findings revealed that thresholds for neglect are not always understood, which posed challenges for effectively safeguarding children at risk of significant harm in privileged families.*

One participant remarked:

- *“Those children are quite hidden, because parents know their rights, they are articulate, and they can be quite avoiding. I would say that social workers are quite often concerned that working with affluent parents rather than with other parents because they are educated and they are very challenging”.*

A Team Manager Commented:

- *“Affluent families are not the people who can't afford to clothe their children.....who can't afford to feed their children, so quite often those basic care needs are being met even if you've got an alcoholic parent, for example. They may be quite high functioning.... the children are picked up from school, their attendance is still good, it might be somebody else actually meeting the child's needs, so it might be more difficult to find out what's really going on in the family, but that child's needs are being met”.*

Parents' sense of privilege and entitlement

- Where there are risk factors – e.g. parental alcohol and substance abuse, domestic abuse, mental health issues – class privileges manifest to make it difficult to find out what is going on for the child.

Parents' sense of privilege and entitlement

- *Participants described difficulties in maintaining focus on the child because of the way that parents used their status and social capital to resist child protection intervention, and many also displayed a sense of entitlement to do as they pleased and that they know best.*

Parents' sense of privilege and entitlement

A participant commented:

“What happens is that social workers get worn down by these cases, and we let go of them without actually achieving the outcomes we want.”

Parents' sense of privilege and entitlement

- All participants felt that the parents' socio-economic status privileged them to subject their practice to a level of scrutiny in a way that families from lower socio-economic backgrounds did not.
- Parents were often very knowledgeable about the workings of the system, and socially well-placed to question decisions.

Barriers to escalating concerns

- A recurring theme was the challenging behaviours they encountered when attempting to escalate concerns for a section 47 investigation.
- Specific barriers included difficulties engaging parents, and the gathering of information to build up a picture for the assessment of the safety needs of children.

Barriers to escalating concerns

- *Participants consistently cited that highly resistant parents were more likely to use legal advocates or the complaints procedures to challenge social workers.*

Barriers to escalating concerns

- *All of the participants also experienced the challenges of inter-agency working with private fee-paying and boarding schools when child protection concerns were raised.*
- Fee-paying and boarding schools were often reluctant to raise concerns with parents and to report safeguarding concerns about neglect to children's social care.

Factors that make a difference for authoritative practice

- *Considerable experience, practice wisdom and knowledge of neglect were essential in relation to working with highly resistant parents who had the resources to challenge social workers' decision-making.*

Factors that make a difference for authoritative practice

- Participants emphasised that they also needed to pay much more attention to how they presented themselves as an expert and authority figure;
- This included paying attention to how they dressed and spoke, as they perceived such elements form barriers to engagement with affluent families.

Factors that make a difference for authoritative practice

- Good understanding of the threshold for neglect
- Self-confidence
- Practice wisdom
- Professional curiosity
- Good supervision
- Support from managers

Factors that make a difference for authoritative practice

- Emotional impact of working with hostility and resistance from parents:

One social worker stated:

- *“You need line managers who are completely behind you all the way, and won't undermine you. You need a confident but child centred approach from line managers as well”.*

Factors that make a difference for authoritative practice

- *Participants cite the organisational cultures of support, purposeful informal conversations about the case with colleagues, and themed learning activities, as key to their ability to work in this complex field.*

Factors that make a difference for authoritative practice

- *“I think it takes a really skilled practitioner, because you have to acknowledge, hear and listen to what parents are saying. You need to give them sufficient attention so they feel what they have said has been heard, whilst at the same time just keep bringing it back to the child and the impact on the child”.*

Thank You

I would like to thank all the social workers and managers who took part in the research.

The full report is available at:

Social, Therapeutic and Community Studies (STACS) - Goldsmiths

...[https://www.gold.ac.uk/stacs/City of London/Goldsmiths Knowledge Transfer Programme](https://www.gold.ac.uk/stacs/City_of_London/Goldsmiths_Knowledge_Transfer_Programme)

References

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