



Joanna Nicolas

Child protection  
consultant and trainer

**Translating Theory into  
Practice – Practical  
Solutions to the Everyday  
Challenges of Child  
Protection**

# How do we know what the challenges are?

Through research and findings from serious case reviews



# What are the greatest challenges for those working in child protection?

1. Understanding the impact of neglect and working with neglect cases.
2. Communication and information sharing between professionals.
3. Keeping the child at the centre of what we do.
4. Working with families where there is either disguised or non-compliance.
5. The impact of multiple risk factors.
6. Recognising the particular vulnerability of some children

# Tudor Rose





Joanna Nicolas

Child protection  
consultant and trainer

# **Practical Solutions to Working with Neglect**

**NEGLECT IS THE  
HARDEST  
CATEGORY TO  
EVIDENCE**



- Neglect is the most prevalent form of child maltreatment in the UK
- Neglect has short and long-term medical, mental health and social consequences
- Neglect is on the increase
- We would not leave young child in a home where there was evidence of persistent physical or sexual abuse
- Consider the significance of the cumulative effect of each incident of neglect
- The overwhelming effect of poverty is strongly associated with neglect, as is the corrosive power of an accumulation of adverse factors
- Neglect affects children's development to an extent that signs should be apparent to professionals
- 80% of the brain develops before a child is three.

- Neglect rarely produces a crisis that demands proactive, authoritative actions
- Professionals become habituated to how a child is presenting
- Need to get better at considering the enormity and pervasiveness of parenting behaviour
- Reluctance to pass judgement, particularly when deemed to be culturally embedded or associated with social disadvantage
- Neglect is known to be at least as damaging, if not more so, than other forms of maltreatment because its impact is the most far-reaching and difficult to overcome. Neglect in the early years may be the most damaging from the point of view of long-term mental health or social functioning but effects all the way through



# What Hinders us?

- Disguised compliance
- Fears about being considered judgemental
- A focus on the parent, not the child
- Failure to understand the child's world
- A fixed view of the family
- Superficial working
- Using words such as appropriate, inappropriate, attachment and bond
- We see love as a strength

# Common Errors

“They are all late walkers in that family”

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v= JmA2CIUv  
UY](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JmA2CIUvUY)

Parental capacity to change

Professionals drawn into the chaos

Lack of evidence presented

Language



# What helps (1)

- Understand the child's day to day life - With the child and the parent separately do a detailed account of a typical day, weekday and weekend
- Remember to deal with the practical, as well as the process
- Use a chronology to clarify your mind and build evidence
- Constantly ask yourselves if anything has changed, for how long has the change been sustained and is it for better, or for worse?

# What helps (2)

- Use the definition of neglect as your reference
- Judgements must be made on evidence, not what parents tell you
- Use the framework for assessment to build a picture and evidence neglect
- Use the right research to evidence the impact of neglect (The Minnesota Parent Child Project)

# Neglect

- Neglect is 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 or development.
- Neglect may occur during pregnancy as a result of maternal substance abuse. Once a child is born, neglect may involve a parent or carer failing to:
  - Provide adequate food, clothing and shelter (including exclusion from home or abandonment)
  - Protect a child from physical and emotional harm or danger
  - Ensure adequate supervision (including the use of inadequate caregivers)
  - Ensure access to appropriate medical care or treatment.It may also include neglect of, or unresponsiveness to, a child's basic emotional needs.

# Capacity to Change

Capacity is made up of two components – motivation and the mental capacity. If one is missing, change is unlikely to happen

# Seven elements of child development

- Health
- Education
- Emotional and behavioural development
- Identity
- Family and social relationships
- Social presentation
- Self-care skills

(Framework for the Assessment of Children in Need and their Families)



# Home Visits

- Best opportunity to see the child's world
- What difficulties the parents have
- The home environment
- The strengths and risks





# In the Home

- How do you feel during the visit?
- State of the home
- Body language
- Child's reaction to the parents and vice versa

# Think the Unthinkable

- Beds may not be slept in
- Food packets may be empty
- Remember – clean and tidy home does not mean no maltreatment



# **Communication & Information Sharing between Professionals**



# What Does Good Working Together Look Like?



- Ask questions of each other
- Do not use acronyms
- Do not assume others are doing the work
- Do not tell other professionals what they have to do
- Share responsibility in child protection – it is not just you
- Play to your strengths
- Talk to each other
- Remember you are not the only one doing the work
- Never lose sight of the child



# Disguised or Non-compliance



# What is Disguised Compliance?

- Peter Reder, Sylvia Duncan and Moira Gray outlined this type of behaviour in their book *Beyond blame: child abuse tragedies revisited*
- Defined by the NSPCC as involving “a parent or carer giving the appearance of co-operating with child welfare agencies to avoid raising suspicions, to allay professional concerns and ultimately to diffuse professional intervention.”

# A Parent's Words

- “I was made aware of a possible investigation and was easily able to manipulate my family and my victims to remain silent”.
- “I was particularly skilful in my approach towards “SS”, saying the right things, being proactive and diverting their attention to less serious problems. I also convincingly explained away “SS” concerns by placing possible blame elsewhere”.
- “There was too much emotion placed on the process leading to blind conclusions”



# Common Errors

- Overly optimistic. Focus on the one positive, not the overall picture
- Listening to the parent, not the child
- Believing the parent, even when there is contradictory evidence
- Specific incident dealt with, not the overall picture
- Thinking a plan keeps a child safe



# Think the Unthinkable

- Beds may not be slept in
- Food packets may be empty
- Remember – clean and tidy home does not mean no maltreatment



# The Impact of Multiple Risk Factors



“There is a cumulative risk of harm when parental and environmental factors are present in combination or over periods of time”

*Brandon et al. 2015*



# Greatest Risk Factors

- Domestic abuse
- Substance misuse
- Mental ill-health

In addition to the “toxic trio”:-

- The parents’ own childhoods
- A history of violent crime
- A pattern of multiple consecutive partners
- Acrimonious separation
- social isolation
- Homelessness
- Not in education



# Domestic Abuse

“The impact of all domestic abuse is harmful to children and a step-change is required in how we understand and respond to domestic abuse. There is a need to move away from incident-based models of intervention with domestic abuse to a deeper understanding of the ongoing nature of coercive control and its impact on women and children, and also on men”.

*Brandon et al. 2015*

# Serious Case Reviews 2011-2014

- Parental alcohol and drug misuse were both recorded as present in over a third of reviews (37% and 38% respectively), with at least one of these in 47% of cases. In 48 cases (27%) both factors were present.
- Parental mental health problems were found in 53% of cases
- Domestic abuse in 54% of cases.



What makes a  
Particular Child  
Even More  
Vulnerable?



- Children with a disability, or with additional needs
- Babies born prematurely
- Children with English as a second language
- Asylum-seeking children
- The age of the child – young infants, pre-school children and adolescents

And Finally.....

**You can be the one to make  
the difference in a child's life**

