

Focusing on the child: Redressing neglect in child protection

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Children and young people are vital members of families, communities, and society, and ultimately of future generations. As such they have indelible human rights, as signalled by the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child. When addressing an issue like child neglect, it is easy to be sidetracked by the inherent complexity of the issue, but the importance of ensuring children's fundamental rights are protected should also come to the fore.

Child protection agencies work with a difficult balancing act – ensuring the safety and wellbeing of children and their sense of belonging in family, while making sure parents take responsibility for meeting their children's needs. As has been highlighted in a number of the articles in this edition, neglect is an issue that offers challenges for practitioners.

Mardani (2010, p. viii) suggests that neglect is “less tangible and harder to define” than other forms of child maltreatment and that is certainly borne out in practice. Neglect is invasive, difficult to tackle and commonly seen in the population of children and young people brought to the attention of child protection services. It is often manifested with multiple, persistent and complex issues. Neglect is often not a headline grabber, and it can be difficult to keep public interest in this area of child protection. The media is more likely to report on physical abuse, as it is the most obvious and visible form of abuse. However, we know all too well that neglect is the silent abuse that has potentially significant impacts on children.

The Office of the Children's Commissioner produced a report on child neglect in 2010 written

by Janine Mardani. Nicola Atwool from the Office of the Children's Commissioner has written a summary of this report for this edition of *Social Work Now*. It sheds light on an important topic and calls for various agencies to work together. This article is both a reply to that report and an opportunity for Child, Youth and Family to articulate how it tackles the issue of child neglect.

While it is a challenging area of work, Child, Youth and Family's core focus is on identifying and addressing the harm or risk of harm to a child, the responsible parties' capability and culpability, and a child's unmet needs.

Context

Understanding the problem – neglect uncovered

Neglect is invasive, difficult to tackle and commonly seen in the population of children and young people brought to the attention of child protection services.

Child, Youth and Family's frontline staff regularly encounter children who have experienced all forms of neglect, including physical, emotional, medical, educational, or supervisory. We find that neglect is often intermingled with issues associated with family violence.

Although Child, Youth and Family data on findings of neglect must be treated with caution, it is currently the best proxy measure we have in New Zealand for the level of neglect that exists. Mardani's (2010) analysis of Child, Youth and Family data found that neglect was the second most frequent finding in 2009, representing 0.393% of all New Zealand children. She suggested that neglect was the sole finding in cases for 63% of children where there were findings and 42% of neglect findings were for those under five years of age in 2009. Mardani also noted that Māori are

overrepresented and half of children with neglect live in deprived areas.

In 2011, neglect continued to be the second most common finding (Child, Youth and Family, 2011c). Neglect was substantiated for 12.7 of every 1000 children under the age of 17 known to Child, Youth and Family. As a comparison, 5.9 out of 1000 children had substantiated physical abuse and 3.3 out of 1000 children had substantiated sexual abuse (ibid). However, further analysis of underlying factors of the data suggests that the rate of neglect is on the decrease (Mansell & Ota, 2009).

A recent internal analysis of Child, Youth and Family data found that clients loosely cluster into four distinct groups (Child, Youth and Family, 2011c). One of the smaller clusters (making up 9% of clients) represented families who often returned to Child, Youth and Family's attention and utilised a significant number of Child, Youth and Family time and resources. This represented a financially expensive group. The most common finding in this group was neglect. This illustrates the high level of investment Child, Youth and Family has with this pervasive form of maltreatment and may also testify to the difficulty of finding sustainable solutions.

The Children's Commissioner's report on neglect recommended that Child, Youth and Family examine a group of children who had a significant number of notifications before a finding of neglect in 2009. The Office of the Chief Social Worker undertook an analysis of these 18 cases.

While these families represent issues at the far end of the continuum of complexities the analysis of these cases has provided some useful insight into the dynamics at play in families impacted by multiple and complicated issues, including neglect. The analysis identified an additional three children, making up a total of 21 children in seven families who had a significant number of notifications before a finding of neglect was made in the 2009 financial year.

They all had significant Child, Youth and Family histories entailing complex issues dominated by pervasive family violence and significant levels of emotional and physical abuse, and in some cases sexual abuse, and parental substance use and criminal behaviour. While there was evidence of neglect in all of these families, it was of varying degrees of severity. In some families, the level of neglect alone would not have reached the threshold for statutory involvement. Nonetheless the neglect in all of the families was one of many issues that were not easily disentangled. The analysis found that Child, Youth and Family

were working with the families on a range of concerns and the absence of an earlier finding did not mean issues were not being identified or responded to.

The neglect that was evident for these children included varying degrees of severity and typology. There were examples of physical, emotional, medical,

educational, and supervisory neglect. Although in some cases the neglect appeared to be of low level, the cumulative harm experienced by these children was undeniable, particularly within the wider context of normalisation of family violence and other abuse. These cases act as a guide. They illustrate the importance of effective and early intervention for children and young people.

Describing neglect can be difficult for practitioners as it is predicated on multifaceted issues. We often see a mixture of intentional and unintentional neglect. Some parents lack material or emotional resources or skills and knowledge to care for their children, while others are overwhelmed by social or environmental factors. We also see an increased risk to children of adverse social and health outcomes, including child maltreatment when economic hardship sets in (New Zealand Children's Social Health Monitor, 2011).

While this article largely focuses on efforts within Child, Youth and Family to tackle neglect, particularly with individual families, a significant component is linked to systemic issues. As has been suggested by other authors in this edition,

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interventions at the micro level are important, but they only go so far.

Although we do have some understanding of the degree and the long-term impact of neglect in our society, the depth of our knowledge is lacking. Atwool points out the measures we have to quantify levels of neglect are limited. As is suggested later in this article, Child, Youth and Family is currently looking at how to improve its use of maltreatment findings. The Ministry of Social Development, in partnership with other agencies, is also considering possible improvements to the way child maltreatment is collected and reported in New Zealand. Further, as per Atwool's recommendation, the Centre for Social Research and Evaluation is exploring ways to incorporate child neglect into their research agenda to provide Child, Youth and Family with a better understanding of child neglect.

Intervening where it counts – the early years

Much attention has been paid to the importance of the early years within the arena of child welfare, and rightfully so. Research is increasingly proving the importance of early intervention in a range of areas for children. The period beginning in vitro is the time when brain structures are formed, profoundly impacting on the development of a child's psychological, biological and social wellbeing (Gluckman, Low & Franko, 2011). This sets them up for life. Evidence is increasingly suggesting that the most useful (and cost effective) interventions for a whole range of personal and social issues affecting children, young people and adults, across a diverse range of health, mental health, justice, education, employment, are in the early years (ibid).

When a child begins a life wherein their basic social, psychological, physical, educational needs are not met, they are placed on a life course of potential disadvantage. Children are naturally resilient, but where the patterns of denied access to their

basic needs are persistent, their development may be compromised and their ability to attach to their caregiver(s) may be disrupted. Without intervention this can put a child on a trajectory that limits their innate potential (McDermott, 2004).

Even in the best of circumstances, parenting is as challenging as it is rewarding. The parent(s) or guardians(s) and the environment in which they inhabit, significantly impact on a child. Our experience shows that where there are issues of neglect or other forms of child maltreatment there are also other issues impacting on the family dynamic, including substance abuse, financial strain, mental or physical health issues, poor housing, overcrowding, family violence, or parental experience of child neglect or maltreatment.

Child, Youth and Family's challenge is to assess early the concerns that impact on the child and find ways to meaningfully address them. This may mean supporting parents to care for their children or, when necessary, find alternative enduring care arrangements for a child. In some instances, Child, Youth and Family may not be the best organisation to be working with the family and may need to refer them to one of the many other services available.

Child protection response

We know that child neglect has a profound impact on our children and young people and on our communities. Child, Youth and Family is committed to making a difference. As neglect is tied to an intricate web of other dynamics within a family, our strategy is to holistically focus on a child's needs. While only a proportion of children who experience child maltreatment come to Child, Youth and Family's attention, we can ensure that our processes are as robust as possible to keep the children who need it safe (Gilbert et al, 2009).

To do this, Child, Youth and Family is currently strengthening assessment and identification of

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needs, reinforcing the importance of child-centred practice and family/whānau decision-making, focusing on family violence and joining up with others to get the best outcomes for children. The agency has tightened its definitions of neglect and is looking at ways to improve the consistency of maltreatment findings. We are focusing on providing training and quality information to staff on the impact of neglect and how best to address it.

Our current direction is to further improve the quality and depth of our assessments.

Making the most of assessments and identifying needs

It may seem obvious, but understanding the needs of a child or young person is the first step to understanding how best to intervene with a family where neglect is a concern. A good assessment is fundamental to any child protection work. Traditionally, child protection agencies have been very skilled at assessing a single event and redressing it, such as physical assault or sexual abuse (Miller, 2007; Munro, 2010), but less adept at describing issues like neglect or emotional abuse. The latter are more likely to be harmful through an enduring pattern.

Child, Youth and Family has been on a journey for several years to better address children's needs. This arguably started with the introduction of differential response and the distinct service pathways in 2007 (see Child, Youth and Family, 2009). This change began to make the shift to looking at needs while still focusing on keeping a child safe. Within the context of ever-increasing notifications, Child, Youth and Family has traditionally focused on assessing risks to children and young people rather than assessing their needs. However, the organisation is now in a better place to more systematically assess and address needs. Our current direction is to further improve the quality and depth of our assessments. The Gateway assessments have been introduced, which help to better identify and address the unmet health and education needs of children entering care. As the programme develops it will be extended to more children (Rankin, 2011).

The Office of the Chief Social Worker within Child, Youth and Family is currently working to strengthen assessment and decision-making tools. The office recognises the importance of good assessment and knows that a robust and thorough assessment will more clearly indicate where a child's needs are not being met and help us to better understand the complexities that underlie any issues of child maltreatment. The new assessment model will steer social workers to analyse historical patterns, be cognisant of cumulative harm, and consider parenting capacity and environmental issues, and will move social workers away from incident-focused assessments. The assessment model will emphasise the importance of assessing children and families throughout their interaction with Child, Youth and Family. This will include assessments at transition points, such as returning home.

In developing new assessment processes, Child, Youth and Family has identified the key components of effective assessments. A good assessment keeps the child at the centre of the process and is written clearly and in a way that a child can understand. A good assessment needs to be timely and have a clear purpose that is apparent to the practitioner, the agency, the child and their family. A full assessment needs to be triangulated and authenticated with information from a variety of sources gathered in a variety of ways. Social work practitioners need to ensure their assessments are free from bias and include time for critical reflection and evaluation of social worker judgement and decision-making. The assessment should also include a good analysis of family history and chronology.

Gathering information for an assessment is only the first step. The analysis of this information is key. It should include careful examination of the interrelationship between the risks, needs and strengths/protective factors of a child or young person, their guardian's parenting capacity and their family/whānau and environmental factors (Salomen & Sturmfels, 2011). Of course

the assessment must then lead into a plan that addresses the issues identified.

Child-centred practice

Child, Youth and Family has long been focused on child-centred practice, but we have committed to further supporting this principle. Neglect is difficult to define as it is the absence of care. This has been further complicated, at least within our population, by the fact that children and young people who are neglected are often situated in families with a constellation of complex issues. We often see, as evidenced in the seven families that were reviewed, a toxic mix of extreme violence, substance use and criminal activities among adults and various forms of child maltreatment of children.

At times it is easy to become tied up with the adult issues in families presenting with multiple challenges. It is necessary to focus on the wellbeing of parents as the guardians of children and young people, but not at the expense of recognising and addressing children and young people's needs. The new assessment model will provide an avenue for keeping children at the centre of our practice, and understanding risks and their impact.

In 2011 and 2012 Child, Youth and Family will be developing a child and young person's participation strategy to ensure that we have clear national support and direction to ensure children and young people are able to meaningfully participate in their own cases, as well as at the local, regional and national level.

Whānau support and decision-making

Child, Youth and Family's Practice Frameworks and the Children, Young Persons, and Their Families Act (1989) support family/whānau decision-making, but beyond these practice and legislative mandates, working with families is core to our

business. In respect of neglect, ensuring families have the capability and capacity to support and care for their children are quintessential. Families know best what is happening within their homes and are best placed to make lasting change. It is our job to make sure that the children and families that are identified as needing statutory intervention have parents or caregivers whose parenting capability has been assessed and who are supported to do the best for their children.

Child, Youth and Family recognised that there was room for improvement in this area of work. For instance, the 21 children who were reviewed had experienced multiple whānau placements. There was a tendency for these placements to break down when a caregiver could no longer manage a child's challenging behaviour. We need to ensure our whānau are supported to parent a child who is exhibiting difficult behaviour so they can provide consistent, loving and stable care.

Where families are struggling to meet their children's needs, Child, Youth and Family has a range of mechanisms at our disposal to draw on the resources of families and professionals to support robust family decision-making to get the best outcomes for children and young people, including whānau hui, family whānau agreements and family group conferences.

We have developed the Whānau Caregiver Assessment and Approval Policy and provided staff with affiliated best practice guidance to emphasise the importance of utilising family decision-making through whānau hui. We emphasise this early in our engagement with families and throughout our engagement with them. The policy also sets guidelines for better supporting whānau to provide care. Similarly we have introduced further practice guidance and training on assessing parenting capacity (see Crawford, 2011).

Focus on family violence

As mentioned earlier, neglect is often a factor

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in cases where family violence is occurring. Attempts to ameliorate family violence sometimes overshadow concerns for children, especially in instances of 'softer' maltreatment like neglect. The dynamics among the adults can draw attention away from child-centred practice.

All seven of the families we reviewed had evidence of prolific family violence. Family violence continues to be an area of practice that we struggle with, but some of the key messages from this review include the importance of ensuring a child-centred focus, continually assessing whether a child is having their needs met within the context of family violence, and assessing parents' capacity and capability to provide safe care. Child, Youth and Family has recently introduced a set of practice triggers on family violence and best practice guidance to support social workers when working with families where there are family violence dynamics. This information explicitly refers to assessing needs and minding cumulative harm (Child, Youth and Family, 2011a; 2011c; 2011d; Miller, 2007; Craigie, 2011).

Training and knowledge sharing

The Children Commissioner's report highlighted the need for Child, Youth and Family to clarify definitions of neglect and to help social workers understand where the threshold for intervening with families lies. We are developing material for our staff to add to our online Practice Centre. This material will focus on improving our understanding of neglect (including this edition of *Social Work Now*) and how best to identify and address it. We are also looking at ways to ensure that the information in our Practice Induction curriculum is sufficient and current.

Additionally the training that will complement the roll out of the new assessment model, the parenting assessment and the family violence

triggers will integrate learnings from this article, in particular the importance of ensuring children's needs are met and focusing on child-centred practice to better identify neglect.

Further we are also looking at ways to better promote the Strategies with Kids – Information for Parents (SKIP) resources for staff to provide to families as suggested by Atwool.

Joined-up work

As suggested by Atwool, the importance of looking at the various aspects of intervening with neglect cannot be ignored. Given the inherent challenges, it requires a future focus. Effective interventions include improving practice and policy, macro and micro, and various agencies working together with a shared definition of neglect and a shared vision. We need to focus on the effectiveness of intervention to prevent occurrence, recurrence and impairment from neglect. With this in mind, Child, Youth and Family has been working to strengthen our relationship with partner agencies.

We are working across agencies to improve the consistency of our understandings of neglect and child maltreatment. In December 2010, welcomed by the Office of the Children's Commissioner, we

launched a revised interagency guide to *Breaking the Cycle*, entitled *Working Together* (Child, Youth and Family, 2010). This guide includes a new shared definition of neglect and covers how we agree to work together. Following on from this we have been holding a series of interagency workshops to strengthen information sharing and working together with our health and education colleagues. This has helped us to clarify our understanding

of, and thresholds for, issues like neglect. As Howarth suggests in her article (see p. 10), the perceptions people have for the thresholds of child maltreatment are based on value judgements that often vary greatly from one

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professional to another. Working Together goes some way to address this, but we also hold joint training with our health and education colleagues to help improve our shared understanding of the thresholds for statutory intervention with child maltreatment and challenge preconceptions where necessary.

Atwool recommends that Child, Youth and Family meet with government partners annually to report on the number of notifications to foster a strong feedback loop. We are doing this with Police in cases of serious abuse as part of the new Child Protection Protocol work, including serious wilful neglect. Similarly, we have improved our relationship with our health colleagues and improved our ability to share information with the introduction of social workers in every District Health Board.

We also need to make sure that we are referring our families to the best possible programmes and community providers to support them and it is publications like this that help us to have the

knowledge to do this well. Research has shown that beneficial programmes include home visiting, parent education and multi-component, targeted services (Davies, Rowe & Hassall, 2009).

Finally, looking to the near future we need to ensure we are utilising the opportunity afforded by the publication of the Green Paper for Vulnerable Children (Children's Action Plan, 2011) to keep the importance of meeting children's needs and ensuring their basic rights are met, in the limelight. We will also need to ensure that we are advocating that this is translated into the White Paper for Vulnerable Children and the Children's Action Plan.

Conclusion

Neglect is pervasive and commonly seen in families who present to Child, Youth and Family. It tends to be manifested with multiple and complex issues, including family violence. A holistic approach is required, whereby we integrate consideration of

neglect into all aspects of practice development and training. We have committed to improving our identification and response to meeting children's needs and addressing neglect where it occurs. Given the enduring nature of neglect, Child, Youth and Family has a role in ensuring that measures to respond to neglect, including emphasising child-centred practice, are routinely integrated into practice developments. We also have a role in identifying barriers to early prevention and identification of neglect and developing information to advance practice advice and guidance.

We are a service that continuously works to do the best for children, young people and their families. To do this we work from an ethos that promotes and adheres to a cycle of continuous

learning and improvement.

We know that neglect is an enormous challenge for child protection organisations and for society. In this article we have outlined where Child, Youth and Family is currently and what measures we are putting in place to improve, but there are no easy

solutions and we will have to continue to adapt and change to best meet the needs of children and young people.

Child, Youth and Family does need to make sure it works together with its partner organisations and with families to optimise the outcomes for children. In the long run, families, communities, and societies have to heed the warning that children's basic needs must be met and their fundamental rights must be upheld if they are to thrive for this generation and the ones to come. ■

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