



Troubled Teens

A study of the links between parenting and adolescent neglect

Summary

Introduction

Child neglect has become topical in recent years with the emergence of new policy and practice initiatives, including parenting support for families with pre-school-aged children as part of early intervention services. There is now a widespread acceptance that poor parental care of younger children limits life chances and is bad for society in the long term.

Parental neglect of adolescents has, by contrast, remained low on the agenda. Although it is generally accepted that raising teenagers is a test of parenting skills, there is little formal support available and a lack of sympathy for those who struggle with its complex demands. This is particularly the case when neglected adolescents are deemed as being 'problematic' for society, for example, if they become involved in crime or anti-social behaviour.

The Children's Society is leading on at comprehensive research programme on adolescent neglect in England. This summary outlines the context for the programme and presents early findings which lift the lid on the extent of neglectful parenting of teenagers in homes across the country, as well as a widespread failure to fully respond to this potentially life-changing issue. It sets out a series of recommendations to create a step change in the way adolescents are supported.

What does The Children's Society mean by parental adolescent neglect?

Bringing up teenagers can be challenging, requiring flexibility from parents as a young person develops and matures towards independence.

Teenagers are often viewed as being more resilient than younger children, but they still need dedicated care to meet their physical and emotional needs, to support their education and to keep them safe.

A lack of consistent attention to any, or all, of these aspects of parenting can constitute neglect, and link to poor well-being and to risky behaviour which can jeopardise a teenager's health or future prospects.

The significance of adolescent neglect

Official data on children's safeguarding indicates that, regardless of age, neglect is the form of maltreatment most often recorded for child protection plans. Research shows that neglect is the most prevalent form of maltreatment young people experience, and studies have demonstrated that this is true in all developed, western countries.

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 harm. There is also research from the US (the Rochester Youth Development Study) that has shown neglect during adolescence can be as harmful as other forms of maltreatment, and more damaging than neglect which occurs only during earlier childhood, and there have been similar findings from studies in Australia.

Although there has been an upsurge in policy and practice activity around neglect in England in recent years, alongside the publication of new research, for the most part the focus has been on young children. This may be because neglect is seen as being a particularly complex issue and because many adults, including the professionals who work with them, think that adolescents have a natural resilience to poor parenting experiences.

The Children's Society's research programme, 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

'Neglect' is a complex concept, especially when used in relation to the care of older children who are maturing towards independence and have changing needs. Measuring its scale and effects has proved to be difficult for researchers, and assessing it is a challenge for professionals.

The 'Troubled Teens?' study used an innovative methodology to explore adolescent neglect. A representative sample of around 2,000 young people aged 12–15 took part in our online survey in 72 schools across the country. They told us how often their parents did particular things as part of looking after them – things related, for example, to educational support and physical care (the full list of questions is in Figure One on the next page). There were also questions in the survey about well-being (how happy a young person was with their life; how optimistic they were about the future), and the older group – 14–15 year olds in Year 10 – were asked about issues like drinking alcohol, truanting from school and their health.

We found that these young people were more likely to be involved in risk-taking and to have lower well-being when their parents provided care or support less frequently – and that this became significantly worse at the lowest levels (where parents 'never' or 'hardly ever' behaved in caring or supportive ways towards their teenage children). Systematic analysis showed where the differences were significant – where parenting was neglectful – and allowed us to look at the scale of neglect (including for different forms of neglect), and at how neglect linked to other problems in teenagers' lives.

Figure 1: Measure of parenting behaviours

In the last year how often did your parents, or the adults you live with...

...show an interest in what you were doing at school? ...attend parents' evenings at school? ...keep track of how you were doing at school – by doing things like reading reports?	EDUCATIONAL SUPPORT
...help you if you had problems? ...support you if you were upset? ...tell you when they thought you had done something well?	EMOTIONAL SUPPORT
...make sure you saw a doctor if you needed one? ...take care of you if you felt ill? ...support you to look after your teeth and go to the dentist?	PHYSICAL CARE
...ask you where you were going when you went out? ...like to know where you were after school? ...expect you to call or text to let them know if you were going to be home late?	SUPERVISION

Response options and scores

Never (0) Hardly ever (1) Sometimes (2) Often (3) Always (4)

Key findings

Aside from the first section on 'parenting norms' all the findings reported here are for 14–15 year olds in Year 10 who lived in one home.

Parenting norms

- The level of 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 Year 10 pupils said they regularly received emotional support. For example, more than three times as many Year 10 pupils (11%) than Year 8 pupils (3%) said they had 'never'/'hardly ever' been supported if they were upset.
- The majority of Year 10 pupils 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 the same frequency for educational or emotional support.

The complexity of parenting adolescents

- As a general rule more care from parents was found to be beneficial – better supported teenagers had higher levels of well-being and were less likely to engage in risk-taking behaviours. The strongest links were between frequent emotional support by parents and high well-being for teenagers (for example, teenagers were more satisfied with their lives, and more optimistic about the future, when their parents regularly helped with problems and gave support if they were upset).
- However, there were some types of parenting where less intense input had benefits. For example 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

- Around 1 in 7 young people in Year 10 (15%) reported at least one form of neglectful parenting. This equates, on average, to three students in every Year 10 classroom. Most (58%) had experienced one form of neglect in isolation, with almost half this group indicating supervisory neglect.
- 8% of young people reported neglectful levels of parenting in relation to emotional support. The same proportion had experienced supervisory neglect. 5% of young people reported neglect for physical care, and 4% for educational support.
- 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

- 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).
- 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.

The negative associations of neglect of 14–15 year olds

Risk-taking

- Neglected young people were significantly more likely to behave in ways which risked their health or jeopardised their future opportunities. For example, young people who experienced emotional neglect were more than twice as likely to have recently truanted or got really drunk than those who had not been neglected for this form of parental input. 27% of emotionally neglected teenagers had truanted at least once in the past month compared to 13% of their non-neglected peers, and 46% had got really drunk in the past few months compared to 22%.

Low well-being

- Young people in neglected groups for each form of parenting had significantly lower scores for well-being than those who had not experienced neglect.
- There was an association between any experience of neglect and lower well-being, but young people who reported multiple forms of neglect (ie neglect in relation to two or more categories of parenting behaviour) had significantly worse levels of well-being than their counterparts who were neglected in relation to one type of parenting in isolation.

Poor health

- Many neglected teenagers also had bad health. 28% of those who reported educational neglect said their health was 'bad' or 'very bad' (as opposed to 3% of those who had not been neglected for this form of parenting), and 21% of those who had been physically neglected gave the same response (compared to just 3% of the non-neglected group for this parenting category).

These findings should be read with caution because they come from the first use of a new measure and methodology for researching neglect. We will be doing more surveys in the future to consolidate them and to explore the issues more.

Conclusions

The scale of adolescent neglect

This study found that tens of thousands of teenagers could be failing to get the crucial support they need at home. More than 1 in 7 (15%) Year 10 pupils 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 lower well-being and a higher propensity than their peers to behaving in ways which may jeopardise their health or their prospects.

The hidden harm of being neglected in adolescence

By linking neglect to self-reported well-being, this study exposed the hidden harms which are associated with low levels of parenting for teenagers. Before now a particular 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. This is because, unlike for other forms of maltreatment, there may be no physical symptoms and there is a belief that teenagers have their own natural resilience.

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 be dissatisfied with their lives overall – and that these feelings become even more negative if they experience more than one type of neglect over the same period.

Supervision and adolescent neglect

Findings from the survey on supervision by parents of their teenage children's activities away from home were difficult to interpret when considering neglect. This is not surprising because this is an area where young people can have an influence (for example by not disclosing information to their parents, or questioning the need to return home at a particular time) and because we were only able to ask about how often parents made attempts to find out what their teenager was doing or expect to be notified if they were going to be home late.

We did find that where parents less frequently did these things, their children were more likely to be putting themselves at risk – but there was less clarity in terms of how lower levels of supervision linked to adolescents' reports of well-being. For example, more of the young people who said 'sometimes' or 'often' to the questions on supervision also reported high scores for life satisfaction than those who reported that their parents 'always' did these things.

Other research on well-being by The Children's Society has shown that young people particularly value autonomy, freedom and choice, but that they feel that this decreases as they become older – so maybe it's not surprising that the 14–15 year olds in our survey said they were less happy when parents were frequently asking about what they were doing away from home. How teenagers and their parents feel about and deal with these issues – control, rules, sanctions, curfews – is something we will explore more as the research programme develops.

Material deprivation and adolescent neglect

In the survey questionnaire we asked young people about how many of a set of 10 possessions, experiences or resources they had (things which most young people would say they need for 'a normal kind of life'), as a way to distinguish how privileged or deprived they were. We found that teenagers who said that they lacked three or more of the things on the list were also more likely to report neglectful parenting.

It is likely that for many young people their own material deprivation reflected the economic situation for their family – that they were living in a poor household – but from this survey we cannot tell how many. Indeed for some this finding might show that relatively affluent parents were choosing not to spend their money on their teenage children, something else that would signify neglect.

- Other research has shown that poverty can undermine some parents' capacity to parent well because they become more stressed, depressed or irritable – although the authors of a recent review of studies asserted that 'the way parents relate to their children does not simply arise out of economic adversity or advantage'. Many families in the UK have seen incomes fall in recent years, particularly as a result of reductions in social security provision, and it is a concern that poverty rates are expected to increase substantially in coming years. Reversing this trend could play a significant role in avoiding the kind of tensions which can disrupt parenting behaviours. We will look into these issues in more detail as the research programme progresses.

What needs to change

Our key recommendations

The majority of adolescents in England are well cared for, but this research reveals that around 1 in 7 of this country's Year 10 pupils experience neglectful parenting, with some groups at higher risk because of the contexts and circumstances of their lives. The study shows how closely-linked the experience of neglect is to low well-being, to risk-taking behaviours and to poor health. Our 'Understanding Adolescent Neglect' programme will include more studies to improve knowledge around neglect over time – but clearly much more already needs to be done to reduce the likelihood that adolescents will face neglect, and to improve future prospects for those who do.

As a starting point we believe that:

- National policy should be adapted and local service provision improved to address the support needs of all families with adolescent children. Although programmes targeting teenagers do exist, the majority of universal parenting programmes in England have been focussed towards the parents of younger children in their early years. Parenting classes should be provided in ways that are non-stigmatising and widely-accessible, with additional support available for those who feel they need it. This should form a key part of the Government's 'Life Chances Strategy' to complement support for families with younger children.
- Training to improve knowledge and understanding of the scale and potential impacts of adolescent neglect should be provided for all frontline workers (in education, health and youth justice services) who have a role in safeguarding teenagers.
- More needs to be done to enable young people to recognise neglectful situations and know what help is available. This could be done, for example, in schools through Personal, Social, Health and Economic (PSHE) classes.
- Support for young people themselves should be made available – including online information, advice and forums alongside directly-accessible, flexible services which are non-judgemental and young person-centred in their approach. Such services could be based within or outside schools to meet the different needs and circumstances of different young people.
- Services for families where there is a problem with adolescent neglect should work with all family members – including teenage children – to ensure that everyone has a stake in building solutions. There may be a need for multiple agencies to become involved and, in these situations, one worker should coordinate and manage different inputs to fully address the factors contributing to parental neglect.
- Material deprivation makes parenting harder. The Government must pay more attention to the additional pressures placed on parents and their consequences in terms of parental capacity, and look again at policies that will significantly affect family income – such as freezing child benefits and tax credits, and cutting support for many disabled children under Universal Credit.

By putting changes like these in place, we can start to make real headway towards reducing the impact that adolescent neglect has in England today.

Endnotes for the briefing are listed below. Full references for cited publications are available in the main report.

- ¹'Maltreatment' refers to three forms of abuse – emotional abuse, physical abuse and sexual abuse – and neglect.
- ²More frequently than any of the three forms of abuse which can be used to register a child protection plan. See Department for Education, 2015 <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/characteristics-of-children-in-need-2014-to-2015> Accessed 11/03/16.
- ³eg Radford et al, 2011. http://www.crin.org/en/docs/1323_child_abuse_neglect_research_PDF_wdf84181_original.pdf Accessed 28/02/16.
- ⁴Gilbert et al (2009) <http://citeseerx.ist.psu.edu/viewdoc/download?doi=10.1.1.413.4690&rep=rep1&type=pdf> Accessed 03/03/16.
- ⁵Cardiff University / NSPCC, 2014. <http://www.core-info.cardiff.ac.uk/reviews/teenage-neglect-em> Accessed 04/02/16; Brandon et al, 2013. <https://www.nspcc.org.uk/globalassets/documents/research-reports/neglect-serious-case-reviews-report.pdf> Accessed 11/03/16
- ⁶Thornberry et al, 2001, 2010; Smith et al, 2005; Stewart et al, 2008.
- ⁷Rees et al, 2010. http://www.childrenssociety.org.uk/sites/default/files/tcs/research_docs/Safeguarding%20Young%20People%20-%20Responding%20to%20Young%20People%20aged%2011%20to%2017%20who%20are%20maltreated.pdf Accessed 11/03/16
- ⁸Around 20% of the sample lived regularly in two homes and it was not possible to confidently interpret their responses on experiences of parental inputs.
- ⁹Assuming an average of 21 students in a secondary school class [Department for Education (2011) Class size and education in England evidence report. Figure 1-6, p9]. https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/183364/DFE-RR169.pdf Accessed 05/05/16.
- ¹⁰Baginsky, 2007; Rees et al, 2010.
- ¹¹See in particular Rees et al, 2013. https://www.childrenssociety.org.uk/sites/default/files/tcs/good_childhood_report_2013_final.pdf Accessed 15/02/16.
- ¹²Recent studies of this topic have concluded that controlling behaviour/suppressing autonomy by parents tends to be bad for young people's well-being and to lead to poor outcomes (Soenens and Beyers, 2012), and have 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).
- ¹³Material deprivation was assessed using a young person-centred scale (Main and Pople, 2011. http://www.childrenssociety.org.uk/sites/default/files/tcs/Images/missing_out.pdf Accessed 04/03/16).
- ¹⁴Katz et al, 2007. <https://www.jrf.org.uk/sites/default/files/jrf/migrated/files/parenting-poverty.pdf> Accessed 06/01/16

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

The Children's Society is a national charity that runs crucial local services and campaigns to change the law to help this country's most vulnerable children and young people.

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