

Working with large sibling group families Practitioner Briefing

Neglect can happen in any family whether there are one or eight children in the family however children in large families can be at greater risk of neglect due to parents struggling to meet the needs of multiple children with some of whom may be particularly vulnerable due to the following (not an exhaustive list);

- Children with a learning or physical disability
- Parent(s) with emotional wellbeing and mental health issues, childhood neglect, physical and/or sexual abuse, a learning disability/difficulties, substance misuse issues
- Children living in larger families with siblings close in age
- Children living in large family with poor networks of support
- Level of vulnerability/resilience of both children and adults
- [Young carers](#)
- Children who live with/experience domestic abuse and/or parental conflict
- Teenage parenthood
- Pre-occupied/exhausted parents
- Families headed by a lone mother, or who have a transient male
- Needy parent(s), pre-occupied with their own needs, physically and psychologically unavailable for their children.

NB: the existence of multiple, pre-disposing risk factors significantly increases the possibility of a child suffering significant harm as a result of neglect.

Abuse and neglect can occur at different ages and stages of child and adolescent development, and for a multitude of different reasons including a variety of parental vulnerabilities.

- Neglect is the most prevalent form of abuse however, it can be difficult for practitioners to identify and evidence as it often occurs in the context of other factors.
- Providing earlier, effective support to parents, whilst keeping the child's welfare in mind, can reduce the risk of abuse/neglect.
- Children with disabilities appear to be one group at heightened risk of experiencing abuse/neglect.
- Children's ability to rebound from such adverse experiences is related to a number of characteristics and supporting factors such as their age, family environment, resilience, social networks and the wider community.

When we refer to a large sibling group we mean four or more children.

Things to consider when working with a large family?

- Be alert to the importance of family structure/re-structure and sudden events as possible causes of neglect and the importance of transitions in children and families' lives as an indicator to potential neglect.
- Understand where there are problems for parents (such as substance misuse, mental health, or physical health difficulties) a whole family assessment should be done to consider whether the needs of **all** the children are adequately being met by the parent/carers.
- **Undertake the relevant [Day in my life tools](#) for the different ages of children and compare their days.**
- Although poverty is closely linked to neglect it should not be assumed that financially poor parents will necessarily neglect their children. Poverty can exacerbate some challenges to parent (e.g. because parents may be stressed or depressed), but studies have also shown that materially wealthy families may be as likely to neglect their children for example in relation to emotional neglect as less affluent ones.
- Do not focus on the parents' issues rather than on the analysis of the impact of their issues/behaviours on the children and their parenting.
- Consider the parent/child relationship/attachment to **all** the children.
- Seek **all** the children's views, wishes and feelings, the individual needs of **all** children and the impact of neglect on each of them needs to be identified, explored and assessed.
- Need to assess whether the children are [Young Carers](#).
- Children with disabilities are at greater risk of being abused/neglected but in a larger family their needs maybe met to the detriment of their siblings or their needs get lost due to the parent(s) trying to care for all the children.
- For some mothers they go on to have more children in an effort to make up for some sort of void or loss, usually from their own unhappy childhood. Babies are totally reliant on the mother but when they enter toddlerhood and start developing independence and a mind of their own, some mothers miss the intensity of the new-born period and want another baby even though that's not in the best interests of the family

Consider calling a [Stop and Review meeting](#). Any agency can request a family be discussed at a Stop and Review meeting if the normal case planning, conferencing or dispute resolution processes have been tried but failed to improve outcomes. The Stop and Review meeting will seek to deliver a flexible and holistic, multi-agency response for the children and identify the outcomes to be achieved. Stop and Review meetings are intended to be used for a small number of cases where improved outcomes are not being achieved/stuck and risks are increasing, practitioners have become 'stuck', run out of ideas, repeating unproductive patterns of service delivery and "a revolving door approach to the case.

[Research in Practice](#) evidence review reports a number of factors associated with neglect. These include:

- **Poverty:** Child neglect is more often associated with poverty than other forms of child abuse, although the majority of poor families do not neglect their children, it can lead to social isolation, feelings of stigma, and high levels of stress. The financial pressures on larger families will be greater.
- **Poor living conditions:** Neglect is often associated with poor living conditions: for example, damp/broken windows/exposed wires/leaky roof/etc. and overcrowding particularly an issue for larger families.
- **Social isolation:** Parents who neglect their children have, or perceive themselves to have, fewer individuals in their social/family networks and to receive less support than other parents which may exacerbate other parental vulnerabilities.
- **Men:** Most of the evidence around neglect relates to mothers rather than fathers. Men can be a source of risk and a source of protection to children they are raising. Fathers can be overlooked in assessments of the family.

Some quotes from adults who grew up in large families;

"Lack of privacy, always having to wear hand-me-downs and constant noise. Our individual needs got lost in the hectic environment. We were socially isolated because engaging in outside activities was too expensive and friends/extended family often didn't want to host such a "brood."

"I am one of eight, the youngest, I loved the noise and fun - sharing a bedroom with three sisters was fab, having my biggest sister brush my hair and help me make my bed. But I wouldn't want it for my children. I was never special or alone with my parents. They loved me but they were easy to fool, slow to recognise when I felt lost or worried. They had lots of love to give and every intention to give it but they just didn't have the time. Too many children to support emotionally and to advocate for. It made me tough and I think children should have challenges but being one of many in your own home is incredibly isolating."

"I loved growing up in large family because there was always someone to play with, my siblings looked out for one another, and we have close bonds still now as adults, my sisters, to this day, remain my closest and best friends".

The personalities of children really determine whether a large family will work well or not, for example an introverted child may be less likely to feel more connected in a smaller than in a larger family as they may feel like no one listens to them and the environment can be chaotic and overwhelming. While a more outgoing, confident and resilient child might love having more siblings to play with and more activity going on. The parents' personalities will also play a large role in whether a large family will work well, having many children is exhausting, particularly if the children have different interests, personalities or they have a disability that requires additional care or attendance at appointments, etc. Parents can become so busy that they may not have time not only for their children but each other, however, some parents may relish multitasking and managing a large family.

So Practitioners need to assess, take into account the parent's personalities and determine what they will be able to do well or what do they need support/advice with.



Any meeting held to consider an individual child but there are other children in the household then there **must** be as part of its agenda a full holistic picture of the other children in the family. For those arranging meetings on individual children consideration **must** be given as to whether those practitioners involved with the other children in the family are invited to or receive the minutes of the meeting.

Working with Poverty - Since 2017, parents having a third or subsequent child are no longer eligible for support for that child through child tax credit/universal credit if they need it. This support is worth up to £2,830 per child per year. "It feels as though my third child doesn't matter" The impact of the two-child limit after four years April 2021 report talks of non-white families being much more likely to live in households with three or more children, particularly Pakistani, Bangladeshi and Black families. In terms of religion, Muslim and Jewish families are more likely to have three or more children because raising children is closely bound to faith and culture. The two-child limit creates additional hardship for those living on a low-income, and for those with higher incomes the safety net is much weaker if they experience a change in circumstances. Affected families report that they have cut back on essentials, such as clothes/dentistry/baby equipment/quality and quantity of food. Many families report despite reducing their spending, they are not always able to make ends meet, and are experiencing debt and rent arrears as a result. Despite their best efforts the financial impact has affected their and their children's wellbeing, restricting their ability to participate in extracurricular activities or socialise with friends.

So it is important that part of any assessment of a family involves the identification, exploration and analysis of the financial pressures on a family.

Please access the [Pan Bedfordshire Procedures](#).