



Psychiatry & Behavioral Science Section - 2015

I30 Unintentional Child Neglect: Literature Review and Observational Study

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The goals of this presentation are to help attendees better understand the issue of unintentional child neglect, evaluate risk factors leading to neglect, and evaluate the consequences of child neglect.

This presentation will impact the forensic science community by instilling a need for further research into the issue of child neglect, specifically unintentional neglect. With a more consistent and cohesive definition of neglect and a better understanding of its associations and risk factors, it will be possible to better address the problem.

Child abuse is a problem that affects over six million children in the United States each year. Child neglect accounts for 78% of those cases. Despite this, the issue of child neglect is still not well understood, partially because child neglect does not have a consistent, universally accepted definition. Some researchers consider child neglect and child abuse to be one and the same, while other researchers consider them to be conceptually different. Factors that make child neglect difficult to define include: (1) cultural differences; motives must be taken into account because parents may believe they are acting in the child's best interests based on cultural beliefs; (2) the fact that the effect of child abuse is not always immediately visible; the effects of emotional neglect specifically may not be apparent until later in the child's development; and, (3) the large spectrum of actions that fall under the category of child abuse.

Some of the risk factors for increased child neglect and maltreatment have been identified. These risk factors include socioeconomic status, education level, family composition, and the presence of dysfunctional family characteristics. Studies have found that children from poorer families and children of less-educated parents are more likely to sustain fatal unintentional injuries than children of wealthier, better-educated parents. Studies have also found that children living with adults unrelated to them are at increased risk for unintentional injuries and maltreatment. Dysfunctional family characteristics may be even more indicative of child neglect. Parental alcohol or drug abuse, parental personal history of neglect, and parental stress greatly increase the odds of neglect. Parental depression doubles the odds of child neglect; however, more research needs to be done to better understand these risk factors and to identify others. Having a clearer understanding of the risk factors could lead to prevention and treatment as it would allow for health care personnel to screen for high-risk children and intervene before it is too late. Screening could also be done in the schools and organized after-school activities. Parenting classes have been shown to be an effective intervention strategy by decreasing parental stress and the potential for abuse; but there has been limited research on this approach. Parenting classes can be part of the corrective actions for parents found to be neglectful or abusive, but parenting classes may also be useful as a preventative measure, being taught in schools or readily available in higher-risk communities. More research is needed to better define child abuse and neglect so that it can be effectively addressed and treated.

Child Neglect, Unintentional Injuries, Maltreatment