



THE PREVENTION OF CHILD NEGLECT: THE SOCIO-ECOLOGICAL MODEL

CHILD NEGLECT is the most prevalent form of child maltreatment, with serious and long-term consequences. It is also the least clearly defined, understood and publicly recognized. The National Alliance of Children's Trust & Prevention Funds, with funding from the Doris Duke Charitable Foundation, is conducting a targeted effort to (1) develop the knowledge base; (2) expand the national conversation and raise the visibility of this issue; (3) highlight the strategies and interventions that work; and (4) strengthen and expand national and state-level collaborations to prevent neglect before it occurs.

In order to best understand the many factors that contribute to child neglect as well as those that are protective in nature, it is important to move beyond consideration of child neglect as a function of parental characteristics. The socio-ecological model considers four levels - - society, community, relationships/family and child/individual characteristics - - as a comprehensive framework for understanding the broader environment in which child neglect occurs. The essence of the ecological model is not simply in the additive effects of each of the four levels but in their mutual interaction (Belsky 1984).

In striving for safe and healthy children, strong and stable families, supportive and thriving communities and a humanitarian society, we need to target prevention efforts at each of the levels of the socio-ecological model in addition to holistic and cross-cutting strategies and actions.

This document provides a selected overview of the four fact sheets that are dedicated to 'what we know' and 'what we can do - as professionals and individuals' to prevent child neglect at the individual, family/relationship, community/neighborhood and society levels. It highlights significant evidence in the pursuit of the prevention of child neglect.

THE SOCIETY LEVEL

WHAT WE KNOW

Federal Laws and Public Policies

Family Policies: In order to address the actual needs of families and children today, our country needs a broad range of public policies including those that give parents more flexibility to take time off work to take care of family responsibilities; detaching essential benefits such as health care from employment; increasing the refundable child tax credit; giving parents more options to stay home in the first year of a child's life by providing a year of paid parental leave and expanding the at-home infant care model for low-income parents; improving the quality of care for infants and toddlers by tightening regulations and providing more support for parents to use it; improving the quality of care and education for preschool children by raising the quality of private care and expanding public prekindergarten and Head Start programs; increasing access to high-quality out-of-school programs for school-age children and adolescents; and changing the school calendar for elementary, middle and high school students to better meet their learning needs (Jane Waldfogel, 2006).

Early Childhood Policy: Early experiences determine whether a child's brain architecture will provide a strong or weak foundation for all future learning, behavior, and health. Policies that support the ability of parents, providers of early care and education, and other community members to interact positively with children in stable and stimulating environments help create a sturdy foundation for later school achievement, economic productivity, and responsible citizenship (Center on Developing Child at Harvard University, 2007).

Underutilization of Existing Federal Programs: Reporting on the underutilization of federal programs that assist vulnerable families, the Office of the Assistant Secretary for Policy and Evaluation of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services estimates that only 29% of the more than 8 million eligible children 0–12 years old received subsidized child care (Magnuson & Shager, 2010). Perhaps as few as 40% of children covered by health insurance had a preventive care visit within the last year; only about 20% of 2 to 5 year olds visited a dentist in the last year; and less than half of 2 year olds are fully immunized (Russ, Garro & Halfon, 2010). More than one-fifth of households with children were "food insecure" in 2008, despite the availability of multiple food assistance programs (Nord & Parker, 2010).

Public Will and Social Norms

Creating a Caring Country and Communities: In the current political environment, initiatives for and investments in children have had difficulty gaining political momentum, becoming national priorities and sustaining political clout. We must strive to create a caring country and communities characterized by "friendship among neighbors, watchfulness for each other's families, physical safety, common resources, visible leadership, and a sense of belonging, ownership and collective responsibility" (U.S. Advisory Board on Child Abuse and Neglect, 1993, p. xi).

Federal and State Financing

Federal Spending on Children: By 2023, the share of federal spending on children will drop as a percentage of the budget from 10% to 8% and as a share of the economy from 2.2% to 1.8% of gross domestic product or GDP. The percentage of the economy allocated to federal

investments in children in 2023 is projected to be lower than it was before the Great Recession—in fact, lower than in any year since 2002 (Urban Institute, 2013)

Financing Child Neglect Prevention: Reducing the frequency and severity of various manifestations of child neglect will not be straightforward or inexpensive. There are multiple agencies, both statutory and non-governmental, that need to be involved. Because the causes and frames of child neglect are complex and often intergenerational, the solutions are inevitably multifaceted. Determined efforts to build a shared information base about child neglect while strengthening the neighborhoods and service system for vulnerable young children and their families could enhance the lives of not only the thousands of children being neglected today, but generations to come (Davies, Rowe and Hassall, October 2011 in *Social Work Now*).

Investing in Disadvantaged Young Children: Evidence supports the economic efficiency of early initial investment in young disadvantaged children that is sustained. The optimal policy is to invest relatively more in the early years. But early investment must be followed up to be effective. Later remediation for early disadvantage is possible, but to attain what is accomplished by early investment is much more costly. If society intervenes too late, and individuals are at too low a level of skill, later investment can be economically inefficient. (Heckman, 2008)

In terms of productivity, it makes sense to invest in young children from disadvantaged environments. Evidence shows that these children are more likely to commit crime, have out-of-wedlock births and drop out of school. Early interventions that partially remediate the effects of adverse environments can reverse some of the harm of disadvantage and have a high economic return. They benefit not only the children themselves, but also their children, as well as society at large. Investing in disadvantaged young children reduces the inequality associated with the accident of birth and simultaneously raises the productivity of society at large (Heckman and Masterov, 2007)

THE COMMUNITY/NEIGHBORHOOD LEVEL

WHAT WE KNOW

Importance of Social Capital: There is growing evidence that social capital¹ is an important determinant of the incidence of child neglect. The community's social support deficits (i.e., no support systems in the extended family or among friends and neighbors and ineffective use of informal helping systems) are a strong predictor of the occurrence of child neglect (DePanfilis and Zuravin, 1999) in Hashima, 2005. Poor families tend to function better in neighborhoods characterized by markers of greater social capital (i.e., community investment, trust and organizational affiliation). The presence of collective efficacy (i.e., social cohesion and trust among residents and willingness to intervene for a common good) is associated with lower rates of perceived neighborhood violence, violent victimization and homicide (Hashima, 2005)

Social Problems of Low Income Neighborhood: Low-income neighborhoods tend to be characterized by a variety of social problems [Austin et al., 2004]. These include but are not

¹ Social capital can be defined as ‘the abilities and willingness of adults to act in the interests of others’ children as well as their own. Social capital depends upon a sharing of norms about behavior along with expectations that others have an obligation to act in accordance with those norms.’ (Korbin & Coulton, 1996, p.165).

limited to, high rates of unemployment, crime, adolescent delinquency, teenage childbearing, social and physical disorder, single-parent households, child maltreatment, high levels of mobility, poor child and adult health and mental health, and poor developmental outcomes for children and adolescents (Coulton, Korbin, Su & Chow, 1995; Policy Link, 2002; Roosa et al., 2003; Sampson, 2001, Sampson, Morenoff, & Gannon-Rowley, 2002).

Child care burden or the dearth of informal resources to supervise children within neighborhoods has been repeatedly associated with elevated rates of maltreatment (Klein, 2011).

Quality health and early childhood development from birth to age 5 is a form of preventive health and economic investment that drives achievement and substantial economic returns (Conti and Heckman, 2000)

Postpartum depression (PPD) is a compelling target for preventive interventions and yet, little has been done in the U.S. to determine which interventions work. In view of the fact that maternal depression can set in motion detrimental patterns of parenting and developmental processes that may be difficult to change as time passes, the limited availability of effective prevention programs in the United States represents an important missed opportunity to improve children's development (Center on the Developing Child at Harvard University, 2009).

THE FAMILY/RELATIONSHIP LEVEL

WHAT WE KNOW

Effect of Poverty: The effect of poverty supersedes all other risk factors of child neglect. A lack of adequate resources in any of the essential dimensions diminishes the family's ability to carry out its mission. Without adequate income, the likelihood of getting necessary healthcare, good housing, adequate education, or any other opportunities diminishes substantially. The resulting tension increases the likelihood of instability in relationships among family members, further decreasing the family's ability to maintain an optimal environment for healthy development (Weissbourd, 2000).

Family Role: Families play a powerful role in creating adult outcomes. Parental skills and abilities matter greatly in shaping the skills of children (Conti and Heckman, 2010)

Parent Involvement in Community: Getting parents involved in their communities can improve the environment in which children and families develop, and decrease the likelihood that maltreatment will occur. (Kim and Maguire-Jack, 2013). Parents who are strongly connected in family and community networks are more likely to provide a positive context where their children's emotional and social needs are met (Gaudin & Pollane, 1982; Gaudin, Polansky, Kilpatrick, & Shilton, 1993; Gracia & Musitu, 2003; Hawthorne, 2008; Thompson, 1995; Vinson, Bladry, & Hargreaves, 1996). Participation in positive support networks is known to improve physical health and mental health and to aid in recovery from illness and adversity (Scovern, 1999, pp. 272-273; Sprenkle, Blow and Dickey, 1999, p.334). Research findings also indicate that informal social supports can contribute to the prevention of child neglect (Guterman, 1997; De Panfilis, 1996; Fortin and Chamberland, 1995).

Reducing neglect encompasses improving parents' ability to do their best for their child's development, and to improve the use of existing levers available to central and local government to enable adults to help infants and toddlers access more of what they need when they need it. Ensuring consistently high quality in a limited number of current services, such as prenatal care, quality early childhood programs and additions to primary health care services would be the strongest foundations to decrease child neglect. From there, streamlined access to appropriate multidisciplinary needs assessment and specialist services with qualified professionals for some is critical (Davies, Rowe and Hassall, October 2011 in *Social Work Now*).

THE INDIVIDUAL LEVEL

WHAT WE KNOW

Risk Factors of Child Neglect: It is misleading to conclude that all parents who suffer from a mental illness, problem alcohol or drug use or are survivors of interpersonal violence are a danger to their children (Cleaver et al, 1999 in Framework for Assessment). That said, there are an array of factors that may impact the capacity of an individual to parent including: alcohol and drug misuse; mental health difficulties; having a disability; interpersonal violence; parenting without a partner; being an adolescent parent; one's own experience of being parented; caring for a child with a disability or complex health needs; being a member of an ethnic minority group; and/or socio- economic factors.

Mothers are more likely to neglect their children than fathers. This is likely due to a combination of their greater parenting role, their greater likelihood of single parenthood, their experience of domestic violence, and their unique exposure to maternal depression. Those who are younger, poorer, without a partner, and with less education, smaller social networks, and limited parenting skills have an increased likelihood of neglecting behavior (Connell-Carrick, 2003; DiLauro, 2004; Tyler, Allison, & Winsler in Davies, Rowe and Hassall, October 2011 in *Social Work Now*)

Fathers: The nature of father involvement significantly influences the neglect of children. Fathers who feel more effective as parents were less likely to have neglected their children. A greater sense of efficacy may reflect parenting skills and be important in enhancing the contribution of fathers to their children's well-being (Dubowitz, et al, 2000)

Child poverty: Child poverty is not solely determined by family income. It is most accurately measured by parenting resources - - the attachment, the guidance and supervision accorded to children as well as the quality of the schools and the neighborhoods that parents can draw on (Conti and Heckman, 2000).