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The neglect of adolescent neglect

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This comment paper aims to highlight the prevalence of adolescent neglect. As a society, do we underestimate that adolescence is a time of vulnerability for some young people, that can be significantly impacted by neglect and abuse?

Child abuse crosses all societal spectrums, it does not discriminate against age or gender making it one of the largest public health priorities seen globally (UNICEF, 2014).

The concept of 'child abuse' traditionally conjures images of children, often sad and unkempt. Certainly, in western society, there seems to be a public perception that it is predominantly younger children who are the victims of abuse, yet older children aged between 10 and 17 account for over a third of all children who are subject to child protection plans in England (Department for Education [DfE], 2021).

Child abuse, particularly neglect, is widely debated. Many factors influence perceptions of neglect, including demographics, past experiences, and societal norms (Frost, 2021). Historically, it could be viewed that acceptance and tolerance of child neglect has lessened over time, however, to effectively analyse this notion, childhood as a concept must be explored and understood (Cunningham, 2020). Children have

been the victims of exploitation and abuse throughout history. In the UK the National Society for The Prevention of Cruelty to Children (NSPCC) (2022) offer that, in its simplest terms, neglect is a failure to meet the basic needs of a child or young person. Neglect has been highlighted in serious case reviews (SCR's) as a significant contributing factor in many cases, but in the adolescent age range, it is pointedly higher (Brandon et al, 2013, Sidebotham, et al, 2016).

Adolescent neglect is a phenomenon that is frequently disregarded, yet widely acknowledged as having a negative impact upon development and outcomes for young people and adults (Naughton et al, 2017). In the UK the Munro review of Child Protection (DfE, 2011) provided clear recognition of the unique risks faced by adolescents, with recommendation to all professionals for vigilance and the need for customised early interventions. Hicks & Stein (2015) importantly note that, within the United Kingdom (UK), academic exploration of the neglect of children has tended to focus on the issue in its entirety, as opposed to considering adolescence neglect as a separate concern. Comparative enquiry with the United States of America (USA) prompts similar findings, reflective of UK literature (Vanderminden et al, 2018). Childhood is a period of rapid developmental changes, it requires a more nuanced approach, this is of particular significance when considering definitions for neglect, combined with stages of development, and the age of the child. Adolescence is a point of momentous transition socially, psychologically, emotionally, and biologically. Whilst there is no absolute definition with regards to age range, adolescence is generally viewed as the period between puberty and adulthood. Brain development during this phase can be a considerable contributory factor when studying young people who encounter risk and adversity (Cheng et al, 2020). A developing prefrontal cortex, alongside reliance on the amygdala, accounts for emotionally driven decisions, and

risk-taking behaviours (Romer, Reyna, & Satterthwaite, 2017). This is heightened when accompanied by anxiety, often the result of neglect, which can impact upon mental health and trigger the onset of mental illness (Jaworska & MacQueen, 2015).

Young people do not identify that they are the victim of neglect, which compounds the complexities when assessing risk, and subsequent intervention. Naughton et al (2017) undertook a systematic review of the perceptions of adolescents who experienced neglect or emotional abuse, offering that demographically, teenagers do not ordinarily fit the stereotypical victim of child abuse. Conversely, it could be argued that they are perceived to be resilient, independent, and inclined to make their own choices (Rees et al, 2011). Naughton et al (2017) offer that it is vital for agencies working with adolescents to exert caution, and not to misread anti-social or challenging behaviour, which is often resulting from deeper issues relating to neglect or emotional abuse. Low expectations for the future, and high levels of stress and anxiety, were also reported by adolescents who experienced neglect. Whilst it is recognised that frequently neglect is sustained, often throughout childhood, it could be argued that in adolescence there can be more nuanced experiences. A key point for reflection is whether professionals such as children's and young people's nurses are fully conversant with the 'basic needs' of an adolescent, which could be open to ambiguity. Raws (2018) offers an example, whereby neglect can result in a young person being asked to leave the family home, due to behaviour. It is debateable whether this would be viewed as neglectful parenting, or the consequence of poor adolescent conduct, again raising the question of responsibility, and acknowledging that adolescents are often not viewed as children. This opens the discourse of whether neglect, by its definition, comprises solely of acts of omission, or whether acts of commission can be considered neglectful also (Hicks & Stein, 2015). When analysing the evidence from adolescent perspectives of what

constitutes neglect, one could argue that historically, they may have been viewed as part of 'normal' child development and promoting independence. This is particularly interesting when looking at issues such as taking on caring responsibilities for siblings, or being expected to do household tasks, which some adolescents perceived to be neglectful parenting (Hicks & Stein, 2015). This widens the debate further and encourages exploration of societal perceptions, and the structures that facilitate these views. As previously discussed, it is important that those working within the arena of child protection are fully conversant with the ecological context in which adolescents live, and should consider neglect from the perspective of educational, emotional, physical, and supervisory (Raws, 2016).

Children's and young people's (CYP) nurses play an integral role in safeguarding and are often best placed to protect adolescents due to their presence in healthcare settings, schools and colleges. It is therefore vital for CYP nurses to understand the unique risk factors that face adolescents, which have been explored within this article. CYP nurses must have an awareness that anti-social and disruptive behaviours may not be the result of "normal" teenage development and importantly decisions to leave home may not signify independence, but in fact may be the result of neglect and harmful parental relationships. Adolescence is period of child development that requires special consideration by CYP nurses. We must acknowledge that they are not adults and thus advocate for their needs yet respect that they are beginning to form a strong sense of self. This requires CYP nurses to use communication skills and emotional intelligence to form trusting, therapeutic relationships ensuring that the child's voice is heard and listened to, the lack of which is often a key theme in serious case reviews. This will lead to risk factors for adolescent neglect being recognised sooner and CYP nurses then have a duty of care to be part of a multi-agency response

in protecting the young person to help maximise their developmental potential and improve future health outcomes.

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