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Educating Social Workers on Child Neglect: A Multi-Dimensional Framework for Assessment

Kim Bundy-Fazioli and Tobi A. DeLong Hamilton

Introduction

Generalist social work educators have the task of ensuring that social work students are adequately prepared for the workforce. In 2006, the Bureau of Labor Statistics indicated 282,000 social workers were employed as child, family, and school social workers. The Bureau of Labor Statistics also estimates that the number of child, family, and school social workers will grow faster than the average (19%) of all other occupations. Given the fact that a large percentage of graduating social workers nationwide will enter into the child welfare workforce, we advocate that curriculum time and attention be given to educating students about child neglect. Also we argue that child welfare workers are not the only ones who should be familiar with assessing for child neglect. All social workers whatever their area of specialization, can benefit from this knowledge since the impact of child neglect is significant whether the maltreatment is identified as a problem that needs immediate attention or has occurred in the past. The purpose of this article is to provide the reader with a rationale for educating social workers in the area of child neglect and to propose a multidimensional framework for assessment within the social work curriculum.

Child Neglect

Why are we focusing specifically on child neglect? In the United States, the majority of child welfare workers receive specialized training first on child sexual abuse, second on child physical abuse, and lastly on child neglect (NCAN, 2004). However, child neglect cases within the U.S. represent 60 percent of all reported child maltreatment cases, followed by child physical abuse at 19 percent, and child sexual abuse at 10 percent (NCAN, 2004; Wilson & Horner, 2005). The U.S. is not alone in this issue. On an international level England, Ireland, and Australia are struggling with a similar phenomenon (see for example Campbell, 1997; Dickens, 2006; Jones & Gupta, 1998; McSherry, 2007; & Stone, 1997)**.** One of the dilemmas within the scholarship of child neglect is that the dynamics of child neglect involve multiple co-occurring problems, thus making it difficult to pinpoint causal factors. As one scholar states, "Abuse is a violent action that harms the child; neglect is the failure to act that harms the child" (Alter, 1985, p.100). To date, there is no universally accepted, operational definition of child neglect, nor is there an agreed upon approach when intervening with child neglecting families (McSherry, 2007). Although scholars and practitioners have called for criteria to utilize in an effort to assess child neglect, the problem of child neglect continues to be under-researched, vague, and confusing (Connell-Carrick, 2003; Berliner, 1994) leaving child welfare workers with difficult terrain to navigate with any degree of objectivity (Alter, 1985).

Child neglect is one of the three child maltreatment categories. Current interventions, aimed at reducing and eliminating child maltreatment, do not take into account the differences between child abuse (physical and sexual) and child neglect (Berry, Charlson & Dawson, 2003). One of the major struggles within the field of child welfare is determining who the client is. Should interventions be targeting the child, the parent, the family, or the community (Dubowitz, et al., 2005; Geen 2001)? Geen (2001) raises this question: Is child neglect the fault of the parents, or is it that they are unable, "through no fault of their own," to adequately care for their child? (p. 169).

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Child Neglect Intervention

Teaching specific skills for assessing and intervening with child neglecting families builds on the generalist social work foundation. Every social work student is taught in practice classes the importance of rapport and relationship building. However, once a student becomes immersed in the cultural norm of an agency, this fundamental skill is often obscured and the functional purpose of the role takes precedence (Shulman, 2009). Forrester and his colleagues found that "the most striking finding [in their study] was the high level of confrontation and the low level of listening shown by social workers" (2008, p. 32). Therefore, in dealing with the issue of child neglect, it is crucial to re-emphasize the importance of relationship-based practice (Platt, 2008).

Relationship-based practice focuses on the ability of the case worker to work effectively with the diversity and complexity that each client brings into the child welfare situation. The ability to have a relationship-based practice is "enhanced understanding across four aspects of practice that include the client, the professional self, the organizational context, and the knowledge informing practice" (Ruch, 2005, p. 111). An ideal relationship occurs when the client and case worker come together as a collaborative team with empathic, warm, affirming, and engaging behavior (Cooper, 2004). A positive client-case worker relationship includes the case worker's willingness to communicate openly with the client and express themselves without their own personal agenda or biases getting in the way (Cooper, 2004).

Similar findings from another study identified child welfare workers who have a "positive disposition, showing compassion and being authentic" as essential characteristics in building a productive working relationship (Author et al., 2008, p.16). It is interesting to note that in this same study both workers and parents identified three characteristics of parents as being important to this working relationship: a parent's willingness to be open, the ability to take risks within the relationship, and the importance of having choices (Author et al., 2008). This study found that both child welfare workers and parents receiving child welfare services identified a productive working relationship when the distribution of power was negotiated and reciprocal. In other words, there was a perceived give-and-take within the relationship resulting in feelings of collaboration (Author et al., 2008).

"While no amount of training or guidance can take away the complexities and ambiguities inherent in this type of work (child welfare), high quality training can give workers greater confidence in making professional judgments so that they are less likely to react in a way which is either oppressive towards families or professionally dangerous" (Stone 1998, p.93). Along with teaching a relationship-based focus to social work students, it is important to teach and incorporate child neglect assessment guidelines using an ecological family approach. An ecological family approach often includes an initial assessment, investigation information, a family assessment plan, consultation with other professionals, and an analysis of the information collected. (DePanfilis, 2005).

In 1998, Burke and colleagues applied research on social isolation and relationships to develop the cluster model, utilizing a systems perspective to guide social workers in assessing child neglect. Their model included three primary areas: parental skills and behaviors, social support and resources, and environmental context. Building on the cluster model we propose a framework which is also grounded in ecological-systems theory but one which also draws heavily on the constructivism perspective and takes into account numerous contextual factors, primarily the ability of the social workers to demonstrate skill and knowledge as well as to develop a productive working relationship (Author et al., 2008).

Multidimensional Framework for Assessment

Theoretical Base. The multidimensional

framework for assessment was developed based on the ecological-systems theoretical belief that individuals are interdependent with and exist in a give-and-take relationship with their environment. (Payne, 2005). Assessment is not considered "whole" without the consideration of all systems in which the individual exists and interacts (Payne, 2005). Therefore, to focus solely on the child or on the parent, such as in a psychological model, prevents the worker from fully understanding and appreciating the family's strengths and challenges. The constructivism perspective contributes to this framework as the belief is that each individual gives meaning to their life circumstances in a uniquely, subjective manner. The philosophy of constructivism is focused on understanding how a person interprets their world view. In social work practice, this translates into less of an "urgency to manipulate or control people" to more of an increase in "trust in client's resources" (Nichols, 2007, p.191).

Assessment Framework. The framework is sectioned into three main areas: (1) strengths and challenges, (2) parent's perception and awareness, and (3) agency involvement. Under strengths and challenges there are numerous areas for exploration, all of which focus on well-being, community/ environment, social supports, and financial supports. The philosophy guiding this assessment is the belief that social workers are often unsure how to conduct an assessment without being authoritative (Author et al., 2008; Forrester et al., 2008). The framework provides a working guideline for both social worker and family members to begin to identify strengths and challenges from the perspective of parental awareness. These points of discussion are to encourage communication between parent and worker, and not to be used as a checklist. The guideline provides areas for assessment as well as discussion points in establishing a reciprocal relationship. In the framework, the three main areas for assessment are discussed more fully, which should assist each social worker's effort to become proficient at conducting a multidimensional assessment.

Child and family strengths and challenges. It is important that family-based assessments include both a focus on strengths as well as a focus on challenges. The list of strengths and challenges is categorized by well-being, community/ environment, social support, and financial support. These are key discussion points when engaging with parents. The language of *well-being* is intended to assist the worker in understanding a complete picture of how the family functions so that the focus is not just on the problems. In a Child Trends report (2002) the authors acknowledged the need for change in child welfare service delivery. They advocate for identifying the "positives as well as the negatives," stating that little is known about "everyday positive parent-child and social interactions…because no one bothers to ask" (Chalk, Gibbons & Scarupa, 2002, p.6-7).

The place to start a neglect assessment is with a history of the parents and the child. According to Perry and Szalavitz (2006) humans tend to parent their children the way they were parented as children. Perry and Szalavitz postulate that in order to explore how a child is currently or has previously been cared for, social workers must begin with the history of the parent or caregiver. Reviewing the developmental milestones of the child can not only give us a clue about areas that the child may need assistance with but also to what extent the neglect may have harmed the child. For example, Perry and Szalavitz (2006) indicate that early neglect "can disrupt development in areas of the brain that control empathy and the ability to engage in healthy relationships" (p. 99). After a thorough parent and child history needs to be taken, it is important to assess the family's community and its social and financial resources.

Parental perception and awareness. A crucial aspect of this assessment process is learning what the parent sees as the strengths and challenges within the family. As discussed earlier, often

workers are not intervening based on a specific incident of abuse. Therefore, workers must understand that the parent who is identified as neglectful is often struggling with a number of other problems at the same time.

Embracing the philosophy of constructionism, what one person may perceive as a problem is not necessarily a problem for another person. There is no doubt that child neglect within the family setting must end; however, identifying what are the *causal* factors is the challenge. An essential feature of this assessment is to identify what the parents perceive as being within their control and what they perceive as being beyond their control. This information guides the social worker's intervention with the family.

One of the assumptions is that co-occurring problems are the obstacle that prevent or limit the parents' ability to create a safe, nurturing environment for their child. It is not unusual to mandate that parents identified as neglectful attend parent-training classes. However, if a parent is struggling to meet the family's basic needs will improved parenting skills eradicate the problem of child neglect? DePanfilis (2005) found in her research that the parent's perception of financial difficulties "was positively correlated with child neglect…; therefore, self reports of economic hardship may be an important signal for engaging in interventions with families to prevent subsequent neglect" (p. 31).

Agency involvement. For families struggling with multiple problems numerous service providers are often involved. It is important for the worker to learn what agencies are involved and which family member is the target of services. It is important to know from the parent's perspective what services (either past or current) are viewed as helpful and not helpful. A discussion with the parent on past and present helpers will provide the social worker with that information. Is the parent more responsive to a direct style of intervention? Or is the parent more responsive to a collaborative type of intervention? The goal is to determine what the parent identifies as helpful. Otherwise, interventions by the worker may produce only short-term compliance as opposed the long-term change that is desired. Compliance is a "problematic issue" that thwarts any and all attempts at partnership and collaboration (Stevenson, 1998, p.113).

Conclusion

Social work educators are faced with competing societal issues that demand attention. We recommend that social work educators include the topic of child neglect as one of their curriculum topics. By introducing and discussing the multidimensional framework for assessment (figure 1), social work students can begin to address, discuss, and understand how to intervene when families present with multiple, co-occurring problems.

Incidents of child neglect occur at alarming rates; yet, minimal attention is given to this societal problem compared to other forms of child maltreatment issues (i.e., sexual and physical abuse). It is unclear why child neglect is "neglected" as a social problem. The ongoing debate among scholars is the role of poverty in child neglecting families and whether to focus services solely on the family or focus simultaneously on systemic issues. Consequently, social workers who work directly with child neglecting families often struggle, feeling "overwhelmed and hopeless" (Wilson & Horner, 2005, p. 472). In part, this may be due to conflicting societal messages about the needs of child neglecting families. Fostering long-term change with parents who have neglected their children can be one of the most challenging career paths in the field of social work.

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Child Neglect Framework

Figure 1: Multi-dimensional Framework for Assessment * PC = parental control

Areas of Strengths & Challenges	**Parent's Perception and Awareness**			**Agency Involvement**	
	History/ Pattern	Change beyond PC*	Change within PC*	Current	Past
Parent History *Significant Events*					
Child History *Developmental Milestones*					
Parent Well-being ▪ Mental health status					
▪ Substance use & abuse					
▪ Domestic Violence					
▪ Trauma, grief, loss					
▪ Communication skills					
▪ Physical Health					
▪ Education/Learning					
Child Well-being ▪ Mental health Status					
▪ Substance use & abuse					
▪ Type of neglect/abuse					
▪ Trauma, grief, loss					
▪ Friends & Activities					
▪ Physical Health					
▪ Education/Learning					
Parent-Child/Family Well-being ▪ Familial Status (who lives in the home?)					
▪ Basic needs (housing, food, clothes)					
▪ Parenting skills (discipline, attachment, safety, basic needs, protection, values)					
▪ Parent-child interaction					
▪ Child interaction with relatives					
Community/Environmental ▪ Housing					
▪ Neighborhood					
▪ Child/family activities (church, school, etc)					
▪ Transportation					
Social Supports ▪ Friends					
▪ Family					
▪ Job					
Financial Supports ▪ Employment					