Child Neglect

Rearing Neglected Children


In the past several years, our society has called upon the foster care system to do much more than temporarily provide food and shelter for children whose parents cannot. Now foster families are routinely asked to care for physically and emotionally neglected children. Neglect occurs when a child’s physical (food/shelter) and/or psychological (dependability, trust, warmth, loving) needs have not been met over a long period of time. The experience of neglect has the power to change the way a child sees him or herself, others and the world. Because neglected children have never had a protective, safe, and loving home, they tend not to trust the world to be accepting and kind or responsive to their feelings and needs.

Neglected children have no expectation that their needs can or should be met because no one has ever provided them with consistent physical or emotional nurturing. This is expressed in a wide range of attitudes, skills and feelings. They can be angry, pessimistic, jaded, and cynical. Sometimes they have mature knowledge of survival skills for a dangerous world (such as stealing food). They can have hidden fears, seemingly bottomless need, and social withdrawal. Some believe that they are worthless, unsafe, or weak. They might also believe that caretakers are under-responsive, unreliable, or even dangerous.

How did they get this way? Many different kinds of experiences are neglectful. Parents/caretakers can be explosive in their anger, give out inappropriate punishments, or scapegoat the child. Others can be literally neglectful of physical necessities. They also provide no supervision, sympathy or other kinds of emotional support. Sometimes neglectful parents and caretakers exploit children by forcing them to take a parent role and care...
Common Problems Among Neglected Children

Behavior Problems:
- e.g. cruelty to animals
- Fire setters
- Criminal
- Can be charming but manipulative

Anxiety:
- e.g. School avoidance
- Nightmares
- Fear of being alone
- Depression when separated
- Worry about death/injury
- Panic

for younger children or adults. All of these parents and caretakers are neglecting the child’s individuality and needs for nurturing and acceptance.

Now foster families are called upon to physically care for these neglected children while providing new experiences for them that will allow them to heal and to learn what a loving home is really like. This is a lot to ask of a foster family.

For further information regarding this or related topics, please contact Kathleen A. Platzman, Ph.D. of the Maternal Substance Abuse and Child Development Project, Emory University West Campus 1256 Briarcliff Road, N.E., Suite 324W, Atlanta, GA 30306. Phone 404-712-9800, or visit our website at www.emory.edu/MSACD/ for further information regarding Maternal Substance Abuse.

Social Problems:
- e.g. Cannot develop relationships
- No friends
- Little apparent need for affection
- No spontaneous emotional expression
- No insight
- Cannot put self in another’s position

Dependency Problems:
- e.g. Insatiable need
- Submissive
- Helpless
- Inadequate
- No interest in material environment
- Flat - no vitality

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The Maternal Substance Abuse and Child Development Project is dedicated to the study and prevention of the effects of maternal substance abuse. Since 1978, the project has studied the development of children exposed to alcohol and other drugs prenatally and their caregivers and provided training for Prevention statewide. For additional information call (404) 712-9800.