



Unmet needs in addressing child neglect: Should we go back to the drawing board?

Jody Hearn

Virginia Commonwealth University, 1001 W. Franklin St., Box 842027, Richmond, VA 23284-2027, USA

ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 9 September 2010
Received in revised form 10 November 2010
Accepted 10 November 2010
Available online 17 November 2010

Keywords:

Child neglect
Poverty
Child welfare
Social justice
Intervention
Evidence-based practice

ABSTRACT

Intervention in child neglect faces many challenges to effectiveness, including: (a) The lack of a cohesive, agreed-upon conceptual/theoretical framework and inconsistent definition of the problem; (b) disjointed intervention in various components of the problem; and (c) the social justice issues of inequity based on class, race, and gender. These conditions have led to a situation in which the role of poverty, potentially one of the most important contextual factors in neglect, can be overlooked. This article presents an argument for the need to pay more explicit attention to the definition of neglect, with particular focus on the role of poverty, in order to improve intervention in this pervasive problem. It concludes with recommendations for research, policy, and practice in child welfare.

© 2010 Elsevier Ltd. All rights reserved.

1. Introduction

Child neglect is the most prevalent form of child maltreatment. Of all maltreated children and youth in the United States in 2006, 64.1% were neglected, 16% were physically abused, 8.8% were sexually abused, and 6.6% were psychologically maltreated (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration on Children, Youth and Families [USDHHSACF], 2008). Effective intervention in neglect faces many challenges, not the least important of which is that programming in neglect is built on a fragmented foundation of the conceptualization of the problem itself. Current services to treat neglect are focused on a wide range of problems, the majority of which are somehow related to parents' intrapersonal limitations and related behaviors. It could be argued that many identifiable parenting-related intrapersonal issues seem to be a function of the parents' lack of access to resources and limited social capital, particularly due to poverty. Parents' initial capacity to provide loving and nurturing care to their children can be impeded by these factors, contributing to a situation of neglect. In order to establish evidence-based intervention in child neglect, social work researchers and practitioners must agree on what the problem is, which will inform how the problem should be addressed. Currently, there is little to no agreement on what the problem is. Where such agreement exists, little to no focus on the context in which a family operates is considered, ignoring an entire set of factors to which intervention could be applied to alleviate child neglect.

Prevention and intervention services for parents who are neglecting or are at-risk of neglecting can prepare, equip, and support parents in fulfilling their potential to best care for their children. But without adequate attention to the broader context that may be affecting their ability to parent, the utility and effectiveness of these interventions could be limited. This article discusses the design and effectiveness of services focused solely on prevention and intervention of neglect and how these programs do or do not attend to the contexts for the families involved. A definition for neglect is not presented in this article – the limitations in research, policy, and practice regarding child neglect seem to hinge upon what is already an unclear and inconsistent collection of definitions being used in different venues. Instead, an argument is being made that all of those involved in addressing this issue must collaborate to better define, and subsequently treat and prevent, child neglect.

There are (at least) two potential reasons the relationship between poverty and child neglect has not been adequately reflected in theory and practice. The first is that the efforts to understand the relationship are too disjointed as a result of the complexity of the issues of poverty and neglect, both individually and in tandem. Some of the literature suggests that there is a strong, important relationship between these phenomena where other sources suggest that the relationship is weak, with other factors (such as family characteristics) being more important to address. Divided results do not provide a solid-enough basis on which to establish intervention without further study.

A second potential reason for the current understanding (or lack thereof) of the relationship between poverty and child neglect is that there are political pressures and disincentives to finding evidence that these two issues are tightly intertwined. If the results were to suggest that poverty were the root influencer in child neglect, the suggested

E-mail address: hearnjl@vcu.edu.

intervention would be to reduce family poverty, an intervention that would require a great deal of cost and a shift in ideology of many of those in positions to change policy and the way the system works with poor families. This idea is not a new one. Nelson (1984) has highlighted that the original framers of child abuse and neglect legislation in the 1960s hesitated to include the child neglect in their definitions of child maltreatment because of their observation of its inextricability with the issue of poverty, and therefore little observed political will to address it. As Lindsey and Shlonsky (2008) have pointed out: “Unfortunately, by avoiding child poverty instead of tackling it head on, the child welfare system has proven to be ineffective in solving the larger, more difficult, and, ultimately, more important issues” (p. 377). This article describes the current state of the definition of and intervention for child neglect, calling attention to the challenges to effectiveness in child neglect practice, including: (a) The lack of a cohesive, agreed-upon conceptual/theoretical framework and inconsistent definition of the problem; (b) disjointed intervention in various components of the problem; and (c) the social justice issues of inequity based on class, race, and gender.

2. Definition of neglect

The bedrock of challenges to effective intervention in neglect appears to be the definition of the problem as a result of a lack of a theoretically-based foundational understanding of the causes and underlying factors of child neglect. There is inconsistency and disagreement across and within involved disciplines on how child neglect is conceptualized, approached, and addressed (Combs-Orme, Wilson, Cain, Page, & Kirby, 2003; Goldman, Salus, Walcott, & Kennedy, 2003; Rodwell, 1988; Scannapieco & Connell-Carrick, 2002; Stowman & Donohue, 2005; Straus & Kantor, 2005; Tanner & Turney, 2003; Wilson & Horner, 2005). One potential reason there is no unified or centralized definition for neglect is that the definition of neglect is not approached as fixed and objective, but is rather a context-bound fluid decision-making process (Rodwell).

However, inconsistency in definition and assessment of child neglect has important implications for practice with neglecting families. Different stakeholders seem to define neglect differently, affecting the ability to understand it for its most important influencing factors. For example, defining neglect as a parent's failure to provide for a child's physical needs may have different implications than defining neglect as the conditions under which a child's normal development is impaired by his or her environment. An intervention based on the first definition may look very different from an intervention based on the second.

Perhaps the most dangerous implication is the potential to misdirect focus toward family characteristics and behaviors that may not be the most pressing (or pertinent) factors associated with child neglect (e.g. substance abuse, mental illness, and inadequate stress-coping skills). This is not to say that these issues are not fundamentally related to child neglect, just that they may draw attention away from underlying factors (such as poverty) that also need to be addressed. What might be needed is an agreed-upon set of definitions, making up a foundational theoretical understanding of neglect that includes attention to all of the important factors including families' characteristics, behaviors, and social–environmental contexts.

Without a comprehensive foundational conceptualization of neglect (perhaps based on an agreed-upon set of definitions), it is difficult to study the problem at its most elemental level, and therefore results in various different approaches to one problem (Wilson & Horner, 2005), with virtually no way of evaluating the relative effectiveness of each type of approach in comparison with one another. This has important implications for the ability to develop and maintain an evidence base in working with child neglect effectively. In addition, child neglect and child abuse, while usually defined

separately, are often grouped together for intervention, without definitive evidence to support or reject the claim that these two issues can be treated effectively in the same way. The lack of an agreed-upon conceptual framework (made up of a set of definitions that reflect the multidimensional nature of neglect) for guidance in addressing child neglect may also impede researchers' and practitioners' abilities to separate factors associated with neglect from those associated with abuse to treat these problems individually and effectively, should separation of these types of problems and their interventions be necessary or appropriate.

One associated factor that appears to be overlooked in its potentially direct influence on child neglect (or risk for neglect) is poverty. Some authors have noted that issues of housing and financial need are the foundational underlying issues for families needing child welfare services and that policy and practice must address poverty in order to be effective at reducing the risk for outcomes like foster care placement (Fanshel, Finch, & Grundy, 1992; Lindsey, 2004). Other authors have suggested that poverty is a reflection of greater overall need, and poorer families and children experience increased risk of problems such as child maltreatment causing an overrepresentation in caseloads (Jonson-Reid, Drake, & Kohl, 2009). Some authors have even stated explicitly that child welfare services, intensive casework practice for families at risk of foster care placement, are ineffective because they do not address poverty (Lindsey, 2004; Lindsey & Shlonsky, 2008), and that child maltreatment is actually a “red herring” (Lindsey, p. 177) in child welfare policy in that it draws attention from this more fundamental social problem.

Poverty is a concept even more complicated in its definition than child neglect. Bordieu's (1990) perspective on poverty (as applied to social work by Fram (2004)) suggests that there are complicated structural forces underlying the circumstances of the unprivileged, and social processes exist that are intended to keep the unprivileged classes from becoming aware of those structures. This creates a situation in which those who are living in poverty experience many barriers to social/financial mobility: (a) Limited choices from which to select in making change in their lives (low situational autonomy), (b) Patterns of behavior that reinforce their position in the unprivileged class (habitus), (c) Poor social networking opportunities, (d) A lack of opportunity to come into contact with those who are privileged and therefore can better navigate social structures (homophilous interaction), and (e) A lack of access to social and cultural capital (that disguises the lack of access to economic capital) (Fram). Given this perspective, parents living in poverty operate within circumstances that are likely to make it very difficult for them to be able to best provide for their children's needs, financially and socially.

There is a dearth of literature on how poverty is or could be related to child neglect, and very few studies of the potential direct relationship between the two. Three studies (two empirical and one conceptual) that have been conducted relatively recently did focus directly on the role of poverty in child neglect. Slack, Holl, McDaniel, Yoo, and Bolger (2004) suggest that some aspects of poverty (like lower employment and higher perceived material hardship) are more predictive of child neglect than others, even when controlling for parental characteristics. Carter and Myers (2007) suggest that parental characteristics (such as substance abuse and mental health concerns) play a greater role in the likelihood of substantiated physical neglect. When controlling for parental characteristics, these authors found that poverty variables alone did not predict substantiated physical neglect. This study may suggest that it is not poverty alone that influences a family's risk of neglecting its children, but does not definitively suggest that poverty does not play a role in the parental characteristics that influence risk of neglect. It also does not address the potentially differential treatment by the child welfare system of parents with mental health and substance abuse concerns regarding the substantiation of physical neglect.

متن کامل مقاله

دریافت فوری ←

ISIArticles

مرجع مقالات تخصصی ایران

- ✓ امکان دانلود نسخه تمام متن مقالات انگلیسی
- ✓ امکان دانلود نسخه ترجمه شده مقالات
- ✓ پذیرش سفارش ترجمه تخصصی
- ✓ امکان جستجو در آرشیو جامعی از صدها موضوع و هزاران مقاله
- ✓ امکان دانلود رایگان ۲ صفحه اول هر مقاله
- ✓ امکان پرداخت اینترنتی با کلیه کارت های عضو شتاب
- ✓ دانلود فوری مقاله پس از پرداخت آنلاین
- ✓ پشتیبانی کامل خرید با بهره مندی از سیستم هوشمند رهگیری سفارشات