

# Neglect

Up to 4% of Australian adults report having experienced neglect during childhood\*.

Neglect occurs in all communities.

Neglect is a term that is used when a parent or regular caregiver fails to meet a child's fundamental needs, including needed experiences that support the child's growth and development.

Neglect is recognised in a parent or regular caregiver's failure to provide a child with adequate:

- Food
- Clothing
- Health care
- Hygiene
- Stimulation
- Protection
- Concern for the child's experience.

Neglect can be:

- Physical
- Emotional
- Environmental.

Parental care is considered neglectful when it negatively impacts the child's:

- Physical and emotional wellbeing
- Development
- Approach to life and relationships.

Neglect is a process that occurs over time, whereby there are multiple observations of inadequate attention and responsiveness to the child's needs, in the absence of another plausible explanation, and where the child is negatively impacted by the lack of care.

Many families experience tough times and, sometimes, this may be reflected in a reduction in the level of care the child normally receives. Neglect occurs when this reduction in the care of the child:

- Is persistent (including after the family's circumstances have improved)



- Involves inadequate responsiveness to the child's fundamental needs
- Negatively impacts the child's wellbeing, development, and/or approach to life and relationships.

## How will I recognise neglect?

Think of a child about whom you have experienced a degree of concern. Ask yourself:

- What is it about the child that causes you concern?
- How long have these factors been present?
- What impact do these factors have on the child's development, wellbeing, and approach to life and relationships?
- Are these factors likely to be the result of the care the child receives at home?
- Is there another, plausible explanation for my concerns (e.g. diagnosed health condition, disability or disorder).

If your concern is about the child's physical, emotional or environmental care in the home, the observations that give rise to your concerns have been present for some time, you are concerned about the impact on the child, and there is no other plausible explanation for your observations/concern, the child may be experiencing neglect.

## What do I do?

If you suspect neglect, you are required to notify child protection authorities in your state or territory. They will handle all investigations in to whether neglect is occurring, or not. You are not obliged to discuss your concerns with the family,

nor should you carry out your own investigation. Rather, you should also notify your Centre Director of your concerns so that they can formulate a plan regarding the Centre's response to your concerns.

### How do I help the child?

Neglect is a form of childhood trauma. There is a fact sheet regarding childhood trauma, which includes information about how to address the negative effects of neglect and other forms of childhood trauma. The fact sheet can be accessed [here](#).

### Case Example: Neglect

Sally is a four-year old child who has been attending at your Centre three days per week for the past six months. Sally typically arrives at varying times during the morning session. Sally's mother exits the Centre quickly and Sally shows no apparent distress at her mother leaving. Sally's hair is often poorly groomed and knotty. From time-to-time she presents at the Centre with headlice. Her clothes appear old and are ill-fitting and soiled. Her clothing is not always appropriate to the weather. She smells. She spends much of her time at the Centre sitting passively, staring in to space or observing the activities of other children. She rarely joins in and is rarely invited to do so by the other children. It is not readily apparent what she is capable of as she rarely participates fully in planned activities.

You suspect that Sally is being neglected by her mother and you inform child protection authorities. You discuss your concerns with the Centre Director and develop a plan to support Sally's connectedness with the Centre, its people and its programs. Your plan involves Sally interacting with the same small group of educators on the days she attends the Centre. You develop a routine around her arrival at the centre and the activities she is invited to engage in. There is a focus on facilitating regular opportunities for brief, one-to-one engagement with Sally over a (play) activity. Your plan involves regularly checking in with Sally at other times and commenting on what you notice about how she might be thinking and feeling. You say this with matched emotional expression, before regulating back to calm. You comb her hair and

ensure that she is wearing adequate clothing for the conditions in the Centre.

In time you notice that Sally begins to attend the Centre at a regular time, her grooming is improved, and her clothing is more appropriate. You are aware that child protection authorities are involved in facilitating her mother's access to community supports. Sally is showing a broader range of emotions that appear natural and appropriate to context. She regularly approaches others, including educators, seeking to engage and join in with activities. She speaks more and tells others what she thinks of this or that activity. She appears to have 'come to life'.



**For additional information and resources, visit:**

- [Secure Start®](#)
- [Australian Childhood Foundation](#)
- [Lynne Peyton](#)
- [The National Child Traumatic Stress Network](#)



\*<https://aifs.gov.au/cfca/publications/prevalence-child-abuse-and-neglect>