

EMOTIONAL NEGLECT

Unresponsiveness to a child's basic emotional needs

What could that look like?

A parent/ carer failing to interact or provide affection; failing to develop a child's self-esteem or sense of identity.
A parent/carer putting undue pressure on a child to perform tasks beyond their age and ability.



What are the impacts on the child?

The relationships formed between a child and their parents/cares can shape the way the child sees the world. If parent is rejecting and intrusive then a child may feel unloved and develop the need to be self-reliant. If a parent is insensitive, unpredictable, and unreliable then a child may feel they are not valued or in affective. If a parent is frightening and unavailable, then the child may feel confused, and believe they must have done something wrong. These initial relationships can provide templates for future relationships and impact on social functioning, behaviour, self-esteem & mental health, including substance misuse, self-harm, and suicide.

What action can be taken?

Each situation will require careful consideration of the impact, severity, and duration of possible harm a child is experiencing from emotional neglect. It is very likely that other types of neglect or abuse may occur simultaneously. Professionals should consider the guidance for the threshold of need of the child and take the appropriate action. The [neglect screening tool](#) may be of assistance.

Emotional neglect often occurs as an act of omission from a parent or carer, rather than a purposeful act which would be emotional abuse. For example, this may occur because a parent is unavailable emotionally to their child, through things like domestic abuse, mental health difficulties, or substance abuse, or because they have developmentally inappropriate interactions with their child or fail to recognise them as an individual.

Children from higher-economic groups are often not thought of when considering neglect. Some parents focus will be to maintain their lifestyle through business and work and its possible they can emotionally neglect their children; not being available to play, cuddle, show support, love, and affection. Some parents may become overly anxious about their child's academic achievements and can sometimes apply unrealistic pressures that stifle their progress and development.

It is possible that parents/ carers have had many adverse childhood experiences themselves. This means that at time where they would have possibly been developing skills needed in later life; like the importance of routine, goal setting, planning and emotional regulation, they were unable to, because their body was overloaded with toxic stress because of the issues they were being faced with. It is important to acknowledge that parents have however developed copings skills to help them survive the adverse issues they faced, and while they may have been useful at the time, they may not be so helpful now. Helping parents to build positive relationships, learn the life skills they may have missed and make links with support in the community can help. The following clips may be helpful to explain adverse childhood experiences and what to do about them:

[Childhood Trauma and the Brain | UK Trauma Council \(youtube.com\)](#).

[How Toxic Stress Affects Us, and What We Can Do About It \(youtube.com\)](#).

Parents and carers play a vital role in supporting their children through, what can sometimes be a difficult transition from childhood to adulthood, referred to as adolescents. Often an adolescent will come to the attention of service because of 'their' behaviour. It is essential to build trusting relationships with the adolescent, to understand their lived experience; they too may not only have adverse childhood experiences, but they may also still be living with toxic stress from the trauma they are experiencing through abuse and neglect. Their behaviour should therefore not be the focus of interventions, but viewed as a symptom of the trauma and how they are coping with it (the first clip above may help to explain this). As well as providing the child with access to support and services, it is imperative work with parents takes place for them to make positive changes. Children's care needs do not stop when they reach adolescence. If the focus is only on the child and not the parents need for change, then there is a danger that any intervention only enforces a belief that what is happening is only the child's responsibility, which can create more harm for the child and leave the parents behaviour unchallenged.