The Neglect of Neglect: Is Research Informing Practice?

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Abstract

Neglect is the most common form of child abuse. In 2005, of the approximately 899,000 children in the United States who were reported as victims of abuse and neglect, it is estimated that approximately 78 percent of cases involved neglect, 62.8 percent of cases were neglect alone. An estimated 32 percent of child fatalities were exclusively attributed to neglect. Given the prevalence of neglect, it is common to hear reference to a “neglect of neglect” among practitioners and researchers. This vague but catchy phrase poses many complex issues, some of which have been addressed in the literature. Yet the criticism persists as a commonly accepted fact. This research addresses two aspects of the “neglect of neglect” in its most simplistic form. First, do practitioners believe that neglect is being neglected in their community? We ask them, what strategies are in place to address neglect in their community and are those strategies reasonably successful. Second, is there a disparity between research and practice? Are publications, both research and informational, proportional to the incidence of neglect, or is neglect being neglected by researchers? The comparison of survey results with mapping of the literature will offer insights regarding the need for further research, more effective dissemination of information, and/or changes in local practices pertaining to neglect.

Objectives

- Practitioner assessment of the adequacy of professional information pertaining to neglect
- Determine the prevalence of professional literature on neglect
- Map the scope of topics pertaining to neglect in the literature

Method

- Survey of U.S. child maltreatment professionals (N=1,724) to determine their opinions on the number of research publications and training opportunities regarding child neglect.
- Review of the research literature on child neglect, 2000 -

Results

We identified 467 English language articles that concentrated primarily on child neglect published in six primary journals from January 2000 through December 2011. Of those, 184 (39%) were published in Child Abuse & Neglect, 95 (20%) appeared in Child Abuse Review, and 85 (18%) were found in Child Maltreatment. Another 103 (22%) of the articles were published in the journals Children & Youth Services Review, Child Welfare, and Pediatrics.

A broad spectrum of topics pertaining to child neglect appeared in the journal literature. Of the 1,718 respondents, only 245 (14%) believed the literature adequately covered the issues related to child neglect, of the 467 articles from the six primary journals containing articles on child neglect, 84 (18%) emphasized risk factors, 65 (14%) dealt with emotional abuse, and 61 (13%) considered neglect within the context of child welfare.

Survey participants were asked whether professional training opportunities on child neglect issues were available. The vast majority, 1117 (65%), reported a dearth of adequate training opportunities. Only 361 (21%) indicated that there were adequate training opportunities available to them. The remainder, 240 (14%) were unsure.

Implications for Research

Neglect is the most prevalent form of child abuse by far. This study determined that there were several hundred articles whose primary topic of discussion was child neglect. Although the total number of articles is not trivial, it represents only a small portion of the professional literature pertaining to child abuse. Are the quantity, quality and scope of research and publication on neglect sufficient to address the issue?

Questions for Further Research

- Do professionals in the field have adequate access to the published literature?
- Is the “neglect of neglect” attributable primarily to inadequate translation of research into practice?
- Should child neglect receive greater emphasis in research and publication?

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