


**Pergamon**

Child Abuse &amp; Neglect 29 (2005) 19–29

## Commentary

## Definition and measurement of neglectful behavior: some principles and guidelines<sup>☆,☆☆</sup>

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Received 29 July 2002; received in revised form 4 August 2004; accepted 14 August 2004

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*Keywords:* Measurement; Child neglect; Child maltreatment
 

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The National Academy of Science report on child maltreatment concluded that a lack of clarity in definition and a paucity of standardized, reliable, and valid measures is a serious handicap to progress in research on the causes and effects of maltreatment and developing prevention and treatment programs (Costin, Karger, & Stoesz, 1996; National Research Council, 1993). That situation continues and was the focus of a National Institute of Child Health and Human Development and Children's Bureau conference in September 2000. The conference was designed to bring greater clarity to the definition and measurement of child maltreatment. This article is also an effort in that direction but focused on research about one type of maltreatment—neglect.

Researchers have approached the measurement of neglect from multiple perspectives. For some instruments, such as the Adult Adolescent Parenting Inventory (Bavolek, 1984), the Childhood Trauma Questionnaire (Bernstein et al., 1994), and the Multidimensional Neglectful Behavior Behavior Scale (Harrington, Zuravin, DePanfilis, Ting, & Dubowitz, 2002; Straus, Kinard, & Williams, 1995), adults retrospectively evaluate their childhood experiences of abuse and neglect. Some of the most widely used instruments, such as the Childhood Level of Living Scale (Polansky, Chalmers, Bittenweiser, & Williams, 1981), are measures which are usually completed by professionals on the basis of interviewing

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<sup>☆</sup> This commentary is based on a presentation by the first author at the National Institutes of Health, Child Neglect Research Consortium, Bethesda, MD, 30 November 2000. For other publications on this or related issues log onto <http://pubpages.unh.edu/~mas2>.

<sup>☆☆</sup> This work was supported by the National Institute on Child Health and Development grant RO1HD39144, the National Institute of Mental Health grant T32MH15161, and by the University of New Hampshire.

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and observing the family. The Child Neglect Instrument (Trocme, 1996) was designed to reflect Ontario's child welfare laws, for the purpose of substantiation by child protective service workers. Fewer instruments are available that are based on the child's self-report measures of neglect, although some exist, for example, the PARQ (Rohner, 1986). Instruments vary widely in regard to the specific aspects of neglect addressed. Some measures assess only one component of neglect, such as physical neglect (e.g., the Childhood Trauma Interview; Fink, Bernstein, Handelsman, Foote, & Lovejoy, 1995), while others evaluate a wide array of neglectful behaviors (Magura & Moses, 1986).

Given the variations in definition and measurement of neglect, the first purpose of this article is to suggest a definition of neglect and to provide a conceptual analysis of that definition. The second purpose is to identify principles, criteria, and problems in creating measures of neglect, including measures based on caregiver self-report and child-report data. The extra attention to self-report measures of neglect is needed to widen the scope of research beyond cases identified by child protective agencies. It is important to bring cases that are not known to CPS into research on neglect because so many cases of neglect are not known to child protection agencies. Cases that are not known to CPS or other service providers can be included in research by use of community epidemiological surveys of the general population. However, such surveys require child-report and caregiver-report measures. In addition, child-report and caregiver self-report measures can be useful in assessing cases known to child protective services (CPS). In some child protective service investigations, the child is viewed as a key informant whose narration of events can be critical to decision-making. Obtaining this data can be facilitated by standardized measures.

A third objective of this article is to facilitate the development of new measures for use in research on neglect. We will identify principles and criteria for a measure of neglect. These principles and criteria can be used as a checklist to aid in selecting an appropriate and valid instrument. They can also be used to examine an existing instrument to determine if there is a need for modifications to make the instrument conform to one or more of these criteria. Finally, these principles and criteria can be used to guide in creating a new instrument to measure neglect.

## **Definition of neglect**

Over the years, several authors have contributed to understanding of the need for a complex conceptualization of neglect (e.g., Dubowitz, Black, Starr, & Zuravin, 1993; Polansky, Chalmers, Bittenweiser, & Williams, 1981; Rose & Meezan, 1993; Slack, Holl, Altenbernd, McDaniel, & Stevens, 2003; Zuravin, 1999). Both the heterogeneity of the phenomenon and the inherent difficulty of specifying omissions of care (unmet needs) rather than abusive actions, are at the core of the conceptual challenge. Additional complexity is introduced if the objective is a definition that encompasses statutory, clinical and research contexts. Our focus is more limited. It is limited to a definition and conceptual analysis intended for empirical research on the etiology and consequences of neglectful behavior. Furthermore, the definition we propose is limited to the neglectful behavior by a caregiver.

Neglectful behavior is behavior by a caregiver that constitutes a failure to act in ways that are presumed by the culture of a society to be necessary to meet the developmental needs of a child and which are the responsibility of a caregiver to provide.

### *Controversial elements in the definition*

“*Behavior by a caregiver*” is emphasized in the definition to avoid confounding the definition and measurement of neglectful behavior with either (1) the causes of neglectful behavior (such as poverty, mental illness, or malevolent motive) or (2) the effects of neglectful behavior such as physical or psychological harm to the child. Obviously, it is often also crucial to measure causes or effects. For example, service providers may need data on harm to the child, as this is often required by statute or agency rules, but for reasons to be explained below, these effects must be measured separately from the caregiver behavior that may have caused them.

“*Presumed by the culture*” is specified because, except possibly at the extremes when a child is seriously injured or dies, neglectful behavior is a culturally constructed phenomenon (Finkelhor & Korbin, 1988; Korbin, 1981, 2002). Cultural norms concerning neglectful behavior vary from society to society. Within a given society they change over time. In Laotian, Cambodian, and many other societies, leaving an infant in the daylong care of 7- or 8-year-old siblings would be expected rather than be considered neglect (Korbin & Spilsbury, 1999). In contemporary American society, both the infant and the 7- or 8-year-old caregiver child would be judged as neglected. Learning to read and write was at one time a privilege of a small minority of children. Today it is viewed as a developmental need that, if not met, constitutes neglect. An investigation of the perceptions of seriousness of various components of neglect held by mothers in three cultural groups and child welfare workers in Chicago found variations in perceived severity between the groups (Rose & Meezan, 1996). These examples illustrate the definitional challenges that exist in situations where a culture or subculture accepts a practice that others presume to be harmful to children, as well as the challenges inherent in defining neglect as cultural norms shift over time. That these challenges are open to empirical investigation is illustrated by the studies of Rose and Meezan (1996) and Giovannoni and Becerra (1979).

“*Responsibility of a caregiver*” is specified to allow for a division of labor between caregivers. With this provision, if there are two caregivers and only one is expected to provide food, and that caretaker does so, then the other caregiver has not been neglectful. However, if both are expected to provide food and one does not, that is neglectful behavior by the caregiver.

## **Principles and criteria**

### *Measure neglectful behavior separately from harm*

The principle that neglectful behavior and harm experienced by the child must be measured separately may seem strange because many of the most important measures of neglect do the opposite. Examples of instruments that combine neglectful behavior with harm to the child include the neglect severity ratings (Barnett, Manley, & Cicchetti, 1993) and the Child Neglect Instrument (Trocme, 1996). The Child Neglect Instrument scoring categories include whether the child has experienced actual harm; for example, “child displays clinical symptoms of malnutrition.” The Third National Incidence Study at first seems to have avoided the problem of confounding neglectful behavior and the presumed harmful effect by providing separate measurement using an “endangerment standard.” However, the specific coding instructions for endangerment reveal that it is not restricted to neglectful behavior. It also includes “actual or probable harm to the child” (Sedlak & Broadhurst, 1996).

There are several reasons why it is essential to measure neglectful behavior separately from harm to a child. First, there is often conceptual confusion because one does not know to what extent the measure or assessment of neglect describes the behavior of the caregiver or the effect on the child. A single incident of neglect can result in immense harm, even a fatality (Margolin, 1990). Conversely, a child enduring repeated neglect, such as repeatedly leaving the child unsupervised, might suffer no harm.

Second, if the measure of neglect includes whether the child was harmed, it becomes virtually impossible to investigate the harmfulness of neglect. This is because both the neglectful acts and the harm are part of the same variable. Or putting it another way, if neglectful behaviors are included in the measure only if the child is harmed, there is no way to compare the risk of harm posed by different types of neglect (such as emotional, physical and cognitive neglect) because, by this criterion, all result in harm. Nor can one investigate mediating factors (indirect paths) or moderating or buffering factors (interaction effects) such as social isolation of the caregiver, poverty, or the age of the child (Gaudin, 1999).

Third, if the measure is based on harm to the child, the prevalence of neglect will be vastly underestimated because a large percent of neglected children show no measurable harm, and will probably not come to the attention of authorities. If a child is left unsupervised, in most instances the child will not be harmed. In this respect, neglect is similar to many other adverse life circumstances. For example, epidemiological research shows that a third of heavy smokers will die of a smoking related disease (Mattson, Pollack, & Cullen, 1987), which means that two thirds will not. Studies of physically abused children also show that only about a third manifest serious life problems (Kaufman & Zigler, 1987; Widom, 1989). These conceptual and empirical problems can be avoided by measuring neglectful behavior separately from harm to a child, as is done for sexual abuse of children. Sex with a child is classified as maltreatment regardless of whether there is evidence of harm to the child. This does not mean that harm to the child is unimportant, only that it must be conceptualized and measured as a separate phenomenon.

#### *Measure neglectful behavior separately from causes and motives*

It may seem obvious and unnecessary to mention that neglectful behavior and the causes of that behavior should be measured separately. However, that basic methodological principle is violated when it is argued that if a caregiver does not provide for a child's basic needs such as adequate food, clothing and shelter because of extreme poverty, it does not constitute neglectful behavior. Although that information may be crucial to determine an appropriate intervention, using it as a criterion for defining what constitutes neglectful behavior undermines the development of knowledge that might help poor parents. It is crucial to understand why some impoverished parents fail to provide for a child's developmental needs and others do not. That is not possible unless neglectful behavior is measured separately from the poverty of the parents (Polansky, Gaudin, Ammons, & Davis, 1985). Moreover, the prevalence of neglectful behavior will be underestimated because it will leave out children living in poverty who have experienced neglectful behavior. In addition, such a measure precludes investigating the extent to which poverty is a cause of neglectful behavior, the circumstances under which poverty does and does not result in neglectful behavior, and the relative effect of poverty and other possible causes. Thus, measurement of neglectful behavior should be based on the principle that failing to provide for a child's needs by a caretaker who has an obligation to do so is neglectful behavior regardless of the motive, reason, or circumstance.

### *Multiple perspectives*

The principle of measuring neglectful behavior separately from its causes, contexts, and effects, does not preclude analyses in which all of these are analyzed. In fact, almost the opposite is the case because, as noted above, the relation of presumed causes, contexts, and effects to neglectful behavior can only be studied empirically if these dimensions are measured separately.

### *Subscales for dimensions of neglectful behavior*

Neglectful behavior is a multidimensional phenomenon and there is virtually no information on the extent to which the different dimensions have similar or different causes and consequences. Some dimensions of neglectful behavior may be more correlated than others with particular types of child problems such as cognitive and academic deficits. Different forms of neglectful behavior may also require different approaches to treatment and primary prevention. Consequently, measures of neglectful behavior need to provide subscales for these dimensions. For example, based on a review of several measures of neglect, Kaufman Kantor, Straus, Mebert, and Brown (2004) developed a child self-report measure of neglect, the Multidimensional Neglectful Behavior Scale-Child Report, that included four domains of neglectful behavior: emotional, cognitive, supervision, and physical.

For purposes of designing a new measure of neglectful behavior, starting with an identification of relevant dimensions can avoid inadvertent omission of a relevant component. It also permits evaluation of whether each dimension is adequately represented. For example, items on one dimension, such as emotional neglect, might unknowingly be under-represented and items on another dimension, such as cognitive neglect, might be over-represented if not checked against a list of dimensions to be covered.

### *Distinguish child's appraisal of neglectful behavior from actual neglectful behavior*

Information on whether a child evaluates or appraises (i.e., subjectively experiences) the behavior of a caregiver as neglectful is important, but is not neglectful behavior as defined above, and should not be confused with neglectful behavior. The child's judgment of the caregiver behavior as neglectful is best conceptualized as a consequence of neglect. Like other consequences of neglect, it is often not present; and like other consequences it must be measured separately from the caregiver behavior that constitutes neglectful behavior. For example, in the child-report version of the Multidimensional Neglectful Behavior Scale (Kaufman Kantor et al., 2004), a child's report of parental acts of educational support is measured by asking if the parent "Helped him/her with homework if needed." A child can report no help with homework and not necessarily evaluate it as neglectful behavior. The child's appraisal of parental educational support is measured by asking if the child "feels good that helps her with her schoolwork." Only if the child's appraisal is measured separately from the caregiver behavior is it possible to investigate the circumstances under which a child does or does not appraise the caregiver as neglectful.

### *Identify level of severity and chronicity*

Zuravin's (1999) review indicates the importance of separate data on severity (the culturally presumed harmfulness or illegality of the behavior) and chronicity (frequency or repetition of the behavior). Chronicity is important for measuring all types of maltreatment, but may be even more important for neglectful

behavior because, in our opinion, there is an implicit cultural tolerance for rarely occurring neglectful behavior by a caregiver. Multiple instances may be required for an administrative or legal determination of neglect. On the other hand, for research purposes, one instance of neglectful behavior may be important. Therefore, an instrument to measure neglectful behavior should provide for a continuous range of frequency of each of the acts of neglect.

### *Referent time period*

It is important to make the referent period used to measure neglectful behavior explicit in order to achieve consistency in measurement between cases in a study and so that the results can be understood and compared with other studies. The choice of a referent period can consider both theoretical and practice considerations. On the theoretical side, it may be important to know if the child has ever experienced neglectful behavior, or if it occurred during a certain period, or both. On the practical side, there may be limits to the time period for which recall of past events can be expected.

Because chronicity is so important in measuring neglect, and because memory of how often an event occurred probably decreases with the length of the referent period, longer referent periods come at the cost of decreased accuracy. Research is needed to determine the optimal time-window for obtaining recall data from children and adults.

### *Indicators must vary by age of child*

An instrument intended to measure neglectful behavior across the entire span of childhood requires different versions with age-appropriate items. For example, the caregiver behavior needed to meet the supervisory needs of a 2-year-old child, such as knowing where the child is playing, is different than the behavior needed for a school age child, such as knowing who are the child's friends. If a computer administered interviewing system is used, branching of questions based on the age of the child can be used to present age-appropriate items (see Kaufman Kantor et al., 2004).

### *Climate of legitimation needed for self-report measures*

A self-report measure of disapproved or illegal behavior requires creating a context in which the respondent feels safe in disclosing the behavior. A promise of confidentiality is the most widely recognized step in this direction. However, it is far from sufficient. Experience with using the Conflict Tactics Scales (CTS) to obtain self-report data on maltreatment of spouses (Straus, Hamby, Boney-McCoy, & Sugarman, 1996) and children (Straus, Hamby, Finkelhor, Moore, & Runyan, 1998) indicates that other steps can help create a climate of legitimacy for disclosing the behaviors included in the measure. The instrument can begin with a legitimizing explanation which implies that many children experience the things to be asked about. Pejorative terms such as abuse, neglect, violence, injury or harm should be avoided. The questions can follow the pattern of the Kinsey studies of sexual behavior by not asking if the respondent had engaged in each act, but instead asking how many times they occurred. Studies that have modified the CTS, for example, by replacing "how many times" with Yes or No have obtained drastically lower disclosure rates of violence (Straus, 1999).

## Using measures of neglectful behavior

### *Threshold for establishing harm must be determined empirically*

A major difficulty with conceptualizing and measuring neglectful behavior is the lack of empirical evidence on the harmfulness of each presumably neglectful behavior that might be harmful. Harm cannot be used as the criterion for the reasons given earlier. Some neglectful behaviors, such as abandoning a child, seem to be more serious or dangerous to a child than others, such as not keeping an eye on a child. But this is based on cultural presumptions, not scientific evidence. A child can be abandoned and rescued without harm to the child. A caregiver may fail to keep a child in view just once, and the child may die of some untoward event. The only certainty is that the more often any neglectful behaviors happen, the greater the risk to the child. This is one of the reasons we suggested earlier that the chronicity of the neglectful behavior is crucial, and it is a reason why child protection standards often cite a need to establish a pattern of behaviors as a basis for presuming child maltreatment.

We also suggest that different thresholds may be needed for different purposes. Measures should be designed so that thresholds or cutting points can be established empirically to meet different purposes and to match different circumstances such as the age of the child. An initial approach to establishing thresholds could be through deviation scores, such as percentiles, or *T* scores. To take a hypothetical example, caregivers in a general population with a neglectful behavior score at the 60th percentile might be appropriate for general education programs of primary prevention, those at the 80th percentile might need a more specific educational intervention, whereas those at the 95th percentile might be manifesting a level of neglectful behavior that needs casework intervention. Many types of empirical research are needed to establish appropriate thresholds. One approach would be an in-depth study of families at each of several possible cutting points to provide a qualitative understanding of the processes that characterize families with different neglectful behavior scale scores. Another approach could involve providing a neglectful behavior prevention program and then determining the reaction to the program of families at different neglectful behavior cutting points. Still another approach would be to administer the neglectful behavior measure to families in which neglectful behavior has been legally or administratively confirmed. The mean neglectful behavior scores of confirmed cases can be considered for use as the cutting point when evaluating the scores for families in the general population. Studies of the sensitivity and specificity of instruments are important to determining how well the instrument succeeds in classifying groups (Browner, Newman, & Cummings, 1988; Kaufman Kantor & Straus, 1999).

## Reliability and validity of neglectful behavior measures

### *Reliability*

Measures of internal consistency reliability such as Cronbach's alpha (1970) are almost certain to be low for measures of neglectful behavior in the general population because the items are relatively rare events. For example, not taking a child to a doctor or hospital when the child needed it was reported by only 4% of the parents in the 1995 Gallup Survey (Straus, Hamby, Finkelhor, Moore, & Runyan, 1998). Such highly skewed distributions reduce the size of the correlation between items and therefore also the alpha

coefficient. The alpha coefficient for a neglectful behavior scale is also likely to be low because behaviors judged to be neglectful are diverse and are not necessarily correlated with each other. Nevertheless, the occurrence of a specific neglectful behavior is an indication of neglectful behavior regardless of whether it is correlated with other neglectful behaviors. The conceptualization of neglect as a behavior defined by cultural norms makes it appropriate to combine uncorrelated neglectful behavior items into a scale. This is because any occurrence of these behaviors indicates violating the norm, regardless of whether the occurrence of one neglectful behavior is associated with an average tendency for the others to occur (i.e., regardless of whether the items are correlated).

The possibility that a valid scale measuring neglect can have a low coefficient of reliability may seem to be contradicted by the principle that an instrument, which lacks reliability, must also lack validity. That principle, however, applies to temporal consistency (test-retest reliability), not to internal consistency reliability. An instrument can have a zero alpha coefficient of internal consistency and also be valid (Acock, 1997; Turner & Wheaton, 1995). An example is the severe assault scale of the Parent-Child Conflict Tactics Scales (Straus et al., 1998). The alpha coefficient for this instrument is near zero because parents are likely to commit only one to two of these most egregious acts. The instrument is valid because the occurrence of even one of these acts indicates that a severe assault has occurred.

#### *Multiple types of data can increase validity*

As pointed out earlier, data on neglectful behavior can be obtained from many sources, including interviewing children, interviewing caregivers, case records, interviews with case workers, reports by lay persons familiar with the family, observations of caregivers interacting with a child, and data obtained by contacting a caregiver by phone at periodic intervals to determine what the caregiver and the child are doing at that moment.

It is important to recognize that if more than one type of data are used, the correlation between them may be low, just as the correlation between different modes of neglectful behavior is often low. If that is the case, combining them into an overall measure of neglectful behavior will produce a measure with low internal consistency reliability, but validity can be high (see preceding section). On the other hand, if the measure of neglectful behavior is based on just one type of data, such as case-worker reports or self-report, shared method variance may result in higher correlations between the items and higher internal consistency reliability, but not higher validity.

#### **Implications for research and practice**

The focus on measuring neglectful behavior separately from harm resulting from that behavior, rather than slighting the importance of harm to a child, facilitates empirical research on issues such as the degree of harm associated with different types of neglectful behavior. Studies of this type would begin by identifying the type and frequency of neglectful behavior and measuring the extent to which each deviates from community standards. Community standards can be measured by surveys, as in the research by Rose and Meezan (1996) or Giovannoni and Becerra (1979). The next step would be to investigate the likelihood and degree of harm associated with those deviations from community standards, for example, standards on appropriate levels of supervision, such as leaving a 7-year-old under the daily supervision of a 10-

year-old sibling after school until a parent returns from work, or leaving the children unsupervised on weekend nights so that a single parent can participate in an activity. These are commonplace examples of omissions of safe supervision that are unlikely to come to the attention of child protective services unless some harm befalls the child, or the pattern of neglectful care is observed and reported by a neighbor.

### *Different purposes require different measures*

It is a truism worth discussing that different measures are required for different purposes. If the purpose of obtaining data on neglectful behavior is to provide information to use in developing or implementing a parent-education program intended as primary prevention, it is important that the data refer to parents whose neglectful behavior is minimal, including a single neglectful behavior. These are parents whose neglectful behavior might become more severe or more frequent. Knowledge of the characteristics of these parents, including their cultural backgrounds, and the circumstances under which the minor neglectful behavior occurred can be helpful in designing educational and other prevention steps to reduce the probability of the neglectful behavior becoming more severe and more frequent. At the other extreme, if the purpose is to aid in determining if a child is to be removed from his/her home, there must be major and chronic neglectful behavior. Moreover, for deciding on child removal, evidence of neglectful caregiver behavior may not be sufficient. Administrative or legal considerations may require taking into account whether there is observable harm to the child.

### *The moral tension*

The practice of requiring both neglectful behavior and harm to the child to classify a child as neglected is in sharp contrast to the practice with sexual abuse. Sex with a child is sexual abuse regardless of whether there is observable harm. Why is this practice not followed in respect to neglectful behavior? Part of the explanation may be pressure because of the limited financial resources available to child welfare services. This requires giving priority to interventions on behalf of children who manifest observable harm. Another factor may be the influence of cases at the extreme which dominate public attention. These extreme cases are symbolically important, but probably apply to only a small proportion of even confirmed cases of child neglect. For example, in the Third National Incidence Study of Child Abuse and Neglect, only about 20% of the neglected or abused children were injured enough to require medical or psychological treatment (Sedlak & Broadhurst, 1996; Zuravin, 1988). This fifth of the cases, however, are so appalling that they epitomize the image of neglected children. These cases create a moral tension that makes it difficult to accept a conceptualization and measurement of neglectful behavior that separates neglectful behavior from harm to the child. Conceptualizing and measuring neglectful behavior separately from harm to the child does not diminish concern with whether a child has been harmed by neglectful behavior. That concern can be met as well or better, while also securing the theoretical and methodological advantages of the principles set forth in this article. The analysis in this article lead us to conclude that assessing both neglectful behavior and harm to a child separately can make an important contribution to research and can also enhance providers' abilities to target intervention and help identify appropriate intervention modalities for perpetrators and victims of neglectful behavior.

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