

# CORE-INFO:

Neglect or emotional  
abuse in teenagers  
aged 13-18

**NSPCC**

**CORE INFO**  
Cardiff Child Protection Systematic Reviews



## Introduction

**This leaflet summarises the scientific literature that describes what teenagers aged 13-18 years who are experiencing neglect or emotional abuse tell us about themselves.**

It focuses on how these teenagers view themselves and their experiences. The literature review did not account for findings observed by others as only self-reported features were taken into account. For all of the teenagers in the studies that were reviewed, neglect and/or emotional abuse were confirmed by the statutory agencies; many were in out-of-home care at the time of the studies. For many of the teenagers, although they were being neglected or emotionally abused at the time of the studies, this may have also been going on throughout their younger years. The impact of this earlier childhood neglect and abuse is outside the scope of this summary.

This leaflet will be of particular interest to: child health practitioners; education staff, including teachers and education welfare officers; children's social care services; police and youth offending services; primary and secondary healthcare services.

## Why we are doing this work

Emotional abuse is an extremely damaging form of abuse, which may occur in isolation, or may coexist with other forms of abuse or neglect. Emotional neglect is also recognised and many research studies combine emotional abuse and emotional neglect together (under the term 'psychological maltreatment'). This leaflet addresses children who are experiencing any form of neglect (physical, emotional, educational, medical etc) and/or emotional abuse.<sup>1</sup>

In this leaflet we aim to explore the association between teenage neglect or emotional abuse, and the likelihood that their maltreatment may manifest itself in issues such as suicidal ideation, depression, victimisation, dating violence and delinquency. Many of the behaviours exhibited by emotionally abused or neglected teenagers may be interpreted by others as a lifestyle choice or 'acting out'. A better understanding of teenage neglect and emotional abuse may enable teenagers to access appropriate and timely help.

This leaflet has been compiled following a systematic rapid review of studies published worldwide between 1990-2014. We report here on teenagers' emotions, general wellbeing, and lifestyle.

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<sup>1</sup> Details of what constitutes neglect or emotional abuse are given in the glossary at the end of this leaflet.

# Key findings

## Victimisation

In one study neglected girls reported being the victims of physical assault, but the neglected boys did not. Another study reported that neglected teenagers may be the victims of dating violence.

Emotionally abused boys and girls have also reported being the victims of dating violence.

## Perpetrators of violence or delinquency

One study has shown that physically neglected boys are no more likely to be the perpetrators of dating violence than other teenagers. However, one study showed that emotionally abused boys may perpetrate dating violence. One study reported that older neglected boys may exhibit delinquency.

## Future expectations

Emotionally neglected teenagers did not express confidence in their future. They have high levels of daily stress, including anxieties relating to school, work, health, and finance. Neglected boys tend to engage more in school, while neglected girls tend to engage less in school.

## Emotional wellbeing

Compared with similar age groups in the community who had not been maltreated, neglected teenagers were more likely to experience depression, particularly if they were younger than 15 years old. However, they were not more likely to express suicidal ideation.

Emotionally abused and neglected teenagers did express more internalising features, such as being withdrawn, anxious, depressed, angry, experiencing post-traumatic stress symptoms, or sexual concerns than teenagers who hadn't been maltreated. And they were three times more likely to express suicidal ideation than children at risk of other types of abuse or neglect.

The research found no association between teenagers who were neglected or emotionally abused and low self-esteem.

## Risky behaviours

Adolescence is a time of increasing independence and exploration, which can include trying out different lifestyles and engaging in some risk-taking as part of normal development. However, this can lead to teenagers' actions being written off as 'typical teenage behaviour' instead of a sign of emotional abuse or neglect. Below are some of the key findings from the review relating to risky behaviour and emotionally abused and neglected teenagers.

**Substance misuse:** Some neglected teenagers may exhibit alcohol-related problems in both early and late teens. Although it is clear that neglected teenagers may be highly likely to engage in substance misuse, particularly those aged 14-16 years, many of the studies did not compare them to other teenagers in the same community. Therefore, it is difficult to determine how much more likely they are to engage in substance misuse. The studies did not find any association between teenagers who had been emotionally abused and their reported alcohol or substance misuse.

**Sexual behaviour:** One small study showed an increased risk of teenage pregnancy amongst neglected teenagers. However, there is little research relating to risky sexual behaviour and the links with neglect or emotional abuse.



## Implications for practice

Practitioners working with children aged 13-18 years may observe some of the key features described in the previous section. Getting help for the child and family as early as possible gives the best chance of a good outcome.

Neglect and emotional abuse are often not recognised in teenagers and even where they are they may not be taken seriously by professionals. Not much is known about their personal experiences, as there is a lack of research which identifies the feelings, or experiences of this population. Many of the behaviours exhibited by emotionally abused or neglected teenagers may be interpreted by others as a lifestyle choice or 'acting out' when they may in fact be an indicator of neglect or emotional abuse. Consequently their conduct may lead them to enter the juvenile justice system rather than the child protection system. A better understanding of teenage neglect and emotional abuse may enable teenagers to access appropriate and timely help.

- All practitioners coming into contact with teenagers who exhibit the behaviours and issues above must actively consider neglect or emotional maltreatment, rather than simply addressing the problems they present, such as alcohol use.
- Remember, teenagers who have experienced neglect or emotional abuse may be particularly vulnerable to other forms of victimisation; therefore appropriate action should be taken.
- A sensitive exploration of teenagers' experiences may help professionals understand their situation, and allow the teenagers to access appropriate support themselves.
- Hospital emergency departments and mental health providers need to be particularly aware that teenagers, especially the victims of violence, may be experiencing neglect or emotional maltreatment.

While early recognition and intervention are vital, it is never too late to help a child or teenager. If concerns about possible neglect or emotional abuse arise it is important you take action as soon as possible regardless of the age of the teenager.

If you have a concern you can call the police, social services or the NSPCC (0808 800 5000). And remember that children can contact ChildLine 24/7 (0800 1111; [childline.org.uk](http://childline.org.uk)).



## Glossary

### **Delinquency:**

An offence or misdeed, act of vandalism, or antisocial behaviour, usually of a minor nature, especially one committed by a teenager, who may be brought before a juvenile court.

### **Post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD):**

A psychological condition characterised by flashbacks, distressing intrusive thoughts or memories, distorted sense of blame, estrangement from others, aggression, sleep disturbance and self-destructive behaviour that may follow a traumatic experience, such as emotional abuse.

### **Suicidal ideation:**

Thinking about, considering, or planning for suicide.

### **Systematic rapid review:**

A search of the relevant literature published in the English language as identified through a limited number of databases searched for a defined period of time. All identified articles are then critically reviewed in a standardised manner, by two independent trained reviewers, with details synthesised in an explicit manner.



## Definitions of neglect and emotional abuse across the UK:

Government guidance on safeguarding varies across England, Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland and slightly different definitions of neglect and emotional neglect apply to each jurisdiction. For the definition applying to your country, readers are advised to consult the online guidance for your jurisdiction.

The definitions contain common elements as outlined below:

**Neglect** is the persistent failure to meet a child's basic physical and/or psychological needs, and is likely to result in the serious impairment of the child's health or development. Examples of neglect include: failing to provide adequate food, clothing and shelter; failing to protect a child from physical and emotional harm or danger; failing to ensure adequate supervision; failing to ensure access to appropriate medical care or treatment; disregard or unresponsiveness to a child's basic emotional needs.

**Emotional abuse** is the persistent emotional maltreatment of a child, causing severe and adverse effects on the child's emotional development. It may involve conveying to a child that they are worthless or unloved, inadequate, or valued only because they meet the needs of another person; not giving the child opportunities to express their views; making fun of what they say or how they communicate; age or developmentally inappropriate expectations being imposed on children; interactions beyond a child's developmental capability; overprotection and limitation of exploration and learning, or preventing the child participating in normal social interaction; seeing or hearing the ill treatment of another; serious bullying (including cyber bullying), causing children to feel frightened or in danger; the exploitation or corruption of children.

Some degree of emotional abuse is involved in all types of ill treatment, but it may also occur alone.



## Further support from the NSPCC

If you are worried about a child, the NSPCC is here to help. 24 hours a day, seven days a week, free of charge.

**Phone 0808 800 5000**

**Email [help@nspcc.org.uk](mailto:help@nspcc.org.uk)**

**Text 88858 (Text 07786 200001 in Channel Islands, standard call rates apply)**

**Or visit [nspcc.org.uk/help](http://nspcc.org.uk/help)**



### NSPCC information service

The NSPCC's library is the most comprehensive collection of specialist resources relating to child protection in the UK. It contains over 40,000 records and you can access it online at [nspcc.org.uk/research](http://nspcc.org.uk/research)

You can also subscribe to CASPAR, a news service that signposts you to the latest policy, practice, and research in child protection.

#### Sign up at [nspcc.org.uk/research](http://nspcc.org.uk/research)

To download this leaflet for free, or for printed copies of this leaflet, please go to [nspcc.org.uk/core-info](http://nspcc.org.uk/core-info) for price details.

The information in this leaflet was current at August 2014.

For the most up-to-date information on this review and the project's other systematic reviews visit the Core info website [core-info.cardiff.ac.uk](http://core-info.cardiff.ac.uk)

This is a collaborative project between the Early Years Research Programme, Cochrane Institute of Primary Care & Public Health, School of Medicine, Cardiff University and the NSPCC.

Further details of this review can be found by scanning the QR code below.

