

Identification and response to baby, child and  
adolescent neglect  
OR  
Supporting parents/families to express love and care?

Jane Wiffin

[jane.wiffin@btinternet.com](mailto:jane.wiffin@btinternet.com)

@JaneWiffin



# Introduction





---

## What am I going to cover?

- Why identifying, responding and intervening to the neglect of children is important
- Key issues within practice across the continuum.
- Principles for this work.
- The six questions which make up identification of neglect

# Why is this Important

1 in 10 children have experienced neglect in their childhood.

Most common reason for early help plans.

9% of young adults report being severely neglected by parents or guardians

Most common reason for serious incidents and LCSPRs.

Many of the children subject to these high-profile reviews were not known to specialist services. They were either in receipt of early help –or universal services.

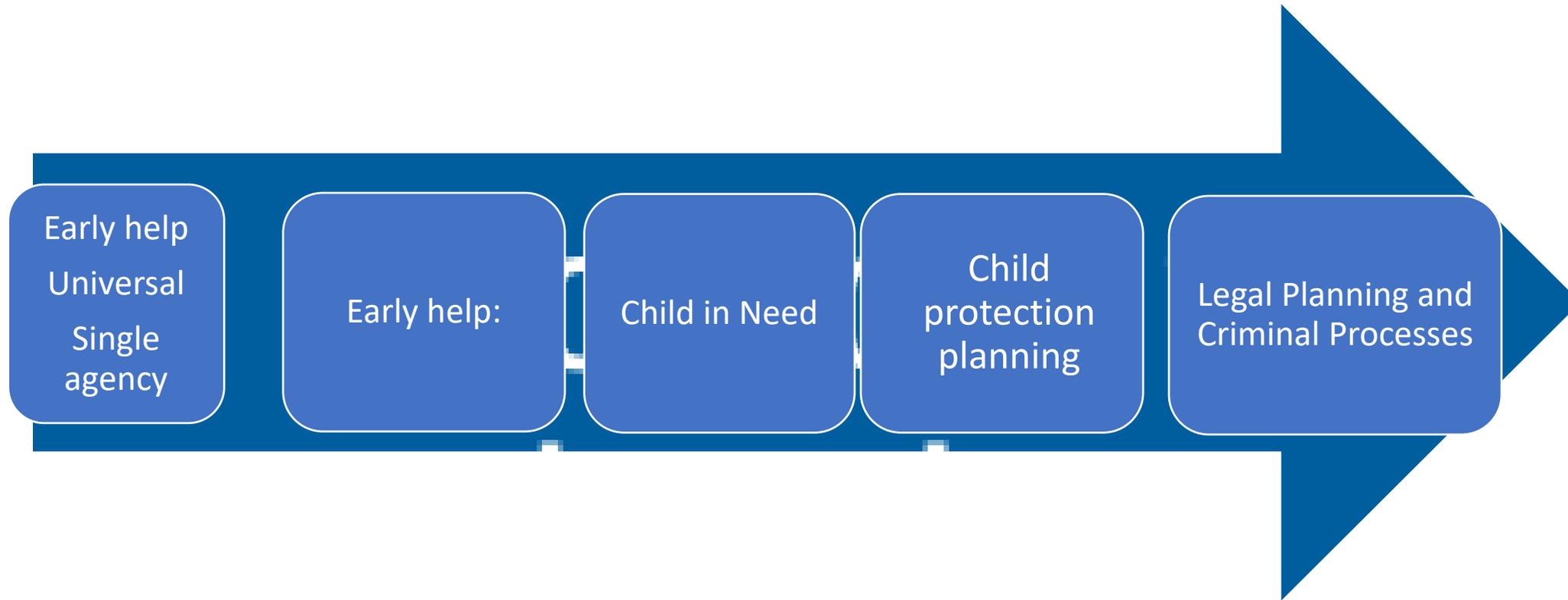
Often having been through the “revolving door of services” with step up and step – down without sufficient change or maintenance of change/enough time for change

Snakes and Ladders – what does that feel lie to a child

Neglect is the most common reason for taking child protection action

41% of the concerns that were referred to police or children’s services, related to neglect

# The issue: the neglect of children as a concept exists on a continuum



# What do children say neglect is? Daniels 2014

- 'not enough love'
- 'parents having no interest in me'
- 'being hungry all the time'
- 'having to always be there for my siblings'
- 'you end up doing your parents job- but you are not so good at it - feels like failure'
- 'it's one thing to say they love you (parents) but they have to show it; love is a doing word'
- 'it is like you do not matter'
- **Commonly written "there is no doubt these parents love their children" but "do these children feel loved and cared for" is the questions.**





ChildLine records  
the feelings  
expressed by  
young people  
during counselling  
about neglect

1. Worried
2. Scared
3. Upset/tearful
4. Lonely/isolated/excluded
5. Sad

Turnbull, M. (2015) Hurting inside: NSPCC report on the learning from the NSPCC helpline and ChildLine on neglect. London: NSPCC.





# The conundrum of child neglect

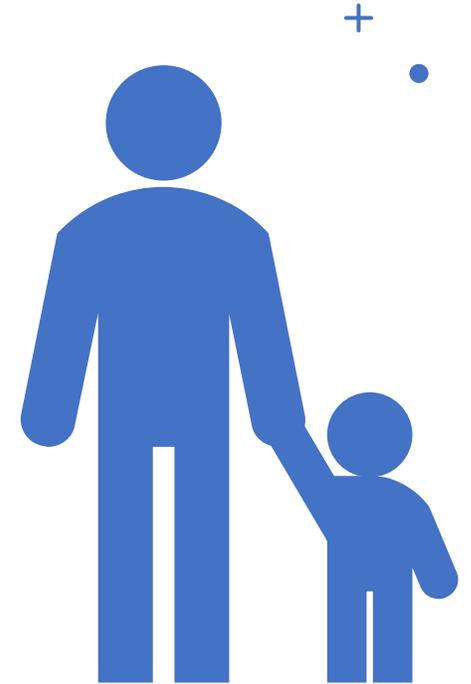
---

- Neglect left unaddressed does not go away – it gets slowly but surely worse
- It festers
- Unhelpful parental patterns develop
- Children's needs do not get met and they struggle to regulate their emotions/behaviours
- Parents start to perceive their children as unmanageable or unparentable
- Unhelpful circular pattern develop – children are blamed – the move from omission to commission
- It is not my fault it is yours-
- Children are harmed and their development impaired

# Neglect is not a 'thing'

---

- Neglect or Child neglect
- Naming it from an Ealey stage
- *“There is neglect in the household”*
  - Where did it come from?
  - Did it arrive from outer space?
- *Home conditions poor?*
  - What does this mean?
  - What does it mean to parents?
- It is relational
- It is about parenting/attachment/ reflective functioning/empathy and understanding about a child’s needs.
- Belief that these can be rebuilt or established



# Top tips

01

**Don't say *there is 'neglect in the household.'***

**Instead, say who is doing what and to whom, i.e., Mother does not always meet Jimmy's emotional needs.**

02

**DO name neglect of children as early as possible – this helps families understand what you are concerned about**

03

**Talk about parenting.**

**So NOT the home conditions are poor.**

**DO say 'mother/father has struggled to address concerns about home conditions**

**AND DO ADD impact - so this means Kaya and Jaz have no safe place to play.**

# Enablers for identifying child neglect

- Relationship based practice
- Child centred practice versus adult focus and child outcomes matter
- Role of extended family and networks, 'it takes a village to raise a child'
- Poverty Awareness
- Cultural Competence and talking about racism
- Recognition of other discrimination faced by adults and children- i.e. disablism, homophobia, transphobia
- Intersectional approach is needed

# Poverty aware

- Not all children who live in poverty are neglected AND not all neglected children are poor
- Poverty is a risk factor - needs to be assessed and planned for but NOT dominate
- What is the impact on parenting and family life
- Beware of compensatory care
- Short term gains and is important.
  - BUT
- If not part of a wider plan, then not visible and not connected to change!
- What is attributable to parental care and what is the impact
- Child neglect is about parenting NOT poverty

# Culturally competent practice

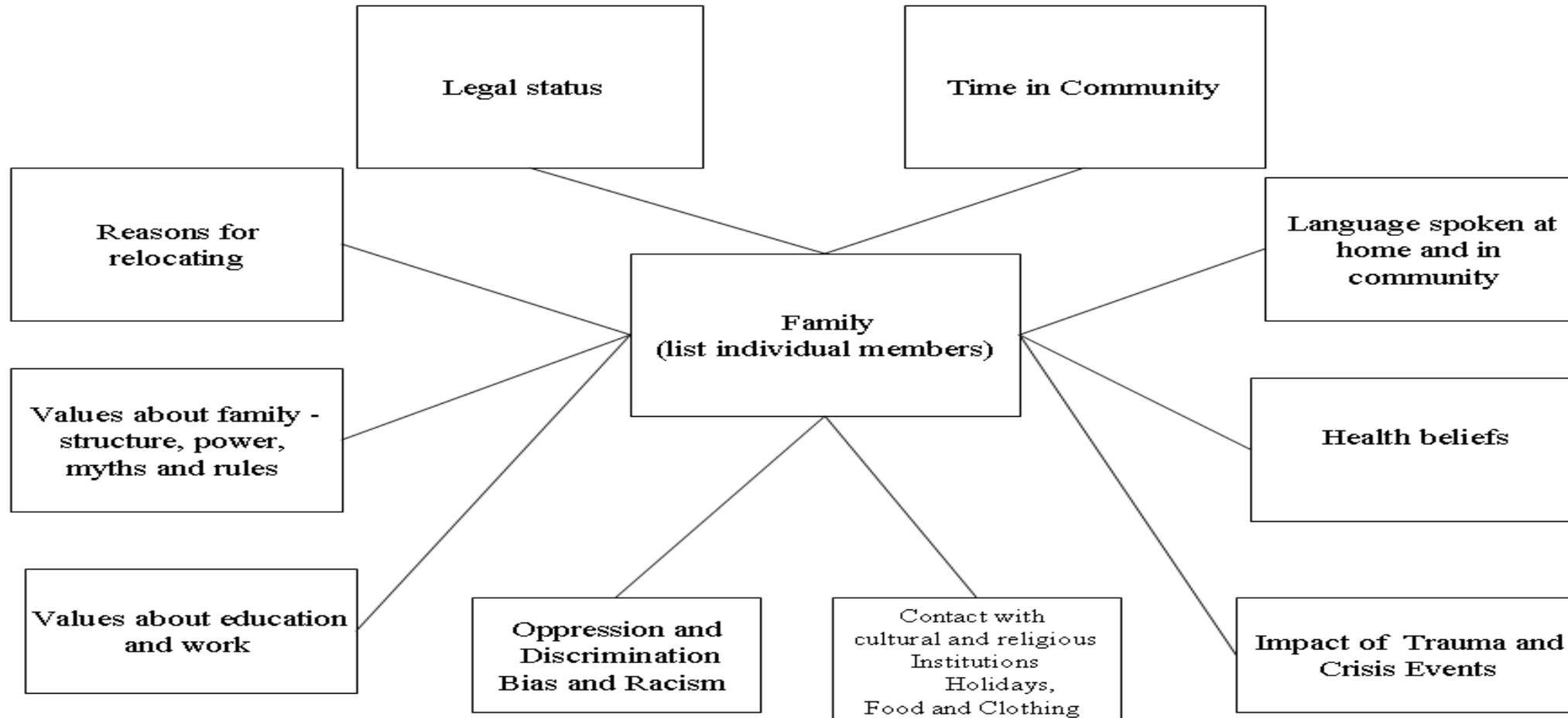
- Consider the cultural context for parenting
- Cultural Bias and cultural relativism
- Cultural strengths
- A continuum of concern
- Acknowledgement of racism and discrimination
- And other forms of discrimination
- What are our cultural biases?

*Young people in the UK are growing up in a context where racism continues to profoundly – and adversely – impact their development. Research has demonstrated that racism affects multiple domains of development – ranging from educational outcomes to mental health [1].*

[Racism, Mental Health and Trauma Research Round Up - UK Trauma Council](#)



**CULTURAGRAM - 2007**



# Barriers in responding to child neglect

This is complex and painful work which impacts on us: in essence we are often feeling other's pain. About the past, present and relationships

Concept of disguised compliance

Not being able to name what is going on – naming child neglect earlier – dilemma because of issue of shame – how do we have those conversations essential to do so

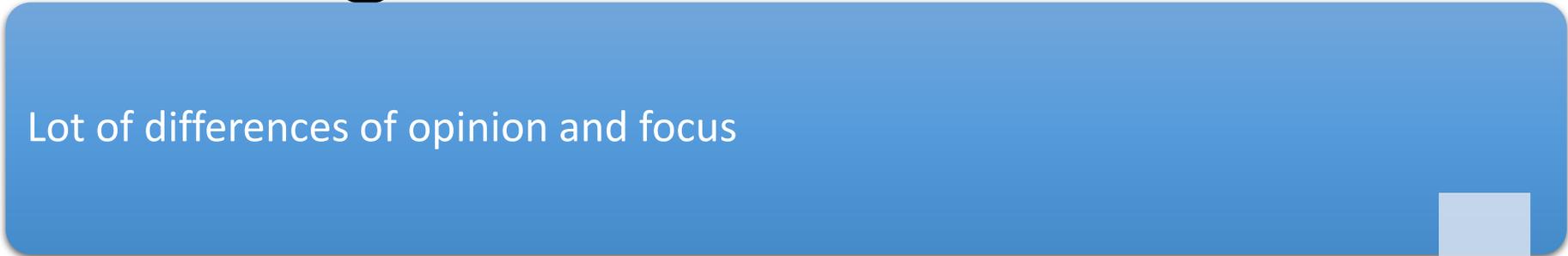
Euphemisms does not = kindness

The misuse of concept of 'good enough'

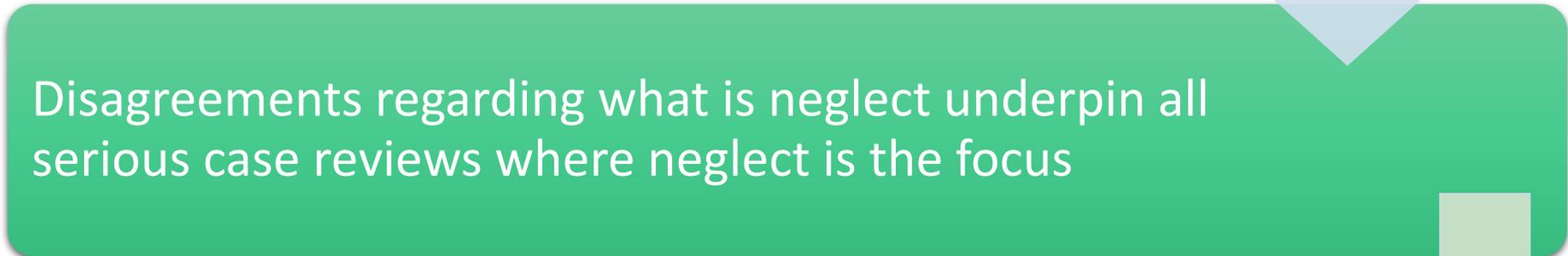
Consent and engagement how do we change the narrative?  
What about children having choices

# Starting with the Definitions:

Lot of differences of opinion and focus



Disagreements regarding what is neglect underpin all serious case reviews where neglect is the focus



What is your definition of neglect?

How do you deal with conflicts/Professionals Disagreements?

Remember if everyone has a different view of a child's life.

Perhaps no one has understood it well?



# Criminal Offence

---

17

24/02/2026

# Children and Young Persons Act 1933



Section 1 of the Children and Young Persons Act 1933 (“the 1933 Act”) provides for an offence of child cruelty. This offence is committed where a person age 16 or over, who has responsibility for a child under that age, **wilfully (i.e. intentionally or recklessly)** assaults, ill-treats, neglects, abandons, or exposes that child in a manner likely to cause “unnecessary suffering or injury to health”; or causes or procures someone else to treat a child in that manner.

Serious Crime Act 2015, Section 66 amendments have reinforced this:

after “ill-treats” insert “(whether physically or otherwise)”;

substitute “(whether the suffering or injury is of a physical or a psychological nature)”.

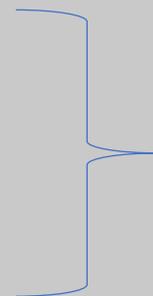
[Serious Crime Act 2015 \(legislation.gov.uk\)](https://www.legislation.gov.uk)

# Civil Definition: Working Together 2023

- The **persistent failure** to meet a child's basic physical and/or psychological needs, likely to result in the **serious impairment** of the child's health or development.
- Neglect may occur during pregnancy.
- Once a child is born, neglect may involve a parent or carer failing to provide
  - adequate food, clothing and shelter (including exclusion from home or abandonment);
  - protect a child from physical and emotional harm or danger;
  - ensure adequate supervision (including the use of inadequate care-givers);
  - or ensure access to appropriate medical care or treatment.
- It may also include neglect of, or unresponsiveness to, a child's basic emotional needs.

# Six questions to organising our thinking

1. Recognising and responding to persistence and change
2. Types of Neglectful Care giving
  - Physical Care
  - Health
  - Safety and supervision
  - Love and care
  - Stimulation and education
3. What is the Harm; Impact – from child's point of view and from the evidence before us – what can we predict using the evidence base for the future -
4. Why the failure? What causes neglect? What drives it?
5. Understanding omission or commission
6. What other kinds of abuse is neglect enabling?



Is it Global?

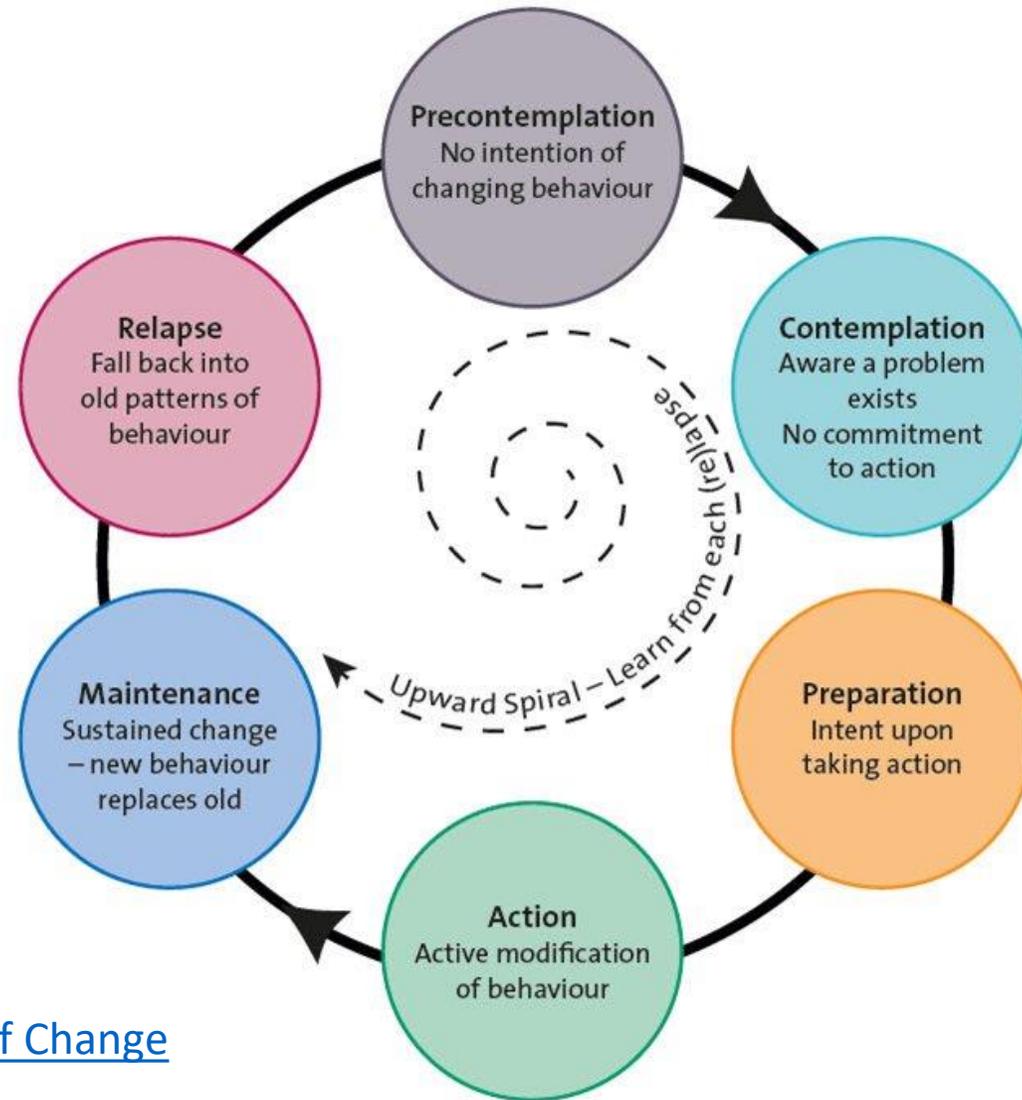
Think of this as along a continuum and a way to organise thinking, target interventions and amalgamate evidence

# Q1. Persistence

- What does this **ACTUALLY** this mean?
- Seen as over time “*cannot do anything because it has not been going on for long enough*” become something of a quasi-legal issue.
- Must be linked to age and stage of development – not just time - and how many caregiving tasks are needed – how many developmental milestones to complete for wellbeing
- First 2 years and adolescence are key points.
- When does history start? If we are reluctant professionally to name neglect early then how do we see cumulative pattern and impact?

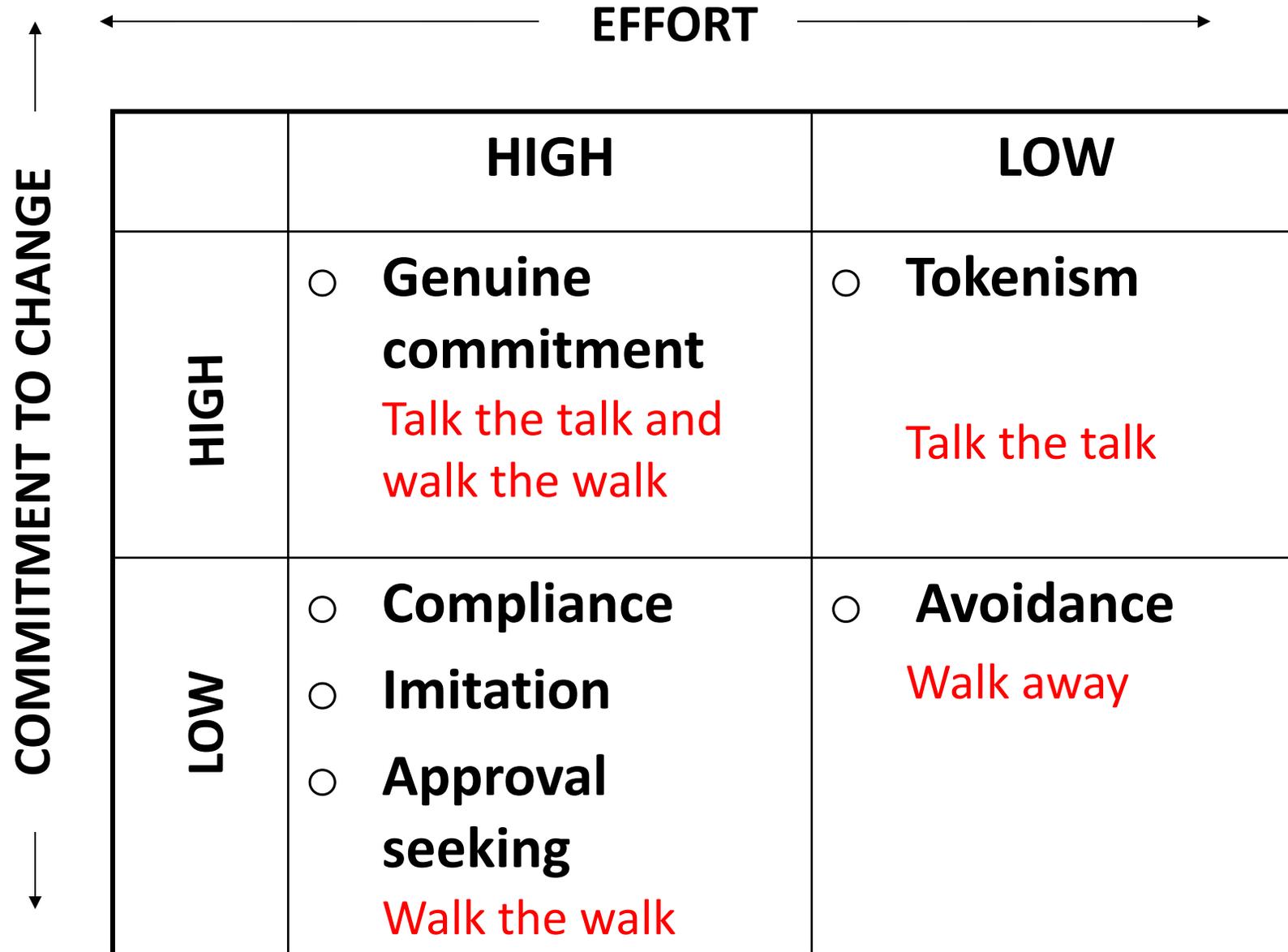
# The Issue of understanding change is critical

1. Understanding change as a process and articulating this
2. Clear plans from early stages (simple not complex) – to see success and failure
3. Recognising impact of types of plans keeping CHANGE for the child at the centre
  - a) **Plans that are about parents/caregivers making commitment to doing something differently. Showing children they can keep them in mind/put them first**
  - b) **PLANS WHICH ARE ABOUT COMPENSATORY CARE**
  - c) **Plans which are about children/adolescents to address individual difficulties – get the balance and recognise possibility of blame**
4. DNA v WAS NOT BROUGHT
5. **Not engaged v did not engage in services designed to improve a child's circumstances**



[Prochaska and DiClemente's Transtheoretical Model of Change](#)  
- Exploring your mind

RESPONSE TO CHANGE

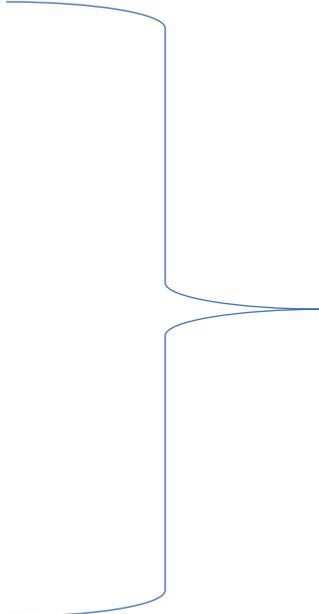


So for Yas (12) – who is running away, “out of control”, having sex, drinking, smoking and problem at school. Blamed by her parents

- The plan:
- Yas: fix the child
  - Drugs and alcohol support/ Relationship ed/ Counselling/ CAMHS/ Mentor at school/social worker/specialist support worker (7)
- Parents: change that will make a difference
  - Discussion of family history/parenting support/parenting programme (3)
- Compensatory care:
  - Support to get Yas to school/advice re debts/after school club (3)
- Total: 13 actions – what equals success?
- What needs to be different for Yas?

## Q 2. Type of neglect

- Physical Care
- Health
- Safety and supervision
- Love and care
- Stimulation and education



**Global  
Neglect**

How do these interact for the child- what connections are there across these domains?

If not global then where are the area's we want to concentrate our energies?

Does one stand out?

# Types of Neglect

There are five subdivisions of neglect. It is important to consider whether all five areas are experienced by the child, and if they are this is evidence of global neglect. For some children, some specific areas will be impacted, and this knowledge will help focus interventions where they are needed.

Physical	Health	Safety and Supervision	Love and Care	Stimulation and Education
<p>This involves a PARENT not providing a child with:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• appropriate clothing,</li> <li>• adequate food,</li> <li>• hygiene and cleanliness</li> <li>• appropriate home conditions</li> <li>• and</li> <li>• a safe place to sleep</li> </ul> <p>or ensuring that children have the skills to provide these where appropriate for themselves.</p>	<p>This involves parents</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• minimising or ignoring children’s illness or health (including oral health) needs,</li> <li>• lack of attention to needs emerging from disabilities</li> </ul> <p>and</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• failing to seek medical attention or administering medication and treatments.</li> </ul> <p>This is equally relevant to expectant mothers who fail to</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Prepare appropriately for the child’s birth,</li> <li>• seek ante-natal care,</li> </ul> <p>and/or</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• engage in behaviours that place the baby at risk through, for example, substance misuse.</li> </ul> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• It also includes adults who perpetrate domestic abuse throughout or during pregnancy</li> </ul>	<p>This involves the parent not to provide adequate levels of guidance and supervision that ensure the child is safe and protected. This includes:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Not being aware of where their child is or what they are doing, which may lead to being at risk of being harmed outside of the home or online</li> <li>• Failing to provide appropriate boundaries that equip children to be aware of safety and risk</li> <li>• Failure to arrange alternative care and supervision</li> <li>• Leaving a child alone in a situation for which they are not equipped to manage, including around animals.</li> </ul> <p>This can affect children of all ages. It is important that the age of a child should not blur the fact that they have continuing developmental and care needs.</p>	<p>This involves a parent being unresponsive to a child's emotional needs, including:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• failing to interact or provide affection and comfort,</li> <li>• failing to develop a child’s self-esteem and sense of identity,</li> <li>• failing to respect a child’s sexuality and gender</li> <li>• failing to provide appropriate boundaries that are consistent and clear enough for a child to understand</li> </ul> <p>and</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• not being available to listen to worries or concerns.</li> </ul> <p>The carer may belittle, humiliate and blame the child seeing them as the cause of the harsh care they are being provided with.</p>	<p>The parents does not provide appropriate learning experiences for their age and/or stage; they may:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Be unstimulated,</li> <li>• Be denied appropriate experiences to enhance their development and/or experience a</li> <li>• lack of interest in their achievements,</li> <li>• lack of help with homework</li> <li>• lack of support to resolve difficulties at educational settings</li> </ul> <p>This may also include carers failing to comply with requirements regarding school attendance and responding to any special educational needs.</p>



# Clutter Image Rating: Living Room

Please select the photo below that most accurately reflects the amount of clutter in your room



1



2



3



4



5



6



7

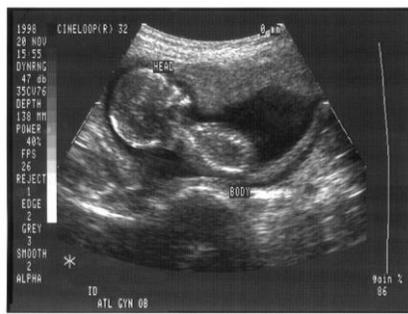


8



9

# Q3: Impact of neglect – casting a long shadow from pre-birth to adulthood and beyond

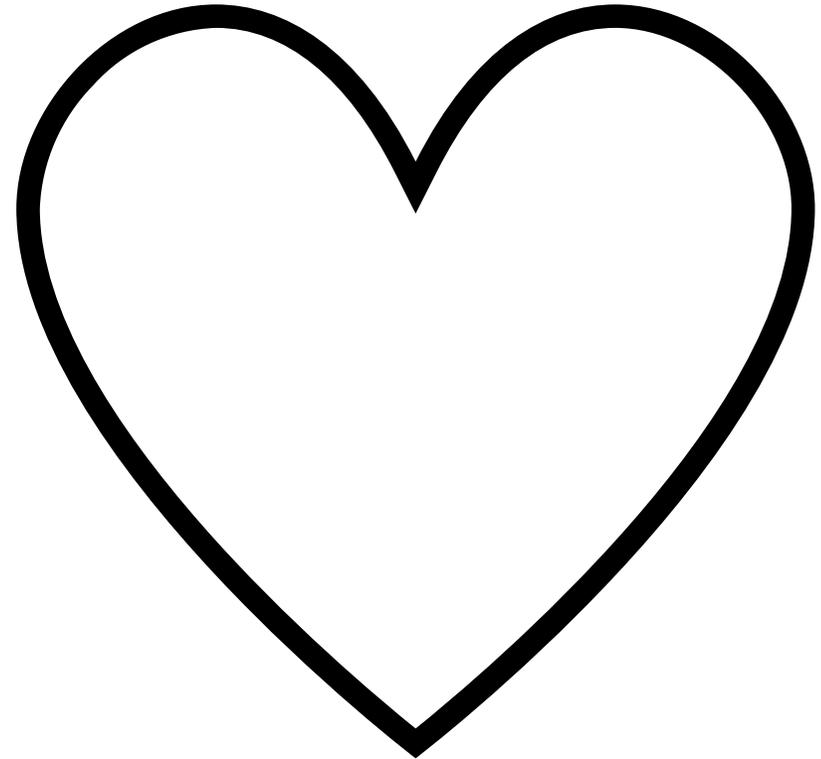


Cumulative impact across the developmental timeline

# The womb

---

- Baby first home
- Call out hazardous living environment
  - Drugs, alcohol, domestic violence, stress caused by life and unaddressed mental health
- BUT
- Do it in way you make people fall in love with the baby and with empathy ( I know it is tough)
- This hazardous environment has known and unknown consequences





Babies  
Baby Blind Spot  
Most Vulnerable age  
Cannot tell us what is  
happening – or what they feel  
How do we represent their  
perspective?

# Effects of neglect

Type of effect	Infants 0-2	Early Childhood	The School Years	Adolescence
<b>Development</b>	<p>poor growth/ intellectual capacity</p> <p>Cognitive development under stimulation</p> <p>nappy rash, infections, hospital attendances</p> <p>failure to thrive</p>	<p>short stature, dirty, unkempt</p> <p>delay in learning new skills</p> <p>learning slow and painful</p> <p>language delay</p>	<p>severe educational deficits: learning disabilities, poor problem solving</p> <p>poor reading, writing and maths</p>	<p>Growth/brain development /achievement of puberty</p>
<b>Behaviour</b>	<p>withdrawn, lethargic, depressed</p> <p>self stimulating behaviour e.g. rocking</p>	<p>lacking social skills</p> <p>either aggressive or withdrawn</p> <p>indiscriminate friendliness</p>	<p>disruptive/overactive in class</p> <p>desperate for attention</p> <p>few friends</p> <p>overcompensation withdrawn</p>	<p>Anti-social behaviour</p> <p>Anger/aggression</p> <p>Depression</p> <p>School problems</p>
<b>Emotional</b>	<p>no learned trust</p>	<p>shame and self doubt</p> <p>lack of confidence and expectation of failure</p> <p>poor self concept</p>	<p>encopresis/eneuresis</p> <p>guilt/self blame</p> <p>self harming</p> <p>disturbed eating patterns</p>	<p>Self harm</p> <p>Exploitation</p> <p>Eating disorder</p>

# Adolescence

Mental health problems such as depression, self-harm eating disorders, pseudo-seizures

CSE

Criminal exploitation

Anger and criminality

Problems at school

Poor relationships

Disrupted sexual development



# Adulthood

In adulthood, relationship difficulties may persist, and show themselves in social isolation or problematic relationships with frequent crises and breakups.

Women who experience neglect in childhood are also more than twice as likely as other women to experience depression, more frequently have problematic teenage pregnancy, and are more likely to be in adult relationships characterised by domestic violence

---

# Impact Genetic versus environmental factors



Impact of  
abuse and  
neglect CAN  
become the  
child or  
adolescent  
problem to  
be solved

---

Thinking about how children are described

---

Damaged or living in damaging circs

---

Difficult or not enabled to manage difficult emotions

---

Badly behaved – not enabled to manage behaviour

---

Problematic – not taught strategies

---

Attention seeking – attention needing/attachment seeking

---

Manipulative – has not been taught how to get help/attention

---

Concerning behaviour or behaviour which suggests concern

---

Out of control – has not been taught to regulate emotions.

---



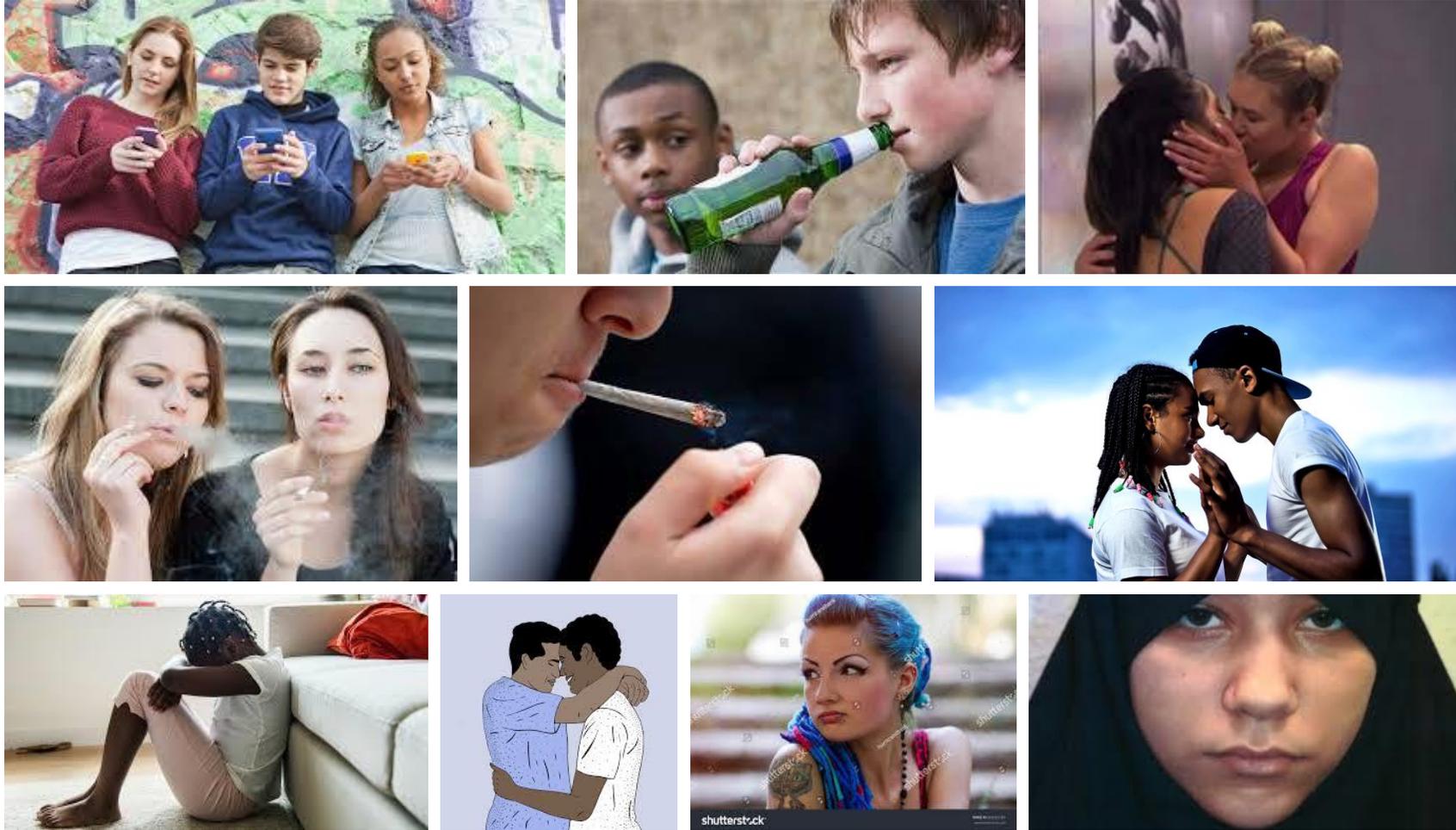
# A Word about help seeking behaviour

# Help seeking behaviours

- **Preserve children and young people's HELP SEEKING BEHAVIOUR**
- **ACTION**
- **CONSEQUENCES**
- **REPAIR**

**Think about Blame – the fix the child conundrum**

**Think about your frame of reference – has the impact become the problem to solve**



Help seeking behaviour





## Q4. Causal Factors

- What is driving the neglect?
- This might also be the time to do a culturagram
- or genogram – what is influence of past on present
- Understanding cause key to intervention

<b>Intervention</b>	<b>Past Experience</b>	<b>Present Context</b>	<b>Intervention</b>
←	<b>negative parenting/abuse in childhood</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Domestic abuse and violence</li> <li>• Parental Learning Disability</li> <li>• Parental mental ill health</li> <li>• Parental problematic substance misuse</li> </ul>	→
<b>Intervention</b>	<b>The Meaning of the child</b>	<b>Social Exclusion and low social capital</b>	<b>Interventions</b>
←	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Scapegoating</li> <li>• Hatred/Blame</li> <li>• Childs reminds parent of rape</li> <li>• Disability not accepted</li> <li>• Ethnicity not accepted</li> <li>• Falling out of love for the child</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Extreme poverty and no support mechanisms</li> <li>• No social capital – lack friendships/family</li> <li>• non acceptance by others unable to attend groups</li> </ul>	→

**Exacerbating factors: POVERTY LARGE FAMILIES ILL HEALTH / PRIMARY AND SECONDARY CAUSES**



# The Big Issues

**All require careful thought- specialist tools and knowledge  
If this is your area of expertise GREAT**

**If not – FIND OUT!**

- **Domestic abuse and violence – the within and between**
- **Parental Learning Disability**
- **Parental mental ill health**
- **Parental problematic substance misuse**

- Section 1 of the Domestic Abuse Act 2021 defines domestic abuse for the purposes of the Act as: – “(2) Behaviour of a person (“A”) towards another person (“B”) is “domestic abuse”
- if (a) A and B are each aged 16 or over and are personally connected to each other, and (b) the behaviour is abusive.
- (3) Behaviour is “abusive” if it consists of any of the following:
  - (a) physical or sexual abuse;
  - (b) violent or threatening behaviour;
  - (c) controlling or coercive behaviour
  - (d) economic abuse (see subsection (4));
  - (e) psychological, emotional or other abuse; – and it does not matter whether the behaviour consists of a single incident or a course of conduct.”
- Further, the Domestic Abuse Act 2021 sets out that children are victims of domestic abuse that is perpetrated against their parent or carer.

# So.....

- Lets change the within and between
- Four phrases
- ‘Domestic Abuse within the family’
- Domestic Abuse between the couple’
- It is a Domestic Abuse relationship’
- ‘She failed to protect – lets change to perpetrator focused language
- ‘what does he do that puts the children at risk of harm’
- What does he do to prevent safety’

# 5. Omission versus Commission

Important to  
recognise both

Omission is passive

Commission – holding  
the child responsible  
for the Quality of  
Care they receive

Psychological trick

Falling out of love

Caring in a way that  
scapegoats

**Q6. What is  
neglect  
driving or  
enabling**

**Sexual abuse and sexual  
exploitation**

**Physical abuse**

**Emotional Abuse**

# What is happening Locally?

- [Neglect - Plymouth Safeguarding Children Partnership](#)
- Task and Finish Group

If you had to tell a parent/family what you learnt about child neglect from this session - what would you tell them?  
If you had to tell a child?

# Reflections & thoughts



I hope this has validated all the good practice that already exists – for you and the service you work for



Is there anything that you are going to think about a bit more? How will you do that?



Is there anything you would like in order to reflect a bit more in a certain area – training/books/articles?