



**The adolescent  
neglect conundrum**  
How can we respond  
better?

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- Working with the most vulnerable children and young people since 1881.

Online archive:

<http://www.hiddenlives.org.uk>

- Services across England for young people and families alongside policy, campaigns and research to understand and advocate for improvements to disadvantaged young people's lives.

[www.thechildrenssociety.org.uk](http://www.thechildrenssociety.org.uk)



# The adolescent neglect conundrum

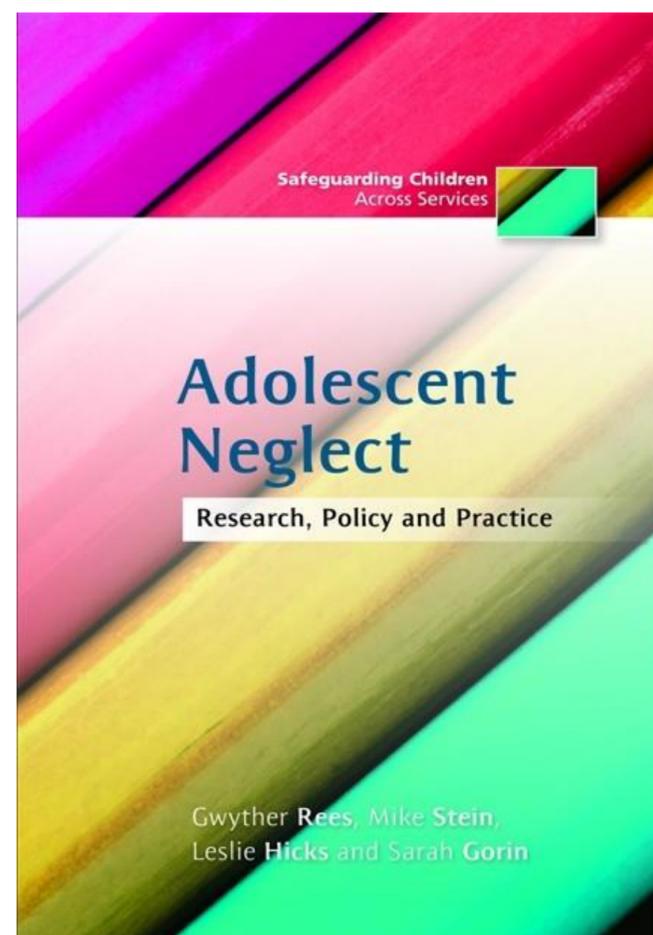
## How can we respond better?

### Webinar contents:

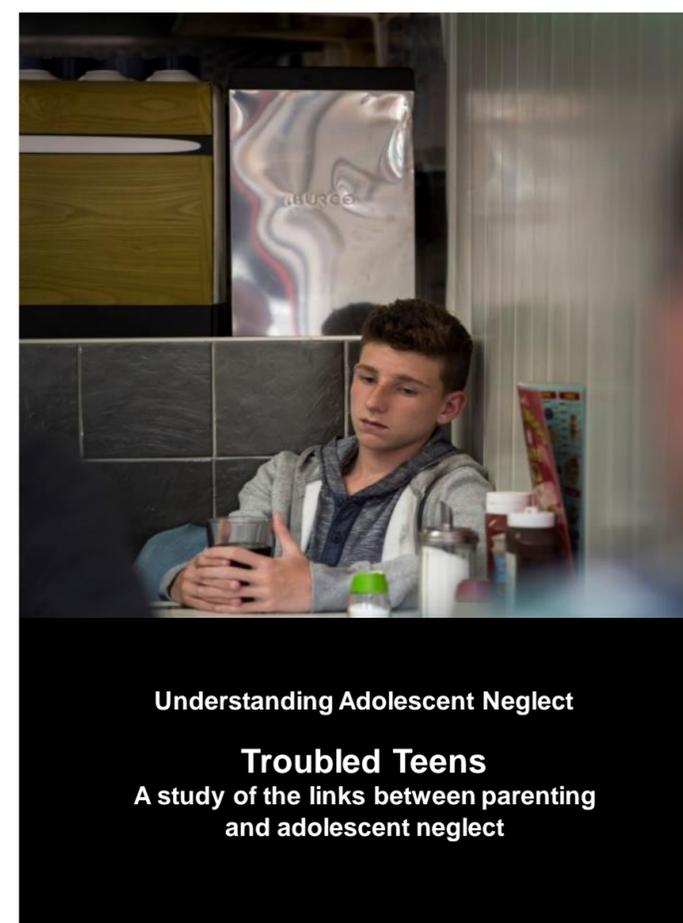
- What is 'adolescent neglect'?
- What we know from research on adolescent neglect.
- How we can respond better to adolescent neglect.

# Collaborative work between The Children's Society and The University of York on adolescent neglect

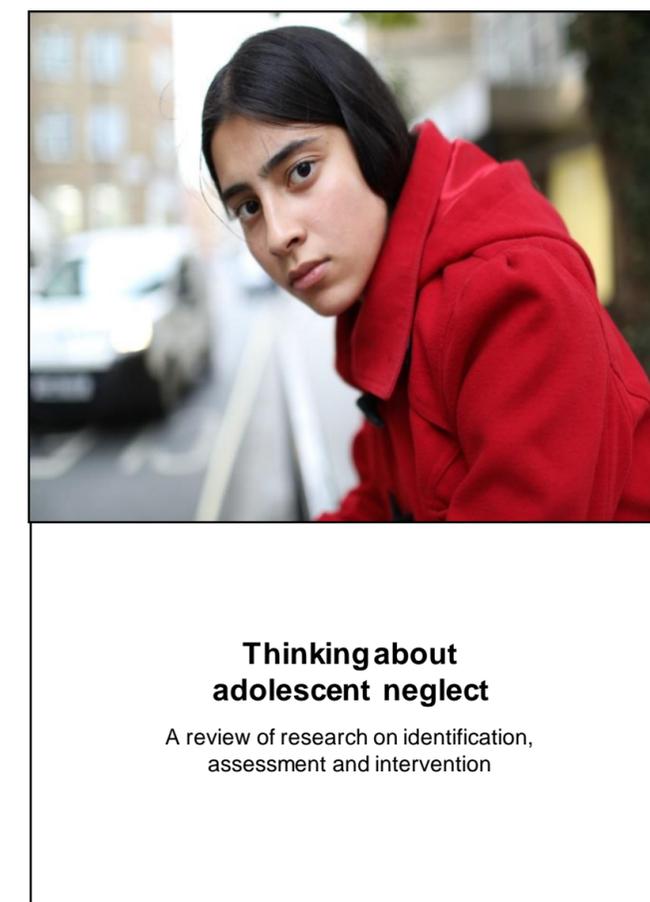
## Publications



Jessica Kingsley Publishers, 2011



The Children's Society, 2016



The Children's Society, 2018

# The adolescent neglect conundrum

## How can we respond better?

“Neglect is arguably the most complex form of maltreatment to understand.”

(Yang and Maguire-Jack, 2016)

Do we really understand  
what adolescent neglect is?

Complexity      Limited knowledge      Partial solutions

But there is learning from work on other topics that can help



## What is adolescence?

- A period of profound change – physiological, psychological, emotional and social.
- Drive for choice and autonomy.
- Peers become more important.
- Goal of discovery of 'self.'
- Increasing evidence of challenges to mental health / well-being.

**Who am I?**



**Why do I feel so anxious?**

**What if I fail my exams?**

**Why are adults so boring?**

**Who do I want to become?**

**Why do I feel so angry today?**

## Stereotype – ‘storm and stress’



Adolescents are **‘imperfect victims’**

(Rees and Stein, 1999)

## When is adolescence?



- Protracted transition – begins in nature (puberty) ... ends in culture ('adulthood').

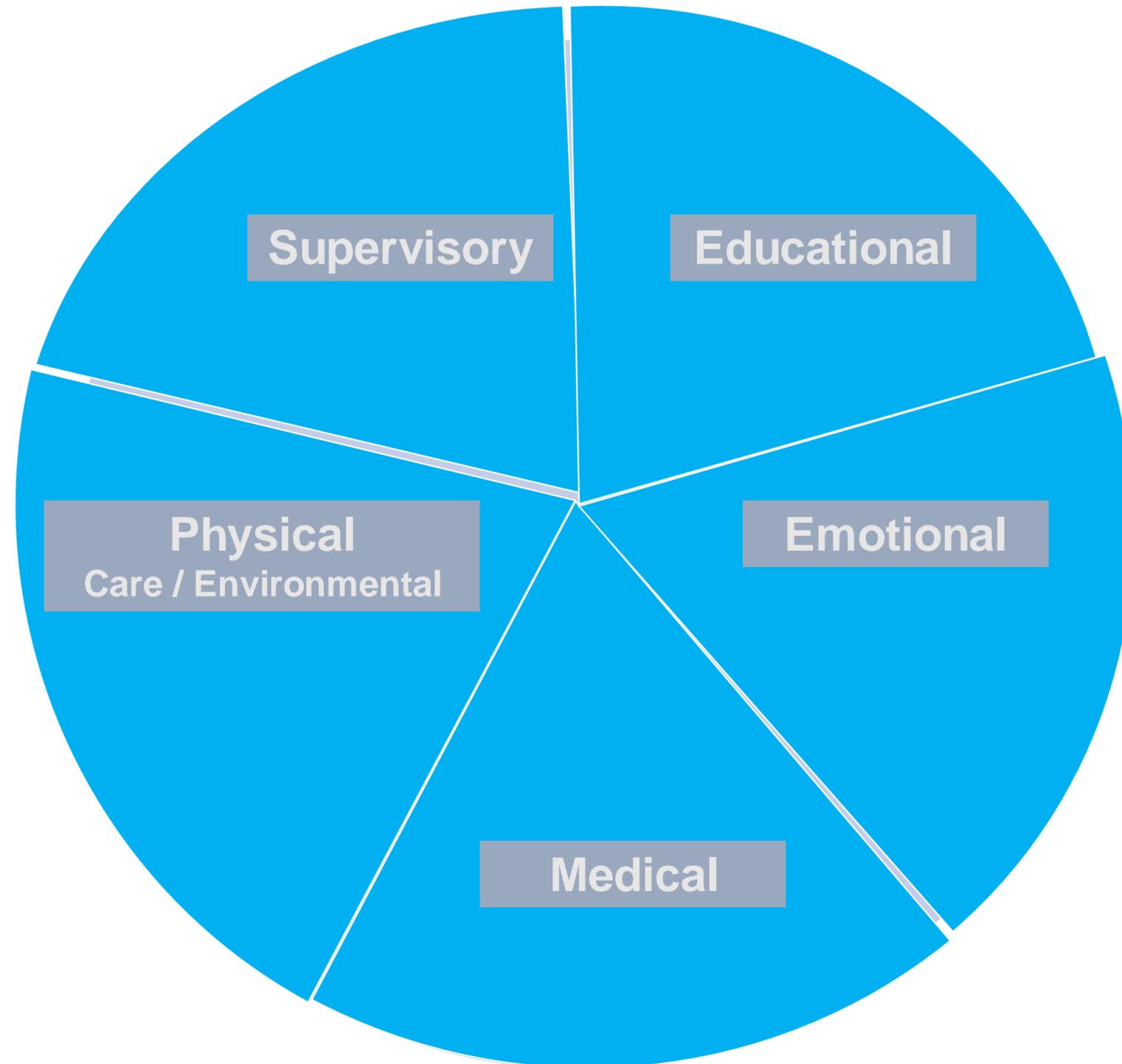
## What is 'neglect'? (Official definition)

“Neglect is 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. It may involve a parent or carer failing to provide adequate food, shelter and clothing, to protect a child from physical harm or danger, or to ensure access to appropriate medical care or treatment. It may also include neglect of, or failure to respond to, a child's basic emotional needs. Neglect may also result in the child being diagnosed as suffering from 'non-organic failure to thrive', where they have significantly failed to reach normal weight and growth or development milestones and where physical and genetic reasons have been medically eliminated. In its extreme form children can be at serious risk from the effects of malnutrition, lack of nurturing and stimulation. This can lead to serious long-term effects such as greater susceptibility to serious childhood illnesses and reduction in potential stature. With young children in particular, the consequences may be life-threatening within a relatively short period of time.”

(Scottish Government, 2010)

- Onus on physical aspects
- Framed around young children's developmental needs
- Suggests 'persistence' is key
- Locates neglect as parents' or carers' responsibility alone

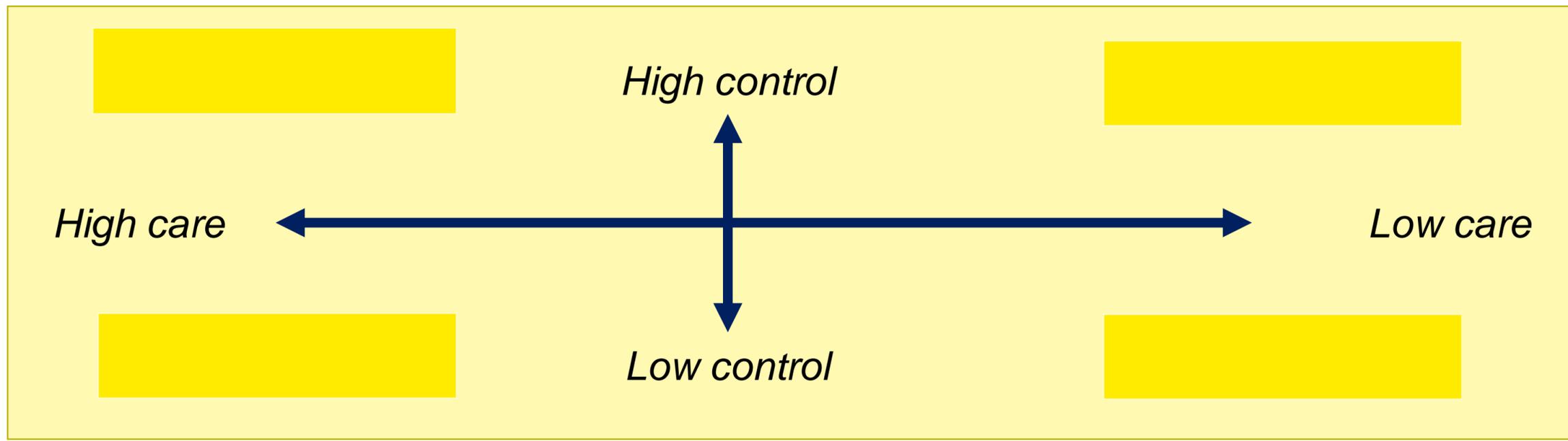
# What is 'neglect'? (Research typologies)



Horwath, 2007; Mennen, 2010.

# What research on parenting says about neglect

- Two dimensions of parenting – ‘demandingness’ (‘control’) and ‘responsiveness’ (‘care’).
- Four ‘parenting styles’ – based on how parents operate with regard to care and control – authoritarian, authoritative, indulgent, uninvolved (neglectful).



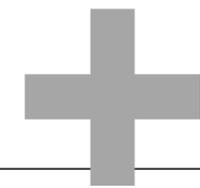
## What young people say about 'adolescent neglect'

- Young people define neglect more broadly than CP definition (e.g. teaching independence skills, favouring siblings, being made to do "constant babysitting", letting a young person become obese).
- Neglect viewed as part of a wider spectrum of harm not clearly separated from abuse; no consensus on the 'right' age for parents to reduce care and support.

**Neglect is ...**



Neglect is the most complex form of maltreatment to understand.



Adolescence compounds this complexity.

**CHALLENGES**

**POLICY**  
Prevention?  
Protection?  
Treatment?

**RESEARCH**  
Conceptualising  
Measuring  
Studying

**PRACTICE**  
Identification  
Assessment  
Intervention

**Evidence, understanding and responses are poor.**

# **Adolescent neglect**

## **What we 'know'**



# The 'neglect of neglect'

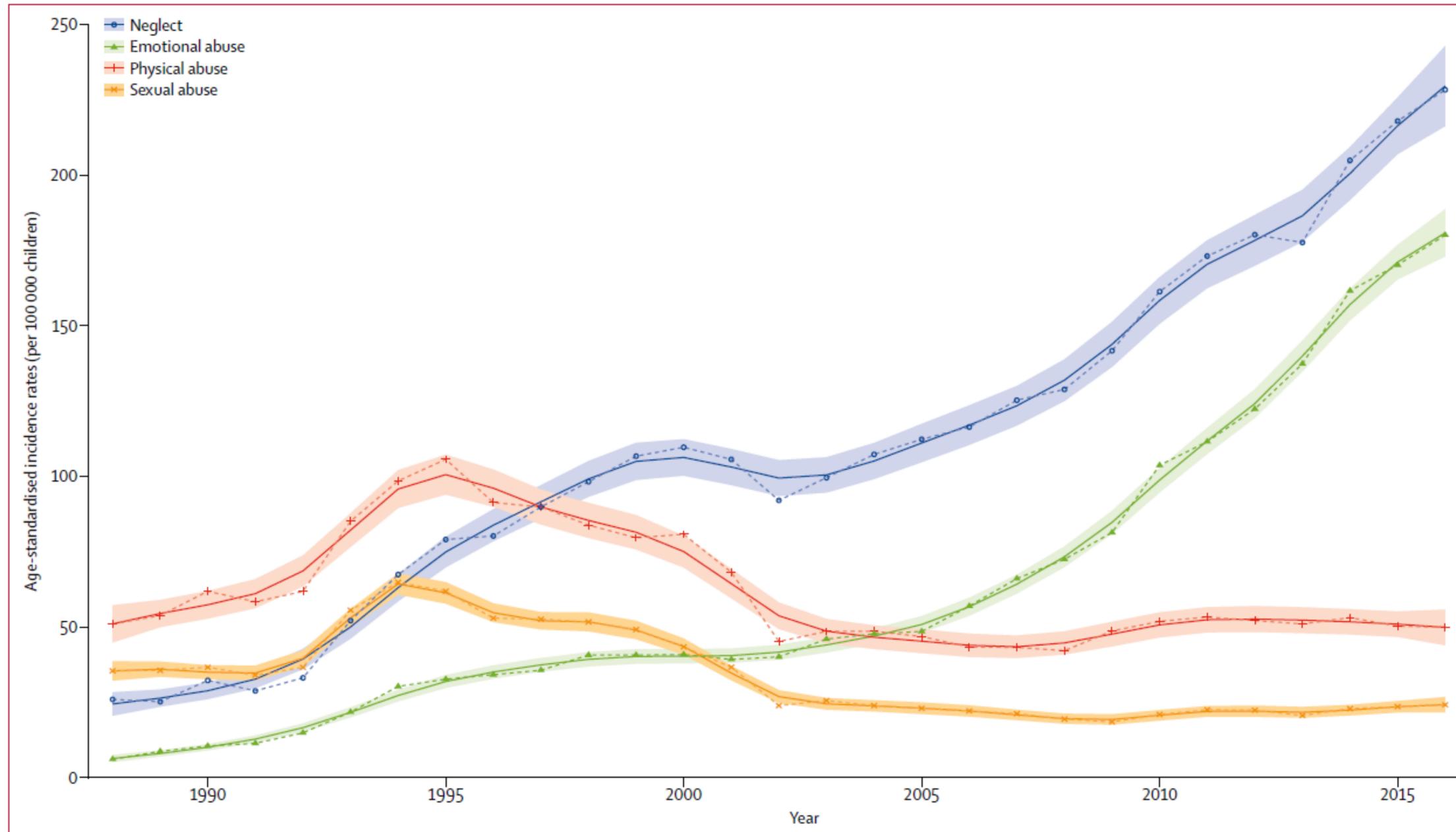
“Although data reveal that child neglect is more prevalent and its consequences as serious as child abuse, it has received far less attention than has abuse.”

(Wolock and Horowitz, 1984)

“Progress has been made in establishing basic child protections and other safeguards for neglect in most countries, but significant barriers and inadequacies remain ... Much work remains to better assess and address this serious problem, in every country.”

(Kobulsky, Dubowitz and Xu, 2020)

# The scale of ~~adolescent~~ neglect: CP data



Annual incidence of child protection registration by type of maltreatment  
England – 1988-2016 (Esposti et al, 2019).

**According to one US study of child protection records:**

**41% of cases had been registered for 'neglect' – but 71% were 'neglected' according to notes in case records.**

**AND**

**Only 5% of those registered for 'neglect' had no other maltreatment experiences**

**AND**

**Neglected children suffered more different types of maltreatment than those who were not victims of neglect.**

*“Official classifications should not be used in determining interventions for children and families. Interventions for neglected youngsters should be individualised to address the complexity of children’s experiences.”*

**(Mennen et al, 2010)**

## According to research with representative samples – what proportion of young people experience neglect?

|                   |                                     |  |
|-------------------|-------------------------------------|--|
| <b>i) 11.6%</b>   | <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> | Neglected at some point during their lifetime (US)   |
| <b>ii) 13.3%</b>  | <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> | Neglected at some point during their lifetime (UK)   |
| <b>iii) 18.4%</b> | <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> | Emotionally neglected at some point during their lifetime (combined international studies) |
| <b>iv) 23.7%</b>  | <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> | Physically neglected at some point during their lifetime (Germany)                         |

# The contexts for adolescent neglect

Neglect is more often observed:

- In materially deprived areas / poor families.
- In 'non-traditional' / restructured families.
- Where parents have 'problems' ('toxic trio').
- Among disabled children.

## **BUT these findings ...**

- May reflect methodologies more than 'reality' – e.g. research has tended to use a '*limited resources*' model (although there is emerging evidence of a high prevalence of 'emotional neglect' among affluent families – Bernard, 2019).
- Can replicate and reinforce a discourse that blames parents / carers – in particular mothers – while ignoring the wider societal causes / contributors to neglect.

# The impacts of adolescent neglect

**When compared with other forms of maltreatment (emotional, physical or sexual abuse) neglect during adolescence is more likely to ...**

**... predict teen birth**

Study of young women in CPS in the US (Noll & Shenk, 2013).

**... lead to new substance abuse disorder**

11-16 year olds in the US child welfare system (Lalayants & Prince, 2016).

**... link to aggressive behaviours / involvement in crime**

12-15 year olds involved in the child welfare system in Canada (Van Wert et al, 2017).

# The impacts of adolescent neglect: Serious Case Reviews

SCR triennial reviews have shown that:

- Alongside infancy, adolescence is the period of greatest vulnerability during childhood.
- Neglect is almost ubiquitous in the lives of young people who experience serious harm.

“Complexity and cumulative harm are not unique to situations of neglect, but, almost invariably, they are a feature of families where children experience neglect ... The complexity of these families’ situations and the large volumes of information held can get in the way of identifying the risks faced by children. Practitioners need to be aware of this and to constantly come back to seeking to understand the lived experience of the child. Adolescents living in situations of neglect may be particularly vulnerable to having their needs, and the risks they face, overlooked.”

(Brandon et al. 2020; p66)

# Research evidence on adolescent neglect - summary



**SCALE** – Neglect is the most prevalent form of child maltreatment ... however you measure it. There is some evidence that it is increasing.



Different approaches to measurement give different results and should be read / interpreted with caution.



**CONTEXTS** – Neglect has been associated with particular contexts (e.g. in poor families).



Methodologies may show bias / prejudice AND there is a danger of reinforcing a narrative that blames parents (mothers).



**IMPACTS** – Neglect in adolescence has been associated with mental ill health, low well-being, risk-taking, relationship difficulties and educational problems. Also ubiquitous in situations of serious harm.



Few impact / outcomes studies. Although strong, the evidence is piecemeal.

# Understanding Adolescent Neglect Research Programme

- **Began in 2013.**
- **Partnership with the University of York**
- **Grounded in collaborative study over 25 years of the issues affecting disadvantaged young people.**



# Troubled Teens (2016) - Measuring neglect by association



Understanding Adolescent Neglect

**Troubled Teens**

A study of the links between parenting and adolescent neglect

- ❑ National schools online survey.  
Representative sample of 1,000 young people in Year 10 (aged 14-15).
- ❑ DID NOT ASK ABOUT NEGLECT!
- ❑ Asked about experiences of care and support at home – and about subjective well-being (e.g. life satisfaction, optimism), externalising behaviours (e.g. missing school, drinking alcohol), negative emotional symptoms / internalising behaviours (e.g. trouble sleeping).
- ❑ Hypothesis - less parental care and support = lower well-being, more risk-taking, etc.

# Parenting behaviours measure: items / categories

(adapted from MNBS-A: Dubowitz et al, 2011).

| In the last year how often did your parents, or the adults you live with ...  |                            |                  |                    |              |
|---|----------------------------|------------------|--------------------|--------------|
| ... show an interest in what you were doing at school?<br>... attend parents' evenings at school?<br>... keep track of how you were doing at school – by doing things like reading reports? | <b>EDUCATIONAL SUPPORT</b> |                  |                    |              |
| ... help you if you had problems?<br>... support you if you were upset?<br>... tell you when they thought you had done something well?  | <b>EMOTIONAL SUPPORT</b>   |                  |                    |              |
| ... make sure you saw a doctor if you needed one?<br>... take care of you if you felt ill?<br>... support you to look after your teeth and go to the dentist?                               | <b>PHYSICAL CARE</b>       |                  |                    |              |
| ... ask you where you were going when you went out?<br>... like to know where you were after school?<br>... expect you to call or text to let them know if you were going to be home late?  | <b>SUPERVISION</b>         |                  |                    |              |
| <b>Always</b>   | <b>Often</b>               | <b>Sometimes</b> | <b>Hardly ever</b> | <b>Never</b> |

# Parenting behaviours measure: scoring

## EMOTIONAL SUPPORT

*In the last year how often did your parents, or the adults you live with ...*

|   | Always   | Often   | Some-<br>times | Hardly<br>ever | Never |
|---|--|---|----------------|----------------|-------|
| ... help you if you had problems?                           |  | 3   | 2              | 1              | 0     |
| ... support you if you were upset?                          | 4  |  | 2              | 1              | 0     |
| ... tell you when they thought you had done something well? | 4  |  | 2              | 1              | 0     |

**SCORE for emotional support**



 3

+

 3

+

 4

=

 10

**RANGE for all categories is 0 - 12**

# Generating 'thresholds' for neglect

## Scores for experiences of parenting ...

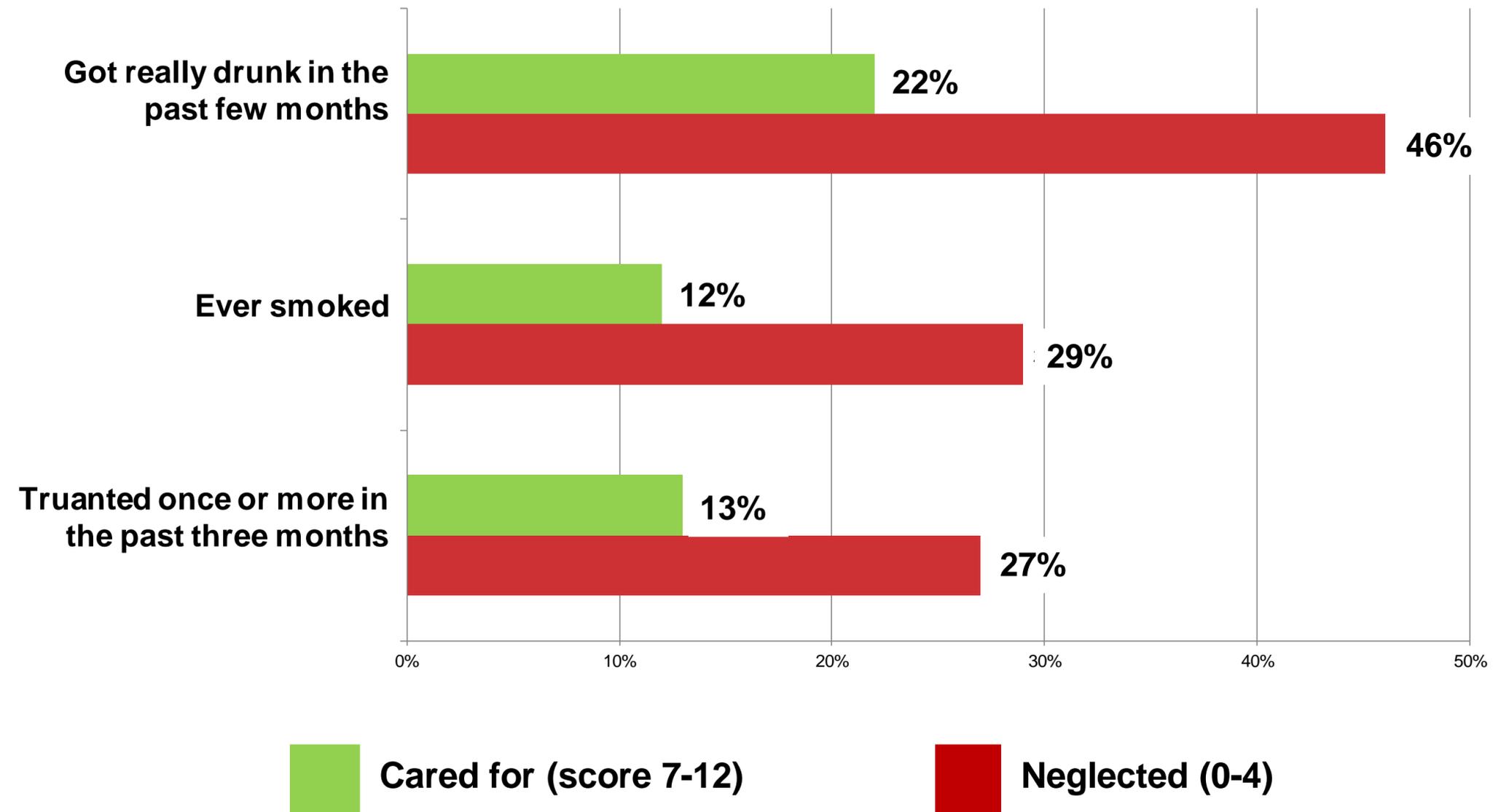
- Emotional support
- Educational support
- Physical care
- Supervision

*Linked to ...*

- **Externalising / risk-taking behaviours**
  - 'Do you ever smoke cigarettes?'
- **Subjective well-being**
  - Huebner life satisfaction (five item scale e.g. 'My life is just right')
  - Positive about the future (optimism)
- **Symptoms of emotional ill health**
  - e.g. Trouble sleeping / feeling depressed.

# Negative associations: *Externalising / risk-taking*

EMOTIONAL SUPPORT: Differences in behaviour of cared for and neglected young people

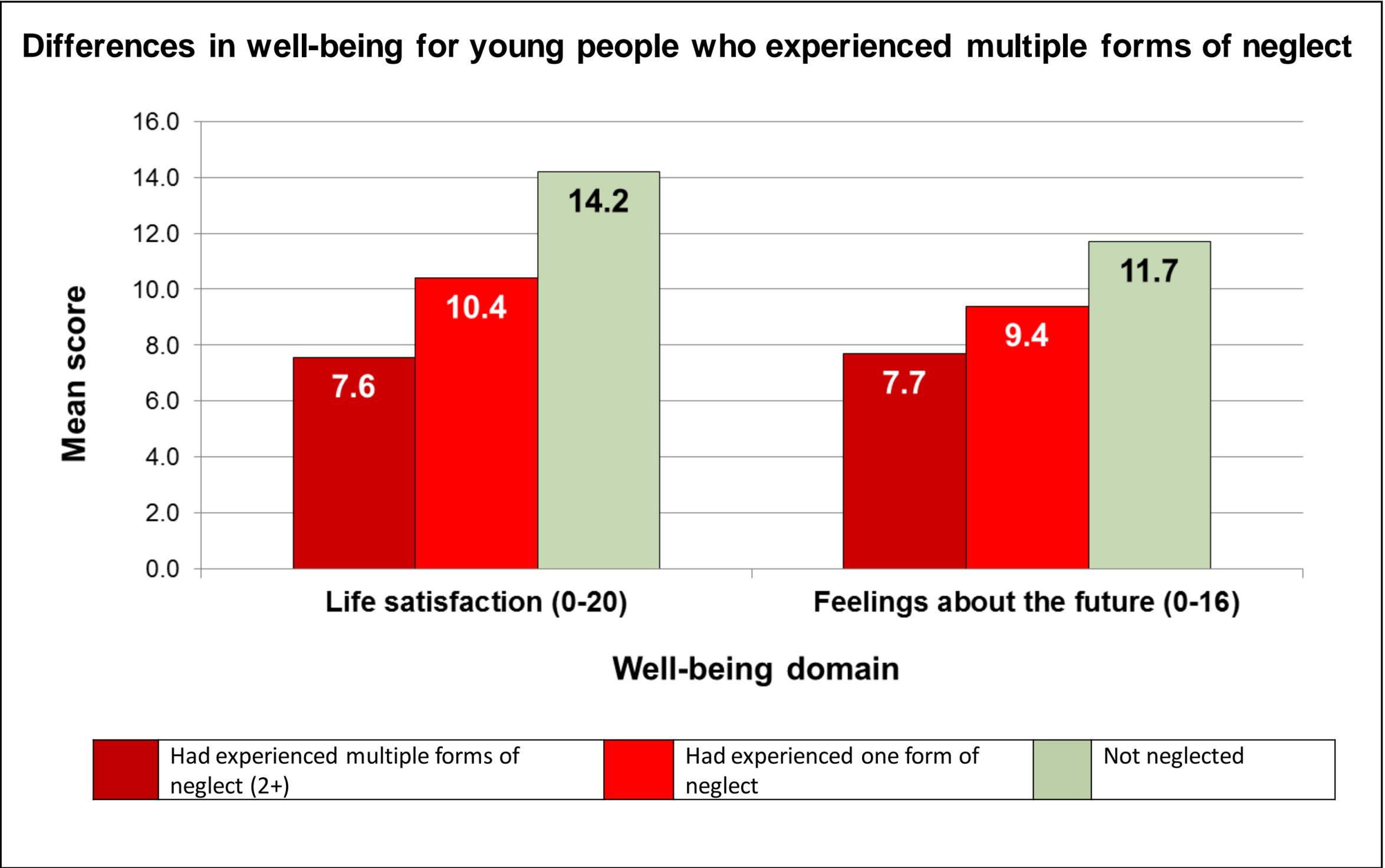


# Thresholds and proportions

- ✓ More care = positive associations / less care = negative associations (...*mostly*)
- 👍 Consistent patterns in the data for when infrequent parenting became neglectful

| Parenting type   | Cared for | At risk | Neglected | % of 14-15 year olds neglected |
|--|-----------|---------|-----------|--------------------------------|
| EMOTIONAL SUPPORT  | 7 – 12    | 5 – 6   | 0 – 4     | 8%                             |
| EDUCATIONAL SUPPORT  | 7 – 12    | 5 – 6   | 0 – 4     | 5%                             |
| PHYSICAL CARE  | 8 – 12    | 6 – 7   | 0 – 5     | 4%                             |
| SUPERVISION  | 7 – 12    |         | 0 – 6     | 8%                             |
| <b>Overall proportion experiencing one or more form of neglect</b> |           |         |           | <b>15%</b>                     |

# Negative associations: *low well-being*



## Emotional support / neglect

How often in the past year did your parents ...

- ... help you if you had problems?
- ... support you if you were upset?
- ... tell you when they thought you had done something well?

- Low overall input (less than 1/3 had highest scores – compared to almost half for physical care, or 45% for supervision)
- Strongest associations with indicators – e.g. regression analysis found that emotional support by parents explained much of the variation in scores for life satisfaction (31%); symptoms of emotional health (19%) and optimism (18%) for 14-15 year olds.
- Replicated in more recent surveys by TCS on young people's well-being (e.g. 'Good Childhood Report, 2017').
- Links to affluence – sometimes not considered in research / practice around neglect (Luthar and Latendresse, 2005; Bernard, 2017).

# **Responding to adolescent neglect**

## **What the evidence suggests**

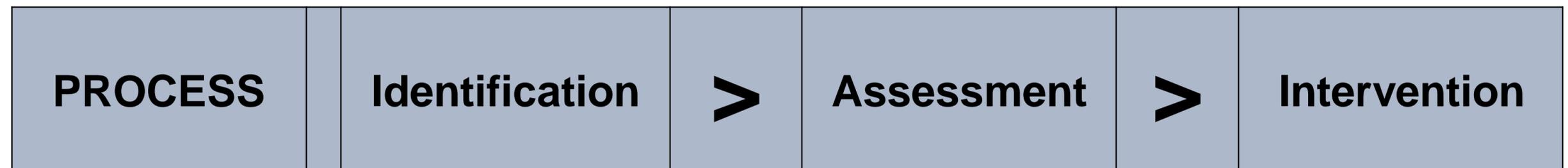




# Responding to adolescent neglect

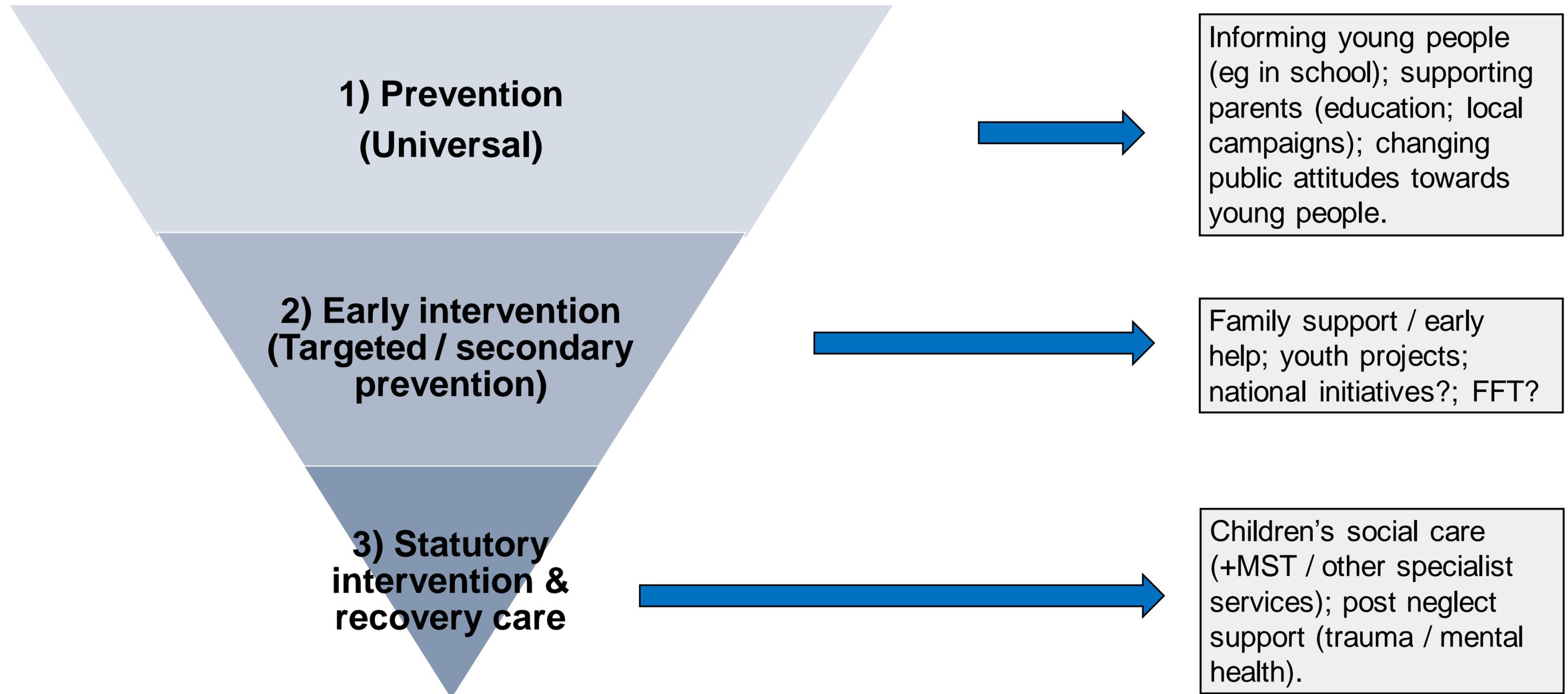
|                |                           |  |
|----------------|---------------------------|--|
| <b>SYSTEMS</b> | Prevention                | There should be an emphasis on preventing neglect from happening in the first place – and / or preventing recurrence – and / or ameliorating longer term impact. |
|                |                           |  |
|                | Everyone's responsibility | Preventing neglect speaks to role of the community - addressing neglect requires significant multi-agency collaboration.   |

|  |             |   |
|--|-------------|---|
| <b>PRACTICE</b><br>(identification, assessment, intervention)  | Awareness   | Anyone who works with young people should be aware of the possibility of neglect – regardless of the context / background of a young person.  |
|  |             | Professionals need to understand the scale, scope and potential impacts of neglect ... and the nature of adolescent development.  |
|  |             |   |
|  | Agility (?) | Although families are at the centre of this, it's unhelpful to focus too narrowly on them – especially to lose sight of a young person's needs when their parents have significant problems themselves. |
| Young people should be regarded as assets / resources – and professionals need to be adept at communicating / working with them. |             |   |



# Responding to adolescent neglect

There should be an emphasis on preventing neglect from happening in the first place – preventing recurrence – and ameliorating longer term impact.



# Responding to adolescent neglect



feeling  
**INVISIBLE**

**ARE YOU GETTING WHAT YOU NEED?**

If neglect is affecting you, or someone you know, we're here to help.

**childline**

ONLINE, ON THE PHONE, ANYTIME  
childline.org.uk | 0800 1111



**Charlie's Dad had his mates over again drinking last night. He's too tired for school today.**

**Neglect Matters**

If you need help or are worried about a child contact the **NSPCC** helpline **free** on **0800 800 5000**  
[www.nspcc.org.uk/helpline](http://www.nspcc.org.uk/helpline)

Campaign created in partnership by **NSPCC** and **Bedfordshire LSCBs**

# Responding to adolescent neglect

## Everyone's responsibility

Preventing neglect speaks to the role of the community



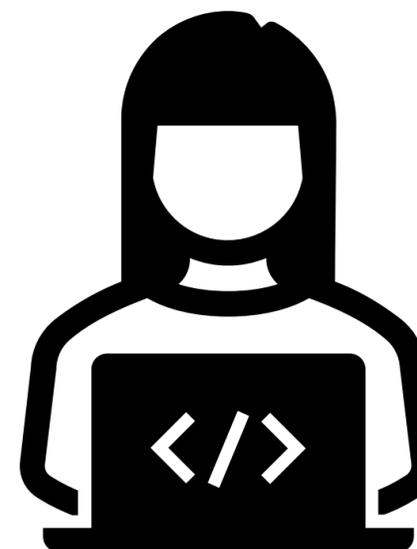
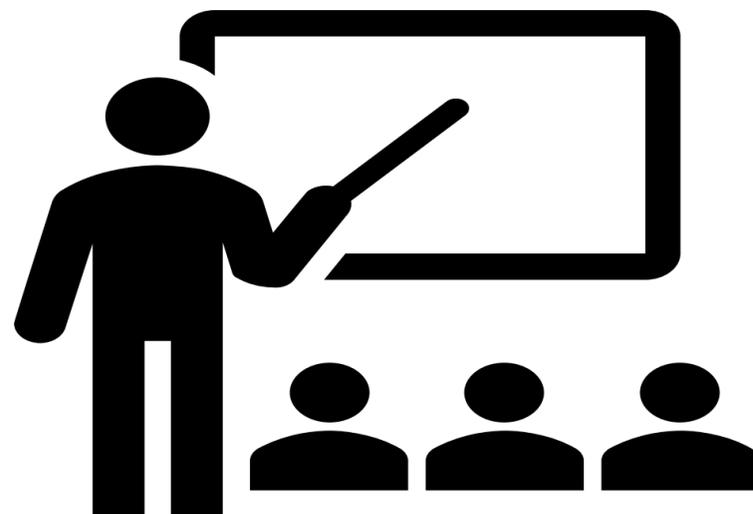
Addressing neglect requires significant multi-agency collaboration.



# Responding to adolescent neglect

|           |  |
|-----------|--|
| Awareness | Anyone who works with young people should be aware of the possibility of neglect – regardless of the context / background of a young person. |
|           | Professionals need to understand the scale, scope and potential impacts of neglect ... and the nature of adolescent development.             |

## Training ...



# Responding to adolescent neglect

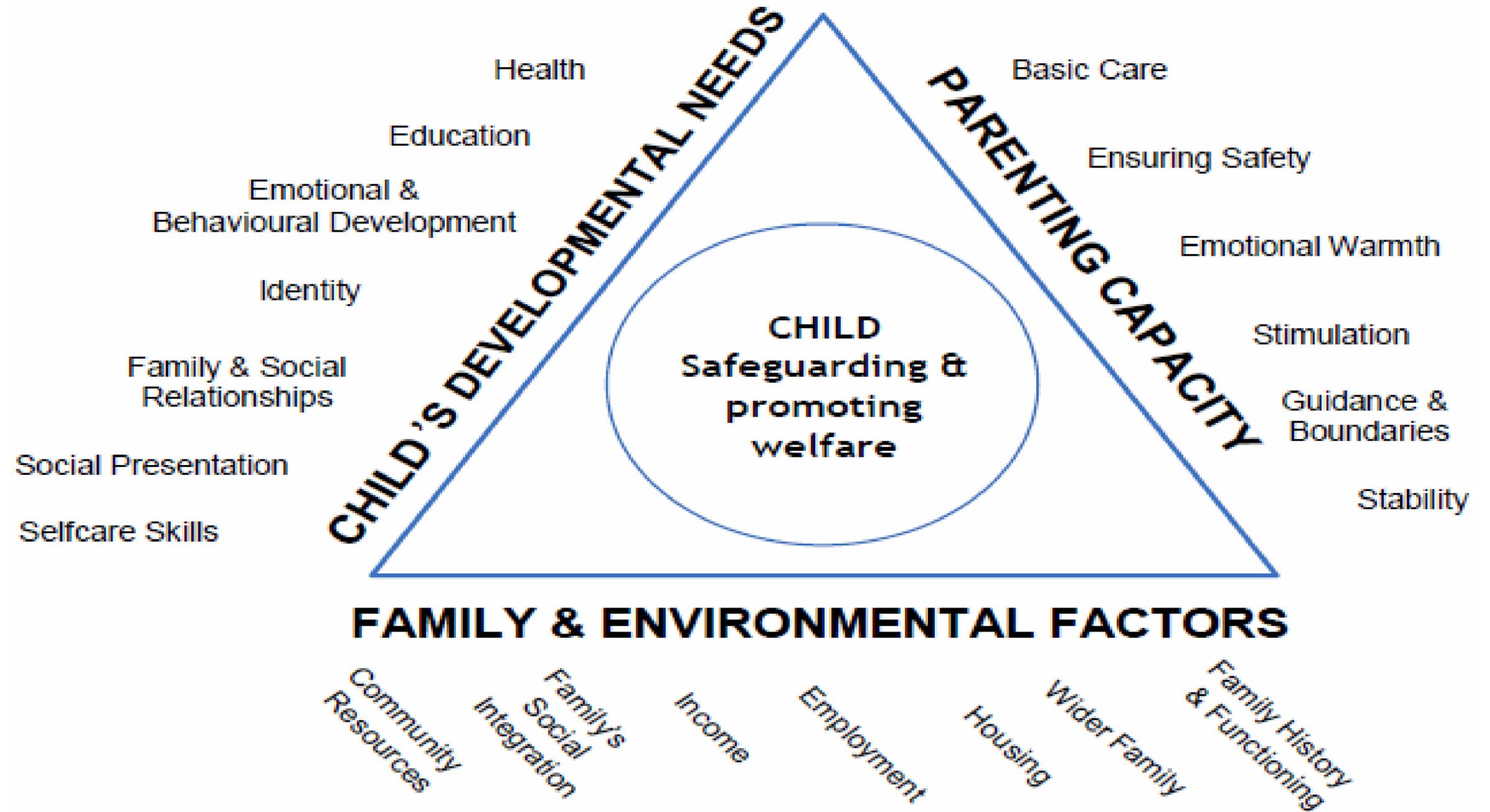
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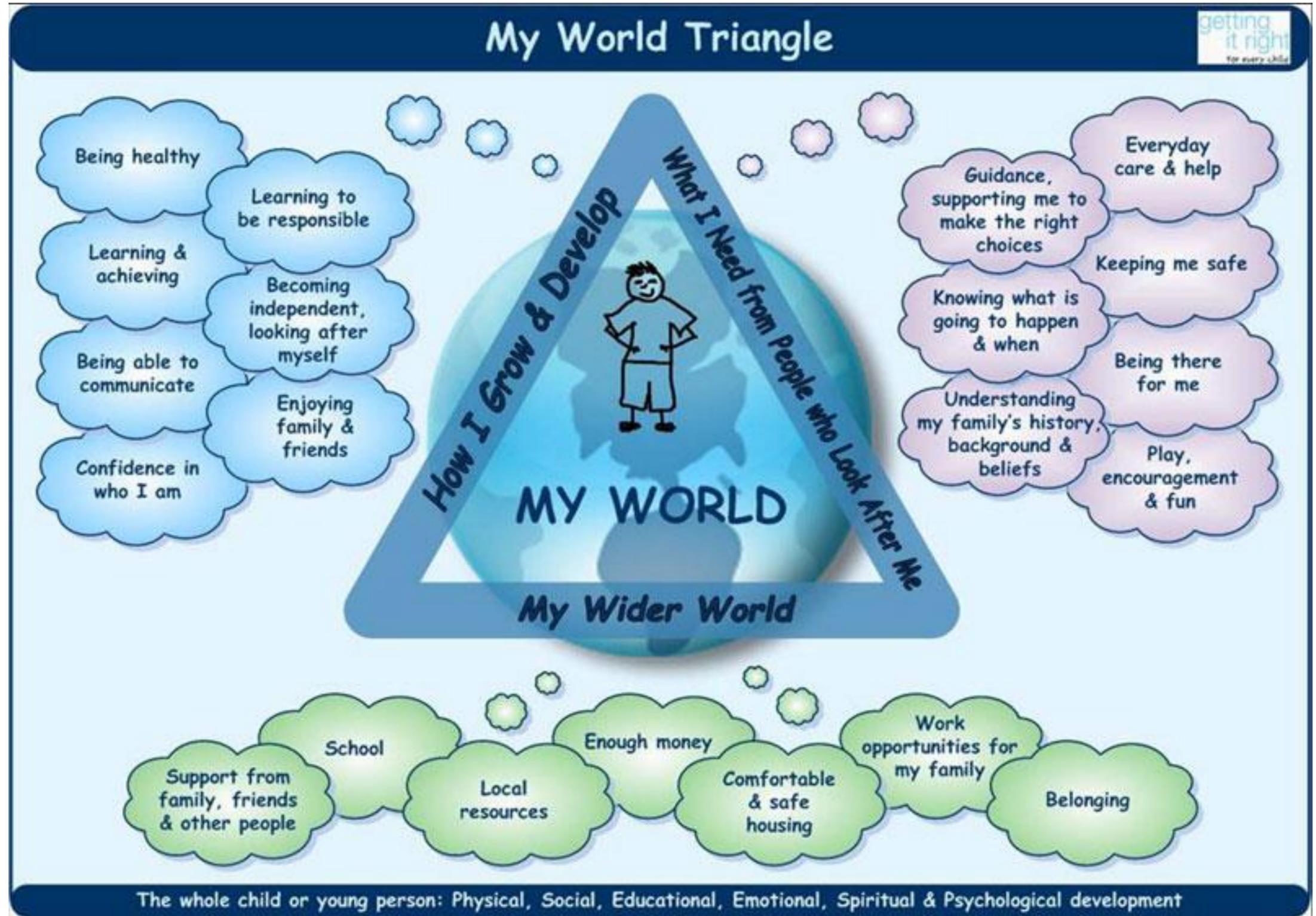
***“Official classifications should not be used in determining interventions for children and families. Interventions for neglected youngsters should be individualised to address the complexity of children’s experiences.”***

(Mennen et al, 2010)



# Assessment Framework





# Responding to adolescent neglect

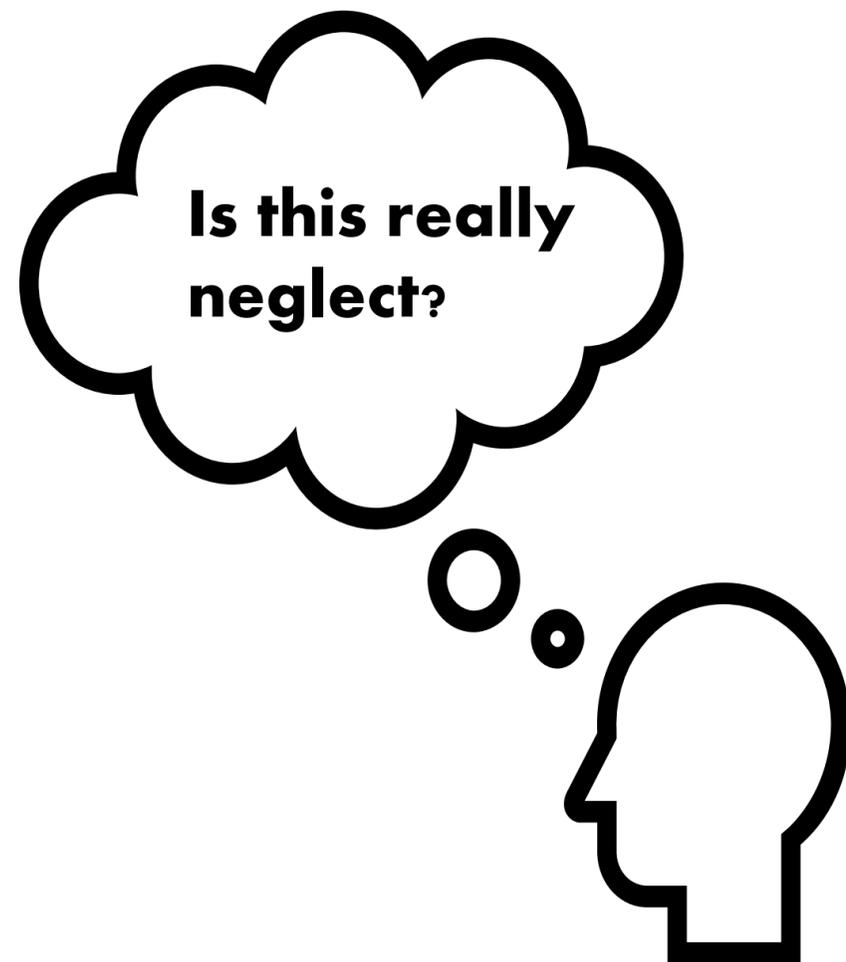
Young people should be worked with. Professionals need to be adept at communicating with them.

**Young people want to be listened to respectfully, have account taken of their views and have a stake in decision-making – work with them as ‘assets and resources.’**

(Hanson & Holmes, 2014)

- **Parallels to the role of ‘ally’?**

# Responding to adolescent neglect



**Professionals may be reticent to identify neglect of adolescents**

- Assumed resilience?
- Absence of crisis?
- Imperfect victim?

**And / or ...**

- Lack of faith in appropriate responses from others?

**Important to develop an attuned organisational culture.**

# 'Thinking about adolescent neglect'



## Thinking about adolescent neglect

A review of research on identification,  
assessment and intervention

- Commissioned by the Luton SCB to support strategy development and training.
- Literature review + interviews with specialist workers.
- **Posed challenges to the SCB Executive Board for improving local responses to adolescent neglect.**
- Available online.



# THANKS FOR LISTENING

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