

# Defining and Understanding the Problem

## Introduction

Since the introduction to the 1998 edition was written, my concern (or burden as I described it then) about the plight of neglected children and their families has increased. Others share this concern; there has been a considerable body of thoughtful research and reflection on the topic. Now, as in 1998, professionals agree that neglect as an aspect of child abuse is not at present satisfactorily handled by British child protection services; many also know that there is quite strong evidence that the longer-term effects of neglect on children may be even more serious than sporadic physical injury as a result of abuse. Yet, somehow, the nettle has not been grasped. Assessment and protection plans have been less effective than for physical abuse. It is widely acknowledged that professionals may feel a sense of relief when there is an 'incident' or a 'happening' in a particular family (whether of sexual or physical abuse), which is seen to legitimate action for children about whom neglect has long been a primary concern. In what follows, I shall discuss the reasons for the difficulties, both professional and academic, in addressing the issue and make some suggestions of ways forward.

This introductory chapter identifies problems. Much of the rest of the book explores these problems in greater depth. For this reason, I have largely avoided the rather irritating authors' habit of referring the reader to later chapters.

The evidence that there are grounds for serious anxiety about the position of seriously neglected children is to be found in statistics, in Serious Case Reviews and in the reported experience of practitioners. The records of the three years, 2001–2004, show that the proportion of children registered for the category of neglect was far higher than the other categories. They have been constant at 41% for neglect, 19% for physical abuse, 18% for emotional abuse and 9% for sexual abuse (mixed categories, in which neglect features, make up the rest). Decisions to place children on the Child Protection Register are taken with reluctance and, therefore, for example, it can be assumed that, in 2004, more than 11000 children in England and Wales were seriously neglected (DfES, 2005a).

The most extreme consequences of neglect are to be found in Serious Case Reviews. Most of those who participated in area child protection committees (not then local safeguarding children's boards) are familiar with such tragic cases where children have died or there have been 'near misses'. In 1995 we were shocked by the story of the death of 'Paul' in Islington; the inquiry report revealed both the inadequacies of family care and of the services designed to support it (The Bridge Consultancy, 1995). Yet, in 2005, a report on a family in Sheffield in which two children missed death by a matter of hours or days, revealed similar inadequacies (Cantrill, 2005). What has been learnt (or not learnt) in these ten years?

The practitioners' view is usually bleak, even when dealing with cases which do not arouse fears of death or near death. We shall examine later the feelings which such families arouse in those who work closely with them; confusion and despair loom large. Those reading this book who work, in whatever capacity, with such families and their children, will have no trouble in conjuring up in their minds the children of whom I am writing. Perhaps these mental pictures will help to keep us focused as complex issues are addressed. I remember speaking to a middle-aged woman who told me how vividly she recalled, at the age of five, the little classmate who always arrived at school smelly and with dirty knickers. 'The first thing the class teacher did was to give her a wash and clean knickers.' To me, the striking thing was that the memory was so fresh, showing the impact that one child, somehow 'different', made on other children. Neglect is not, of course, only about physical and external well-being. But the example reminds us that in the families we shall be considering there is usually a sense of social distance from others and an awareness of difference, which in turn provokes reactions in the family members and the community within which they are located: in truth, a vicious circle.

Furthermore, evidence accumulates of the long-standing, even permanent, damage which serious neglect inflicts on children: Tanner and

Turney (2006, p. 1) in reviewing the evidence, point out that ‘research highlights the deleterious effects of neglect, in its own right, in children’s development and challenges a common perception that it is ancillary to “more serious” forms of abuse, such as physical or sexual abuse.’

## Definitions: arguments and limitations

This book is focused on serious and sustained neglect of children which affects various aspects of their development. It is not about ordinary parents who, from time to time, omit to care adequately in some respects, not even about those who show emerging signs of neglectful parenthood. The cases we consider are found at the end of a continuum. Indicators of trouble ahead are often observable at early stages in the life of a family. This raises important questions about early detection and remedial ‘preventative’ work.

The government in power since 1997 has placed considerable emphasis on family support, with a variety of initiatives of which Sure Start has been particularly prominent. These schemes, designed to assist parents and young children in a range of ways, have been developed and evaluated over several years. Although the focus of this book is on families who are already in serious difficulties, there is obviously an issue as to whether earlier intervention could have effected change.

The affirmation of the importance of family support and of provision to children in need offers a positive approach to intervening constructively with families in difficulties and is particularly relevant to cases of potential or developing neglect. Indeed, in policy terms, there is a case for concentrating effort in that sphere, since, as we shall see, the evidence for success in intervention when there is serious neglect is shaky. Nonetheless, the moral and economic arguments for improving the quality of help offered to seriously neglectful families are unsailable. Although the emphasis of the present policy has great merit, there is a danger that less concentration on the complex and intractable aspects of child protection work may lead to yet further ‘neglect of serious neglect’. Such cases are small in number but in terms of human misery, professional time and energy, long-term damage and long-term costs, their significance is disproportionate.

The definition of neglect used in this book largely corresponds to that of the latest guidance in *Working Together* (DfES, 2006). Definitions of neglect are controversial. This is illustrated well by Zuravin (Dubowitz, 1999). However, I have taken the view that, for the purposes of this book, which is focused on serious neglect, there can be a workable consensus, such as that offered in this recent DfES guidance.

'1.33 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. Neglect may occur during pregnancy as a result of maternal substance abuse. Once a child is born, neglect may involve a parent or carer failing to provide adequate food or clothing, shelter including exclusion from home or abandonment, failing to protect a child from physical or emotional harm or danger, failure to ensure adequate supervision including the use of inadequate caretakers, or the failure to ensure access to appropriate medical care or treatment. It may also include neglect of, or unresponsiveness to, a child's basic emotional needs.' (DfES, 2006) (my italics)

This definition is more detailed and sophisticated than in earlier guidance (see, for example, DoH, 1989). The reference to neglect in pregnancy is particularly valuable. It makes clear the various forms which neglect of children can take. Broadly, it covers the areas critical to healthy development: physical, psychological and social. However, within the term 'psychological' there are two components, cognitive and emotional, and it is disappointing that these are not referred to specifically in this definition, although these matters are acknowledged in subsequent discussion.

'9.10 Severe neglect of young children has adverse effects on children's ability to form attachments and is associated with major impairment of growth and intellectual development. Persistent neglect can lead to serious impairment of health and development, and long-term difficulties with social functioning, relationships and educational progress. Neglected children may also experience low self-esteem, feelings of being unloved and isolated. Neglect can also result, in extreme cases, in death. The impact of neglect varies depending on how long children have been neglected, the children's age, and the multiplicity of neglectful behaviours children have been experiencing.' (DfES, 2006)

In recent years, there have been major advances in our understanding of the development of the brain in infancy and early childhood. This throws more light on the long-term effects of neglect, in particular, of under stimulation, on children's development. As for 'emotional' neglect, a holistic model of child development, surely now uncontroversial, carries with it the assumption that all 'persistent failure' to meet developmental needs is inherently emotionally harmful.

Research undertaken by Glaser *et al.* confirms the importance of keeping these two aspects of maltreatment, neglect and emotional abuse, linked in the minds of those in child protection work (Glaser *et al.*, 1997). They investigated 94 children from 56 families; 54% of

these children were registered under the sole category of emotional abuse and 48% were registered jointly for emotional abuse and one or more categories of abuse or neglect. The mean age of the children at registration was seven years five months, but nearly all had been known to social services departments for varying lengths of time, some substantial. Most of the forms of ill-treatment to which the children had been subjected are highly significant in relation to consideration of neglect; for example 27% were found to have been emotionally abused through 'emotional unavailability or neglect', 34% through 'denigration or rejection' and 42% through 'developmentally inappropriate interaction with the child'.

The more one probes the definitions and distinctions between emotional abuse and neglect the less satisfactory they become. When neglect is construed as an omission of care, which affects not only physical but social, intellectual and emotional development, the association between the two becomes clear. For example, if an infant is said to have 'dirtied his nappy on purpose' and is left unchanged, this may be due to 'developmentally inappropriate' expectations but it leads to neglect of physical care. If a six-year-old is required to undertake tasks (or roles) for which he/she is too young and adult/child boundaries are blurred, this may lead to neglect of his/her social, intellectual and emotional needs as a six-year-old (for play, cuddles, etc.). We may well have reached a stage when clarification and reshaping of these categories are appropriate. Meanwhile, however, whatever the wider ramifications, there is much work to be done to address more systematically those aspects of maltreatment in which omission of care places well-being and development in jeopardy.

One important issue, discussed at some length, which arises in any discussion of the nature of neglect or emotional abuse, is the significance of cultural factors in the definition of the problem. Whilst in no way minimising the intrinsic interest and importance of cultural factors in approaching families where neglect is the subject of concern, such debates should not divert us from a recognition that there is a very significant cross-cultural consensus about the basic needs for healthy child development. To the extent that cultural factors are 'a problem' in addressing neglect, it may be as much about the approach and anxieties of workers as about the definition of serious neglect itself.

Although current literature and guidance accepts the significance of neglect, which goes beyond the grosser and more obvious manifestations of physical and hygienic deficiencies, it is sadly evident that in cases which 'hit the headlines', these draw the more attention. It may be that some of the workers involved are less sensitive to the other elements or are, perhaps, worried that only these long-standing and familiar indicators will be convincing to seniors or to lawyers.

Here it is argued that it is equally important to examine the parents' ability to protect their children from physical and emotional hazards and from untreated medical conditions. Furthermore, the reference to lack of 'appropriate supervision' means much more than the occasional 'left alone in the house' incident. There is a very real danger, which I have discussed elsewhere (Stevenson, 1996) that, if multiple minor 'accidents' cannot be conclusively established as intentional abuse, they are discounted, whereas they may be indicative of quite inadequate parental supervision or abuse, both of which must be taken seriously. This was graphically illustrated in the inquiry into the death of Stephanie Fox (Lynch & Stevenson, 1990) in which a total of 27 minor injuries, many to the head, were recorded to Stephanie and her siblings in the last two years of her life, and the number increased markedly in the last six months of her life. Argument concerning parental 'intention' may simply deflect us from effective appraisal of the parents' ability to provide a safe enough environment for the child.

Neglect, then, covers a wide range of behaviours. We do not seek a 'neglectful parents' syndrome', within which understanding can be conveniently packaged, although there are certain aspects of neglectful behaviour and children's responses (such as attachment theory) which can be helpfully viewed from particular theoretical perspectives. Crittenden (1999) proposed a model for differentiating different types of neglectful parenting. She argues that a socio-economic explanation is not adequate to explain it and suggests an analysis based on 'distortions of mental processing' (p. 47). Three categories of neglect are considered, 'disorganised', 'emotionally neglecting' and 'depressed'. (See Chapter 5.) Crittenden herself is tentative about the validity of many of the propositions made, acknowledging that there is insufficient evidence to confirm them. However, she argues, convincingly, that 'the dual perspectives of individual pathology and societal failure have not led to effective solutions to the problem of neglect' (p. 67). Whether or not this model is accepted, its strength lies in the attempt to distinguish between kinds of parental difficulty which lead to neglect. It offers workers an opportunity to find alternative ways of understanding and helping the families when they seek to help.

## **'Thresholds'**

The word 'threshold' has been frequently used in the debates about neglect amongst practitioners and managers. It is a kind of professional shorthand, reflecting some of the anxiety and confusion surrounding intervention in such cases. The only relevant definition in the *Oxford English Dictionary* is 'entrance'. Entrance to what, one may ask? The term is now used much more often in relation to neglect than other

categories of maltreatment. It can be described as 'movement to the next phase' of intervention, but it also carries the connotation of a 'gateway, a distinguishable step, not simply movement on a continuum'. Until the publication of the latest *Working Together* (DoH, 2006) there were three key thresholds in the assessment of neglect, in each of which the judgements were made on children's well-being and parental capacity. These were: to categorise a neglected child as in need of services; to place the child on the Child Protection Register; to go to the courts, which might result in the removal of the child. (Following the recommendations of the Victoria Climbié enquiry (2003), the decision has been taken to abolish the Child Protection Register.) The Department of Health (1995), in *Messages for Research*, devoted a section of the guidance (pp. 14–18) to discussion of the concepts of thresholds.

It is interesting that there are few references to thresholds in the latest guidance (DfES, 2006); nor indeed was the term significant in the earlier guidance of 2000 (DoH, 2000). What these documents stress is an orderly path from referral onwards, with defined steps, set out in great detail. They are based on the now familiar 'triangle' for assessment (see Appendix 5) upon which judgements are to be made, and suggest the possibility of a seamless process, in which the significance of particular thresholds will be less important. However that may be, there will, inevitably, be a threshold at the point when consideration is given to the removal of a child. Furthermore, the vital question (is the child, or the care he or she is receiving, getting better or worse?) requires appraisals which may mark critical turning points in the lives of the families. For many, the word threshold suggested the value of measurement, a need for accuracy and precision in the making of these grave decisions. It is a short step from this to questionnaires, checklists and forms. Yet, many workers at field level, not least in the field of child protection, resent such growing trends. Since the first edition of this book, workers have been operating within the *Framework for the Assessment of Children in Need and their Families* (DoH, 2000), which provides very detailed guidance (2000a; b) and a variety of scales and checklists (2000c). The triangle itself is particularly helpful in relation to neglected children and their families. The scales and checklists, which refer to maltreatment generally, are much less useful if the focus is on serious neglect. It may be that some more work, especially on measures of children's well-being, will prove useful. However, the underlying problem, epitomised by the longing for clear thresholds, has to be accepted by practitioners and is, indeed, implicit in the guidance now offered. There will never be automated processes by which these grave decisions can be made. It is high time that the workers involved (and the managers and lawyers who advise them) marshal the well-founded evidence from many sources now available to make



the necessary judgements. 'Waiting for an incident' should be a thing of the past.

## **Wider factors**

This chapter is entitled 'Defining and Understanding the Problem'. So far, the discussion has focused on the notion of neglect as a category of maltreatment. But the failure to tackle the problem adequately goes further and is, in some ways, deeper than these conceptual and procedural difficulties. It would be naive, therefore, to hope for significant improvement in work with neglectful families without seeking to understand and hence to modify some of the existing contextual difficulties.

In common with other work with people in difficulty, there is confusion and fear at the heart of this debate. The injunction to 'condemn the sin and not the sinner' has been at the centre of the ethical framework for social work for many years. It is, of course, extremely difficult to preserve this distinction. There is a deep-rooted feeling that by attributing difficulties, in part at least, to the behaviour of the person concerned, one is blaming them. There is, of course, a way round that, if it can be shown that the difficulties (for example in parenting) may be connected to earlier experiences (for example in childhood) over which the parent had no control, or indeed, to basic limitations in ability. Yet that, in turn, leads to increased concern about a model for understanding which appears to diminish personal responsibility. It is felt that it is a slippery slope and may encourage dependence, instead of building on strengths. Part of the fear of 'blaming' reflects a legitimate concern that individualistic explanations of deviant behaviour may be used to deflect attention from social deficits and social evils. This is often presented as a dichotomy between the left and the right politically. But this places the professionals in an untenable position. They should not have to deny or inhibit their insight into the difficulties of parents for fear of being 'aligned' with the right of politics.

A particular difficulty in working with neglect has arisen from what has been described as the 'forensic model' in investigation of child maltreatment. This has led to the emphasis on incidents and episodes to which I have earlier referred, rather than on a more holistic approach. This shift has been referred to in terms of 'socio-legal' rather than 'socio-medical' discourse. The former, although it has its place in the range of activities in child abuse investigations, can have a curiously blocking effect on the search for understanding which must precede long-term judgements about intervention. Short-term decisions may indeed have to be made simply on 'happenings' which place a child at



risk. But when we enter the field of intelligent anticipation (not prediction) and the likelihood of future harm is considered, the need for the holistic approach is demonstrable and essential in cases of neglect. However, the term 'socio-medical' needs qualification, for it carries with it the baggage of past conflict in the field of child abuse and elsewhere. For a start, it raised fears of domination by two, differing but narrow, approaches which have been influential and controversial. The first, ironically, supported a socio-legal or forensic way of looking at the problem, for it sought to establish precision and reliability in diagnosis. No one can doubt its value given the early resistance of the medical profession to the belief in the existence of 'battered' babies and its utility within the judicial system itself, but its limitations have become increasingly apparent, especially in relation to neglect.

The second approach, epitomised in the work of Kempe (for example Kempe & Helfer, 1968) stressed mental health problems of the parents in the aetiology of child abuse. Again, this has played, and will continue to play, an important part in raising awareness of such connections. But it has also been sharply criticised because of the biased samples on which early studies were based and because the very use of certain psychiatric and psychoanalytic classifications is controversial. The consequences of this approach may, it has been argued, lead to altogether too pessimistic a view of the characteristics of those who abuse their children. Yet whatever terminology we use, and there are difficulties associated with alternatives, we need a phrase to express the holistic ideal which is at the heart of effective and purposeful thought about abusive parents, most particularly neglectful ones. It seems likely, then, that workers have been caught in a kind of pincer movement: from one side, guilt and anxiety about 'blaming' and unease about the use of 'pathological' descriptors; from the other, an organisational context which has discouraged systematic reflection about people, rather than events.

A further difficulty concerns the courts and the judicial process. Work with neglected children and their families often starts well before the involvement of the courts and may never reach them. More effective work with 'children in need' may further reduce the need for courts to be brought into the process. However, it is evident, from what social workers have said, that the shadow of the courts hangs unhelpfully over their heads when they are confronting serious cases of neglect. This centres on the nature of evidence needed for neglect to be proved. In some ways, this is surprising. Workers are extremely unlikely to take cases to court without grounds for serious concern. There is now an accepted corpus of literature on children's physical, intellectual and emotional needs; it is unlikely that magistrates and judges would be reluctant to make orders on the basis of definite and systematically collected evidence. However, it is apparent that these

tensions between social workers and those involved in the judicial process, including local authority lawyers, still present major obstacles in the management of cases of neglect (Iwaniec *et al.*, 2004; Dickens, 2006). (See Chapter 5.)

Whatever the part played by the courts, everyone concerned is aware that, in many cases (though not all), failure to provide good enough care by parents is bound up with their limitations in ability, distressing family backgrounds and mental health problems. When chronic poverty is added to this, there may be a pervasive sense of sympathy, linked to the hope that such parents can be helped to improve their care sufficiently to permit the children to stay at home. The lack of precision concerning the effects of neglect on development plays into the chronic indecision which is so often a feature of work in such cases. Optimism about the potentiality for change must, however, be underpinned by realism, by a reasonable knowledge base about likely and unlikely change and improvement in parenting capacity and the conditions necessary for it. On this matter there is research, mainly from the USA, which offers some valuable insights, discussed later. Nonetheless, when critical discussions concerning the future of the children have to be taken, and the courts are bound to consider the capacity of parents to sustain or improve the existing quality of care, we are in foggier territory than in relation to child development. The imperative that we should seek to work in partnership with parents, linked to uncertainty as to what change or development is possible, has led to some decisions to leave children at home whose quality of life is simply not good enough.

However, uncertainties and anxieties surrounding work with neglectful families are also affected by its organisational context. The shift from 'socio-medical' to 'socio-legal' approaches has been fundamentally unhelpful in cases of neglect because it can cause the wrong or less important question to be asked. Many professionals are enthusiastic about a shift of paradigm, a different way of looking at abuse, which will encompass neglect more satisfactorily. Tanner and Turney (2003) have stressed the importance of sustained work, 'to be based on clear assessment, objectives for change, strategies for achieving change and a way of evaluating whether change has taken place' (p. 32). They coin the phrase 'managed dependency' to describe a method of working in which the worker is not trapped in an unhelpful dependency relationship but uses it in a purposeful way to achieve change in parental attitudes and behaviour.

There has been little indication that those who manage social services for children have recognised the need for long-term support for some neglectful families. Indeed, the culture has been in various ways

inimical to such practice. Targets were set which placed value on cases closed, being taken off the register of protected children or re-registered. Thus, there were perverse incentives against prolonged and systematic work with certain families. (The abolition of the register will, of course, have a bearing on this.) There needs to be an explicit acceptance that, for a small number of families, long-term work is the only realistic, morally justifiable alternative to removal of the children.

There are two further matters of great significance in understanding the nature of the problem which confronts us. The first concerns the sympathy and compassion which some parents (usually mothers) of neglected children raise in workers, especially health visitors and social workers. So often the parents have themselves been the victims of the same type of upbringing which is currently being criticised. They do not provoke the same sense of outrage as some other abusers who inflict very obvious injury on children. (They may, however, contribute to such harm by their failure to protect.) They are struggling with major environmental deficits, of which financial poverty is only one, which make us feel ashamed of the society in which we live. Uncertainty about thresholds interacts again with such feelings and may lead to a kind of passivity on the part of the workers. One of the social workers in research conducted in the 1990s (Allsopp & Stevenson, 1995) expressed his concern about the predicament of the women who were his clients and his anxieties about the role in which he was placed, in which authority (including the courts') had to be exercised to protect the children at times from an alcoholic mother.

'I think that women get a rough deal anyway out of society and they have been dumped, they've all been deserted by their men, they've always been used and abused by men all through their lives, their fathers have abused them, their boyfriends/husbands and here we come along, male social workers. We start using and abusing them . . . we're punishing them for what society's done to them.' (Allsopp & Stevenson, 1995, p. 34)

The duty (morally as well as legally) to put the neglected children first never requires us to lose sympathy with the parents; it does, however, require us, on occasion, to act as decisively to protect children as we do in other types of abuse, a fact of which that social worker was well aware.

As if the above were not difficult enough, there is a second strand of particular relevance to social workers at the present time. That is, the loss of confidence in the capacity of the system to provide good enough alternatives to parental care. There is a profound sense of pessimism about present arrangements for 'looking after children'; the extent to which this pessimism is justified cannot be explored here, but

it is bound to colour judgements and actions about children neglected in their homes. Again, we are in a vicious circle; the longer children remain at home in unsatisfactory circumstances, the harder it may be for substitute care to be beneficial.

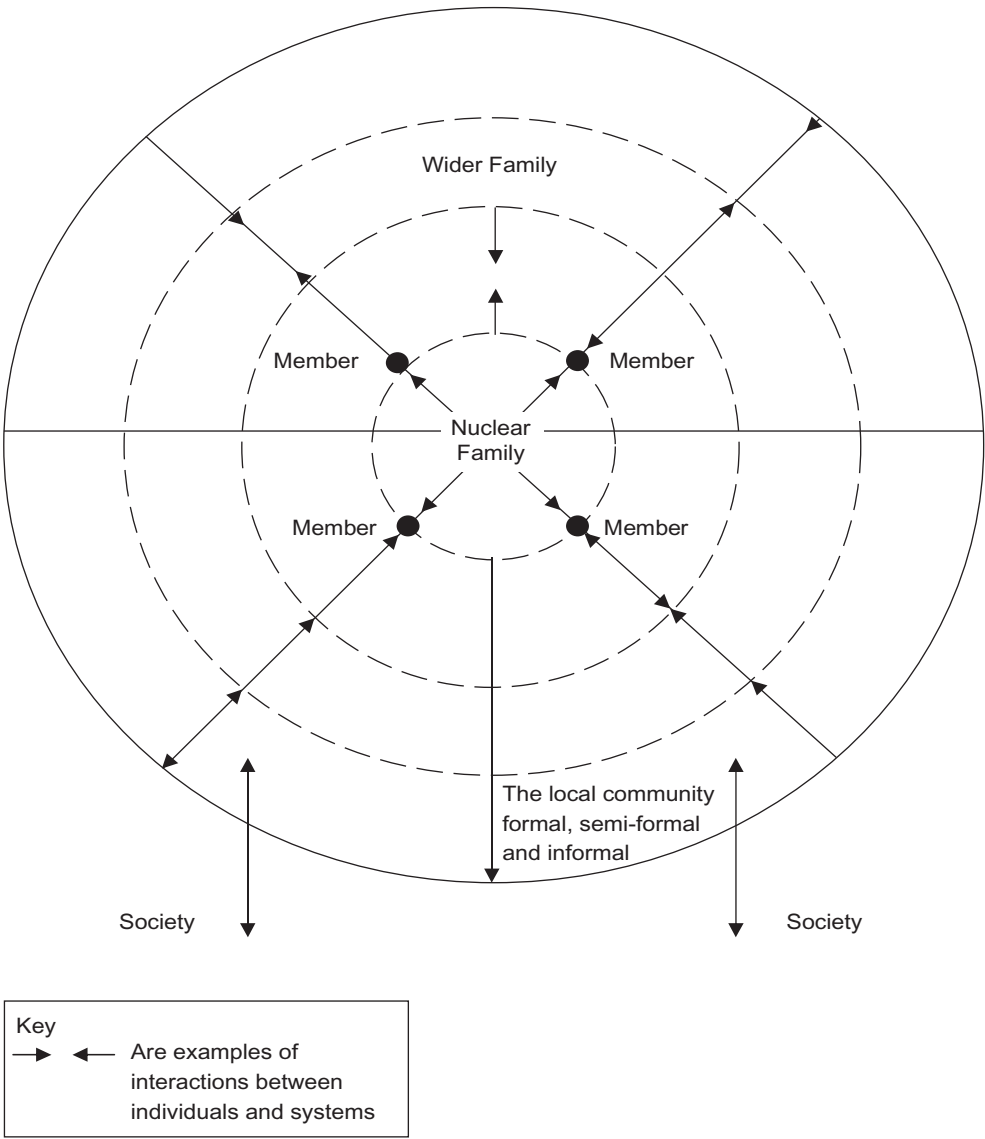
This short chapter sets out the framework which I shall use in seeking to understand the phenomenon of neglect, as it was described in the preface, and in considering purposeful intervention.

The broad outline of the framework is one which is applicable in principle to all work with families where children are 'in need' or need protection. (Indeed it has still wider application.) But the emphasis that is put on the various aspects of family functioning will vary greatly according to the nature of the problems which the families present. As we shall see in the families with which we are here concerned, there are particular difficulties and tensions in balancing and integrating the various factors involved.

The approach chosen here therefore has two strands. First, as Figure 1.1 illustrates, the widely used 'ecological' model enables us to examine a wide range of factors which affect such parents in common with many others. Second, however, it further enables us to focus on particular factors which research or experience suggest are of especial relevance to the predicament of these families. Thus, for example, Chapter 3 examines the impact of social isolation in the lives of these families.

Figure 1.1 is a stylised and simplistic diagram to indicate a systemic approach to the subject; it suggests that just as family members interact with each other, so the family both collectively and individually relates to the world outside. There are a number of dimensions. First, there is the 'nuclear' family, within which individuals interact. Second, there is the wider family. Third, there is the local community, within which there are a number of potential supports; the informal, friends, neighbours, etc.; the semi-formal, such as playgroups for babies or toddlers; and the formal, such as health visitor services or children's centres. Finally, there is wider society which provides the overarching structures of law and governance, including social policies, and which influences families in all kinds of ways, especially through the media. *Families and the individuals within them interact with all these wider systems, both directly, and indirectly through other systems.*

This model emphasises a holistic view of family functioning and implies that change and development occur, for better or for worse, in a number of dimensions. It does less than justice, however, to the complex processes by which individuals and families internalise social and cultural norms and values so that the world outside lives in the minds and feelings of those within the family. Thus, for example, at a



**Figure 1.1** Ecological factors in child neglect.

very early age, children absorb social expectations concerning gender, not only from their parents but also from a wide range of other influences from school to television, to which they are subjected.

The model also shows that both the family as a system and the individuals within it are affected collectively and severally by the external forces which impinge on them. For example, one particular child's relationship with an adult outside his/her family or with other children in the locality may be of positive or negative significance in his/her development.

This approach to understanding family functioning has been more and more influential in recent years. The early work of Bronfenbrenner (1979) laid the foundations for a systems model for analysing the social ecology of families (Jack, 2000, p. 702). It can, of course, be utilised in relation to all families, at least in developed societies. However, it is of particular value in considering neglectful families. Gaudin (1993) describes and summarises the literature concerning wide-ranging factors which interact in cases of neglect and concludes that, despite the relative paucity of research on neglect as compared with other kinds of maltreatment, 'it is clear, from existing studies and from the experience of practitioners, that there is no single cause of the inadequate parenting we term child neglect' (p. 11).

This position is now widely accepted and supported by evidence from a range of research explored in later chapters. Garbarino and Collins (1999) convincingly argue that:

'A systems approach helps to clarify the complexity we face in understanding the interplay of biological, psychological, social and cultural forces in neglect. An ecologically grounded systems approach helps us discover connections that might otherwise remain invisible.' (Garbarino & Collins, 1999)

According to Harbin (1980) the first law of ecology is that 'you can never do just one thing' (p. 4). Whilst this 'first law' does not apply to all situations in which families are perceived to need help, it is nearly always true for seriously neglectful families. Jack (2000), arguing the case for an ecological approach to social work with children and families, makes a crucial point which has particular salience for those who work with neglected children.

'The approach . . . is not something which can merely be added to the social workers' toolkit of skills and techniques . . . Rather, it should be thought of as the toolkit itself. It is the cultural environment within which all other policies and practices should be developed.' (Jack, 2000, p. 713)

It cannot, Jack asserts, simply be 'bolted on'.

It may be that today's students and practitioners are more receptive to thinking in ecological terms because of the growing awareness of these subtle and extensive interactions in the worlds of biology and zoology. However, such awareness can lead to a sense of being overwhelmed, of powerlessness, in the face of these complexities. For those who work with neglectful families, it is important to stress that this broad approach in no way diminishes the value of specific theory within the overall framework. For example, knowledge of attachment disorders and their effect on children's behaviour may be crucial to intervention at certain times, whereas, at others, recognition of the impact of financial stress on parental behaviour and interaction may be regarded as the first priority for action. An understanding of systems theory involves recognition that any intervention at a particular aspect of interaction can have positive or negative effects on the whole. The downward 'vicious circle' of a spiral is not the only possibility. There is also the benign circle, brought about by timely and appropriate action on a specific issue.

However, a further point which arises from an acceptance of the ecological model is the necessity of developing effective working together across agencies and professions so that the expertise of all can be pooled. Whilst this has been generally accepted and the focus of government guidance over many years, frequent gross failures have been documented in a range of inquiry reports and research studies. Less well understood has been the relevance of this model to the issue of 'social exclusion', the focus of extensive government effort since 1997 (Jack, 2000; Ghate & Hazel, 2002; Spencer & Baldwin, 2005). Acceptance of an ecological model, within which various other theories can sit quite comfortably, does not absolve us of a responsibility to consider the *weight* which we give to the various factors which contribute to serious child neglect. It is useless to see the problems in isolation, whether they be poverty, immature dysfunctional parenting or environmental stress. We will be left with choices, dependent in part on particular expertise as well as professional or individual preference, as to the focus of the work in certain situations and at certain times.

Although there are dimensions to the concept of social exclusion which are particularly salient to our contemporary society, there are strong resonances with the earlier concentration on 'the cycle of deprivation' in the 1970s (Rutter & Madge, 1976; Fuller & Stevenson, 1983). Whilst the word 'cycle' with its determinist implications, seen by many as suggesting individual pathology, was largely discredited, the issues raised, especially in relation to seriously neglected children, are strongly similar. Although such families are not exclusively to be found in particular geographical areas and neighbourhoods, there is little doubt that the majority will be found in locations, characterised by



multiple deprivation at every level and in many ways, in which deficits in environmental, health and educational provision stand out. The conditions of far too many families, as graphically shown by Ghate and Hazel (2002) has been recognised by the government and efforts to combat this social exclusion must be respected; the difficulties in achieving improvements must also be acknowledged. There is, however, a worrying possibility. If there is some success in 'lifting' significant numbers of families out of the grosser aspects of social deprivation, it seems all too likely that the families who are the focus of this book will be further exposed as singularly difficult to help. That could set in train processes of blame and stigmatisation which would simply further oppress and alienate those who, seemingly, we cannot reach. This is why a multi-factorial approach is indispensable.

## Conclusion

If we return to Figure 1.1, we can begin to identify many dimensions, explored in later chapters, which are critical to understanding and intervention in these families. These include:

- The differing capacities of particular parents and children.
- The quality of interaction between family members, especially between mothers and infants.
- The relationship between the parents and their own parents which may be highly significant, both positively and negatively.
- The social isolation of such families from the community.
- The family's often highly problematic relationships with the formal sector.
- Their relationships within the local neighbourhood are often highly problematic.
- Their well-being is crucially affected by a range of social policies which affect their material well-being, their health and their education.

Such an approach, however, does not mean that all such factors can be, or need be, given equal emphasis at a particular point in time, or that individual workers can or should pay attention to them all. It does, however, imply the need for a coordinated strategy which, because of the complex problems such families present, will necessarily involve interprofessional and interagency cooperation at a sophisticated level, involving a wider range of workers than heretofore.

This chapter clarifies and summarises the particular problems and dilemmas which arise for practitioners and managers in relation to seriously neglectful families. These are in part definitional; in part

arise from doubts about the grounds for specific action; and, more generally, occur because of the complex and anxiety-provoking feelings which are aroused in those who engage with such families.

This chapter has also sought to provide a kind of map to guide us through very confusing terrain.

