

# The Effects of Childhood Neglect on Development and Behavior

**Source:** Spratt EG, Friedenberg S, LaRosa A, et al. *The effects of early neglect on cognitive, language, and behavioral functioning in childhood. Psychology.* 2012;3(2):175-182; doi:10.4236/psych.2012.32026.

Researchers from multiple institutions examined the impact of early physical and emotional neglect on children's cognitive, language, and behavioral functioning. The cases consisted of: 1) US children, 3 to 10 years old, with a history of physical and emotional neglect (USN), removed from the neglectful environment and ultimately living with a related caregiver, nonoffending parent, or "rehabilitated" offending parent; and 2) internationally adopted children who were in an institutional environment prior to adoption (IA). The control group consisted of nonadopted US children who had not experienced neglect or out-of-home placement. Children in current Child Protective Services (CPS) and/or in foster care were excluded from the study. Multiple specific, age-appropriate standardized tests were administered to study children to measure cognitive, language, and behavioral functioning. Caregiver stress was measured by the Parenting Stress Index Short Form (PSI-SF).<sup>1</sup> Testing only occurred after the neglected children had been in a stable, non-neglectful environment for  $\geq 1$  year. The authors accounted for the influence of annual household income when assessing children's functioning.

A total of 32 neglected children (17 USN, 15 IA) were compared to 28 control children. There were no significant race, age, or gender differences between the cases and controls. USN children were older than IA children at the time of placement in a non-neglectful environment ( $P = .008$ ), and had spent a greater mean proportion of their lives in a neglectful environment than IA (55.8 months vs 30.9 months). Children in the control group performed significantly better than USN and IA children on cognitive and language testing. In addition, USN and IA children had more symptoms of attention problems, aggression, anxiety, depression, and more internalizing/externalizing behaviors identified on behavioral function tests than controls. Among neglected children, the USN group performed worse than the IA group on these behavioral functioning tests. Caregivers of neglected children also scored significantly higher on parenting stress tests than those of control children (PSI Parent-Child Dysfunctional Interaction subscale;  $P < .0001$ ).

The authors conclude that USN and IA children have lower levels of cognitive, language, and behavioral functioning than controls, while IA children have better behavioral adjustment than USN.

## Commentary by

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*Dr Lee has disclosed no financial relationship relevant to this commentary. This commentary does not contain a discussion of an unapproved/investigative use of a commercial product/device.*

"Benign neglect" is an oxymoron with regard to very young children. Neglect is the most prevalent form of child maltreatment in the United States, and may have the most detrimental impact of all

### PICO

**Question:** Among children who have experienced physical and emotional neglect, what is the effect on their cognitive, language, and behavioral functioning?

**Question type:** Descriptive

**Study design:** Prospective cohort

mistreatment on social, cognitive, behavioral, and language development.<sup>2</sup> Yet most abuse research has focused on physical and sexual abuse, resulting in a "neglect of neglect" (see *AAP Grand Rounds*, December 2005;14[6]:70<sup>3</sup>). This study has refocused attention on neglect and quantified the specific areas in cognition, language, and behavior affected by neglect. The study is, of course, not perfect. Behavioral data were obtained through caregiver self-report, so the observed differences may only reflect the caregiver's biased perspective. For example, an adoptive parent might be more tolerant of their child's negative behavior than a kinship care parent. Also, there is significant variation in the extent and duration of neglect in US children compared to international adoptees, which makes comparison of these 2 groups challenging. Finally, the most severe US cases of neglect – children in foster care or CPS – were not included in this study because of consent issues.

An intriguing question raised by this study concerns the degree to which money matters. Low income has been shown to be strongly associated with child abuse and neglect. A previous study by Juffer and Van Ijzendoorn found that IA children had fewer behavioral problems than domestically adopted children. Those authors hypothesized that because the IA parents had more financial resources than USN parents in their study, these resources might have enriched the children's development.<sup>5</sup> While money may not buy happiness, it does grant access to an environment of cognitive and language enrichment which can promote emotional resiliency to adversity and decrease behavioral problems.

## Editors' Note

Because of the design of this study, cause and effect cannot be truly determined. It is possible that some of a child's cognitive or behavioral issues led to neglect, rather than vice versa. It would be valuable to measure cognitive functioning and behavioral symptoms in neglected children at the time that a placement decision is made and then follow the children over time to assess the effect of continuing to live with the biological parents versus the stress of being removed from the home.

## References

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