

## Neglect: There is No Such Thing as “a Little”

Statements such as, “there was just a *little* neglect.” Or, “His birth parents didn’t abuse him. They *just* neglected him” continue to be heard—frequently. The belief that children who have experienced neglect pre-adoption will “come along just fine” once placed in a healthy environment is a total fallacy that must be shed by professionals and parents. This promotes the thinking that “love will be enough” or he or she “will grow out of it.”

The reality of neglect is far from these perceptions. Neglect is a lack of experience. In fact, neglect means that the child lives in a chronic state of hunger, filth, and loneliness. The neglected child is not provided the food, clothing and shelter needed. Neglect may also include lack of medical care and/or mental health services as well as poor supervision, no supervision, or leaving the child in the care of someone not capable.

The outcome of neglect can include:

- The child who has been neglected experiences all caregivers as unreliable. That is, one time the child may cry and someone may come; however at other times, the child’s cries are dismissed or go unheard because no one is there. In fact, many children who are neglected are left alone for hours and in frequent instances for days. There is no one talking, playing peek-a-boo, rocking him or just spending time gazing in his eyes telling him what a beautiful boy he is. Neglect, therefore, contributes to a lack of trust that adults can meet the child’s needs. The neglected child believes, “I must take care of myself. You big people can’t be counted on.”
- Repetitive experiences of harm and/or rejection by significant others, and the associated failure to develop age-appropriate competencies, are likely to lead to a sense of self as ineffective, helpless, deficient and unlovable. Thus, the child of neglect has poor or very limited positive sense of self. The end result of multiple attempts to be acknowledged and cared for, only to be disregarded, confirms to the child that she is not worthy of her birthparents’ or care givers’ time and attention.
- In order for the child to develop, he needs stimulation and acknowledgement—physical and psychological care giving are essential! If these elements are not provided, the basic neural pathways that were ready to grow through experiences, wither and die:

*If babies are ignored, if their care givers do not provide verbal interaction, language is delayed.*

*If a child does not receive kindness, he may not know how to show kindness.*

*If a child’s cries go unheard, he may not know how to interact positively with others.*

The brain is use-dependent. That means it needs repetition of experiences to develop the skills necessary for the individual to function.

This above information related to neglect may be especially important for the family adopting internationally. The ratio of care givers to babies and toddlers in institutional settings is often poor. Review of countless hours of orphanage video clearly demonstrates five or more infants with one care giver. This would be the same as a family having quintuplets! Although, in an institutionalized setting, a mother, mother-in-law, sisters, church members and neighbors aren’t available to help out.

- Malnutrition, both before birth and during the first few years after birth, has been shown to result in stunted brain growth. These effects on the brain are linked to cognitive, social, and behavioral deficits with possible long-term consequences. For example; iron deficiency (the most common form of malnutrition in the United States) can result in cognitive and motor delays, anxiety, depression, social problems and problems with attention. Protein deficiency can result in motor and cognitive delays and impulsive behavior. The social and behavioral impairments may be more difficult to “repair” than the cognitive impairments, even if the nutritional problems are corrected.
- Failure to thrive is a medical diagnosis given to children who don’t gain weight or are consistently underweight in comparison to children of the same age. Most diagnoses of failure to thrive are made in infants and toddlers. Failure to thrive can lead to serious long-term issues. The child’s brain grows more in the first year of life than at any other time. Poor nutrition, during this critical window, impacts subsequent development. Children with a history of failure to thrive are at risk for impairments in intellect and verbal skills. Attachment may be disturbed thus, social and emotional development may not keep pace with peers.

A “little” neglect has serious consequences. We need to “get it” when it comes to neglect—the child’s future is jeopardized in a very short period of time in a neglectful environment. These children need immediate stimulation—nurture—upon being adopted or placed into foster care. We need to cease believing that the impact of this trauma will simply vanish! We need to go back and provide the child the experiences missed—no matter what the child’s age at time of placement with a healthy foster or adoptive family. We must be diligent in our efforts to educate others to the impact of this trauma of absence.