

Can we undo the harms from the  
past?  
Developing a theory of change to  
redress the developmental  
consequences of chronic neglect on  
children.



Annette Jackson December 2016  
La Trobe University, Victoria Australia

# The research problem

## Definition of neglect

Serious neglect is defined as when the child is not having his or her essential needs met to the extent it leads to significant harm.

Chronic is when this occurs over a period of time.

There are various sub-types of neglect, such as physical, educational, emotional, and supervisory neglect and abandonment.

## Dearth of research

Despite prevalence and severity of consequences associated with serious chronic neglect, there is a dearth of interventions and research about whether children recover and how to assist that process.

# The research problem

Complexity of researching this phenomena compounded by:

- heterogeneity of consequences associated with neglect
- its impact on multiple developmental domains
- confusion regarding definition
- various sub-types
- frequent co-occurrence of neglect with other types of maltreatment; and
- likelihood that a variety of disciplines, fields and roles are involved in responding to the impact of neglect.

Given lack of research there's limited program theory to explore what could help children recover from neglect

# Systematic review of the literature

Allin, Wathen, and MacMillan's (2005) systematic review of the literature on interventions with neglect.

*"Although the ultimate goal would be to prevent neglect before it occurs, it is important that effective interventions exist to assist neglected children. To our knowledge, there are no current systematic reviews of child neglect interventions. Therefore, the objective of this systematic review is to examine available evidence for the effectiveness of child neglect treatment interventions, make practice recommendations, and provide direction for future research."* (p.498)

14 of 697 studies met the criterion of which 5 studies focused on children's outcomes. They concluded that *"... the effectiveness of treatment for children exposed to neglect alone (that is, without co-occurring abuse) cannot be determined from the existing literature"* (p.499).

The interventions described included *therapeutic child care* (e.g. Culp & Little, 1991), *play therapy* (Udwin, 1983) and *resilient peer training* (Fantuzzo et al. 1996).

The review concluded there was some evidence for positive outcomes for children who had experienced neglect, such as some play therapy approaches including group play training and play therapy involving resilient peer treatment and therapeutic child care.

“Given the adverse consequences of neglect, one might expect to find a number of evidence-based interventions aimed at ameliorating the impact of neglect on social and emotional functioning.

Unfortunately, there are few programs that have demonstrated efficacy specifically for neglected youth.

Even rarer are programs that have demonstrated efficacy for certain subtypes of neglect, despite the fact that these subtypes predict different symptomatology.

Most of the programs that address neglect are, understandably, family focused, and do not typically target the social and emotional needs of school-age youth who have experienced neglect (American Human, 2009; DePanfilis, 2006).” (Taussig et al. 2013, p.57)

Few interventions focus on ameliorating the consequences of neglect for children. Those that exist focus mainly on the parents. We need both.



*“Interventions with children who carry the life-long scars of continuing neglect must be provided to alleviate the detrimental effects of maltreatment on their development (Egeland, Sroufe, & Erickson, 1983).” (Nelson, Saunders, & Landsman, 1993, 670)*

# Significance of this study

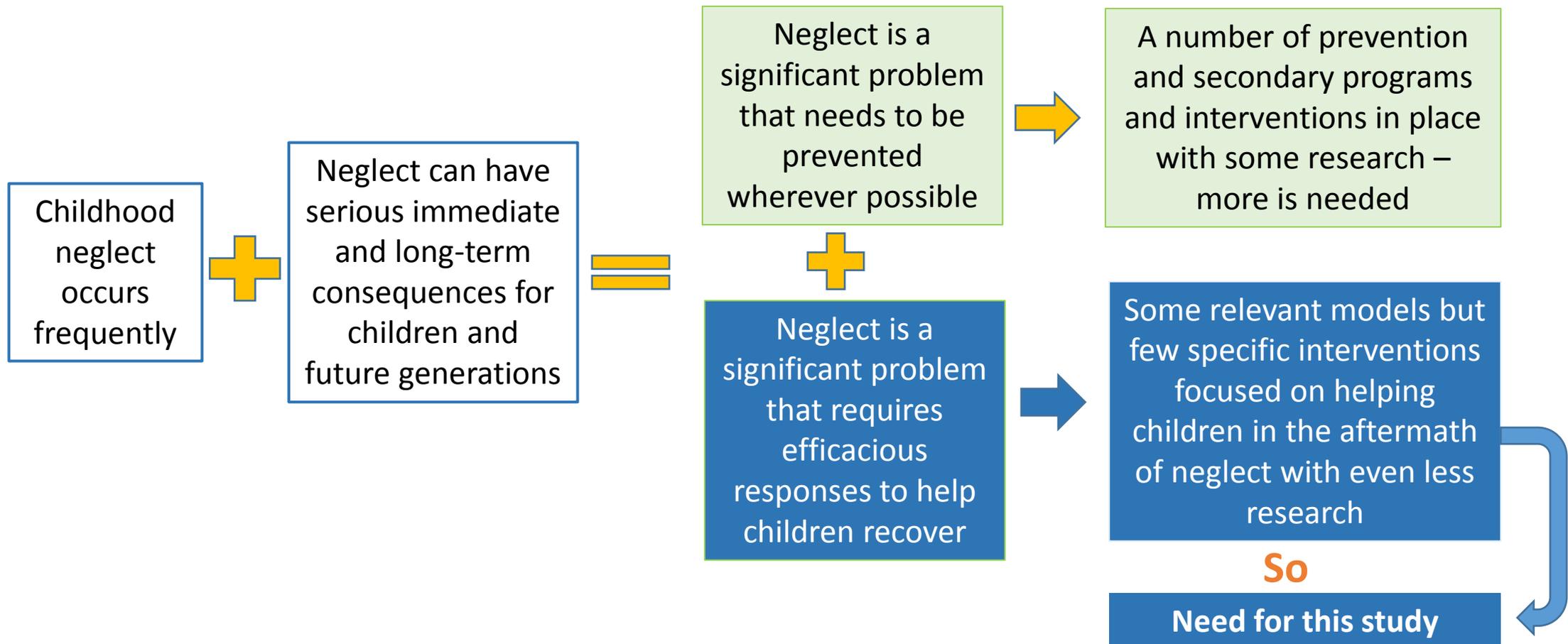
- Neglect is one of the most prevalent and impactful types of child maltreatment in Australia and many other countries.
- Childhood neglect has been reported as a human rights problem; a public health problem; a socio-economic problem; an intergenerational problem; and a biopsychosocial developmental problem for children.
- As prevention of neglect is a documented human right so too is the imperative to help children recover from its consequences.
- The pervasive, serious consequences of neglect, if not addressed, are likely to have health, developmental and socio-economic consequences for the child and future generations.
- This study will provide the opportunity to develop a program theory with an emphasis on theory of change to inform new or strengthened interventions and associated research.

# Significance of this study

## Evidence has shown:

## This means:

## What has occurred?



## What to do when there is little research or documented practice:

Consider relevant theories to shed light on phenomena

Discover and document what is occurring in practice

Discover and document assumptions and conceptual thinking underlying practice

## Approach to constructing theory – This study's research design

Constructivist grounded theory to explore perspectives of those working or caring for children impacted by neglect

by

Questionnaires sent to professionals and carers through range of networks

then

Focus groups with workers and groups with carers

## What type of theory is being constructed

**Program Theory = theory of change + theory of action**

**Theory of change = mechanisms by which change is believed to occur**

**Theory of action = How is the program or practice constructed or supported to activate the theory of change**

# Purpose of this research

The primary purpose of this research is to develop a program theory with emphasis on theory of change to inform application or design of models or interventions to redress serious consequences for children who have suffered serious chronic neglect.

Intent is to develop a theory of change that clarifies:

- How neglect and its consequences are understood
- What mechanisms are involved when a child recovers from the consequences of neglect?
- What are the major processes or actions through which recovery can occur?

# Aims of the Research

- To explore how serious chronic neglect, its impacts and interventions are conceptualised by those working with or caring for children who have experienced such neglect, including professionals from different disciplines and roles and foster parents.
- To discover and describe approaches used by professionals and caregivers that aim or appear to reduce or redress the harmful consequences of neglect.
- To explore how different conceptualisations of neglect and its impact are associated with possible mechanisms of change and professional and caregiver roles
- To construct the foundations of a theory of change that aims to alleviate the consequences of serious chronic neglect for children and to consider what further research would be required to complete this theory of change and theory of action.

# The research question

## Overall question:

What are the key elements of a theory of change that can inform choice and/or design of interventions to help children recover from the harms of serious chronic neglect?

## Guiding questions include:

- How is the phenomena of serious chronic neglect and its impacts on children understood by various disciplines and roles involved in the children's lives?
- What are the mechanisms by which children may be harmed by different sub-types and other dimensions of neglect?
- What are the mechanisms involved in recovery after neglect for children and have these been translated into targets for change when planning interventions?
- What, if any, interventions have been used to help children recover from the consequences of serious chronic neglect, in what context and by whom?
- What, if any, are perceived barriers or constraints which can impede application or perceived efficacy of interventions?
- What influences the choices of interventions?
- Are there ideas for new or adaptations of already existing interventions to assist children recover from the impact of neglect?

# Philosophical stance underlying research

- Pragmatic view - assumes the value of any theory rests on whether it can be effectively applied in practice. It also implies that the research design should tap into what happens in practice.
- A theoretical perspective derived from pragmatism is symbolic interactionism. It assumes we each construct our sense of self, our view of society and our view of reality through interactions (Charmaz, 2014).
- As with pragmatism more generally, symbolic interactionism challenges the idea that research should hold a polarised view that reality only exists through perception (idealism) or where reality exists regardless of perception (realism).
- Childhood, neglect, parenting and recovery are all phenomena heavily influenced by perception and interpretation. They are social constructs which can only be understood in a social, cultural and developmental context. Yet it is a reality that children need a certain level of care in order to survive and develop.

# Research design and method

## **Research design:**

A constructivist grounded theory approach with a mixed method approach using surveys and focus groups.

## **Research method:**

- An online survey sent to a range of professionals and carers to gather ideas about neglect, its impact, mechanisms for harm, mechanisms for change and overall program theory
- Series of focus groups of workers and carers to develop and refine a proposed theory of change

# Abductive analysis and grounded theory

Abductive analysis emphasizes that, rather than setting all preconceived theoretical ideas aside during the research project, researchers should enter the field with the deepest and broadest theoretical base possible and develop their theoretical repertoires throughout the research process.

Instead of theories emerging from data, new concepts are developed to account for puzzling empirical materials.

The methodological precepts of grounded theory can stimulate abductive reasoning through a process of revisiting, defamiliarizing, and alternative casing in light of theoretical knowledge.

The surprise, puzzle, or anomaly that may trigger a novel theory then emerges methodologically through careful data analysis against a background of cultivated theoretical expertise.” (Timmermans & Tavory, 2012, p.180)

# Sample selection - Surveys

- An opportunistic sample will be sought to send surveys electronically to potential participants using Survey Monkey or similar software
- Approaches will be made to various networks to distribute the survey such as:
  - Berry Street Childhood Institute?
  - ChildTrauma Academy?
  - Australian Institute of Family Studies (AIFS)?
  - Australian Child & Adolescent Trauma, Loss & Grief Network?
  - Phoenix Australia?
  - ASTSS?
  - Mental health networks?
  - Foster Care Association Victoria (and other bodies interstate)
  - ACWA and Centre of Excellence
  - Indigenous specific networks
  - Other discipline specific organisations? (OTs, Teachers, Paediatricians, Mental health)
  - Child Protection: eg DHHS (Victoria), FACS (NSW), DCPFS (WA), Community Services (ACT)

# Constructivist grounded theory

Constructivist grounded theory seems the best fit to this study because:

- It acknowledges that I (the researcher) bring in prior knowledge and opinions rather than starting with a blank slate (this is considered part of the data)
- It recognises value of a literature review earlier in the process
- Emphasises both abductive and inductive reasoning as helpful in building theory – allowing for surprises
- Emphasis on heuristic principles rather than rigid rules for analysis
- Acknowledges multiple realities in complex phenomena

# Content - Surveys

- Demographics of participant (closed choice)
- Discipline, field and role of participant (fixed choice with free text)
- Descriptors of client group in relation to neglect (closed choice)
- Definition and descriptions of neglect and sub-types (free text?)
- Most common impacts of neglect on children they have witnessed (give them fixed list where they select up to a certain number eg 5 or 10)
- Which explanation provides the best fit for how neglect leads to these harms (fixed choice or free text)

# Surveys – Content (example of questions)

## What do you think?

- How do you define child neglect?
- Please list different types of neglect
- What do you think are some of the consequences of neglect on children?
- What do you think it is about neglect that contributes to these consequences?
- What are other possible factors which influence how neglect impacts on children?
- Please provide a non-identifiable example of a child you have worked with?
- How would you know if a child has recovered from the consequences of neglect?
- What do you think is needed in order for a child to recover from the consequences of neglect?
- What do you think are strategies, experiences or other inputs that can help a child recover from the consequences of neglect?
- What informed your choices of how to help a child recover from the consequences of neglect?
- What could be some constraints or barriers to helping a child recovering from the consequences of neglect?
- How much of your time has involved implementing particular approaches to help a child recover from the consequences of neglect ?
- Please provide a non-identifiable example of a child you have worked with and what you or others did to try to help the child recover from the consequences of neglect?

# Sample selection – Focus group approach

- A question will be on the survey to seek interest in being contacted to participate in a focus group
- If particular groups or individuals become identified as having insight into this question or further questions need to be explored (as part of theoretical sampling), new focus groups can be established

# Focus group - Content

- Although aim of focus groups is not to actually design an intervention they will be used to help form the program theory that will hopefully inform subsequent design of intervention/s. As such it will be informed by both processes for developing program theory and by human-centred design thinking processes
- Possibly using art as well as text to encourage creative thinking for design
- A series of guided questions
- Will be digitally recorded with a second person present to record

# Limitations

- Lack of direct participation by children and families
- Symbolic interactionism would normally suggest an ethnographic method involving direct observation. Such observation is impractical in this context. Also complex ethical issues given the vulnerability of the children and most involved in statutory system.
- The use of surveys are unusual in research using a constructivist grounded theory approach. Although being used for pragmatic reasons it has led to most questions needing to be free text. This may reduce number of respondents willing to complete the questions.
- A potential risk is insufficient surveys or participants in focus groups. The opportunity to do this in a staged way will mitigate this risk as the approach can be modified as needed and within the constraints of ethics approval.

# Questions to consider regarding research methods

1. Overarching question is regarding how to research an 'absence'? Not only is neglect an 'absence of needs being met' but the assumption is that there is an 'absence of interventions'
2. I have attempted to develop a method that is 'more than a sum of its parts' and does not appear to have been used in this way before - therefore needs to be examined and challenged as to the fit between question and method. For example:
  - a) Use of surveys is to scan possible perspectives before narrowing to those interested in joining a focus group – but items need to enable free text responses for grounded theory analysis – how to balance the need for free text with the aim to get reasonable response rate?
  - b) Positives and negatives of focus group compared to Delphi technique, given interest on divergent views not just consensus?
  - c) What are the best strategies for developing program theory, with emphasis on theory of change?
  - d) Will human centred design thinking add value to the focus group process or are these too different?

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