

# **Neglected Children and Their Families**

Second Edition

## **Olive Stevenson**

Olive Stevenson, CBE, D.Litt, MA (Oxon) is Professor Emeritus at Nottingham University, where she has a continuing contract to teach and supervise research. She holds honorary degrees from the Universities of East Anglia and Kingston. She is an honorary professor at the University of Kingston and the Poly-University of Hong Kong.



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To the memory of my parents who cherished me



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## Update to First Edition Foreword

This book should be of interest and relevance to practitioners and policy makers alike whose interest is working to prevent and effectively intervene in families where children are neglected. Not only does it comprehensively review the literature and research on neglect, it also has very practical application. It provides the reader with evidence from practice of what works when seeking to improve outcomes for this group of children.

Seeking first to understand the historical, social, economic, and parenting factors in children who are neglected, and then those less commonly dwelt upon, such as mothers' health and drugs abuse, the book draws the reader's attention to the importance of valued thorough assessment and planning to build on strengths and to meet children's timescales.

This book has been comprehensively updated to draw on very social and economic realities and policy context of 2007. These are quite different to those obtained in the late 1990s, at least in their aspirations for the eradication of poverty and the inclusion of all our citizens and the vital importance of social cohesion.

Any social worker, health visitor, police officer, teacher or community paediatrician will recognise the portrait of children who are neglected and will recognise the devastating impact of neglect on healthy development. What has not changed over recent years is that this cohort of children provides the most intractable of dilemmas for practice and management and are the most telling representation of the effects of social exclusion and poverty. Olive Stevenson has at one and the same time addressed these wider strategic economic issues, and also provided an analysis for practice, which is no mean feat.

When I first wrote the foreword to this book in 1998, I wrote from the perspective of an Executive Director of Social Services in a large northern city who had herself worked up from being a social worker in the 1970s and could identify with many of the characteristics of

families portrayed in this book. I reflected on how useful this book would have been for me when I was in practice, and I recommended it to practitioners who are now working in the field.

In commending the book, I drew attention to the hard work and dedication of practitioners and policy makers whose work on assessment and planning in the 1990s had contributed significantly to making an impact on improving the well being of children and young people. I was an Executive Director of Social Services seeking to support the use of research in every day work, and to champion partnership working in a very meaningful and practical way as the only means of tackling the distress of individual children and their families when neglect was evident. I commended the book hoping that it would help my staff and those across the country to develop confidence to be assertive practitioners putting the interest of children at the forefront and recognising that a cycle of disadvantage if not broken has lasting and devastating consequences.

I now write this foreword as a Chief Executive of an inner London borough all of whose wards are in the most deprived of those in the country. A borough of contrast where well off, successful inhabitants, benefiting from the prosperity of London, live cheek by jowl with some of the most impoverished of our citizens, many of whom have come to this country to find refuge from war or natural disaster seeking to improve conditions for themselves and opportunities for their children. And you might ask why a local authority Chief Executive would want to be interested in research and practice regarding neglect. The reason is simple. The agenda for local authorities is to provide community leadership and 'place shaping'; to promote the well being of citizens in its area. Recognising and tackling the neglect of our most vulnerable children has got to be at the heart of this agenda. One of the effects of local government legislation and children's legislation in recent years has been to bring the agenda for well being, regeneration and safeguarding to the heart of local government, and very much into the main stream agenda for local authority Chief Executives. Because of this, I commend Olive's book and its recent updating and hope that it can play a part in assisting those who work on our behalf with these most intractable difficulties to be able to do so with an increased effectiveness. Whilst we champion an agenda that puts the five outcomes for all children at the heart of our arrangements, we cannot afford to ourselves neglect the most hard to reach, and difficult to work with, families where children's most basic needs are not being met. Research has highlighted the importance of early years parenting on later outcomes and this book reinforces that message.

*Penny Thompson  
Chief Executive  
London Borough of Hackney*

## Foreword to Second Edition

This is a very timely point at which to publish this new edition. Inevitably I have looked at it through the spectacles of a social worker trained in the early 1970s and, as I am now, a strategic director of children's services currently charged with the responsibility to support local authorities across England in the establishment of children's centres.

I come from a generation of social workers whose reading list certainly included the names of experts about whom Olive Stevenson reminds us in this book; experts who wrote about the essentials for healthy child development and the observable consequences for children when their parenting was 'not good enough'. In those days the observation of children and the impact of their experiences on their development was a focal point for social work. Olive reminds us about the huge body of evidence that exists about the impact of neglect on every aspect of a child's well-being – their health, their ability to learn and their own future parenting skills. However, she also reminds us about why some of these issues are so intractable.

The book brings these perspectives back into play in the context of the current policy environment for children's services and the issues in family life that have increasingly impacted on children over the decade since the first edition. The outcomes for the children of seriously neglectful parents are very poor indeed and the search for interventions that address this remains as challenging as ever. There are huge questions about whether the introduction of a universally avail-

able early years service based on a national network of children's centres will make a difference to what Olive calls 'our' children. These are the children, and their families, whose characteristics are described in this book. They exist on the margins of mainstream society, often 'disorganised', often 'depressed' and rarely amenable to simple instruction on how to improve their lives.

There is already much evidence of the benefits derived from the precursors of children's centres (the Sure Start Local Programmes) but as Olive points out, we face a very challenging task if these benefits are to reach children whose lives are blighted by the most extreme forms of chronic neglect.

This task challenges all involved in children's services within the newly integrated environments that are being created by local authorities and their partners. This book will not only be of interest to the many social workers who continue to hold Olive Stevenson in the highest regard but also to teachers, health professionals and the new generation of children's centre managers for whom improving the lives of neglected children will be a key challenge. There is a core base of knowledge and skills to which Olive refers in this book that needs to be held in common by everyone who works in children's services.

*Liz Railton CBE  
Programme Director  
Together for Children*

## Preface

Those who work with seriously neglectful families will recognise this description. Paula Simmons, who is twenty-five, has three children, Alan aged eight, Mary three and Kevin eighteen months. The children have different fathers and there is no man currently living in the household. Paula has been known to social services since she was a child; she was in care for short periods and was known to be neglected as a child, and sexually abused in her teens by her stepfather.

There is serious concern about Paula's capacity to offer adequate care to the children. Alan is already known as a budding delinquent in the neighbourhood. His school attendance is erratic and he has been excluded for indiscipline several times. He is teased and bullied by his peers because of his poor clothing and unkempt appearance. He is below average in attainment. Paula cannot offer him effective control and he is often out late in the evening. He is a healthy boy of average intelligence, but seems an angry child and shows little warmth to his mother.

Mary seems a rather miserable child. She attends a family centre and frequently arrives smelly and seemingly hungry, often with a runny nose and a skin rash. Her general development, physical and intellectual, is delayed and she has a marked squint. There has been concern that she has not been taken to hospital appointments about this. She constantly seeks affection and reassurance and is very jealous of younger children.

Kevin was a premature baby and was a very difficult baby to feed. He is very passive. During infancy, there was doubt as to whether he was appropriately stimulated.

Paula takes little care of her appearance and often appears tired, dispirited and 'flat', with little interest in responding to the children. She struggles to manage financially and is in debt to 'loan sharks' in the area. She is not well physically, often complaining of heavy periods, but is frightened of going to the doctor, in case 'something bad' is found to be the matter. She welcomes visits from health visitors and social workers and will talk at length about the many difficulties which she encounters. She struggles to keep up with the housework and there are times when standards get worryingly low, with flea infestation, unwashed crockery and clothes, and a very dirty toilet. Her own personal hygiene is poor.

Those who visit become fond of her. They see a woman who is struggling to survive in very difficult circumstances and who needs much support. However, the quality of life for the children does not seem acceptable, no matter what efforts are made to help. They are not receiving 'good enough' physical care, supervision, control and warmth to ensure their proper development. Health visitors and social workers have put a lot of time and energy, with a range of services, into this family. But now they are anxious and uncertain what to do.

Since the first edition of this book was published in 1998, there have been many changes in law, policy and practice in children's services. There has also been new research which has strengthened the evidence of the adverse effects of neglect on children's development. There is also evidence that increasing numbers of children have been placed on the Child Protection Register for neglect, but little indication that practice in this area has improved to any significant extent.

The preparation of this edition has coincided with public anxiety about 'antisocial' children and young people. 'Social exclusion' is an issue which has received much attention from the present government, but the Prime Minister (Blair, 2006) has acknowledged that there is a group of families and children which has not responded to the support offered and for which other measures are necessary.

Seriously neglected children, who are the focus of this book, undoubtedly form part of this socially excluded group but it is not clear how far the analysis of their family life given here can be applied more generally. How far is the neglectful parenting at the root of the children's bad behaviour? How far is it part of more general maltreatment, not just neglect? (We know that serious neglect is often associated with other forms of abuse.) How far are we seeing much wider social prob-

lems in contemporary society for which individualised interventions are simply inadequate?

These are questions which I cannot answer. What is indisputable is that poor parental control and supervision of children is almost always a feature of seriously neglected children. It is essential that this aspect of neglect is taken as seriously as its other familiar manifestations, such as poor nutrition and hygiene.

# Acknowledgements

I am indebted to many more people and to a far greater extent than is customary for an author. Because this book attempts to bring together material from a wide variety of sources, both from literature and from the professional and academic experience of friends and colleagues, I have unashamedly begged and borrowed (but not, I hope, stolen) from many people, not all of whom I can name here. My thanks to them is no less warm, including those whose work forms an important part of the appendices.

In the preparation of the second edition, I have particularly appreciated the prompt responses of those whom I have urgently asked for advice. Special thanks to Jonathan Dickens for his help over legal issues.

Despite the miracles of modern technology, I would have been lost without the invaluable support of Julie Ball, who has patiently dealt with my incompetence. Her high standards of accuracy have made the preparation of this second edition much less onerous.