

CWLA AMERICA  
STANDARDS FOR  
CHILD PROTECTION  
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# 3

## SOCIAL WORK IN PROTECTIVE SERVICE

Social work with parents of neglected or abused children is the core of protective service. Helping parents to give care that meets the child's needs is the most effective way to protect the child from further neglect or abuse and to promote the child's well-being. The purpose of social work is to help parents change behavior and attitudes that impair their parental role, and to make use of appropriate resources and services available in the community.

Protective services can range from brief service to long-term assistance involving cooperation with other social agencies, hospitals and other community resources, to provide a complete range of services. The provision of protective services must be flexible, with immediate response to crises and a planned approach to chronic situations.

### *Social Work With Child's Parents*

The families must receive continuing and consistent help based on the individual situation to stimulate and assist them to meet the minimal essential needs of their children.

#### 3.1 Social work approach to parents of neglected or abused children

The approach to the parents should demonstrate that it is the purpose of protective service to help them provide adequate care for the child; and that the social worker has concern for them as persons as well as for their children, and faith in their potentialities and ability to change. At the same time, it is necessary to keep clear the protective function of the agency, and the responsibility delegated to the social worker to inquire into a report of neglect or abuse that has been received.

In protective service, the social worker must always be concerned with the needs and the protection of the child and with the effects of the situation on the child. At the same time, the social worker must understand the problems of parenthood and, in particular, those problems of the individual parents that prevent them from giving the minimum care needed for the child's healthy growth and development.

Although the community at large may react to neglect, abuse and exploitation of a child with aggressive and punitive feelings toward the parents, the social worker must understand them as persons who have their own problems and needs, without condoning mistreatment of the child. The social worker can never effectively help parents who neglect, abuse or exploit their children unless the parents perceive the worker as someone who understands them and their life experience.

Even in circumstances where there has been extreme cruelty or sexual abuse, the social worker must have the flexibility, compassion and discipline to help the parents as well as the child. It is necessary to do this while making clear that the community expects the parents to meet more adequately the needs of their child, even when the child has to be removed temporarily.

The first opportunity to demonstrate that a helping service is being offered comes when the social worker tells the parents about the report and explains the agency's function and its interest in this particular situation. It should be made clear that if the report is true, the social worker is prepared to work with the parents toward correcting the situation. The social worker should emphasize that the important thing is not who made the report, but whether it is true, and what may need to be done to help the child.

The worker must accept the challenge of being tested by the parent for his trustworthiness, especially the parent whose experiences with other individuals and agencies have been hurtful and disappointing. As an authority figure, the worker cannot expect to be trusted immediately. By focusing on the experiences and life circumstances that have meaning to the parent, the worker can begin to provide a structure that is supportive.

Differences in ability to accept and use help must be recognized. Some families can accept help offered with sympathy and skill. Others may decide to use the service, although reluctantly or unwillingly, when they realize the worker's concern for them, what the community expectations are, and further, that the agency is responsible for seeing that the child has proper care. Some families can be helped best if the agency

establishes an authoritative position and sets time limits that require them to work on problems harmful to their child unless they wish the children removed from their care.

The social worker must express understanding of the parents' feelings about the fact that someone has made a report about the care of their child, and acknowledge the parents' feelings about what they might regard as interference or invasion of family privacy, or perceive as punitive, persecutory action.

### 3.2 Social work goals in working with parents

The social worker must keep in constant focus the social work goals of working with parents: that the child should receive adequate care, that the parents should be able to fulfill their parental roles more adequately, that unnecessary separation of a child from his parents should be prevented, and that whatever may be of value for the child in a relationship with the parents should be conserved.

Social work goals will vary with different situations and at different times during the social work process.

The social worker should aim to help the parents

- feel concern for what is happening to the child and themselves, face and accept the reality that neglect or abuse exists, and recognize that the community expects them to provide care that at least meets minimum standards, or have the child removed from their care
- determine whether their expectations of the child and themselves have led to inappropriate or inadequate parental response to the child's behavior
- develop motivation to change their attitudes and methods of caring for the child; use help to decide how the situation should be modified so that the child will have a better opportunity for healthy development; and take part in a plan to bring about such a change
- mobilize their energies through the social worker's relationship and the use of other social services, with the focus on their task of improving the care of their child
- cope with environmental stress and situational problems by finding and making use of resources and services available in the community, such as financial assistance, health and mental health services, family planning services, homemaker and day care services, and vocational opportunities; and participate in recreation and other community activities, church, PTA, civic and social groups

- affirm and use to the full their capacities as parents, and carry out their parental rights and obligations responsibly and consistently
- develop, recover or maintain a self-respecting desire to perform their natural parental responsibility and to achieve what they want for their child
- participate with the agency in a decision at the end of a period of evaluation as to whether they are now able to carry on by themselves, whether they should use another service, or whether action may need to be taken to remove the child from the home
- give up the child where this is necessary, either voluntarily or through the courts
- where court action is taken, go through the court experience with full understanding of what is involved for them and their child, and without its being another destructive experience for them
- avoid drifting into acceptance of an unfavorable way of living with their natural parental rights abridged
- have their legal and constitutional rights protected.

### 3.3 Use of authority

Inasmuch as protective service is generally not sought or accepted voluntarily, the agency and the social worker must accept and use creatively the special authority vested in the agency and inherent in the worker's professional knowledge and skill. (1.8)

Social work skills and feeling for persons, on the one hand, and the responsibility for being in the situation, on the other, are required to achieve a relationship that will help parents to change the conditions that are unfavorable to the child.

The responsibility of the agency to protect neglected and abused children provides the basis on which the social worker can approach the parents: can set up limitations within which they may work together, if the parent choose to do so, to achieve adequate care of the children; and can motivate parents to change or to use help in order to change. This responsibility gives the social worker the needed sanction to approach parents who have not requested service, and to use his social work skills effectively. The worker needs to know and to feel that it is right to intervene and to be involved in the situation, and the parents must recognize that the social worker has a right to be there.

The social worker must carry out this responsibility by

- determining whether the community's concern about the family's care of the child is founded in fact
- taking the initiative in offering social work help and persisting in the development and maintenance of a relationship with the parents
- using agency policies and procedures as the framework and support for helping parents to face the reality of the neglect or abuse, and the requirement that they work on a plan to provide suitable care for the child
- determining with parents, whenever possible, realistic limits and objectives necessary to achieve a minimal standard of child care
- deciding that neglect or abuse has ceased to exist, and service may be terminated; or that action should be taken through petition to the courts to remove the child from the parents' care.

### 3.4 Evaluation

The social worker should evaluate the family situation in order to decide what needs to be done and what can be done, taking into consideration the problems and the strengths in the given situation as they relate to the neglect or abuse of the child. (3 17)

The agency's initial study provides the social worker with the basis for intervention and the determination of appropriate service and methods of help. If neglect or abuse is found, it provides the social worker with a legitimate basis for bringing service to the parents, and points up the necessity for such service if the children are to be helped.

Information should be obtained about the conditions under which the family is living, and the social, medical and personality problems that may interfere with the parents' ability to provide suitable care, such as

- how the parents relate to the child and to other children in the family
- how the parents' relationship to the child and other children in the home is affected by environmental and family stresses or by the personalities of the parents or marital problems, including such factors as inadequate income, unsuitable housing, mental or physical illness, or other critical family conditions
- lack of ability or resources to give the child better care
- lack of knowledge of, or motivation to use, existing resources
- ignorance of community standards for care of the child with respect to providing financial support, food, shelter, clothing, medical care, education, protection, guidance and love.

It is necessary to determine how the child is being affected, and what the child's needs are.

Evaluation must be made of

- the seriousness of the neglect or abuse, particularly for infants and young children, and whether the child requires immediate care outside the home
- the willingness and capacity of the parents to involve themselves in using help and in trying to change their relationship with their child
- the parents' capacity to improve conditions affecting the child and themselves and to recognize and carry out their responsibilities
- the resources and strengths that are available or lacking in the community
- the appropriateness of the parents' expectations of the child and the quality of the relationship to the child
- the kind of help needed in relation to an immediate crisis, to environmental stress, to a limited or basic change in the parent-child relationship, or to the parents' inability to meet the needs of the child
- what the parents are currently willing and able to do, in order that the agency may later withdraw, allowing them to resume unsupervised care of their child
- what his parents and his own home mean to the child, with respect to the child's ability to use some other form of care.

### 3.5 Social work methods

All social work methods may be used in providing this service, including casework, group work, community work.

In many situations, particularly physical or sexual abuse, casework or counseling may be the appropriate and principal method, but this service is not exclusively clinically oriented casework; nor is it entirely dependent upon professional techniques of interviewing and use of the casework relationship.

It is being increasingly recognized that adaptations of casework techniques are called for in working with persons who do not express themselves easily in words, or who have not had the experience of having someone want to help them.

The service may include direct treatment of personality problems of parents or children, individually or in groups, and the treatment of

the family as a unit by social workers with specialized training, experience and appropriate skills.

Since this service is intended to be supportive and remedial as well as to prevent further problems, methods may be used other than those that are specific to social work, such as teaching and guidance, to help parents understand child development and behavior and to help them anticipate and cope with normal stresses and crises in family life and child rearing.

Skills in consultation, in working with other professions, in group leadership, in supervising a team operation, and in working with community groups are also needed.

In providing a comprehensive service a team approach may be preferable, though it need not be used exclusively. Clear delineation of the role of the team leader and other team members is required.

Teams may be used to provide

- a variety of services required for comprehensive planning
- opportunities for multiple interaction with helping persons at a level and time that meet family needs
- continuous availability of helping persons for parents in crisis
- management of workloads to provide flexibility in responding to varying needs of families
- variety of direct observations for initial and ongoing assessment and planning.

### 3.6 Social work planning

The social worker should assume responsibility for planning the protective services to be provided, and for determining long- and short-range goals that must be achieved for the improvement of the child's care and for his protection.

Plans should be realistically related to the family situation; should safeguard the child and help the parents gain confidence and capacity to care appropriately for their child; should be flexible to allow for changes in the situation and the use of the service based on ongoing reevaluation of how the child is being affected.

The social worker should relate the plans to community expectations of the parental role and responsibility for the child and should work with or consult with other agencies, community services and other professions, as required.

### 3.7 Coordination of service

The social worker should take responsibility for involving and coordinating other services and community resources necessary to improve family functioning, so that the family receives service in an integrated manner.

Services such as medical care for injury, or foster care should be part of the social worker's planning to ensure care and protection of the child.

Planning cooperative services with schools and day care centers, pediatricians, psychiatrists, public health nurses, hospitals, homemakers and clinics may be required to complement the services needed by the family.

### 3.8 Helping parents to express their feelings

It is important for the social worker to recognize and accept the parents' reaction to agency intervention, and to help them express their feelings about their own situations and deal with these constructively.

The lives of many of these parents have been and often are characterized by indifference, harshness or unreasonable expectation. Few parents look to others for warmth and understanding. Some hostility is present in any situation where service is offered on the basis of a report of neglect or abuse. Even when the initial hostility is dealt with in a constructive way, it usually will be expressed from time to time during the treatment process.

The usual reaction of parents is one of anxiety and fear—*anxiety* as to what the situation may mean for them; *fear* that their children may be removed from them. In addition to anxiety, fear and at times guilt, the parents frequently react with intense hostility toward the worker and the agency he represents, as well as toward the person who has made the complaint. In many cases, hostility and anxiety are expressed overtly through denial that anything is wrong and refusal to consider the matter further. In some instances, the neglectful or abusing parent may not be able to recall clearly the circumstances involving the report or may not be aware of the mistreatment of the child that resulted in the complaint. It is important to relate to the parents as persons and assist them in dealing with the problems of daily living. Direct confrontation, with its sense of criticism, may not be so helpful as positive attention to the parents, who may then begin to respond to the offer of a helping relationship.

The worker must be prepared to demonstrate genuine concern for, as

well" as active and concrete evidence of interest in, the parents by such means as home visits and help with their problems of daily life.

In situations where the parents do not express feelings openly, the social worker should continue to attempt to help them do so, so that they can use their energy in examining the situation and in making efforts to correct it. This applies particularly to parents who have been so unhappy and discouraged in their own life situations, and need help so badly, that they are relieved by the entrance of the social worker and seize upon and use any offer of help, however presented and with whatever threat involved. Other parents who are unable to acknowledge expressions of hostility may need to experience and feel the worker's concern for them as individuals so that they will not take out their unexpressed feelings on their children.

### 3.9 Relieving environmental stress

It is necessary to help some parents to create a more favorable environment for their children, to improve the conditions under which they are living, or to obtain the essentials that the family and children lack.

No social service can substitute for enough money to buy adequate food, shelter and clothing and to permit participation in community life. It may be impossible to compensate for the effects of prolonged deprivation and insecurity. It is often necessary to minimize stress and prevent or modify conditions that contribute to deprivation and poor family situations to help a parent change.

Steps may have to be taken to assure the family and child an adequate income, public assistance, decent housing (relocation), help in home management (homemaker service), health care, developmental experiences (e.g., day care or Head Start), vocational opportunities, recreation.

### 3.10 Duration of service

The term of service should be determined in any situation by the nature of the problem, the use parents are able to make of the service, and the progress that is made toward correcting the situation and meeting the child's needs.

An arbitrary time limit should not be set by the agency, but periodic evaluation of the family situation will assist in determining focus and direction of the social work plan and whether the situation can be modified.

It is necessary to accept the parents' pace in making use of the social

work service without losing sight of its major goal—adequate care and protection of the child.

The initial active period of service characteristic of all social work services is intensified in protective service. This period must often be prolonged to give extended attention to the parents to enable them to gain self-esteem and trust in their own ability to be more effective. As they gain the ability to see their child's needs as separate from their own and begin to meet these needs, protective service can become less intensive.

### 3.11 Termination of service

Protective service should be terminated when the child is receiving care that meets at least his minimum needs, and the parents have demonstrated their ability to continue to care for the child without the agency's service.

In protective service, it is the agency's responsibility to determine when its purpose has been accomplished and its service is no longer needed, and to decide at what point to step out.

Other agencies and professional persons should be involved in the planning of termination when there has been a cooperative arrangement in providing protection of the child.

Service may be terminated if a report has been found to be unwarranted, even though no service other than the initial exploration and evaluation has been involved.

When parents have been helped to recognize the neglect of their child, have been motivated to improve the care that they give the child and derive some satisfaction from the improvements, the social worker should clearly indicate to the parents that protective service is no longer needed. If the parents need and desire help in relation to other problems, the social worker is responsible either for referral to the agency or department giving the type of service needed, or for continuing with them if he carries responsibility for providing the service needed, as in a multi-service agency.

When parents have not been able to use protective services effectively and the child's needs are not being met or when abuse or exploitation of the child has not modified, the protective service has the responsibility to sum up the evidence and initiate court action. When this is done, and the court has provided for the child, protective service should be terminated. Service should continue, however, if the child is to return home or if other children in the home require protection.

instances where a child is not receiving satisfactory care and parents will not use help, and there is either insufficient evidence or no possibility of getting evidence to refer these situations to court, the agency may decide to terminate its service for the present. It should notify persons who might subsequently have knowledge of evidence required for court action to report upon it at that time. Parents must be told that the agency will re-enter if there is a valid report of neglect or suspicion of abuse.

### 3.12 Use of voluntary placement

Where parents request that a child be removed from the home, or have recognized their inability to give the child proper care and have shown that they are able to make the placement plan for the child, voluntary placement may be effective.

Temporary foster care can be a means of providing relief, particularly in a time of family crisis, and can be an enabling process for the parents and a safety factor for the child. Voluntary placement is a responsible act by the parents and should serve as a bridge for the child to return home or to go to a permanent home elsewhere.

When return of the child to the family is the plan, work should continue with the parents during and after placement to help them use their potential strengths to make the home safer and better for the child, thus integrating placement plans with the goals of protective service.

When the child returns home, the protective services worker should continue to help. The worker needs to ascertain that care of the child has improved to meet the essential standards of child care and to consolidate the gains that have been made. Some families will need extra help to tide them over this period. Some parents may not be able to sustain their gains once the child returns home and the child may again be neglected or abused and require separation from the parents.

### 3.13 Removal of children from parents through court action

Where neglect or abuse has been continuous or severe, and the parents do not recognize it or have not been able to change their behavior even with social work help, court action should be taken to determine the most suitable plan of care. (1.5, 4.9)

Whether or not the parents want voluntary placement of the child should not at this time affect the process.

Court action should be taken to determine if a child is within the legal definition of neglect or abuse, and not to bring charges against the parents. Court action may serve to focus the problem for the parents, and assure for the child the continuing protection he needs. If the child is neglected or abused, parents should be helped to recognize this, and should have the opportunity to discuss with the court what they think about the situation and what they plan to do. This is essential to the subsequent working relationship with parents, who otherwise might go on denying the neglect or abuse indefinitely and take no responsibility for working on their problem.

If the subsequent plan is placement in foster care or adoption, the goal of social work is to help the parents accept placement as the desirable plan, and, if they are able, to help their children face and adjust to the changes in their lives that will follow.

Court action serves to clarify the custody status of the child and the status of the placement agency with respect to his custody. For the parents, it clarifies the extent of their rights and responsibilities for the child in his changed status.

### *Direct Social Work With the Child*

Although protective service is given primarily through social work with the parents, direct help to the child should be provided as required, particularly where separation from the family is necessary. Social work with the child should be coordinated with the plan of working with the parents. The parents should be helped to understand the agency's role in relation to the child.

Direct services and resources as needed by the child should be available whether the child remains at home, lives with relatives, is in emergency care, or is in temporary placement.

### 3.14 Purpose of social work with the child

Social work with the child is necessary in order to get to know him, and to provide a continuing relationship through which the child may have the necessary help directly.

The social worker should have opportunities to work with the child, either in the home or in the office, to

- evaluate the effect of the situation on the child and determine if he is neglected, abused or exploited

- help the child understand what is happening during the time the agency remains in the situation
- help in his relationship with his parents
- help the child to adjust to changed and improved conditions or parental attitudes; or to deal with the internalized problems that do not respond to improvement in the parents' attitudes and care
- help remove the child from a hazardous situation where necessary
- help prepare the child for separation and for emergency care or placement where a plan involves separation from the parents
- act temporarily for the parents or as a supplement to parents, when they agree to it but are not ready or able to give the necessary immediate help to the child themselves, as when the child needs social, educational, medical, psychiatric or other services.

### 3.15 Nature of direct service

The extent and type of direct social work with the child should be determined by the age of the child, the nature of the child's problem, the child's capacity to understand, the ability of the parents to help the child themselves and the parents' willingness to permit direct help.

The social worker should see each child as well as other members of the household in relation to the specific report and determine if problems are present with which help will be needed. If the child is hospitalized, the social worker should see the child but not question the child to elicit proof of his own abuse or neglect.

Children who remain with their parents in a family where there is neglect or abuse or sexual involvement have needs and concerns with which they should have specific help, including concern about agency intervention. The social worker should help the parents with the child's problems, determine the extent of the child's awareness of the situation, and plan with the parents for the use of community resources that can be helpful to the child's development, such as medical care, day care, camping experiences or educational therapy.

If suitable arrangements can be made, placement of the child with relatives may be a possibility when he cannot live with his parents. He may need help from both his relatives and the social worker to understand why he cannot be with his parents. A direct social work relationship with the child is indicated when there is need to supplement what the relatives are able to provide.

Direct help is needed for the child who has to be removed from his

home in order to protect him from immediate danger, when the child's life is at stake or seriously threatened, when abandonment occurs, when the child has been a victim of a sex crime, or on direct request from the child.

Social work with the child who is alone—abandoned, orphaned or removed from parents—should assist the child to accept his situation and referral to an appropriate agency. It may also cover plans for placement with relatives or in temporary care. The social worker should carry responsibility for a continuing relationship with the child until an adequate plan is made. For the child who must be placed temporarily away from home, direct help can be given in a relationship with a worker who knows the child and understands what separation means to children. The relationship may sustain the child, since the social worker is a liaison between the child and the parents and represents the known in a situation full of unknowns for the child.

### 3.16 Approach to the child

Help to the child must be given with respect for and understanding of his parents, even though their behavior is damaging or harmful to the child.

It is necessary to recognize and support the importance of parents to their children. Every effort should be made to retain the child's respect for his parents, even though reference is made to improper actions that may have been the cause of neglect, abuse or exploitation.

Any social work service given directly to the child is more effective if the parents will permit and support it. In protective services, as in other social work services, the adults in a child's life must work together.

### 3.17 Evaluation of effects of situation on child

An evaluation should be made of both the physical and emotional effects of neglect and abuse on the child and the possible effect of placement away from parents, as weighed against continued inadequate care or danger to the child.

The focus of protective service should be on how the situation is affecting the child and other children in the home.

The meaning to the child of his own parents' unwillingness or inability to rear him, and problems of identity—who he is and where he belongs—should be recognized.

## *Social Work Skills*

### 3.18 Requirements for social worker in protective service

The social worker in protective service should be expected to have or to develop specific skills in addition to generic social work skills. (5.11, 5.14)

He must first of all be a skillful social worker.

Some of the specific skills that he must have are developed as a result of experience in an agency providing protective service, and some are acquired through practice in other settings but are equally applicable in protective service.

He must have skills in using social work methods and procedures required by agency function, and in carrying out the responsibility inherent in protective service, including

- communicating comfortably and appropriately with parents who have not asked for help and who are generally angry or uncooperative
- dealing with informants and helping them to separate their own feelings and needs from the report involving neglect or abuse of children, so that they can understand the agency's function and method
- evaluating reports from the community to make a quick assessment and plan for treatment or action
- accepting the parents' reaction to the agency's intervention and dealing with it constructively, so that the helping relationship becomes effective, and the parents' and the agency's rights in the situation are clear
- helping parents to face and accept the reality that neglect or abuse exists, and motivating them to change their care of the child
- collaborating and consulting with other professionals and community agencies, and supervising team operations in treating the child or the family
- recognizing when personal reactions interfere with service to parents because of such overidentification with children who have been neglected or abused that there is underidentification with the parents
- accepting the parents' pace in making use of social work service without losing sight of the major responsibility, which is adequate care and protection of the child
- evaluating continuously the effect of neglect and abuse on children, both from a physical and emotional standpoint
- evaluating the necessity of placement of the child away from his parents, as against continued improper care

- evaluating evidence for court action in relation to the specific neglect or abuse statute of the state
- helping parents to go through the court experience with as full an understanding as possible of what is involved for them and their child, and to see it as a constructive experience
- helping the child to understand what is happening throughout the agency's contact
- helping the child to move from his own home into temporary care when emergency situations make this necessary.

# *CPS Treatment of the Neglectful Parent*

By  
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## *Introduction*

Child neglect, for many different reasons, is the most difficult form of child maltreatment to deal with by helping professionals. Some of these reasons will be discussed in this article and several treatment considerations will be presented. In the past, most of the attention in human services has been directed towards child abuse with little money or resources left over to adequately research the area of child neglect. Yet, the larger the body of knowledge in the area of neglect, the greater our ability will be to effectively predict the impact of our treatment intervention. Even though our knowledge of the causative factors of child neglect is limited, it can be stated that the gap between what we do know and our ability to provide effective treatment is great. It may be time for us to realistically look at what can be done with the limited amount of time and resources currently available to work with neglectful families rather than to continue complaining about the lack of time, energy and community programs designed to eradicate the problem. Large caseloads and limited community resources are certainly not going to improve in the near future, but a systematic approach to the problem with strict adherence to the child protective service casework process will help to improve the treatment we give to neglectful families.

The casework process, as outlined by the American Association for Protecting Children, has beginning, middle, and concluding aspects which are applied to helping people solve specific problems.<sup>1</sup> Beginning stages are receiving the report, taking and completing a thorough intake evaluation, and doing a systematic investigation or initial assessment of the risk to the children of continued neglect. This initial investigation and assessment must be done in a timely fashion and be reflective of the legal mandate and standards of practice of the investigating agency. The second phase which includes assessment, diagnosis, and case planning requires that the caseworker begin to get to know each individual member of the family. When the caseworker approaches the family and identifies himself as a Child Protective Service worker and begins to accumulate information necessary for the assessment, he is saying to the family, "You are important and it is necessary for me to get to know more about you." Another important aspect of this second phase of the CPS process is the diagnostic statement which is a written evaluation of the problem areas identified by the helping professional and agreed upon by the client. The establishment of a case plan is also completed in conjunction with the client when the assessment information and diagnostic statement is shared and discussed. The third phase of the CPS process involves service provision, case plan review, and case closure. This ending phase of the process becomes less difficult if the initial assessment and identification of treatment goals is accomplished in a timely and efficient way.

It must be understood that treatment of a neglectful family begins the moment a case is accepted by a CPS agency and continues throughout the casework process described above.

This article will look at some of the real difficulties we have in defining child neglect and how this has influenced our treat-

ment of the condition. A brief review of the **Highlights of Official Child Neglect and Abuse Reporting 1986** and its implications for treating or not treating neglecting families will be presented. Reasons why helping agencies, helping professionals, and neglecting parents themselves often are not able to effectively engage in the treatment process and the more generally accepted causative factors of why people may neglect their children will be discussed. Finally, treatment techniques and skills can be presented because, if we have followed the process as specified above, we will know the clients we want to work with toward the amelioration of the neglecting behavior. Treating the neglecting client requires that we follow the casework process in order to establish the kind of helping relationship necessary to bring about change. Relationship and alliance with the client are goals of casework treatment, not a pre-condition for working with neglectful parents.

## *Definitional Considerations*

Many people have difficulty in separating abuse and neglect. They tend to think that child maltreatment falls on a continuum, where a person begins as neglectful and will eventually become abusive. Young found that abusive parents and neglectful parents have one major common characteristic which is an immature personality.<sup>2</sup> Fontana feels that child abuse and neglect are different and this affects the treatment of the parents. However, from the child's point of view, it is all maltreatment. Abuse can be described as an act of commission, positive maltreatment, or an "act of desperation." Neglect is an act of omission, negative maltreatment, or an "act of despair." It represents parental failure and can be best understood when we look at the personal meaning of the neglecting behavior from the parents' perspective.

States, communities, and even neighborhoods have different definitions of what constitutes neglectful behavior. In addition, professional disciplines emphasize different facets of neglectful behavior. Legal definitions identify what parents cannot do to their children and are not concerned with causative factors but rather with matters of clear and present danger. Most medical definitions of neglect refer to the failure by the parent to provide the basic physiological needs of the child. The educational definitions are much more specific because of the fact that neglect can affect the child's ability to learn within a structured classroom setting. Social work definitions are concerned about what the child's future will bring if nothing is done about the neglectful behavior; they are able to look at the causative factors, the child's current condition, and predict future behavior.

The conflicting and often confusing standards of child care, which may differ depending on the area of town in which one lives, along with the different emphasis various disciplines put on neglectful behaviors, can cause real confusion for the parents who are confronted with an accusation of neglecting their children. Most definitions do not specify what is or what is not acceptable in operational terms, thus, there is no clear distinction between what is acceptable parenting and what is not. Parents confronted with this confusion may show their resis-

tance by remaining silent and seemingly non-caring. It may very well be the only way many clients can make a statement about what is happening to them.

### ***Magnitude of the Problem***

A review of the statistics in regard to the reports of child neglect compiled by the American Association for Protecting Children may be helpful in considering some of the reasons why people who neglect their children may be verbally inaccessible and seemingly unmotivated. The **Highlights of Official Child Neglect and Abuse Reporting 1986** shows that 55 percent of the types of maltreatment reported were for deprivation of necessities. This analysis also indicated that 52 percent of all reported cases were closed after initial investigation.<sup>4</sup> Schene suggests, but acknowledges that it cannot be absolutely determined from this data, that the reasons for these cases being closed after investigation could be either that there was no need for Child Protective Services intervention or that resources were so limited that more families could not be served.<sup>5</sup>

Given the fact that most cases of maltreatment reported are for neglect and that CPS agencies require a time limit for their investigations to be completed, it may be that the caseworker was unable to complete the assessment because of the client's resistance and/or verbal inaccessibility. The caseworker's inability to really get to know the family because of the client's poor communication skills, inability to verbalize feelings, or feelings of distrust, may in fact cause the caseworkers to be less enthusiastic in identifying problem areas to focus on in future treatment interventions. When a caseworker is not sure what constitutes neglectful behavior and what is considered normal child care, when he is unable to engage the client in the initial assessment process and feels the pressure of getting a case in and out of the system quickly, then the less obvious forms of child maltreatment are often ignored and the case is closed with no treatment services provided. These cases are for the most part neglecting parents and their children. This experience will further alienate many of these families and the neglect will continue.

### ***Causative Factors of Neglect***

In order to effectively treat child neglect, one must know who one is dealing with and have some possible explanation for the neglecting behaviors witnessed. Most parents want to be good parents, have the capacity to be good parents, and can be helped to do an adequate job. Child neglect is rarely a willful act; it represents parental inadequacy and an inability to care for their children. There are reasons why neglect occurs.

Economic deprivation is the major source of social stress and social stress is a major factor in child neglect. The anxiety, strain, and continuous frustration that people in poverty endure can lead to many different dysfunctional behaviors. The caseworker must be very skillful and persistent in environmental manipulation in order to get for his clients as much as possible in terms of concrete services. This provision of concrete help enables the caseworker to better establish the trusting relation-

ship necessary before the client can begin to be less suspicious of the worker and more able to verbalize feelings.

Differing cultural values may also contribute to neglectful behavior. Many parents do not share the predominant values in our society in regard to child rearing. The child rearing practices are often learned from the parents' own upbringing. The caseworker must act as an agent for socialization and also be a model for the parents. Teaching the parent "normal, acceptable" child rearing practices begins immediately at intake and continues through case termination.

Problems in family structure is another causative factor of neglect. Kadushin cites a study that found 60 percent of neglectful families were single-parent families as compared to only seven percent of all families being one-parent in the sample population.<sup>6</sup> Family size is a significant factor: excessive numbers of mouths to feed is stressful. Mulford found in a Massachusetts Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children study of neglectful families that the average number of children in those families were 3.4.<sup>7</sup> Kadushin cites another study where seven percent of the neglectful families had between 7 and 13 children.<sup>8</sup>

Polansky provides evidence that neglectful families are not in helping networks as are others of similar social position.<sup>9</sup> This tendency of the neglectful parent to be disengaged and detached from family and friends further hinders the caseworker's efforts at engaging the client in a treatment relationship. The caseworker must emphasize family networks and effort to involve other family members who may add strength to the neglectful family system. Knowledge of and referral to other community resources is necessary in order to increase the families' social network. The 1986 AAPC data reveals various stress factors present with child neglect. Health problems were cited in 41 percent of the cases, economic and living problems in 52 percent, and family interaction problems in 72 percent of the cases.<sup>10</sup>

Conditions of poverty, large families, single-parent families, differing cultural values, poor health, and family interaction problems, all contribute to neglect but are certainly not the only causes. The environmental stress associated with these above mentioned conditions, combining with the inner chaos associated with personality disturbance, may very well be the primary cause of child neglect. Polansky identified types of personalities observed most frequently among mothers in situations of child neglect. They all share infantile characteristics and it is helpful to know which one you are dealing with because the treatment interventions will vary.

- *Apathetic-Futile Mother.* They demonstrate a pervasive aura that nothing is worth doing. They are unable to indulge themselves, they have no goals and little energy. They are the most verbally inaccessible because they feel that talking out their problems is not worth the effort primarily because it has never helped before. Increased verbalization of feelings may improve child care.
- *Impulse Ridden Mother.* They seek an all or nothing response. Child neglect is felt to be secondary to self-