

Is Chronic Neglect the Future for Children?

Chronic neglect refers to cases that are reported to child protection repeatedly. Our recent webinar speaker Dee Wilson estimates that it accounts for 1/5 to 1/3 of child protection cases nationally.

Chronic neglect includes a breakdown of parental norms, for example by leaving pre-school children alone for hours or days at a time. Frequently it is accompanied by deep poverty and spirals into physical and sexual abuse.

In [this article](#) Wilson states that once chronic neglect takes hold, therapy and other interventions are ineffective. So the appropriate response is intervening early with financial supports and services to restore parental functioning.

However today's adult-focused policies encourage workers to treat each maltreatment report separately and ignore the overall pattern. This, combined with political pressures to limit the role of child protection, presages a future where children are purposefully consigned to chronic neglect.

Narrative for podcast on chronic neglect blog

Today's blog and podcast are based largely on the work of Dee Wilson, particularly on his 2020 article "What is Chronic Neglect". There is a link to this article in today's blog, or you can find it at www.deewilsoncon.com/copy-of-comm-129.

Dee Wilson worked for many years in Washington state's child welfare system at all levels, then moved to the School of Social Work at Washington University where he focused on research and training of direct service workers. Interestingly, he worked for five years at Casey Family Programs where he wrote about many issues including torture and chronic maltreatment, which is the main topic of today's podcast. He produces a monthly column called the *Sounding Board*, which he publishes independently but also has appeared in published in the online child welfare news magazine called The Imprint. You can find Wilson's Sounding Board articles on his consulting website which is DeeWilsoncon.com/writings.

<https://www.deewilsoncon.com/writings>

It is interesting that Wilson lasted as long as five years at Casey Family Programs, where his point of view, which is pretty much in sync with that of Safe Passage and really at odds with that of Casey, which as you know if you have followed Safe Passage at all is responsible for Alternative Response programs throughout the country, which are a very adult-friendly and child-unfriendly approach to child welfare, one which gives parents and any other adults in the household opportunity after opportunity to avoid child protection intervention, and consistently leave children in situations where they deteriorate quickly or in some cases are killed. That is why today we are focusing on the Wilson analysis of chronic neglect.

By the way, if you are interested in professional, child focused quality analysis of child welfare issues and you don't have time to read all the academic articles, there are two blogs I recommend. One we have talked about before which is Marie Cohen's Child Welfare Monitor and the other is the Sounding Board.

So regarding chronic maltreatment, Wilson does a lot of training in his current consulting work. He has told us that whenever he trains a group of child welfare workers he asks them what are the most reports of child maltreatment they have on any case. He says that he virtually always has hands raised up by workers who are saying that they have cases that were reported to child protection 30, 40, 60 or even 100 times. As mentioned in the blog, he estimates that 1/5 to 1/3 of the child protection cases nationally fit into this category of chronic neglect. He compares that to only 1% to 2% of cases which are in the better-known categories of the battered child syndrome.

The impact of chronic neglect on children is severe, as we have pointed out many times in our communications from Safe Passage. They include in Wilson's terms a loss of efficacy for the child meaning a loss of control or feeling of ownership of the body and mind, and a feeling of inability to control social situations. Obviously chronic neglect also has a huge impact on children's developmental growth, so that the brains of children who are chronically failed to develop normally and they are often ill-equipped to lead a full adult life.

Wilson describes chronic neglect largely in terms of an erosion of social norms around parenting. He gives examples for example that normally people do not think that it is appropriate to leave preschool age children alone. But in chronic but situations parents may go from leaving an infant alone for a couple of hours while they run an errand to leaving toddlers home for days at a time. Other social norms around giving the child adequate nutrition and water, changing their diaper or giving them a bath and other basic parenting tasks are avoided. Over time he says that chronic neglect can often spiral downwards into physical and sexual abuse. This can even get to the point of torture, which is a topic we have covered elsewhere, in which parents eventually actually gain sadistic pleasure from harming children. This occurs particularly in situations where children have been adopted or are being fostered.

Wilson attributes chronic neglect partly to workers who are overloaded, and where they do not screen in cases because each individual reports of child maltreatment may not rise to the level of a strong child protection intervention. In addition we would add that alternative response programs, or Family Assessment as is known in Minnesota, actively discourage workers from screening in cases that are not an immediate threat to children, based on the political ideology typical of both the far right and far left that families should almost always be left intact because families do a better job of raising children and does government. This was actually enshrined in law in Minnesota until 2015 until which the law said that workers could not use previous reports of maltreatment or involvement in the child protection system when considering a new report. As a result of the 2015 Governor's Task Force on the Protection of Children, we were able to get this changed in Minnesota so that previous child protection involvement including previous reports must be considered in making a determination on a current maltreatment report.

However, there is no way to determine whether counties are actually following this law in Minnesota or are trained to look at the overall pattern maltreatment as opposed to the individual. In addition existing assessment tools are not designed well to pick up on chronic maltreatment.

We think it is obvious that looking families through a strictly political lens does not serve the interests of children adequately. As we have often said this is a political philosophy that is not based on research or a professional approach to child welfare, it is one that is adult focused and not child focused, and it ignores the most basic safety and child well-being norms of society. It frankly treats children as property to be used and disposed of by its owners who are often the parents but sometimes also include other people living in the household, or even distant kin or fictive kin who have taken custody of the child.

Unfortunately Wilson makes the case, and I encourage you to read the article that is linked to his argument in the blog, which is on our website, that once neglect becomes chronic it is impervious to any type of therapy or intervention. So unless we come up with strategies to intervene earlier, children will be increasingly condemned to life altering forms of neglect where their only possible escape is to be removed from the family. And as mentioned getting children removed is becoming increasingly difficult.

Wilson also has a pretty gloomy view of the future of child protection overall. He points to the movements to abolish child protection completely and predicts that it will be increasingly difficult to fund traditional child protection and foster care programs or get support for basic norms around protecting children

Given this his strategy is to focus on early intervention, first by having child protection put more emphasis on financial supports for families who are on the verge of or are in the system. This is because poverty, particularly deep poverty, is a primary driver of child maltreatment overall and neglect in particular. Secondly he recommends providing services that directly address the breakdown of parenting norms. These might include in-home services that help develop parenting skills. I would add to that early childhood programs which will give children stimulation to help with brain development, particularly for infants and toddlers.

My personal take away from this is to consider taking the long-standing Safe Passage strategy of improving child welfare practices by making them safer and more nurturing for children, and adding to it an emphasis on encouraging child protection to focus on immediate financial supports for parents, and on in-home services including prenatal to two programs as well as ones for parents with older children. This is not only a tough sell though, not only in terms of budgets, but it runs into the conundrum that child welfare is very reluctant to intervene early and to mandate parents to utilize the services. As child advocates the political challenges facing us seem to be increasing over time rather than diminishing, which means that we have to redouble our efforts and stay the course if we want to speak on behalf of children.

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