

A Textual Analysis of Dental Neglect in The Child Abuse User Manual Series

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Background

- As a form of child neglect, dental neglect is defined by the American Academy of Pediatric Dentistry as “willful failure of parent or guardian to seek and follow through with treatment necessary to ensure a level of oral health essential for adequate function and freedom from pain and infection” (AAPD, 2020, p. 16). The concept of dental neglect is also vaguely defined both in the literature and within the law.
- There is a scarcity of research that deals with the intersection of child welfare and dentistry.
- While dental neglect is often grouped into medical neglect, non-dental professionals do not always have the training or comfort to identify dental neglect (Whyatt et al., 2021).
- One important guide that aids in the identification of, prevention of, and response to child maltreatment is the Child Abuse and Neglect User Manual Series. These documents directly inform child welfare practice and serve as an overarching resource for child welfare professionals

Purpose

- This study performed a textual analysis of the Child Abuse and Neglect User Manual Series to help determine how dental neglect has been historically and is presently conceptualized in the documents to understand how dental neglect can be better incorporated into child welfare practice.

Methods and Design

- The study completed a textual analysis of the Child Abuse and Neglect User Manual Series. The series is published by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services Administration for Children and Families and is meant to serve as a foundational tool to provide both knowledge and practice guidance surrounding child abuse and neglect to child protective service caseworker and community partners and professionals in law enforcement, the legal system, domestic violence, health care, mental health, and substance abuse, as well as childcare and education.
- The study employed a qualitative approach, while reporting select quantitative frequencies of terms, through the theoretical framework of grounded theory, whereby through the data obtained, the researchers generated a theory on the way dental neglect is conceptualized in the user manuals through the context in which dental neglect is presented (Creswell & Poth, 2016).
- The study evaluated both the new and revised versions as well as the 1990s versions. The manuals in this temporal frame consisted of a total of 17 publicly available documents.
- All documents were manually reviewed by the researchers. Each document was searched twice by both coding researchers to ensure all textual references were identified.
- Eleven search terms were initially utilized to locate areas in the text where dental health was mentioned: dental, oral, mouth, tooth, teeth, dentist, dentistry, toothbrush, cavity, decay, and caries.
- These codes were determined by preliminary searches of the documents and agreed upon by the coding researchers, who are practicing dentists, to be common terms associated with oral health.
- The categories were manually clustered into themes, allowing for the development of common themes across the documents. The medical researcher then reviewed the themes to ensure accuracy, and all three researchers determined the findings.

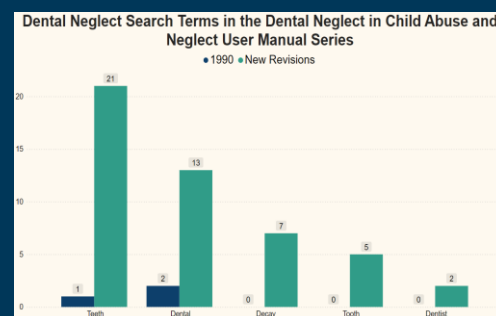
Results

| Themes in 1990s Manuals | | | | |
|-------------------------|---------------------|-----------------|------------------------|-----------------|
| Dental | Medical Neglect | Substance Abuse | | |
| Oral | Reporting Practices | Sexual Abuse | Feeding Concerns | Substance Abuse |
| Mouth | Sexual Abuse | Substance Abuse | Prenatal Drug Exposure | |
| Teeth | Physical Abuse | | | |
| Cavity | Abdominal Cavity | | | |

- The term dental neglect specifically was not found in any of the documents in this temporal frame. The following describes the themes that were noted where dental neglect was alluded to or indirectly mentioned.
- When dental neglect was indirectly referenced, it was mentioned in the context of physical neglect including refusal or delay in dental care. The term dental is also mentioned under childhood deprivation, where it is stated that this deprivation will lead to oral health problems that will require attention in the future into adulthood.

| Themes in New Revisions Manuals | | | | | | |
|---------------------------------|---------------------------|--------------------------|--------------------------|------------------------------|------------|--------------|
| Dental | Generalized Child Neglect | Medical Neglect | Unattended Dental Issues | Physical Abuse | | |
| Oral | Reporting Practices | Sexual Abuse | Oral Hygiene | | | |
| Mouth | Sexual Abuse | Drug Usage | Physical Abuse | Witnessing Domestic Violence | | |
| Tooth | Physical Abuse | Unattended Dental Issues | | | | |
| Teeth | Generalized Child Neglect | Physical Abuse | Medical Neglect | Unattended Dental Issues | Drug Usage | Oral Hygiene |
| Dentist | Barriers to Care | Mandate Reporting | | | | |
| Toothbrush | Oral Hygiene | | | | | |
| Decay | Oral Hygiene | Unattended Dental Issues | General Neglect | Physical Neglect | | |

- As seen in the 1990s Child Welfare User manuals, the term dental neglect was not specifically mentioned and was grouped with medical neglect as a subsection of physical neglect.
- When dental problems were mentioned, none of the articles descriptively defined what should specifically be identified as potential clinical markers of dental neglect.



This graph demonstrates a comparison between the 1990s and New Revisions Child Abuse and Neglect User Manual Series. The select terms chosen were most closely associated with the context of dental neglect within the documents. The figure demonstrates that while dental neglect is not mentioned in either set of documents, there is an increased mention of the concept of dental neglect in the New Revisions as compared with the 1990s documents.

Discussion

- As can be seen from all the articles searched in both temporal frames, there is not a single time where the term “dental neglect” is specifically mentioned.
- Often dental neglect is alluded to as part of medical or physical neglect but is not clinically defined.
- The user manual series often grouped dental neglect as a part of generalized child neglect or medical neglect.
- In congruence with these findings, the most recent NCANDS/Child Maltreatment report for the FFY 2021 does not differentiate dental neglect from medical neglect. The data indicate that dental neglect is not distinguished from medical neglect when compiling federal statistics on national abuse victimization patterns (Child Maltreatment, 2021).
- While the American Academy of Pediatrics notes that collaborating with professionals and resources within the community to help optimize the health of a medically neglected child is important, as dentistry is often practiced in isolation, this principle is less readily translated into dental practice.
- Interconnection between dental professionals and social workers would help bridge access to care issues that prevent families from obtaining dental care such as inability to access transportation or difficulty navigating the health care system that may lead to unintentional neglect.
- Social work intervention that provides links to community-based supports addressing these factors can help to empower families to appropriately seek and follow through with dental care. In addition, greater dental professional involvement in child welfare assessments would help to provide clinical context to situations of dental neglect both in isolation and the context of greater child neglect and, with a historical context, could provide clarity and insight into potential cases of child maltreatment.

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