NEGLECT SCENARIOS & Reflection Questions CARDS for Social Workers & Other Professionals

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Physical neglect

Unsafe and unhygienic home

Teachers raise concerns about Amira, aged five, and Sami, aged seven, who often arrive at school dirty and hungry. A home visit shows a damp, cluttered flat with broken furniture, little food and no heating. Their mother, Layla, says the landlord refuses repairs and she cannot keep up with cleaning or cooking. The children sleep on thin mattresses without bedding and say they feel cold most nights. The home smells of damp and there are signs of mould on the walls. Layla says she feels embarrassed and does not know how to ask for help.

Reflection questions

- What are the main risks to Amira and Sami's health, safety, and wellbeing?
- What information would help you understand the family's situation more fully?
- What support or practical help could improve the children's daily living conditions?
- When would professionals have a legal or policy duty to take protective action?
- How might your personal views about poverty and neglect affect your assessment?

Medical neglect

Untreated health needs

Ella, aged nine, has diabetes and has been hospitalised twice this year due to dangerously high blood sugar levels. Her father, Mark, says he forgets her medication schedule and finds managing insulin stressful. School staff say Ella often appears unwell and tired. Health professionals report repeated missed appointments despite offers of help. The family doctor believes Ella's care is inconsistent and unsafe. Mark says he loves his daughter but feels overwhelmed and unsupported.

Reflection questions

- What are the immediate and long-term risks to Ella's health?
- How would you assess Mark's capacity to manage her medical care safely?
- What professionals or services might need to be involved to support this family?
- At what point would professionals have to act under child protection law or policy?
- How could Ella's voice and experiences be included in your assessment?

Emotional neglect

Lack of warmth and attention

Lucas, aged seven, is quiet and withdrawn at school and rarely joins in with other children. His teacher says he seems anxious and avoids eye contact. During a home visit, his mother, Tina, speaks sharply to him and shows little warmth. The home feels silent and tense, with no toys or signs of play. Tina says she finds parenting stressful and that Lucas "gets on her nerves." Lucas says he stays in his room so he does not make his mother angry.

Reflection questions

- What does this situation suggest about Lucas's emotional needs?
- How might this home environment affect his behaviour and development?
- What factors could be influencing Tina's ability to show emotional warmth and care?
- How could supervision or reflection help you maintain professional curiosity and objectivity?
- What kind of support or intervention could address the concerns?

Educational neglect

Persistent non-attendance

Chloe, aged fourteen, has missed most of the school term. Her mother, Denise, says Chloe refuses to go and that she will not force her. Chloe spends most days at home online or sleeping. The school reports that Chloe is falling behind and becoming isolated. When visited, Chloe says she feels anxious at school and that her mother tells her she can stay home. Denise says she had a poor school experience herself and does not believe education matters.

Reflection questions

- What do you need to understand about the reasons for Chloe's absence?
- How would you explore both Chloe's and Denise's views on education?
- What are the possible long-term effects if this pattern continues?
- What professional or legal responsibilities apply to long-term non-attendance?
- What support could help rebuild positive routines for Chloe and her mother?

Supervisory neglect

Children left alone

A neighbour reports that Mason, aged eight, and Lily, aged six, are often left home alone while their mother, Rachael, works night shifts. Rachael says she calls them regularly and leaves food prepared, insisting they are safe. On one visit, the children are found watching television after midnight with the door unlocked. They say they get frightened when they hear noises. Rachael says she cannot afford childcare and feels she has no choice.

Reflection questions

- What are the immediate safety risks for Mason and Lily?
- How would you assess Rachael's understanding of risk and her willingness to change?
- What support might reduce the risks for this family?
- What laws or policies guide professionals when children are left without supervision?
- How can you stay compassionate towards Rachael while ensuring the children's safety?

Neglect linked to parental substance misuse

Jayden, aged two, is found at home with his mother, Sophie, who appears intoxicated. There are empty bottles and cigarette butts on the floor. The home smells of alcohol, and Jayden's clothes are dirty and damp. Neighbours report hearing shouting and crying late at night. Sophie says she drinks to manage stress and fears asking for help in case her son is removed. She says she loves Jayden but feels trapped.

Reflection questions

- What are the short-term and long-term risks to Jayden's wellbeing?
- How would you assess Sophie's motivation and ability to make changes?
- What professionals or agencies could work together to support this family?
- What legal or policy duties might apply in this case?
- How could you build trust while ensuring Jayden's safety remains the priority?

Chronic neglect

Long-term minimal changee

Hannah, aged eight, lives with her mother, Kelly, who has been known to services for several years. Concerns about hygiene, poor diet and attendance continue despite earlier support. Kelly is polite and cooperative but rarely follows through. The home is cluttered, and Hannah's clothes are unwashed. Kelly says she is "doing her best" but feels too tired to keep up. Professionals describe a pattern of brief improvement followed by decline.

Reflection questions

- How can you recognise and evidence chronic neglect in this case?
- What signs suggest that Kelly may not have the capacity to change?
- What professional reviews or oversight could help prevent drift?
- How can Hannah's day-to-day experience guide next steps?
- What further actions are needed to ensure Hannah's safety and wellbeing?

Neglect linked to domestic abuse

Leanne lives with her partner, Tom, and their children Ben, aged five, and Sophie, aged seven. Tom is verbally abusive and controls Leanne's movements and money. The children are often late for school and appear anxious. During visits, Tom answers for Leanne and becomes defensive when asked about family life. The children cling to their mother and avoid eye contact with Tom. Leanne says Tom is a good father and never hurts the children.

Reflection questions

- How is domestic abuse affecting Ben and Sophie's wellbeing and safety?
- How can you assess the level of risk to Leanne?
- What immediate actions are needed to protect the family?
- How could you support Leanne to make safe and informed choices?
- How can you make sure the children's views and experiences are properly heard and recorded?

Cultural context

A school refers Ali, aged nine, after he often appears tired in class and sometimes arrives late. His parents, Samira and Omar, recently moved from another country and speak limited English. They explain that Ali stays up late to take part in evening prayers with the family and helps care for his younger siblings in the mornings. The teacher worries that Ali is not getting enough sleep or rest and may be under too much responsibility. A home visit shows a close, caring family with strong faith and community links. Samira says they feel misunderstood and judged for their way of life.

Reflection questions

- What information do you need to decide whether this is a safeguarding concern or a cultural difference?
- How can you ensure your assessment is culturally sensitive and fair?
- How might communication barriers or personal assumptions affect your understanding of this family?
- How could you build trust and work respectfully with Samira and Omar?
- What can professionals learn from this case to improve cultural understanding in their practice?

Adolescence and self-neglect

Ryan, aged sixteen, has stopped attending school and spends most of his time in his room. His mother, Paula, says he refuses to wash, eat properly or see a doctor. His room is cluttered with rubbish and leftover food. Ryan says he feels worthless and does not care what happens to him. Paula says she feels helpless and isolated. Professionals are worried about his health and mental wellbeing but find it hard to engage him.

Reflection questions

- What are the main risks to Ryan's physical and mental health?
- How could you build a trusting relationship and gain his participation?
- What services or professionals might help meet the family's needs?
- What legal or policy responsibilities guide work with self-neglect in young people?
- What would progress or improvement look like in this situation?

Cumulative neglect

Multiple low-level concerns

Martin and Sarah have three children aged four, six and nine. The children are often late for school, miss health checks and wear unwashed clothes. Each concern alone seems small, but professionals note a consistent pattern of neglect. The parents are friendly but unreliable and forget appointments. The home is cluttered and cold, and the children say their parents "forget things." There is no evidence of deliberate harm, but care is inconsistent.

Reflection questions

- How would you assess the combined impact of repeated low-level concerns?
- What might be preventing Martin and Sarah from maintaining progress?
- How could professionals share information to build a full picture of risk?
- What legal or policy guidance applies when neglect is ongoing but not severe?
- How could you help the parents understand the seriousness of this pattern?

Institutional neglect

Multiple low-level concerns

Jasmine, aged fifteen, lives in a residential care home and says staff often ignore her when she asks for help. She reports missed meals and bullying that is not addressed. The home appears understaffed and poorly maintained. Staff say they are doing their best but have too many residents to manage. Jasmine says she feels unsafe and tries to stay away from the home. The manager blames funding cuts and staff shortages for the problems.

Reflection questions

- What signs suggest Jasmine may be experiencing institutional neglect?
- What are the immediate and longer-term risks to her welfare?
- How should you record and report concerns about the quality of care?
- What actions could professionals take to ensure consistent and accountable care?
- How can you ensure Jasmine's voice is listened to and acted upon?

Scenario – the Morrison family

Kara Morrison lives with her three children, aged twelve, nine and six, in a two-bedroom housing association flat on the edge of town.

The children attend school most days but are often late. Teachers describe them as polite but tired, and say they sometimes arrive without breakfast.
Kara works part-time at a care home on night shifts. She says she struggles to manage mornings and relies on her eldest, Megan, to help her younger siblings get ready for school.

A home visit shows a small, cluttered flat. The carpet is worn, the kitchen cupboards are half-empty, and there is a faint smell of damp.

The children appear close to their mother, who is open and cooperative during visits. She says she has no family nearby and limited support.

The children talk fondly about their mum and say they “do lots together” at weekends, though Megan looks tired and says she “keeps an eye” on her brother and sister when their mum sleeps after work.

The family have had several previous early help plans, mainly focused on attendance and home routines.

School staff remain worried that progress is never sustained.
The family doctor has raised concerns about Kara’s low mood and frequent missed appointments.

Kara explains that she feels exhausted but insists she is managing and does not want more people “checking up on” her.

When professionals visit, the children are affectionate and show no fear.
There are no obvious hazards, but the flat feels cold, and the washing machine is broken.

Kara says she cannot afford a new one until payday.

The children’s school shoes are scuffed and too small, but they are clean and dressed appropriately for the weather.

Kara says she would “never let them go without.”

Scenario – Sophie

Sophie is 15 years old. She lives with her mother, Karen, and her younger brother, aged 8. Karen works long hours at two part-time jobs. She often comes home late, tired, and short-tempered. Sophie takes on many household responsibilities, including cooking, cleaning, and caring for her brother.

Over the past year, teachers have noticed that Sophie's attendance has declined. When she does attend school, she appears exhausted. She has fallen behind in her studies but refuses support from the school counsellor. Sophie has also become withdrawn from friends.

Neighbours have raised concerns that Sophie is out late with older young people. On one occasion, she was seen arguing with her mother on the street. Karen told a family friend that Sophie has become "disrespectful" and "out of control", shouting at her and refusing to follow rules. She says Sophie has even pushed her during an argument.

Sophie says her mother is neglectful and verbally abusive. She reports that there is little food at home and that her mother drinks most nights. Karen denies drinking excessively and says she is doing her best as a single parent. She believes Sophie is exaggerating and blames her for the family's problems.

When a social worker visits, the home appears clean, and both children are dressed appropriately. Karen is defensive but polite. Sophie is quiet and says things are "fine". The younger brother appears attached to both mother and sister.

Scenario – Liam

Liam is 16 years old and lives with his father, Paul, in a small town. His parents separated five years ago, and his mother lives in another city. Paul works night shifts as a delivery driver and is often asleep during the day. Liam spends most of his time on his own.

Liam tells his school that he prefers this arrangement. He says he likes his independence and that his father “trusts him to get on with things”. He cooks for himself, manages his own money from part-time work, and makes most of his own decisions.

However, school staff are worried. Liam has lost weight, sometimes smells of sweat, and has missed several medical appointments. He often falls asleep in class and has recently been excluded for fighting. When asked about this, he says he does not want anyone interfering in his life.

During a home visit, the social worker finds the house tidy but bare. There is little food in the kitchen, and the heating is off. Paul explains that he is doing his best. He believes Liam is old enough to take responsibility for himself and says that “he needs to learn how the world works”. He becomes angry when asked about supervision, saying social workers are “soft” and that his son is “no baby”.

Liam’s mother wants him to move in with her, but Liam refuses. He says she is too strict and treats him like a child. The parents disagree strongly, and both accuse the other of neglect.

Scenario – the Rahman family

The Rahman family recently moved to the country from overseas. They have three children aged 9, 6, and 3. Both parents speak limited English. The father works in a factory, often on night shifts. The mother stays at home and rarely leaves the house except to collect the children from school.

Teachers notice that the two older children are frequently tired, sometimes hungry, and wear the same clothes for several days. They are polite and quiet but do not join in playground games. When the school contacts the parents, the father insists that everything is fine and says the school should not interfere in “family matters”.

During a home visit, professionals find the house clean but bare. The children sleep on mattresses on the floor. There is food, but mostly basic items such as rice, lentils, and flatbread. The mother appears nervous and avoids eye contact. She says her husband prefers her not to speak to outsiders. She also explains that she believes children should respect their parents by staying quiet, obeying, and not complaining.

The father later explains that in their culture, discipline is strict and children are expected to work hard at home. He admits he sometimes smacks the children but says this is normal and not harmful. He feels judged by the system and says the family has been treated unfairly since arriving in the country.

Scenario – Maya

Maya is 11 years old. She lives with her parents, an older brother aged 15, and a younger sister aged 5. Her father works away during the week, returning home only at weekends. Her mother, Claire, is at home full-time but has a history of depression and anxiety.

Maya's school has noticed a slow change in her appearance and behaviour. She is often quiet, withdrawn, and has started to come to school in unwashed clothes. She sometimes smells of urine. Her packed lunches are irregular; on some days she has food, on others she does not. When staff ask her about it, she says her mother forgets sometimes and that she tries not to bother her.

At home, most attention is focused on Maya's brother, who is struggling with aggressive behaviour and recently started seeing the youth offending service. The youngest child has a developmental delay and requires regular appointments with health visitors and speech therapy. Maya helps with her sister's care, often feeding and dressing her when her mother feels unable to.

Neighbours describe the children as polite but quiet. They hear shouting late at night and see the older boy outside at all hours. The younger child is often seen in her pyjamas in the garden. Maya is rarely seen outside and usually stays indoors.

When the health visitor visits, the home appears reasonably clean. The mother says she is exhausted and trying her best. She says Maya "doesn't need much attention" because she is "independent and sensible". Maya spends most of her time in her room drawing and watching online videos. She has no close friends and says she feels "invisible".

The family has no extended support network nearby. The father says he worries about Claire's mental health but cannot afford to stop working away. He insists the children are fine and that the situation will improve once he earns more money.

Scenario – Isla

Isla is seven months old. Her parents, Jade and Kyle, are both 18. They live in a small rented flat in a low-income area. Neither of them is in full-time education or stable employment. Jade stays at home with Isla, and Kyle does casual work when he can find it. They have recently moved after losing their previous accommodation due to rent arrears.

Neighbours have contacted local services several times, reporting that the baby cries for long periods and that arguments can be heard from the flat late at night. One neighbour said she heard the baby crying for almost two hours before anyone responded.

When a family support or health visitor attends, Jade appears pale, tired, and withdrawn. The flat is cluttered and smells strongly of damp, though it is not dirty. There are bottles and nappies left out. Jade says she struggles to get Isla to sleep and feels constantly exhausted. She misses health appointments because she says she finds it too hard to leave the flat with a pram and bus fare is expensive.

During one visit, the worker observes that Isla is small for her age and quiet. She rarely smiles or babbles and lies still for long periods. Jade says Isla is a “good baby” who sleeps most of the day. She keeps her in the cot while she does housework or scrolls through her phone.

Kyle says he loves his daughter but finds it stressful. He says Jade becomes upset easily and sometimes leaves the baby with him for a day or two while she stays with friends. He says he tries his best but feels judged and unsupported. He admits they argue often, mostly about money and feeling trapped.

There are no visible injuries to Isla, but she is underweight and not reaching developmental milestones. Both parents have limited understanding of child development and have not attended parenting or community support programmes.

Reflection questions

- What type or combination of neglect might be present in this situation?
- What are the immediate and long-term risks to the child's wellbeing?
- How does the child's daily lived experience help you understand the seriousness of the neglect?
- What strengths or protective factors are present in the family?
- How do poverty, stress, or cultural expectations influence what is happening?
- What signs suggest that neglect may be chronic or part of a wider pattern?
- How could professional curiosity help uncover hidden or cumulative neglect?
- What legal or policy frameworks guide your response in your country or region?
- How can you ensure the child's voice and perspective are clearly heard?
- What kinds of support, intervention, or partnership could help bring lasting change?
- How might your own beliefs, values, or emotions influence your assessment?
- What indicators would show that the child's situation is improving or worsening?
- How can professionals work together effectively when neglect is long-term or unclear?
- When would neglect move from a need for support to a need for protection?

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About this Resource

Neglect Flashcards is a free, printable PDF resource designed for social workers, teachers, and other safeguarding professionals to support reflective learning and training around child neglect. Each card presents a realistic scenario—from physical or emotional neglect to medical, educational, or chronic neglect—followed by structured reflection questions that guide professional discussion and analysis.

The cards help practitioners identify signs of neglect, explore risk factors, and consider the impact of parental capacity, environment, and wider circumstances on a child's wellbeing. Scenarios include diverse family situations such as neglect linked to substance misuse, domestic abuse, cultural misunderstandings, or systemic issues like poverty and service drift.

This resource encourages critical thinking, supervision discussions, and case-based learning. It can be used for individual reflection, team training, or classroom-based social work education. The reflective questions prompt users to balance empathy with accountability—considering legal duties, cultural sensitivity, and the child's lived experience in every case.

Professionals can use the Neglect Flashcards to strengthen assessment skills, improve multi-agency working, and maintain professional curiosity. By engaging with realistic examples, practitioners enhance their ability to recognise neglect early, plan effective interventions, and ensure children's safety and wellbeing remain the central focus of their practice.

Comprehensive, practical, and easy to use, this free PDF is a valuable tool for safeguarding teams, educators, and anyone involved in child protection and family support work.