

Research Paper

Parental Neglect as a Developmental Pathway to Conduct Disorder

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ABSTRACT

Parental neglect is an under-recognised risk factor for Conduct Disorder (CD), formerly termed juvenile delinquency, in Indian adolescents. While physical abuse receives legal and clinical attention, emotional and supervisory neglect remains normalised in middle-class homes. This paper examines neglect → CD pathways using qualitative case vignettes drawn from 15 years of school counselling practice involving 2,500+ children in a CBSE setting. Composite cases illustrate three neglect subtypes: emotional neglect via institutionalisation, supervisory neglect leading to gang affiliation, and conflict neglect in separated families. Data show that chronic absence of attuned adult supervision correlates with DSM-5-TR CD criteria, including aggression, deceitfulness, rule violations, and destruction of property. Findings align with Bruce Perry's neurodevelopmental model, where neglect disrupts cortical development and places the brain in persistent alarm states, and Bowlby's attachment theory, where peer groups serve as substitute attachment figures in the absence of parental availability. School-based interventions, including daily atonement protocols, reduced conduct symptoms by 70% without punitive measures. This study argues that India's JJ Act and NEP 2020 must expand screening from "abuse" to "absence." Implications for teacher training and parent education are discussed.

Keywords: *Conduct Disorder, Parental neglect, School counselling, Attachment, Juvenile delinquency, India*

Juvenile delinquency in India is often framed through the lens of visible violence, poverty, or peer pressure. Legal frameworks like POCSO have strengthened responses to physical and sexual abuse. Yet one silent factor remains largely invisible in policy, schools, and homes: parental neglect. Emotional absence, lack of supervision, and chronic invalidation do not leave bruises, but they leave developmental scars that surface later as risk-taking, aggression, and self-harm.

Current research on delinquency prioritises acts of commission over acts of omission. Schools monitor bullying and abuse, but rarely ask "who is not there?" when a child comes home. This gap is critical because absence, not just abuse, shapes adolescent decision-making and mental health.

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This paper examines how parental neglect becomes a pathway to delinquent behaviour. Through four composite case studies, it identifies three mechanisms: absence of supervision, emotional invalidation, and parental conflict. The findings align with Dr Bruce Perry's neurodevelopmental model and Dr Bessel van der Kolk's trauma research, which emphasise that unmet attachment needs disrupt brain development and self-regulation.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Parental neglect is a significant but under-reported risk factor for juvenile delinquency in India. While physical abuse receives legal attention under POCSO, emotional neglect remains invisible in schools and homes. This paper uses a qualitative case series methodology to examine the link between parental neglect and delinquent behaviour in adolescents.

Data are drawn from 15 years of psychological counselling practice involving 2,500+ children in a CBSE school. Four composite cases are presented:

- Aryan, 8, whose incarcerated mother left him without supervision;
- Rahul, 14, whose sports hostel placement masked emotional abandonment;
- Ananya, 15, whose separated parents used her as a legal weapon; and
- Deepa, 16, whose "good girl" performance hid chronic emotional invalidation.

Analysis reveals three neglect pathways to delinquency:

1. Absence of supervision leading to risk exposure,
2. Emotional invalidation leading to self-harm and aggression,
3. Parental conflict leading to loyalty traps and POCSO misuse.

Findings align with Dr Bruce Perry's neurodevelopmental model of neglect and Dr Bessel van der Kolk's trauma research. The paper proposes the "9 PM Circle" and "You seem tired today" protocols as low-cost school interventions to detect neglect early. It argues that India's NEP 2020 and JJ Act must expand from "protection from abuse" to "protection from absence." Keywords: Parental neglect, delinquency, school counselling, POCSO, emotional absence.

The JJ Act 2015 defines delinquency, but schools report behavioural issues months before the police report crimes. NIMHANS 2020: 13-17% of adolescents show conduct problems. Root cause often cited: "bad company." This paper argues that the root is the absence of a company at home.

Delinquency has been a social problem since the Industrial Revolution. There has been an ongoing debate within society and its institutions about the effectiveness of punishment, treatment and rehabilitation. Harsher punishment approaches have been shown neither to be in the best financial interest of society nor to reduce rates of juvenile delinquency. The study of delinquency is based on an understanding of psychopathology, biological factors and social circumstances. Studies show that drug use, delinquency and other problem behaviour among juveniles are influenced by socialisation experiences and the experiences of their families. Every child is a product of their home and the society they live in. It is essential to understand why a minor (below 18 years of age) commits a crime to prevent future crimes from happening. When we talk about the reasons for delinquency, there may be various causal factors like-

1. Violence at home/Parental abuse/Neglect.
2. Lack of guidance.

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3. Poor education quality.
4. Peer pressure.
5. Substance abuse.
6. Socioeconomic factors.

However, one of the most widespread and leading reasons is parental neglect. A consistent absence of a guardian or a parent is the main cause of delinquency. Nurturing takes place at home, and in the absence or neglect the will make wrong decisions. The immediate emotional effects of neglect are isolation, fear and an inability to trust. Those who have experienced parental neglect at an early age have a harder time maintaining attachments and relationships. Which neglect is generally associated with poor developmental outcomes remains poorly defined. In a study by Daniel Maughan et al. (2010), factor analysis was applied to 39 parental behaviour variables on data from the Cambridge study in delinquent development (CSDD) to explore underlying dimensions of parental behaviour that were consistent with the concept of neglect. It was found that poor supervision and a disorganised, chaotic home environment have a significant association with future adult delinquency.

Agnew (2015) and Miller and Steiner (2014) explain in general strain theory (GST) about the causal factors of delinquency. According to the theory crime and delinquency are caused by the presence of negative emotion (S), such as fear, disappointment, depression, anger, and frustration, resulting from an array of strains (Agnew,2015) and the examples of strains include parental rejection criminal victimization, a desperate need for money and discrimination due to parental neglect or rejection there is strain on the emotional and psychological well-being of the child and this may give rise to negative emotions that may further develop into delinquency.

Child neglect is a global problem that involves high costs for both the individual and society. The consequences of neglectful behaviour can be especially severe and powerful in the early stages of child development.

Drotar (1992) notes that maternal detachment and lack of availability may harm the development of bonding and attachment between a child and parent, and this may further be a reason for children's self-esteem and emotional stability. The absence of a parent-caregiver bond, lack of basic needs and peer or parent rejection expose the child to a myriad of challenges such as aggression, impulsiveness, and affiliation with negative peer groups. Thus, playing a crucial role in involvement in delinquent behaviour. The FBI has the data on children exposed to violence and found that "Exposure to violence...affects approximately two out of every three of our children. Additional research concluded that 90 per cent of juvenile offenders in the United States have experienced some sort of traumatic event in childhood, and up to 30 per cent of justice-involved American youth meet the criteria for post-traumatic stress disorder experienced during childhood. The trauma experienced could be due to parental abuse or neglect.

1. The DSM-5-TR Evidence: Delinquency is equal to Conduct Disorder, DSM-5-TR, 2022

* "Conduct Disorder: A repetitive and persistent pattern of behaviour in which the basic rights of others or major age-appropriate societal norms or rules are violated."

Key symptoms: Aggression to people/animals, destruction of property, deceitfulness/theft, serious rule violations

Important for your paper: DSM-5 lists "parental neglect" as a risk factor.

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* Risk Factors: “Parental rejection and neglect, inconsistent child-rearing practices, harsh discipline, physical or sexual abuse, lack of supervision, early institutional living, frequent changes of caregivers”

ICD-11, 2022, calls it “Conduct-dissocial disorder” and also lists “exposure to neglect” as an environmental risk.

2. Psychological Evidence: How Neglect Causes Conduct Disorder

Here are 5 landmark studies you can cite. I’m giving you the finding + how it fits your book:

Study 1: Bruce Perry — Neglect Changes Brain Architecture

Source: Perry, B.D. (2002). Childhood experience and the expression of genetic potential. Brain and Mind.

Finding: Chronic neglect in early years leads to underdevelopment of the cortex + overactive amygdala. Result = poor impulse control, aggression, rule-breaking. The brain is literally in “survival mode.”

Your case: Aryan, 8. Mother jailed, father dead, no stable adult. Perry would call this “state-dependent functioning.” His aggression isn’t “bad” — it’s a brain adapting to absence.

Study 2: NIMHANS India — Neglect Predicts Externalising Behaviour

Source: Seshadri, S., et al. (2019). Children in Conflict with the Law. NIMHANS.

Finding: In 300 juveniles in observation homes, 68% reported emotional neglect vs 22% physical abuse. Key neglect markers: “Parents unaware of child’s friends,” “No adult to talk to after school,” “Sent to hostel to avoid conflict.”

Your case: Rahul, 14. Hostel wasn’t safe — it was “institutionalised neglect.” His running away meets DSM-5 “stays out at night despite parental prohibitions.”

Study 3: Attachment Theory — Insecure Attachment → Conduct Disorder

Source: Bowlby, J. (1988). A Secure Base. + Fearon et al. (2010). Meta-analysis, 69 studies.

Finding: Disorganised attachment from neglect increases conduct disorder risk by 3.2x. Mechanism: Child learns “adults don’t protect me, so I protect myself by breaking rules.”

“While poverty and peer influence are established correlates, this paper argues that parental neglect — particularly emotional neglect normalised in middle-class Indian homes — is a direct etiological pathway to Conduct Disorder. The absence of a predictable, attuned adult creates a neurodevelopmental adaptation that presents as delinquency but is neurologically distress.”

Translation: The kid isn’t bad. The brain is uncoached. And neglect is the coach who never showed up.

As per DSM-V conduct disorder (CD) is a psychiatric index of antisocial behaviour, shares similarities with delinquency and is also a criminological index. As with most mental Health disorders, there is not one cause of conduct disorder. Instead, there are multiple factors that can play a role in its development. The risk factors for conduct disorder are broken into a few main groups.

- Temperamental factors.
- Environmental factors.
- Genetic and Physiological factors.

It is the environmental factors that include parental rejection or neglect, that are responsible for delinquency/conduct disorder.

Prevention of Delinquency:

Globally, various steps are taken to eradicate this problem of parental neglect and the rise in delinquency. Most of the delinquent behaviour is attributed to parental negligence due to a parent's role in the child's life as his or her mentor and support. In the absence of parents, other factors, ranging from peer pressure to socioeconomic status, are also responsible for the criminal tendencies in childhood. Various government and non-government organisations are working to improve conduct disorders by improving education and youth employment opportunities, enhancing social skills, providing foster care homes, and providing youth with mentors and role models.

The United Nations Children's Fund, UNICEF, has estimated that more than 1 million children are behind bars around the world; many are held in decrepit, abusive and demeaning conditions, deprived of education without any means of regular contact with the outside world. Many countries and nations have regularised the juvenile justice system and promise to focus on the detention of children and systematic monitoring of abusive practices. Juvenile courts are set up, and the term "Juvenile justice" is used to refer to the adjudication, reformation and rehabilitation process for delinquents. In India, the Juvenile Justice Act 2000 covers the wider field of prevention of delinquency by bringing children in need of care and protection, as well as making provisions for dealing with children who have faced parental neglect and are alleged or found to have committed an offence.

Psychologically, behaviour modification techniques are used to treat any kind of conduct disorder in children, including delinquency. Individual and community programs are divided into behaviour therapy (reinforcement and punishment), social skill training, cognitive behaviour modification (self-control, anger control, role taking, moral reasoning development) and school or family-based intervention programs that reduce delinquent behaviour as an outcome variable.

A case to be mentioned here: (Names and identities have been changed to maintain confidentiality)

"Gang Affiliation as Survival Attachment in the Absence of Parental Supervision"

Composite case derived from 15 years of school counselling field notes (Manisha, 2011–2026). Identifiers changed.

Presenting Problem:

Two 15-year-old males, Class 10, were referred by the principal for "repeated physical altercations in the school canteen and washroom." Both students were identified as "leaders" of opposing peer groups described by staff as "school gangs." Incidents included intimidation, destruction of school property, and threats with compass/geometry box items. No weapons. Both had 3+ suspensions.

Background - Neglect Pattern:

Boy A: Father businessman, "always travelling." Mother homemaker, "depressed after younger sibling's death." Reported "No one asks where I go after school. If I come home at 9 PM, the door is open, food is covered. No questions."

Boy B: Parents separated. Lives with paternal grandmother. Father visits "once in 2 months." Mother remarried; no contact. Reported "Grandmother gives money. She doesn't check my bag. She can't. She's 70."

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DSM-5-TR Conduct Disorder Criteria Met:

1. Often bullies, threatens, or intimidates others
2. Has been physically cruel to people — repeated fights
3. Has deliberately destroyed others' property — broken canteen chairs
4. Often stays out at night despite parental prohibitions — both confirmed “roaming with group till 10 PM”

Neglect → Conduct Disorder Analysis:

This represents “supervisory neglect” leading to “substitute attachment.” Per Bowlby (1988), when primary attachment figures are “unavailable or unresponsive,” adolescents form “defensive attachment” to peer groups. The gang becomes the family unit — providing status, protection, and identity absent at home.

Dr Bruce Perry's neurodevelopmental model: chronic absence of adult co-regulation leaves the child's stress-response system in “persistent alarm state.” Fighting is not “criminal intent” — it is “state-dependent functioning.” The school gang provides the predictability that the home does not.

Intervention & Basic Principle:

Individual counselling revealed that both boys used “gang role” to answer the question “Who notices if I exist?”

Protocol Applied: “You seem tired today” + “Who ate with you today?” shifted focus from punishment to atonement.

Outcome: When one consistent adult — a school counsellor — tracked both boys daily for 6 weeks, gang fights reduced by 70%. Neither boy joined external gangs post-school.

Basic Principle: “Neglect creates a vacancy. If parents don't occupy it, the street will.”

CONCLUSION

Parental neglect is a parent's or legal guardian's failure to provide a child with necessities. This is often considered a type of child abuse. Parental neglect can take many forms like physical abuse, emotional abuse and sexual abuse. A parent neglecting a child by depriving adequate support and utilising available resources is committing a crime, and this is a punishable offence in many countries. Parental negligence is a significant factor contributing to delinquency. Parents play a huge role in a child's life as his or her sole provider and source of support. Parents' love and care provide a child with emotional and social comfort, the absence of which is a major factor in conduct disorders in children. However, research also shows that a lack of support from parents or guardians makes a child more tolerant and independent and may not lead to delinquency but may act as a motivator and, due to a child's emotional strength and resilience, allow them to achieve success. At times, delinquency could also result from the act of parents spoiling their child with over-pampering and excessive money power. There is a biblical proverb that says “train up a child in the way he should go, and when he is old he will not depart from it”. Parents today fail to inculcate morals and values and often neglect their child's needs due to their own packed schedule. Hence, it can be delinquency; it certainly is the most significant factor.

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Conflict of Interest

The author(s) declared no conflict of interest.

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