Learning Outcomes
To understand the importance of looking beyond single incidents (cumulative harm).

Audience  Groups 2-8 (Working Together 2010)  Time  30 minutes

Key Reading


Links to Common Core
Common Core 3  Safeguarding and promoting the welfare of a child (skills: relate, recognise and take considered action). Make considered judgements about how to act to safeguard and promote a child or young person’s welfare.
Learning outcomes.

This presentation focuses on the impact of accumulation of adversity upon a child. Vulnerability to the effects of adversity is elevated in an accumulated fashion and, therefore, at the outset it is important to remind practitioners that the concept of cumulative harm is especially important in neglect.

This slide and the following two slides set out some quotations relating to cumulative harm and the issues of an accumulation of factors – both chronic and acute.

The highlights in red are to pick out some key issues that would lend themselves to further discussion with participants. For example, the concept of ‘toxic stress’ and the impact on the developing organism is gaining more attention and underpins much of the current focus on the need for effective intervention during the very early years of a child’s life.

The concept of ‘chronic adversities’ is especially salient for understanding neglect which is normally (but not exclusively) characterised by its chronic nature. The research on outcomes affirms that chronic neglect leads to some of the poorest outcomes for children.

The highlights in red are to remind participants of the challenges that neglect poses to a system that can be preoccupied with incidents. There is a persistent discourse amongst practitioners that it is difficult to evidence chronic situations and that it is often only when there is an incident that action is taken.

The evidence on cumulative harm should provide practitioners with the underpinning evidence they need to make a strong case for taking action as a result of chronic circumstances, not just incidents.
Understanding cumulative harm

This slide reasserts the notion that the cumulative harm can in itself constitute evidence to use when building a case for intervention, including statutory intervention.

For children, the harmful effects of cumulative adversities can be profound. It is likely that practitioners will already be conscious of the concept even if they are not familiar with the term, which may be a helpful term to help them to articulate their observations of the corrosive effects of neglect.

Parents can be affected by the cumulative harm of many years of adversity from their own infancy onwards. Frequently this cumulative harm is also exacerbated by an accumulation of factors. Nair et al. (2003) undertook research in which they examined the impact of 10 risk factors on the parenting of 161 women known to be misusing substances (so the substance misuse was a given as an existing factor also).

Discussion point: Quick fire: ask participants to try and identify 10 risk factors.

The research team measured:

- maternal depression
- domestic violence
- nondomestic violence
- family size
- incarceration
- no significant other in home
- negative life events
- psychiatric problems
- homelessness
- severity of drug use.

They found that parenting stress and ‘child abuse potential’ were greater for women with five or more risks.
The concept links with developmental theory as well as the emerging literature on the physiological impact of adversity in childhood. The work of Bruce Perry has been helpful in providing insight into the effects of neglect upon developing brains – he has graphic images of the brain of a chronically neglected child which is substantially smaller than that of an emotionally and physically nurtured child (see www.childtrauma.org).

As above.

This and the next slide describe some of the barriers to recognition of neglect.

Discussion point: Participants can be encouraged to relate these to their own experience and identify other barriers – and, more importantly, how they can be overcome.

The term ‘cumulative harm’ is not explicitly used in Working Together (HM Government 2010). Practitioners need to be alert to the signs of an accumulation of issues affecting the children’s health and development over time (and perhaps also the parents). Significant harm may be suffered as a consequence of cumulative harm.

This slide points to the extent to which cumulative harm can affect all in the family members so that chronic factors can affect parenting capacity over time, thus establishing entrenched patterns of neglect.
The list of pointers here could be helpfully used to structure either a referral for further assessment and intervention or as the basis for an assessment report.

As above.

This slide and the next provide some pointers for assessment.

As above.