

# Risk of Serious Harm to Others – Guidance



Serious harm means death or injury (either physical or psychological) which is life-threatening and/or traumatic and from which recovery is expected to be difficult, incomplete or impossible. Only a small number of young people referred through *Onset* will cause a risk of serious harm to others, but in such cases it is important to ensure that a thorough assessment is made.

## When should you complete the *Onset – Risk of Serious Harm to Others* form?

The 'Indicators of serious harm to others' section in the *Onset – Assessment* form highlights:

- actual serious harm already caused by the young person
- evidence that the young person was intending or preparing to cause actual serious harm
- evidence that the young person has exhibited behaviour that could very easily have caused serious harm to others (perhaps unintentionally).

If a key worker believes that one or more of these issues applies to the young person, the full *Onset – Risk of Serious Harm to Others* form should be completed, in order to:

- provide evidence for and record serious harm issues for the files
- amend the intervention plan if necessary
- provide evidence for a referral to be made to a more appropriate agency.

It is important to note that this form aims to provide an evidence base for additional work that might need to be done, not to provide an indication of the type of interventions that need to be put in place. This will depend on both national and local policy and guidelines developed by programmes themselves.

If the young person is also working with the YOT, you should talk first with the YOT officer about concerns over risk of serious harm to others, and work with plans that already exist.

Any risk of serious harm to others assessment should only be undertaken by staff who have received appropriate training, and be discussed with a manager.

## What to do if you identify a risk of serious harm to others

There is currently no specific risk management plan for the prevention agenda, and individual YOTs have different procedures for registering and managing high-risk cases. It is therefore important that key workers completing *Onset – Risk of Serious Harm to Others Assessment* share their findings to see if any further work is needed outside the remit of the prevention programme.

Any specific risks identified should be considered and addressed when planning the *Onset – Intervention Plan*.

**NB** A young person may present a risk of serious harm to others and simultaneously be vulnerable i.e. at risk of experiencing harm themselves. In such cases, the *Onset – Intervention Plan* should address both these issues. Referral to the local safeguarding children board may also be required.

## Harm-related behaviour

Harm-related behaviour is defined quite broadly in this section. It includes:

- any behaviour that resulted in serious harm being caused to other people
- any behaviour that indicates that the young person was intending and/or preparing to cause serious harm to others
- any behaviour that was very likely to have caused serious harm to others unintentionally.

While an adult offender may have a long record of violent or sexual offending that gives a strong indication of the possibility of further harmful behaviour, a young person will not have this extensive history as evidence. By using a wider definition of harm-related behaviour – and considering issues such as the young person's intentions to cause harm – it is possible to obtain a much fuller picture of the risk that he or she may present.

### **Victims**

'Targeted' victims includes anyone who was chosen for a particular reason: for example, because he or she belongs to a particular ethnic or religious group, or because the young person has a grudge against him or her. The key issue here is not whether the victim was already known to the young person (this point should be addressed in the 'Context and circumstances of harm-related behaviour' question), but whether he or she was selected for a specific reason.

'Particularly vulnerable' victims includes the elderly, people with disabilities and those younger (or much smaller) than the young person.

### **Context and circumstances of harm-related behaviour**

In answering this question you should distinguish between the long-term and the immediate issues contributing to the young person's previous harm-related behaviour:

- long-term issues (for example, experiences of abuse or loss) can lead to the gradual build-up of emotions over time (for example, anger, resentment, hostility or suspicion of others), which may contribute to problematic behaviour
- particular triggers or prompts (for example, other people encouraging the young person to hurt others, or a failure to take medication) may lead to specific offences or other incidents of harm-related behaviour.

Separating out these long-term and immediate factors is important for gauging the likelihood of the young person committing harmful behaviour in future and for deciding on the most appropriate types of intervention or support.

## Current risk indicators

This section looks at whether the young person's current attitudes, interests or circumstances provide any indicator of a risk of harm to others. Some of the factors follow on directly from the 'Indicators of serious harm' section of *Onset – Assessment*.

While there will often be some overlap between this and the 'Harm-related behaviour' section, this will not always be the case: it is possible to have some evidence of past harm-related behaviour, but to have no current risk indicators. Conversely, it would be possible to have no evidence of previous harm-related behaviour, but to have a number of concerns about the young person's current situation.

- **Current attitudes to previous harm-related behaviour**

This refers to the young person's *current* attitude towards any previous harm-related behaviour, for example:

- a denial that the events occurred
- a denial that he or she was personally involved or responsible
- a denial of the level of harm caused.

The young person's attitudes to victims of his or her previous behaviour could also be included here: for example, particularly cold or callous attitudes, evidence of ongoing feuds or grudges, or having a view that the victim 'deserved it'.

- **Other relevant thought patterns**

These could be current attitudes about particular types of behaviour (for example, believing that violence is normal and acceptable) or about particular groups (for example, claiming that it is acceptable to be aggressive towards people from certain estates or from different ethnic groups).

Any other factors associated with the young person's perception of what is right and wrong (for example, learning difficulties might affect perception of what is appropriate sexual behaviour) should also be noted here.

- **Current behaviour**

This includes interests or activities that are causes of concern, and which the young person pursues either alone or with other people. The same activity can have different implications for different young people, and it is important to consider each case individually: for example, a collection of military paraphernalia may reflect a legitimate interest in the armed forces, or be a sign of a potentially dangerous preoccupation with weapons. Give details (where known) of who else may be involved in the activities or whether this is something he or she does alone, how often he or she is involved, where the activities take place and anything else that you consider relevant.

- **Current circumstances**

You should consider whether the young person is in a position where he or she has – or could have – access to potential victims or the equipment necessary for causing serious harm. For example:

- a young person who has previously abused a younger sibling and is currently living in accommodation with easy access to other younger people
- a young person living with older friends who are known to have a record of violent behaviour and may be planning future offences.

Also consider any other events or circumstances that might act as a trigger for harmful behaviour, for example:

- a difficult anniversary
- the young person has previously been violent towards Minority Ethnic people and a Black family has just moved in next door
- failure to take medication as prescribed.

- **Any other concerns**

Has anybody else expressed concerns about the possibility of the young person causing serious harm? For example, parents, carers or teachers who are apprehensive about aspects of his or her behaviour and think that this may indicate a possible risk to others. Give details of who has expressed these concerns, what the concerns are, how much weight you attach to them and why.

## Future harmful behaviour

In this section, you are asked to make a judgement – based on all the information available to you – about the types of harmful behaviour that the young person might commit in future. It asks you to indicate what the harmful behaviour might be, when it would occur, how it would happen and who the victims might be. This information should provide the basis for the ‘current classification for risk of serious harm to others’ question in the conclusion.

### **1. Are there indications that the young person will engage in future behaviour that would cause serious harm to others?**

Consider:

- patterns of past harm-related behaviour
- the young person’s current attitudes, interests and circumstances
- forthcoming events or circumstances
- intentions, plans and threats.

You should tick ‘Yes’ here even if there is not an immediate risk, but you think there is a real possibility of serious harm at some definite point in the foreseeable future.

A ‘No’ response means that you do not need to complete any more of this section, and should tick ‘Low risk’ in the ‘current classification for risk of serious harm to others’ question in the conclusion.

### ***What is the nature of this potentially harmful behaviour?***

The information here should include:

- the type of behaviour that might occur (for example, violence, sexual offending, dangerous driving)
- particular features of that behaviour (for example, use of weapons)
- the nature and extent of the harm that is likely to be caused.

### ***Is it likely to be deliberate/intentional or unplanned?***

‘Deliberate behaviour’ refers to any behaviour where there is some prior thinking or planning, and where the young person has a particular goal in mind. It includes behaviour where the intention is specifically to cause harm, and behaviour that is likely to lead to serious harm, even though that may not be the young person’s explicit intention. It is the deliberateness of the actions rather than the nature of his or her intentions that determines whether the behaviour falls into this category.

‘Unplanned behaviour’ refers to any behaviour that is spontaneous – a quick response to an unexpected situation or something done without prior thought and planning.

It is not always easy to classify behaviour as being either ‘deliberate’ or ‘unplanned’. For example, driving offences can be defined as ‘deliberate’ if the young person purposely sets out to race friends around residential areas or to entice the police into giving chase. In other situations, however, reckless driving may be considered as ‘unplanned’, if, for example, the young person is responding to pressure from friends in the car, or driving is considered dangerous by virtue of his or her age alone.

### ***In what context/circumstances is this behaviour likely to occur?***

This covers the likely social and personal circumstances at the time of any potentially harmful behaviour. Information of any specific events that may trigger the behaviour should also be included.

## 2. Who is at risk from the young person?

These could be specific individuals, people belonging to particular groups, or random members of the public.

## 3. How soon is harmful behaviour likely to occur?

You should include information on:

- how soon the behaviour could occur
- particular reasons why the young person could *not* commit this type of behaviour in the near future (for example, if he or she is currently separated from a particular offending peer group).

## 4. How quickly do you need to take action?

This is an important factor that will help to determine the risk classification in the next section.

## Conclusion

There will always be an element of uncertainty in this type of assessment and it is not possible to give definitive predictions about risk of serious harm to others. In reality, the most that you can do is to base your decisions on a thorough consideration of all the evidence that you have at any given point in time. This section provides a framework for recording the outcome of such an assessment and specifying the practical action that needs to be taken as a result.

In this section, you are asked to indicate the level of risk of harm to others. This is your opinion of the current level of risk which the young person presents, based on the information available now. The risk level you tick will be a key factor in choosing appropriate risk management strategies.

In reaching a judgement about the risk level, the main factors to consider are:

- the *likelihood* of the behaviour ever occurring
- the *imminence* of the behaviour
- the *impact* of the behaviour.

### **Low risk**

There is no evidence *at present* to indicate any likelihood of future harmful behaviour.

This would be the appropriate response if you have answered 'No' to the question: 'Are there indications that the young person will engage in behaviour that would cause serious harm to others?' in the previous section.

### **Medium risk**

Some risk identified but the young person is unlikely to cause serious harm unless circumstances change. Relevant issues can be addressed as part of the normal supervision process.

### **High risk**

Risk of harm identified. The potential event could happen at any time and the impact would be serious. Action should be taken in the near future and the case will need additional supervision and monitoring (for example, oversight by middle/senior management, or local registration).

There may be some hesitation about identifying a young person as 'high risk' because of the practical implications this will have. In such cases, it is important that decisions about risk of serious harm to others are discussed and shared within teams, and not left entirely to individual members of staff.

***Very high risk***

Imminent risk of harm identified. The young person will commit the behaviour in question as soon as he or she is able to, and the impact will be serious. Immediate multi-agency action is likely to be required.

**NB** It is important to remember that the risk level may change over time if new information comes to light. For example, a young person who is sometimes violent towards certain members of his or her family but is currently living in local authority care might be assessed as 'medium risk' because the particular behaviour which causes concern is not likely to occur in the near future. This would have to be reviewed when the young person leaves local authority accommodation and has more frequent contact with the family.