Presentation Notes

Learning Outcomes

To assess parents' capacity to respond to a child's needs.

Audience Groups 1-8 (Working Together 2010) **Time** 30 minutes

Key Reading

Birleson, P. (1980) 'The validity of Depressive Disorder in Childhood and the Development of a Self-Rating Scale; a Research Report'. Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry 22: 73-88.

Brandon, M., Bailey, S., Belderson, P., Warren, C. Gardner, R. and Dodsworth, J. (2009) Understanding Serious Case Reviews and their Impact. London: Department for Children, Schools and Families.

Child and Family Training Services In my shoes.
Available: http://www.childandfamilytraining.org.uk/tools.html. Accessed 6th August 2011.

Goodman, R., Meltzer, H. and Bailey, V. (1998) 'The Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire: A pilot study on the validity of the self-report version'. European Child and Adolescent Psychiatry 7: 125-130.

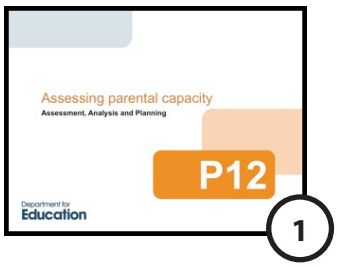
Horwath, J. (2007) Child Neglect: Identification and assessment. Hampshire: Palgrave MacMillan.

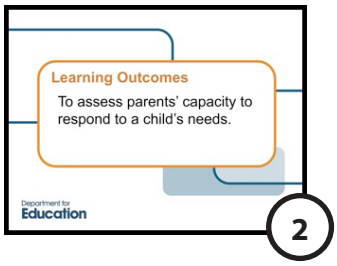
McLeod, A. (2008) Listening to Children: A practitioners guide. London: Jessica Kingsley Publishers.

Links to Common Core

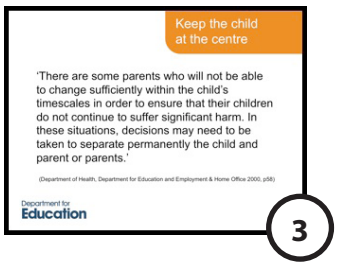
Common Core 1 Effective communication and engagement with children, young people, their families and carers (skills: consultation and negotiation). Understand the key role and value of parents and carers; know when to refer them to further sources of information, advice or support.

Common Core 3: Safeguarding and promoting the welfare of the child (skill: Relate, recognise and take onsidered action). Understand the key role of parents and carers in safeguarding and promoting children and young people's welfare and involve them accordingly, while recognising factors that can affect parenting and increase the risk of abuse (for example, domestic violence).

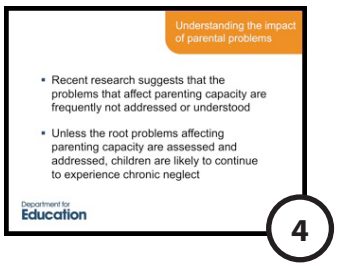




The learning outcomes relate to assessing parents' capacity to respond to their child's needs.



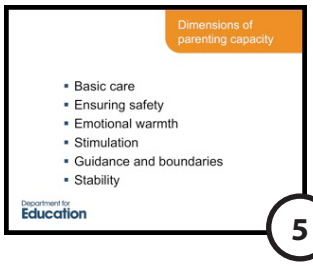
This quote is used as the reminder to keep the child at the centre and links with one of the key themes, namely to guard against the 'start-again' syndrome as identified by Brandon et al (2009). It also reminds participants that an assessment of parents' capacity must be linked to the identified needs of the child, and family and environmental factors. The key question is how do these parents respond to this child's needs.



Farmer and Lutman's (2010) study of neglected children, who had been returned home after a period of being looked after, showed that startlingly little attention is routinely paid to addressing the factors that affect parenting capacity and that precipitate children being removed from home in the first place. This means that children are returning home to the same or worse circumstances. The prevalence of this finding across cases suggests that it is reasonable to assume that it will be feature of many cases known to participants.

Whilst the study did not focus on children who remained at home, it does suggest that this could also be an issue with practice with children remaining at home. It would be helpful to check this with participants. So – whilst this presentation is not addressing the issues for looked after children as such, it does aim to remind participants of the vital importance of addressing the core factors that are affecting parenting capacity.

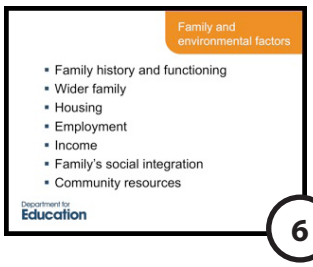
There is a briefing on Farmer and Lutman's (2010) study in the background reading.



The dimensions of parenting of the Assessment Framework should be familiar to the participants. But, precisely because they are so familiar there is a danger that their implications cease to be considered in depth.

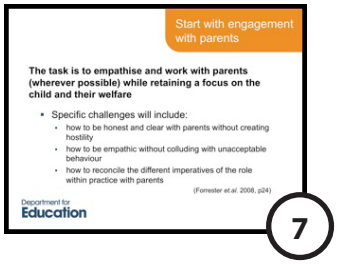
Discussion point: For the purposes of this presentation the aim is to encourage participants to look again at each of these dimensions and to consider:

- **The ways in which the mother or mother figure's capacity to provide care under each one is affected.**
- **The ways in which the father and any father figure's capacity to provide care under each one is affected (whether present in the household or not).**
- **The ways in which any other significant carer's capacity to provide care under each one is affected (whether present in the household or not).**
- **What would help each parent to improve their capacity to meet their child's needs under each dimension?**
- **What resources are required to help improve parenting capacity?**



The same set of questions should also be addressed in relation to the family and environmental factors. Jack and Gill's (2003) work on structural issues reminds us that family and environmental factors are often overlooked, and yet for neglect it is crucial because of the extent to which neglect is associated with disadvantage.

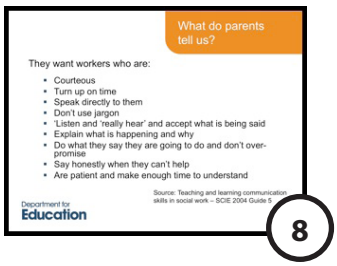
Again, it will be helpful to ask the participants to consider when they last really looked at each of these dimensions in detail and fully assessed their relevance for parenting capacity and whether they have developed plans that truly aim to improve the capacity of the parents to respond to their children's needs.



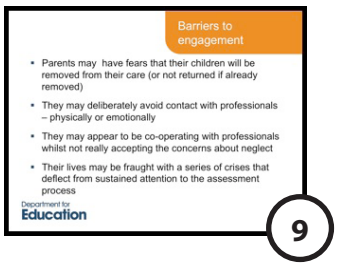
Any assessment of parents' needs will be impoverished if time is not taken to make an initial working relationship with parents. Even when parents do not agree with professionals' concerns they can still recognise and respond to genuine attempts to gain their views. The way in which parents respond to attempts to build a working relationship can also provide valuable insights into the likelihood of establishing a longer term joint plan with parents. Munro (2011) prefaced the interim report of the review of child protection with a quote that highlights this issue:

'It's all about relationships. We are talking about dealing with people with problems, with painful stuff. You have to know someone, trust them. They must be reliable and be there for you if you are going to be able to talk about the things you don't want to. The things that scare you.'

Parent Family Perspectives on safeguarding and relationships with children's service
The Children's Commissioner for England (2010)

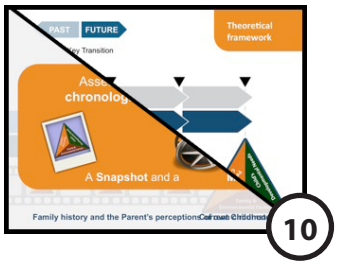


This slide provides information from parents about what they appreciate from workers. Parents can appreciate these characteristics even if there is fundamental disagreement about the nature of the concerns.



These are just some of the forces that can be in play during assessment and participants will be able to identify a range of ways in which the assessment process can be de-railed, delayed or deflected. These kind of factors can be associated with the 'assessment paralysis' identified by Reder and Lucey (1995).

Furthermore, families may have been assessed on several occasions by a variety of professionals. Therefore, the extent to which families are engaged with the assessment process may impact on their engagement with any plan that follows.

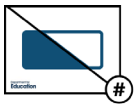


The 'ecological-transactional-developmental' framework as described by Brandon et al. (2008) should underpin assessment of parenting capacity and what services are needed to support parental capacity.

It sounds complex, but ecological-transactional-developmental means what it says. It recognises that child development is a dynamic process shaped by interactions between environment, caregiver and child as well as interactions of previous experience with current functioning. It takes account of individual, family, social and structural factors affecting development and the relationship histories of parents and the quality of children's early attachments.

It is important to establish whether the parent has had support from their own parent/s and whether this continues. The worker should also try to find out whether or not the parent would want their children to have a similar childhood to their own. If this is dismissed as irrelevant, the practitioner should persist; a parent or carer's view of their own childhood is likely to have a considerable effect on the quality of their relationship with their own child. The question is not so much what actually happened but how does the parent now understand his or her own experience.

The worker needs to note how much the parent can remember about their childhood, whether the memories match the descriptive adjectives and how the parent feels now about what happened. Some parents will make it clear that they have come to terms with what happened. Others, however, will convey, either through denial, anger or continuing preoccupation with what happened, that their past is still very much influencing the present and how they relate with their own children.



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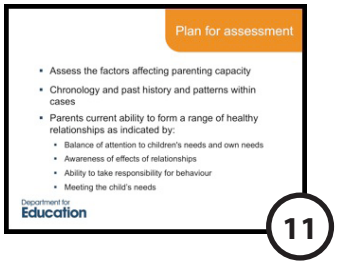
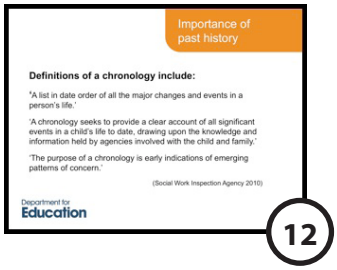
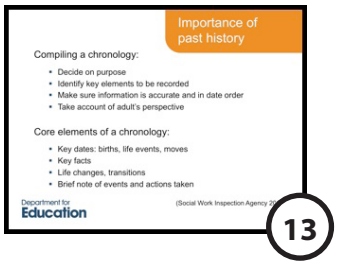


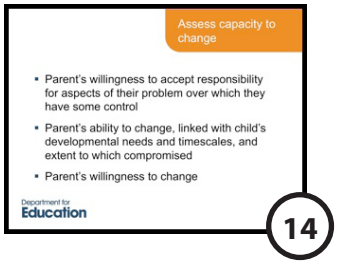
An outline of some of the key components that need to be considered in assessment.

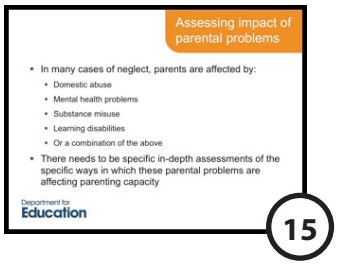




Practitioners can think chronologies are complex. For example, there is concern that chronologies are no more than a repeat of what is recorded on file, are arduous to compile and, once completed, are so detailed that workers cannot 'see the wood for the trees'. The temptation is to record everything in a parent's life in the chronology as well as the record.

A chronology should contain sufficient detail but not substitute effective recording in the file. A chronology should not be relied on as the only practice tool to manage day-to-day work. The purpose of an assessment will influence the type of chronology, and the review and analysis of a chronology are essential to an effective assessment (Social Work Inspection Agency 2010).

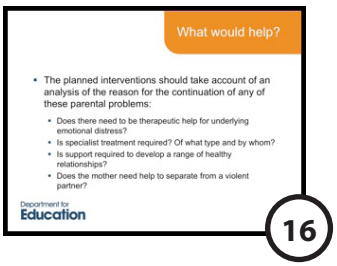




Given the prevalence of these factors practitioners must be alert to their presence in all cases of neglect and assess their impact on parenting capacity.

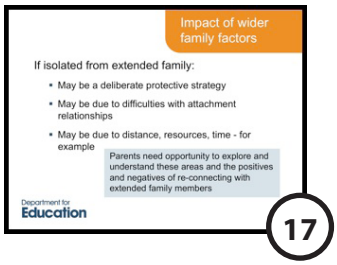
Even if these factors may not be immediately apparent, careful discussion with parents could identify them. It is important to assess each parent and any other adult carers.

Often the role of the father is overlooked, or mothers are held responsible for protecting children from the impact of domestic violence – but the extent to which each adult is affected should be assessed. Assessments will require the input of a range of professionals and those with specialist knowledge.



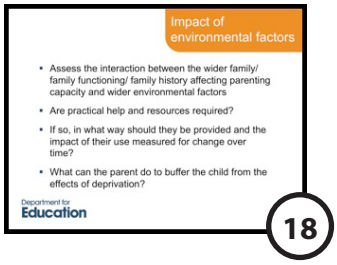
Depending on the assessment of the cause of the problems, different approaches may be built into the intervention plan. Examination of what has been tried before and what has worked or not and why will also be helpful here.

These are just some examples of the different elements that may need to be addressed; participants will be able to identify more.



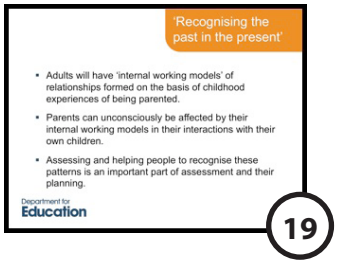
Parents of neglected children are often isolated and find it difficult to make use of both informal and formal sources of support. Parents may be disconnected or estranged from family and social networks and tend to see themselves as lacking people they can turn to, even if there is extended family available.

However, care is needed when assessing the social networks of parents. It is dangerous to assume the benefits of connecting people with extended family without assessing the reasons for distance. Parents may have deliberately cut contact with family members who were abusive or neglectful to them or who reinforce them in their substance misuse, for example.



Practitioners typically struggle with assessing the impact of environmental factors, either downplaying their effects or seeing them as excusing neglect.

The key is to examine the interaction between environmental factors and parenting capacity, and planning accordingly. Income maximization, employment and education support and so on may be required – but typically parents whose children are neglected require considerable support with accessing services and resources. In some cases, where substance misuse is serious, providing financial resources without appropriate monitoring will be dangerous because parents may use the resources to fuel their addiction.



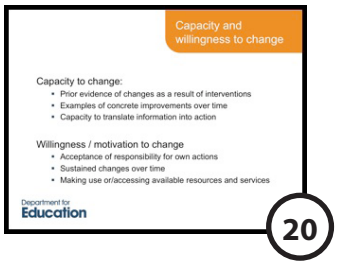
The quote is taken from Barlow with Scott (2010), which emphasizes the benefits of understanding the extent to which parents unconsciously play out their early difficult and abusive relationships, and subsequent experiences of attachment.

Discussion point: The following examples from the book may be helpful illustrations:

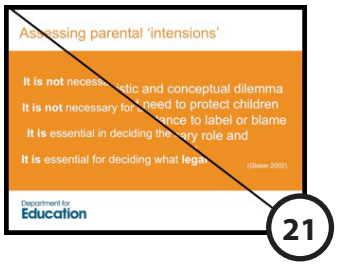
'Mary is angry, demands a lot of attention from the therapists and ignores her baby. The therapists try to calm her down and ask her to tell them what has happened. She describes how her baby's fingers had clung to her hair at home and how it caused a strong reaction in her: "I lost my temper and I remembered how my mother dragged me by the hair with my feet 10cm from the ground. I left the baby crying and I went to the balcony for a cigarette to calm my nerves".

Linda always feeds her baby with unheated milk. During lunch we discuss the memories that the mothers have of food when they were little children. Linda finds a connection between the cold bottle and her childhood experience. She remembers how her own mother and baby-sitter forced her to eat and drink food and liquids so hot that her mouth was burned over and over again...'

(p67)



In-depth assessment of capacity and willingness to change will not be required of many practitioners attending core training. There is more detail on this issue in presentation N18 Assessing motivation and willingness to change. However, practitioners from a range of disciplines can provide useful pointers to the issue of the extent to which someone is able and/or willing to improve their parenting.



Practitioners are also often anxious about 'blaming' parents or being judgmental in the face of the recognition of the problems parents are experiencing. For initial recognition of neglect and the identification that something is needed to improve the child's life issues of intent are less important.

However, when assessing what needs to be done, it is important to assess what is happening in the family, issues of intent and what interactions maintain the neglect, and to keep in mind how the child might experience the process of their parents being assessed.

Notes