

Handout

Relevance of historical information

Research studies and file audits have repeatedly shown that historical information is not given the attention that it should be given in assessing the needs of children (Rose and Barnes 2008, Reder and Duncan 1999). In a range of studies, important information was variously not shared (O'Brien 2003), missing or lost (Laming 2003), particularly when the family moved geographically across boundaries or borders.. Evidence was available from past history but either not referred to or not analysed in such a way as to see the emerging pattern of increased risk of suffering harm (Munro 1999). The information gathered was not checked with family members to ensure accuracy. The focus of the process of gathering and recording information was the family rather than the individual child (Scottish Executive 2002). Workers tended to deal with each incident separately (Reder and Duncan 1999) so that a threshold for action was never reached (Brandon et al 2008) and the focus was on the 'here and now' and not the past (Farmer and Owen 1995).

Trying to predict future risk of neglect is a difficult task. However, practitioners appear to have been making this task even harder by failing to make a proper assessment of what has been happening to the child in the past. Neglect is cumulative and made up of the consequences of repeated failure to met basic needs. The very nature of neglect means that good recording and good skills in interpreting chronologies are vital practitioner attributes.

There a number of reasons why practitioners should be concerned about gathering and making sense of historical information in assessment:

- **prediction of future harm**
- **exploring the significance of events**
- **increasing reliability of evidence**
- **assessing motivation and parenting capacity**
- **therapeutic value.**

Continued ↘

Prediction

In the absence of any better indicator, '...the best guide to future behaviour is past behaviour' (Munro 2008, p77). When neglect is a possible concern, due attention and weight must be given to the level of care provided previously. Gathering information from across services will help to build a picture of previous patterns and whether circumstances have changed over time. A clearer picture can be built up of referrals to agencies and the impact of interventions in the past (Reder et al. 2003). By identifying these patterns it is easier to make reliable predictions of the likelihood of future neglect. Neglect is characterised by its chronic nature and the lack of critical incidents around which to base assessment practice means that holistic ecological assessments are required to establish not 'what has happened?' so much as 'how is this child doing developmentally?'

Significance

Taking down a family history can highlight past conflicts which may still be impacting on family functioning. The meaning of events can be considered in terms of the interaction between the child's needs and the parents' ability to meet those needs and can provide pointers towards future risk of harm (Reder et al. 2003). The impact of some cognitive processes (such as the availability heuristic) can mean that practitioners are attracted to particular types of information and find it more difficult to notice other types of information (Helm 2010, Munro 2008). Typically, this means that recent events and vivid detail are more cognitively available to workers than dull and abstract information. In terms of neglect, we may become immersed in the noise and chaos of the present and fail to pay sufficient to the dull, abstract but vital information available in files and chronologies.

Reliability

There is a need to separate out information that is fact from information that is tentative or second hand and this information needs to be checked with family and compared with their account (Reder et al. 2003). Munro (2008) suggests that practitioners need to take care to separate out fact, opinion and hypothesis in chronologies. Existing recordings can take on a legitimacy which is undeserved and practitioners need to be critical in seeking evidence to substantiate and challenge recorded information.

Assessing motivation

Practitioners who are willing to help parents to fill in gaps in their past and in their understanding of their past will be more trusted and effective than a worker who ignores the past (Fahlberg 1994). Partnership working with parents can facilitate access to vital information which parents may hold but only be willing to share in the context of a trusting relationship built over time.

Therapeutic value

The developmental literature (for example, Daniel et al. 2010) recognises the benefits of adults having a coherent story of their childhood. Working with families to develop a chronology may provide a potential opportunity for family members to gain an increased sense of security, as well as a more cohesive sense of identity and resolve issues around difficult events in the past. Children may have partial and confused ideas of family history and many memories may be quite abstract and inaccessible to conscious retrieval. Diligent and sensitive work with children can help a clearer sense of belonging and self (including both positive and negative aspects) and help children come to terms with the past and can contribute to ongoing social and emotional development (McLeod 2008).

[Continued ↘](#)

Chronology

In cases of neglect there needs to be a succinct, readily accessible chronology of events and concerns (Scottish Executive 2002, Laming 2003). Chronologies should be kept for individual children rather than sibling groups (Cleaver and Walker 2004). The nature of neglect means that often these chronologies will be kept by universal services and it is important that these chronologies are regularly reviewed and well maintained so that they can be retrieved and shared as and when necessary (Social Work Inspection Agency 2005).

Practice Challenges

Gathering information in child care assessments has been likened to building a jigsaw puzzle (for example, Munro 2008). However, this analogy assumes that the practitioner knows what the picture is that they are trying to complete and that they will know when they have all the pieces (Helm 2010). The use of frameworks for assessment of neglect is a vital element in ensuring that all the areas of a child or young person's developmental needs have been appropriately considered.

Chronologies are expected to be succinct yet contain all relevant information. Practitioners therefore are required to address two tensions around selection of information. The first is the matter of how much detail to place in the chronology. Too little information may result in dangerous gaps appearing in the chronology but too much information can make the chronology unwieldy and inaccessible. The second tension is the question of 'significance'. To whom is the information 'significant' and in what way? For example, the death of a pet may be of great significance to a child but not to the parents or professionals. There is a need for shared theoretical frameworks to bring consistency and congruity to interpretation of historical information (Helm 2010).

There is a tension for practitioners here because many professionals feel that they do not have the right or mandate to ask families about their history and there are concerns that, for some practitioners, a lack of time, skill and knowledge may result in further harm as traumas are revisited in unhelpful or even damaging ways. Practitioners working with neglected children and young people may not be working regularly with child welfare and protection services. In such instances recording is less likely to be rigorous and structured and uncertainties persist about why, how and when this information should be shared.

Neglect is pervasive and has been likened to the air that some children and young people have to breathe (Minty 2005). The lack of single identifiable incidents can mean that current protective services struggle to identify and respond to the needs of neglected children. This means that some form of incident is usually required to 'catapult' the child into the child welfare and protection system (Dickens 2007). Until such an event occurs, much chronological detail may go unnoticed and workers may fail to recognise the neglected child in need.