

The importance of history to safeguard children and young people.

Welcome to this Practitioner Briefing which aims to help practitioners and their managers understand the importance of gathering and collating historical information for children and their families. The messages in this briefing are just as important for those practitioners working with adults who are parents.

We know from local and national Reviews they have identified missed opportunities to reduce the risks to the child/young person because critical information in the family history was not shared with agencies working with the children/young people. This meant that interventions to support children, young people and their families were not based on a full understanding of the family history. All practitioners working with children/young people should be reminded of how important history is to safeguard them.

In the absence of any better indicator, '...the best guide to future behaviour is past behaviour' (Munro 2008).

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. By identifying these patterns, it is easier to make reliable predictions of the likelihood of future abuse/neglect. 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/young person's needs and the parents' ability to meet those needs and can provide pointers towards future risk of harm.

Why is it Important? Family functioning and history is a key part of all safeguarding work and includes both genetic and psycho-social factors. The experience and history of parents, and their experience of parenting, will have significant impact on their child young person's lived experience.

What else should you think about?

- Do you have a chronology of life events for the family?
- Include all the people that are important to the child young person – absent parents and siblings.
- Have the family been previously known to services?

What Should a Chronology Include?

- Key dates, life events and changes in family composition
- Factual information
- Transitions and life changes
- Key professional interventions
- Family or health issues
- This should give a sense of the child/young person's lived experience.

What should you consider?

- Who is living in the household?
- Have there been any significant changes in family/household composition?
- What is the history of childhood experiences of the parents?
- To consider all the current & historical information about all the children, young people, parents/carers, and household members.

What other tools can you use to help?

A **Genogram** is a tool used to visualise a person's family relationships and history. It moves a step further from the traditional family tree and highlights generational patterns and psychological factors that affect the relationships. A **Chronology** needs to be a succinct, readily accessible chronology of events and concerns. Chronologies should be kept for individual children/young people rather than sibling groups. Chronologies should be regularly updated, reviewed, and shared when necessary. A **Multi Agency Chronology** is all those succinct pieces of information held by separate practitioners about a child young person's life in one document to set out the full picture of concerns and response.

Practice Challenges

Gathering information is like building a jigsaw puzzle. 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. 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/young person but not to the parents or practitioners. There is a need for shared theoretical frameworks to bring consistency and congruity to interpretation of historical information. There is a tension for practitioners here because many may 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/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.

The lack of single identifiable incidents can mean that current protective services struggle to identify and respond to the needs of neglected children/young people. This means that some form of incident is usually required to 'catapult' the child young person into the child welfare and protection system. Until such an event occurs, much chronological detail may go unnoticed, and workers may fail to recognise the neglected child/young person in need.

Please access the [Pan Bedfordshire Child Protection Procedures](#) and register for updates.

Visit the [Safeguarding Bedfordshire website](#) for information and support to safeguard children and adults.

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. 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. There are benefits and possible therapeutic value for 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/young people 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/young people can help a clearer sense of belonging and self (including both positive and negative aspects) and help children young people come to terms with the past and can contribute to ongoing social and emotional development.

