

One Minute Guide - Parenting Capacity Analysis

Social workers need to be able to make informed decisions about which parents are unable to meet their children's needs and why, what aspects of parents' behaviour need to change and whether parents have the capacity to make such changes within a timeframe that is appropriate for the child. An important skill for social workers is applying what is known about child development, family functioning and 'what works' to test out intuitive hypotheses, to make sense of the available information about an individual family, and to support them through the process of change.

The preceding sections set out the evidence of significant harm, the impact on the child, the risk of continuing harm, and the steps that have been taken by the local authority to support the parent to make changes. In light of the evidence and analysis in preceding sections, make a clear statement that analyses the parents' capacity to meet the child's needs now and in the future. Where relevant cross reference the chronology (including the date of the incident(s)) but don't simply repeat the evidence. Consider the following questions and best practice principles:

- ❖ **Are the parents able to provide safe and stable care that meets the child's developmental needs, now and for the duration of their childhood?**
 - Are the parent(s) able to ensure the child's safety now or in the future?
 - Does the parent protect the child from harmful influences?
 - What are the parents' strengths and how do they balance with the issues of concern?
 - Does the parent understand the impact of the harm identified in the evidence? Are their barriers to their understanding, such as learning difficulties/disability, mental health issues, substance misuse?
 - Are their barriers to the parents exercising their parental responsibility, such as involvement in a harmful relationship, substance misuse, or learning difficulty?
- ❖ Consider **the child's needs balanced against the parents capacity:**
 - On balance, is the parent able to meet the child's needs?
 - What support would need to be put in place to make this safe?
 - Is the recommended plan realistic and sustainable?

- ❖ Can the parent make the required changes within **the child's timescales**? Consider:
 - Does the parent accept there is a problem? Is the parent's interpretation of the problem aligned with the professionals' interpretation?
 - What steps has the parent taken to make changes?
 - What is the parents' motivation to make changes? (ie understanding of the impact on the child, risk that the child will be taken into care, because they have been told to etc).
 - What evidence is there that the parent has made, or attempted to make changes?
 - What are the children's timescales? When does change need to occur to avoid significant harm or poor outcomes?
 - Consider the professional opinions. What are the recommendations for treatment and what are the timescale? Do these timescales align with the child's timescales?

Presenting Problems & Underlying Issues

When undertaking a risk assessment it is important for social workers to consider the presenting problems and the underlying issues. Presenting problems relate to the observable issues, for example poor school attendance, neglected appearance, evidence of physical harm, or the child's withdrawn appearance. The underlying issue relates to the reason why the child is receiving a poor standard of care, or the parent is acting in the way that they are, for example, unresolved trauma and loss, mental health issues, personality disorder, learning difficulty/disability, substance misuse, or involvement in a harmful relationship.

The distinction between presenting problems and underlying issues is important to ensure that interventions are purposeful and targeted. For example, where a child is experiencing neglect it may be helpful for the parent to attend a parenting program to develop their practical parenting skills, however, this assumes that the issue to address is a lack of knowledge and that once they learn the skills they will be successfully applied. An inquisitive social worker will undertake observations of parent-child interactions as part of a robust parenting assessment and may discover that the parent is unable to understand what the child needs or is feeling. This type of assessment requires the social worker to understand what they are seeing and to have a sound understanding of attachment and child development theory. Does the parent misinterpret the child's cues? Does the parent respond appropriately to the child's needs and cues, and in good time? If the parent has a poor capacity to mentalise and is unable to recognise or separate the child's needs and feelings from their own, the parenting program will have limited benefit. Until the parent addresses the underlying

issue and develops a capacity to recognise the child's needs, cues and feelings there will be little to no sustainable improvement in the parents' capabilities. A more effective response to this situation might be mentalisation based intervention that develops the parents' capacity to mentalise¹.

Day to Day Functioning

While many child protection issues stem from underlying psychological issues, chasing a diagnosis can be a diversion from undertaking a robust social work assessment, particularly where the parent is resistant to expert assessment. Assessing the day to day functioning of the parent and the child's lived experience can provide a wealth of evidence that can be sufficient to meet threshold.

Understanding the day to day functioning of a parent can be as simple as collating a snap shot of the family routine and the child's day to day experience over a period of time. Commenting on day to day functioning is a means of evidencing how a parent exercises their parental responsibility on a day to day basis. Ensure that you set out how the local authority has attempted to understand and address the underlying issues and support the parent to improve their day to day functioning, even when these efforts have been frustrated. Comment on what factors are influencing and reinforcing these behaviours.

Contacts:

Sarah Rothera, Senior Project Manager: 0207 527 6048

Jeannette Adames, Senior Project Officer: 0207 527 7127

Norma Quashie, Project Support Officer: 0207 527 7745

¹ Midgeley N and Vrouva I, 2012, *Minding the Child: Mentalisation Based Interventions with Children, Young People and their Families*, Poutledge.