A Practitioner's Quick Guide to Cumulative Harm

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Guidance document

What is Cumulative Harm?

Cumulative harm is the way that harmful events or a pattern of harm build up to have an impact on the chid/young person over time. Cumulative harm results from episodes or periods of abuse, neglect and other harmful or difficult circumstances that a child/young person sees, hears and experiences. It can include physical, sexual, emotional and psychological harm caused by a lack of care or by the behaviour of parents, carers, other adults, other children and young people or the child/young person themselves. Accidental harm and other traumas such as pandemics, natural disasters and living through war can also add to the harm a child suffers.

When considering harm to a child or young person over time, it is important that we consider any safety that reduces or mitigates the harm and the impact on the child/young person.

Safety can include times when parents, carers or someone from the wider network has stepped in to stop the harmful behaviour from happening in the first place, or from affecting the child/young person. This could include parents/carers choosing to behave in safer ways, or a member of the network stepping in to keep the child safe and meet their needs when harmful behaviour is happening around the child/young person.

Identifying cumulative harm

When a child/young person first becomes known to you, read the child/young person's record and contact other practitioners who know the child and family for any relevant information they hold. This is particularly important when a child and family has moved from another area, and we don't hold their history on our records.

Take time to understand the child/young person's history and develop a multi-agency chronology of the most important events in their life, both good and worrying.

Focus on the child/young person's whole childhood alongside the presenting issues.

Understand what life is like for them day to day and how any past experiences could still be affecting them currently.

Work directly with the child/young person to understand what is happening in their life from their perspective. Speak to the people who love and care about the child/young person (the family network) and the practitioners who know the child and family for their take on the situation.

Predicting harm is an inexact science however past behaviour is generally the best predictor of future behaviour. However, this can and does change (Eileen Munro).

Use tools to support you to identify cumulative harm. Multi-agency chronologies and the Harm Matrix are generic tools that can be used in every situation. Other tools such as the DASH and DARA (domestic abuse), the Child Exploitation Matrix and the HEAT (Home Environment Assessment Tool) are specialist tools to be used when specific worries come to light. See Useful Resources section for links to these tools.

When using the Harm Matrix, consider the behaviour that is concerning, the timespan, the severity of the first, worst and last incidents or periods of harm and the impact on the child/young person.

Think, what is the impact of repeated incidents or periods of harm on the child/young person over time? When the abuse or harmful behaviour is repeated, remember this can mean that the impact of the harm multiplies.

Identify any experiences of loss or separation, including when a child/young person becomes a child in care.

Be culturally sensitive in your practice and consider intersectionality, for example what role does culture, religion, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation and so on play, and how do inequalities and prejudice interact with each other over time.

Consider the impact of 'lesser' traumas and micro aggressions that build over time such as bullying, poverty, broken relationships, and isolation.

The role of strengths and safety

Any identification of harm should be balanced with an exploration of what helps to reduce the harmful behaviour and increase safety.

Be curious about and explore all instances of strengths and safety that mitigate the risks or harm. Explore this from multiple perspectives, including the child/young person themselves, their parents/carers, wider family network and practitioners who know the child and family.

Explore exceptions to the harmful behaviour, i.e. times that something harmful could have happened but it didn't, or the child/young person was kept safe from the impact of the worries. Consider who or what contributed to this.

How long are the gaps between the harmful behaviour and what has been different about these times compared to when the worries were greater? Remember that safety isn't just the absence of a harmful event being known, it's about what people are doing differently to prevent the harm from happening in the first place or from impacting on the child/young person if it does happen.

Be clear about who the people are who are most important to the child/young person and their parents/carers. Who are the people who take the worries seriously and have shown that they notice and can step in to help when the child/young person is at risk or in danger?

Impact of cumulative harm

What is the impact of the harm on the child/young person over time and how do we know? Be clear about when the child/young person is *at risk* of being harmed and when they have *been* harmed. Consider the seriousness of the harm based on the evidence, for example risk to life, risk to health, risk to wellbeing etc.

What is the child/young person telling us about the harm and how it has affected them? Remember, the child/young person does not need to tell us that something has happened for us to be worried about them. There may be times that they don't feel able to say anything, for example re sexual abuse or domestic abuse. What are people seeing in the child/young person's behaviour or presentation that is making them worried? *'If the behaviour could talk, what might it say?'*

Consider how we make sense of a child/young person's behaviour given their experiences. Think 'what has happened to this child?' rather than 'what is wrong with this child?' This is a shift from viewing the child/young person as the 'problem' or 'perpetrator' to someone who has suffered abuse or harm.

Consider what has happened in the past that is still having an impact on the child/young person today. This is the golden thread, and it can help us to understand how a child/young person is learning to cope with what has been happening, such as withdrawing, self-harm etc. Don't make assumptions. Remember that behaviour is communication.

How do people respond when the child/young person tells someone about the harm they have suffered or are suffering? Are they believed and is action taken to keep them safe? If not, what is the impact of not acting on the child/young person?

Harm may lead to increased self-blame, self-hatred and negative thoughts. For example, 'it's my fault, this is all I deserve, it keeps happening so it must be me.' Be mindful of staying away from victim blaming language such as 'they put themselves at risk', 'they made poor choices', 'their vulnerabilities led to them being abused', so we don't unintentionally feed into this mindset. Instead try saying, 'the young person is at risk from adults sexually exploiting them' or 'mum and the children have been controlled by dad…'

If the harm is caused by the person who is the child/young person's main carer or someone who is trusted and loved, the impact of the trauma is likely to increase and become more complex.

Cumulative harm and trauma can show up at different times for a child/young person and the impact may be seen long after the events. When exploring impact, it's important to name this, consider what the impact is currently and what the impact *could be* in future.

Consider how life events such as becoming a parent, a relationship ending, getting a job etc may re-trigger trauma or lead to thoughts and feelings re-surfacing for a young person as they grow and develop.

Ongoing harm in the absence of safety can reinforce the impact of different types of harm on the child/young person. Are things getting better or worse for the child/young person over time and how do we know?

Remember that less serious ham can become more serious if this happens repeatedly.

Repeated harm leads to loss of trust and makes in harder for us to connect with the child/young person as time goes on.

Impact of strengths and safety

Be clear about the impact of any strengths and safety that mitigates the harm, for example who are the people who provide good enough care to the child/young person and what is it that they do? Make sure that the child/young person isn't just adapting to their circumstances or internalising their worries.

Who are the people who the child/young person feels safest around and what is it that they do to help? This could include the wider family network and practitioners who play an important role in the child/young person's life, who see them regularly, such as teachers.

Who are the people that the child/young person has good relationships with? Who 'gets' them and helps them to feel valued, loved and worthwhile?

What is the balance of strengths and safety in relation to the harm and what is the overall impact on the child/young person taking the whole picture into account?

Remember that safety isn't a one off. It needs to be demonstrated over time to make sure that it is making a difference to the child/young person in the longer run.

What can we do?

Create and contribute to the child/young person's multi-agency chronology of their significant events, that includes both harmful and positive experiences and the impact of these.

Consider harm from the perspective of the child/young person by 'standing in their shoes', as well as from what research or practice wisdom tells us. Explore the harm from the perspective of the parents/carers, the family network and practitioners who know the child and family best so that any difference can be explored.

Make sure that the right person or people are regularly working with the child/young person, so we know if things are getting better or not.

Use tools such as the Harm Matrix, multi-agency chronologies and specialist tools such as the DASH, DARA, CE Matrix and HEAT tool. These can be re-visited to track any progress or increase in harm over time.

Increase your knowledge of the impact of different types of harm on boys and girls, children of differing genders, ages, abilities and so on.

Have conversations with the child/young person, parents/carers, the family network and practitioners working with them about what cumulative harm is. Name this and talk about it in family network meetings and multi-agency meetings.

Safety plan with the child/young person, their parents/carers and network of important people to reduce risk.

Use plain language that is kind, respectful and non-blaming.

Be trauma informed in your work with children and families.

Remember that safety is only temporary without healing. Focus on healing and repairing relationships in your plans and planning. We want to prevent, reduce and compensate for the impact on the child/young person.

Consider how everyone around the child/young person, such as their parents/carers, family members, friends, other important adults and practitioners can learn to enrich the child/young person's sense of self-worth, alongside any specific therapeutic support.

The most powerful therapy is human love' (Bruce Perry, Psychiatrist)

Useful resources

- **Threshold Guidance**
- **Multi-agency Chronology Guidance**
- **Durham Harm/Worry Matrix**
- **DASH Risk Assessment**
- **Child Exploitation Risk Assessment.pdf**
- **Multi-Agency HEAT Tool**
- **Multi-agency HEAT Tool Guidance**
- **Language that Cares Guidance**
- **NSPCC Graded Care Profile 2**
- **Voice of the Child and Lived Experience**