

James was a 4 month old baby who was killed by his father. James's mother was 20 & his father 26 at the time he died. His half-sister was 2. There were 4 findings from the Serious Case Review and 16 actions. Below is the link to the full SCR review.

The SCR Findings

1. There Can be a Fundamental Lack of Understanding of the Risk Factors for Children, in Particular Domestic Abuse

Most of the focus was on the mother who had a history of domestic abuse & misusing substances, including Class A drugs.

There were concerns about the father but they weren't acted upon effectively. He was allowed to be a shadowy figure lurking in the background.

At one point the mother said her benefits had been stopped because James's father had moved in.

Explanations of injuries to the mother were just accepted - e.g a fractured jaw happened from "falling off a pavement on a night out".

There was no heating or hot water. The mother was also caught shoplifting food twice. The home was in a state of disrepair, there was damage to the doors, and the sofa disappeared.

The mother was losing weight & looked in a poor state. She was at constant risk of eviction.

Finding 1: Key Learning Points for all Professionals

- Are explanations for injuries plausible? What are the risk factors?
- Domestic abuse harms babies in the womb
- Domestic abuse is child abuse
- Multi-agency Referral Forms **MUST** hold all the key information
- Keep asking yourselves – “What are the risks here?” “How?”, “Why?”, “Who?” & always “So what?” to every bit of information. So in this case. “HOW” - How did the mother break her jaw? What do you do when you fall? You put your hands out. How likely is it you would fall on your chin? How much stress does it create for someone if they are at permanent risk of eviction? “WHY” – why is a mother stealing food? Why is the mother losing weight and looking in a poor state? Why did the father use different names? “WHO” – who is the man? How much time is he spending with the children? Is he left alone with them? Is he a risk? “SO WHAT” – The mother said her benefits had been cut, so that would mean she had no money. How could she feed her children and pay the bills? There was no heating & hot water so how is the home kept warm and how is she bathing the children?

Useful links:

1. <https://www.gscb.org.uk/media/2090789/gscb-james-serious-case-review-final-170719.pdf>

2. The Systems, Guidance, Tools & Supervision in Place in Gloucestershire Currently do not Sufficiently Assist & Support Professionals Working with Cases of Domestic Abuse

None of the professionals worked directly with James's father, even when the mother was pregnant with his child. It was never known exactly what role James's father played.

Staff supervision did not help affect change for the children.

There was unrealistic language; "ensuring", often in the context of safety. The mother will "ensure Child One is kept safe from harm", "The mother will ensure Child One does not witness any arguments".

No one can "ensure" safety and the mother was not the perpetrator of domestic abuse.

Finding 2: Key Learning Points for all Professionals

- Equal focus on men & women
- Focus on the perpetrators of the abuse. Only the perpetrator of domestic abuse can stop the abuse
- Use realistic language
- Who does what in the home & who cares for the children? What is their lived experience?
- Just because a child is meeting developmental milestones & seem to be happy & chatty does not mean they are not deeply traumatised

3. There can be Insufficient Significance Given to Family History

James's mother had grown up witnessing domestic abuse and she had already been in two abusive & violent relationships before she met James's father when she was 19 years old.

His older half sibling had been on a child protection plan & then a child in need plan because of domestic abuse.

The mother, despite saying she would over months & months, failed to complete a single domestic abuse course, or attend sessions at the Children's Centre.

The father was known to 4 police forces. Most police information related to concerns of dealing & taking drugs. He had convictions for resisting police, common assault of a female victim and burglary. He has also been investigated for possessing cannabis, robbery, common assault, murder, possessing a prohibited weapon and criminal damage.

Useful links:

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Finding 3: Key Learning Points for all Professionals

- Family history is VITAL. Why did it matter in this case - because research says that girls who grow up witnessing domestic abuse are more likely to enter abusive relationships and having been in two abusive relationship by the time she was 19 research says the mother's relationship with James's father was highly likely to be abusive.
- Look at what families do not what they say and think so what? Are they doing what they agree to do and if not, Why not?
- Think "so what" when you get the police check back

4. It is a Challenge for Gloucestershire County Council to meet its Statutory Requirements in Terms of Child in Need, as Set out in the Children Act, 1989 & Working Together to Safeguard Children

The case was unallocated then numerous changes of staff then led by a community family worker for a period of time. The case was closed because the mother was not engaging with the child in need plan

Finding 4: Key Learning Points for all Professionals

- A family not engaging is NOT a reason to close a case – think "So what?"
- There is a very big difference between "attending" and "engaging" – engaging means things are actually getting better for the children because the parents are making the changes happen – not just turning up but actually wanting to learn & to change.
- Think about all the adults in a child's life. Doesn't matter if they live in the home, spend 4 nights a week there, or are there for 3 hours a day. What matters is how much time do they spend with the children? Are they alone with the children?
- Any professional can request a strategy discussion & if Children's Social Care says it doesn't meet the threshold think "so what?" If you think the child has or is likely to suffer significant harm use the Escalation of Concerns Guidance

Always, always think "So What?" What is the impact on the child of whatever you think might be happening in the home?

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