

How the assessment triangle aids professionals identifying needs

[Sociology](#), [Poverty](#)



" The Assessment Framework requires that each child's needs are individually assessed, as well as the parent's capacity to care for each child, and the impact of family and environmental factors on each child's development and on the parents' capacity to meet this particular child's needs. It provides a conceptual framework or ' scaffold' for practice and is not intended for use as an instruction manual: its use needs to be supported by appropriate practice and research-based knowledge and tools to support practice. " <https://www.education.gov.uk/publications/eOrderingDownload/DFE-RBX-10-08.pdf>

Child development Knowledge of child development is vital for good assessments. The understanding of Maslow's hierarchy of need along with the expected development stages of children (stepping stone) gives a scaffold in which it is possible to see if a child is developing at the expected rate. Obviously there may be factors that will alter a child's development that are linked specifically to that child that would alter their development and can be accounted for. Therefore it is imperative that children are treated as individuals and their situations taken into consideration. (Serious illness, premature birth or complications, Specific conditions such as downs syndrome) Looking at the aspects involved in the development of a child or young person, it is helpful in order to discover any difficulties or strengths a child that is being looked after has. Linking these with expectations can help to provide an overview of the child's experiences and build on positive development in the future. The health of a child is a basic need and a pointer that looked after children initially have to undergo. Medicals and ensuring they have received their inoculations, eye tests and dental check-ups

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ensures the basic medical information of a child can be gathered and any problems highlighted can be dealt with. It is also often a reason or an aspect that influences some other area of the child's development. For example, a child who needs glasses but has never visited an optician may, and often does, display behaviour problems and learning difficulties; dependent on the severity of the eye problem. In establishing and correcting that issue, often the behaviour problems also subside. Other areas that affect a child's development are their ability to form and maintain relationships. This is something that initially is learnt from their primary carer. Clingy children are often misinterpreted to have good attachment where in reality it is a poor attachment and a learned behaviour to gain the basic needs of food and warmth. Family relationships and self identity are often a difficult aspect to deal with for looked after children. Families in essence are all unique. How a child is brought up depends on cultural beliefs and heritage. Therefore a child from a totally different culture (simply a child from an urban setting placed in a rural community for example) will display totally different behaviours and developments. A child's self identity is linked to their background and family. Understanding this and ensuring a child is able to develop this identity is important. This in the case of looked after children can be very difficult. This is where using the CAF is important in matching children to families/ carers. Self care and independence can illustrate where a child has been left and not shown or given guidance in basic needs such as cleanliness and being able to gain skills for life. It can also show that a child has not had adequate parenting and has had to manage tasks beyond what is expected of them to live adequately. Children who have a great

independence are often left to themselves and therefore learn to cope alone or look after siblings. Understanding child development, the expected outcomes at each age and then understanding the child can give a very good picture of the child's experiences and lifestyle. This however doesn't necessarily indicate negativity. Sometimes its circumstances that mean children over exceed milestones and again illustrate importance of judging each situation individually. A child's behaviour, social and emotional developments are key in their ability to mature into adults and cope in society. This part of a child's development is linked with the love respect and care given to them. The emotional development of a child underpins many other aspects of development and needs to be considered carefully.

Throughout the process and whilst a child is in care or in need, the assessment must be continually revisited to ensure a child's needs are consistently being met and their Parents and Carers Key research findings relating to the assessment of parents' capacity to meet the needs of each particular child include the importance of understanding the basic requirements of parenting and of considering parents' ability to change (Jones, 2009; Reder et al., 2003). Selwyn et al., 2006). In such cases, psychological assessment can be valuable to assess parental capacity, including sometimes their IQ. It has also been suggested that one way of assessing capacity to change is by giving parents 'managed' opportunities to change. In these cases, it is important to be clear what needs to change, how change will be assessed or measured, and over what time scale, how parents are to be supported, and the consequences if no or insufficient changes are made. Studies involving children who are re-united with their

parents after a period of being looked after indicate that outcomes are better if, before the return home, there is a clear plan of action, a written agreement with the parents and on-going monitoring (Farmer et al., 2008; Harwin et al., 2003). In one study involving babies and very young children who had suffered or were likely to suffer significant harm, parents who overcame their difficulties generally did so within the first six months of the child's life (Ward et al., 2010). Elsewhere, motivational interviewing techniques have been found to be useful in addressing readiness to change in situations of alcohol or drug misuse (Forrester and Harwin, 2008; Harwin, 2009). Assessment of parents generally relies on verbal communication, so if parents are inarticulate, passive, have learning disabilities, communication impairments or there are cultural misunderstandings, cooperation and engagement might be misinterpreted, and they and their children risk being disadvantaged. Improving the assessment of parenting capacity therefore requires a combination of approaches to the collection of information. In addition to conducting interviews (including taking a full family history), the range of approaches may include observation, assessing changes in parenting practices, use of validated tools, and consideration of previous reports regarding the child and family. It is important that assessment is done on a 'child by child' basis as a parent may be able to care for one child but not another within the family. A particular aspect of parenting that is covered in the research is the role of fathers. Recurrent shortcomings have been identified, amongst many groups of professionals, in taking account of men in the households with which they were working. There is an extensive literature on fathering, and within that a considerable range of research

findings indicating how social workers and other professionals can fall into the trap of ignoring fathers, of dismissing their contribution, or of loading responsibility onto mothers to protect children from any dangers coming from the father (for example, Scourfield, 2003). Professional vigilance is necessary to ensure that information about fathers is available whenever possible, especially as fathers may exert a considerable influence even when they are not living with their children. Studies also highlight the need to take account of the impact of factors related to family functioning and family history — for example domestic violence, parental mental illness, substance misuse and learning disability - on parents' capacity to meet their children's needs. In all the experiences and the environment a child has had will impact on how they function with carers. However, for other children this may be exactly what is needed to allow them to develop and become happy and settled. The importance of understanding the dynamics of the family and the wishes of the child are imperative in ensuring a successful placement.

Family and environmental factors Assessment of family functioning is important, as it has been suggested that the best predictors of multi-type maltreatment are poor family cohesion (family members feeling disconnected from one another), low family adaptability (rigid roles and inflexibility in relationships and communication) and the poor quality of the adults' relationship (Higgins and McCabe, 2000). Assessing family functioning can also provide a basis for a strengths-based approach that accepts that all adults and children possess strengths that can be tapped to improve the quality of their lives. While this does not appear to be an area that has been prominent in assessment, one study reported improvements in

the extent to which family strengths were recorded, following the piloting of the Common Assessment Framework in Wales (Pithouse, 2006). Beyond more general parenting issues, specific family functioning and family history factors that emerged from the literature as being very important because of their impact on parenting capacity included the issues raised by substance misuse, parental mental health difficulties, domestic violence, and parental learning disabilities (Brandon et al., 2008 and 2009; Cleaver and Nicholson, 2007; Cleaver et al., 2007; Forrester and Harwin, 2008; Rose and Barnes, 2008). While none of these factors predicts child maltreatment, they make parents more vulnerable to impaired parenting capacity and can have a detrimental effect on children's health and development. Therefore it is very important that practitioners know when these parental problems are present and understand their impact on the child and family. Assessment requires careful analysis of the inter-relationship between the positive and negative factors in a child's life, i. e. the risk factors that are likely to impact on the child's health and development as well as the protective factors. It is important therefore that the different domains of the 'assessment triangle' are not seen as discrete areas for investigation and that systemic thinking is used to explore the interconnections and interactions between different pieces of information. However, studies have shown that practitioners do not always give equal attention to all three domains of the Assessment Framework to get a balanced understanding of the child and family's situation (Horwath, 2002). The transactional-ecological approach proposed by Brandon et al (2008, 2009) offers a helpful way of thinking about the interconnecting risk and protective factors in families' lives. Other

approaches to support analysis and decision making involve the use of decision trees (Munro, 2008) or methods drawn from qualitative research (Holland, 2010). Good assessment is a complex activity. It involves the systematic and purposeful gathering of information but is more than simply a process of collecting 'facts' (which may, themselves, be disputed). The practitioner needs to know why they are seeking the information in the first place, and then to be able to 'process' a mass of multi-faceted and sometimes contradictory material to come to a view about its meaning — including understanding its meaning to the child and to the parents - and to decide how to proceed. This requires a range of knowledge and skills, including the capacity to think analytically, critically and reflectively. Intuition also has a role to play and can, additionally, be helpful in establishing rapport and demonstrating empathy (Holland, 2010; Munro, 2008). Critical and analytical thinking encourages the practitioner to process information rigorously and methodically and to question the reliability of both sources and content. Building reflection into practice allows for regular review of assumptions and formulations in the light of new information. Whilst intuition has a place in the reasoning processes that are needed, drawing as it does on the practitioner's life experience and practice knowledge, it is prone to bias, not necessarily reliable, and may lead to premature judgments. So intuition can be a good place to start but not to finish thinking, and its use should be tempered by both critical and analytical reasoning and reflection. It is clear from the studies we reviewed that the analysis of information has continued to be problematic in practice so attention needs to be focused on strengthening this crucial aspect of the assessment process. This should

include ensuring that social work education and training at all levels provides the learning required to support the development of analytical skills and their application in assessment. Methods of teaching and learning analysis in assessment are being developed and there are a number of useful research-based texts that provide additional advice and guidance for practitioners (Beesley, 2010; Bentovim et al., 2009; Brown et al., 2011; Dalzell and Sawyer, 2007; Helm, 2010; Holland, 2010; Platt, 2011) A number of factors - practical, cognitive/psychological, emotional and systemic/organizational - can undermine the capacity to think purposefully and effectively Reflective supervision has a significant part to play in supporting and promoting this capacity. Support, supervision and consultancy Supervision has long been recognized as a cornerstone of professional practice. But evidence suggests that changes in organisational culture have affected the way social work practice is managed and have led to a prioritising of the administrative and performance management functions of supervision at the expense of the professional learning and development functions (Munro, 2010). The priority of reflective, ' clinical' supervision has been reaffirmed in a number of recent guidance documents and reports (Barlow and Scott, 2010; HM Government, 2010; HSC 330, 2009; Social Work Reform Board, 2010), in line with findings about the role and significance of this process for safe and effective practice. Given the complexity of family situations, relationships and emotional dynamics, it is easy for practitioners working under pressure to lose focus or to get stuck in a particular way of thinking (Brandon et al., 2009; Farmer and Lutman, 2009). And it is hard to challenge one's own patterns or habits of thought. So workers need a safe and ' containing' space to be able to think

about what they are doing and how they make sense of the practical and emotional pressures of the work. Supervision also provides an opportunity for the practitioner to review and if necessary, re-think, their understanding of particular situations. Actively reviewing assessments is important for a number of reasons: new information may become available and needs to be rigorously assessed, particularly if it appears to be at odds with the prevailing understanding of the case; situations do not remain static and children and families change; and reviewing allows the practitioner to check the accuracy of the original assessment - they may find they have jumped to the wrong conclusion. The supervisor may need to use their view from 'outside' the case to challenge assumptions, prejudices and fixed thinking and help the practitioner to remain open-minded (Burton, 2009). They can also help practitioners to keep the child at the centre of their analysis, by being alert to the danger of workers becoming overwhelmed by the demands of very needy adults and losing sight of a vulnerable child within the family. When practitioners are working with complex emotional relationships, the worker/service user relationship may start to become reflected in the supervisor/practitioner relationship. So both practitioners and supervisors need some understanding of emotional dynamics and psychological processes — for example, mirroring, transference and over-identification - in order to manage these different relationships safely. Reflective supervision in such situations is itself a challenging task and one for which supervisors need to feel properly equipped. So it is important that the time, training and support that supervisors need to do the job properly are considered, along with their own levels of experience. Moreover, practitioners may also benefit

from opportunities to learn by doing joint assessments alongside more experienced practitioners. Team managers or senior practitioners are in a key position to offer supervision but they are not the only possible source of support. Peer-group or other forms of group supervision can provide valuable support and insights, and external consultancy can be appropriate, especially in complex cases. There may also be a role for senior managers in auditing case files to review the quality of assessment as part of the 'organisational health checks' recommended by the Social Work Force (2009). In essence, the assessment triangle ensures all aspects of the child is taken into account in order to ensure children in care are given the very best opportunities for a stable happy upbringing. Bibliography <https://www.education.gov.uk/publications/eOrderingDownload/DFE-RBX-10-08.pdf> <http://content.iriss.org.uk/assessment/> <http://www.archive.officialdocuments.co.uk/document/doh/facn/fw-02.htm> http://www.nspcc.org.uk/Inform/trainingandconsultancy/learningresources/developingworldnotebook_wdf60153.pdf <http://www.effectiveservices.org/images/uploads/file/publications/Supporting%20the%20Childrens%20Services%20Committees%20Initiative.pdf> <https://www.education.gov.uk/publications/standard/publicationDetail/Page1/DH-4014430>