

Key issues related to Parental Vulnerability in Oxfordshire case reviews

This short review is based on Oxfordshire case reviews, and themes in common with national case reviews, where vulnerability of parents/carers was a key factor.

Published case reviews tell us that professionals sometimes lack awareness of the extent a parent/carer's own needs may impact on parenting capacity. This may result in a failure to identify potential safeguarding issues.

The review gives an overview of findings and learning for improved practice around working with vulnerable parents.

Key findings

Finding one

Vulnerability of parents/carers must be considered when assessing the needs of the family, providing support and making decisions.

Finding two

Support the parent/carer throughout the time that they receive safeguarding support, contribute to joint plans and contingency plans, and help determine risk, with the social worker.

Finding three

Practitioners had limited or no knowledge of the parent's diagnosis, how this would present and/or impact on their parenting capacity.

Learning points for practitioners

- Consideration should be given to advocacy where a parent/carer has a learning disability
- Support services should be tailored to the parent/carer's specific needs at an early stage
- Think family! Take a whole family approach and think about who is in the family each time a decision is made
- Need to involve fathers and wider family better as a protective factor

Learning for improved practice

Understand the impact of mental health issues on parenting capacity

One of the most frequently made recommendations in these case reviews relates to mental health issues and learning disabilities in the context of parenting capacity. It is essential to consider the following:

- the impact of the stresses of parenting on the parent's mental health
- the impact of the parent's mental ill health and/or learning disability on the safety and wellbeing of the child

Paying attention to these factors will help to identify risk and make sure safeguarding opportunities are not missed.

Think family

Failure to share information across professional groups resulted in assessments of the child without seeing the bigger picture posed by the parent's needs. In particular, professionals working with adults should ensure they share information about the parent's vulnerabilities with practitioners in contact with the child.

Listen to parents

Opportunities for intervention were lost when a parent gave clear warnings that they or their partner were not coping well with parental responsibilities. Really listening to what is being said may facilitate a conversation about family functioning, focus on potential risk and lead to recognition for the need for intervention.

Assumptions cannot be made about the nature/degree of any learning difficulty, and that this may require assessment to fully understand it prior to assessment of parenting capacity. Assessment of parenting capacity should be tailored to parents' level of understanding/learning need, to ensure it is fully accessible and meaningful. Consider advocacy support for parents with additional learning needs.

Focus on the child

The complexity of a parent's needs can feel overwhelming and require a lot of professional attention. These reports show that focusing on negotiating the difficulties of the parent often resulted in professionals losing sight of the child's needs. It's vital to think beyond the immediate needs of the adult and consider how their needs impact on the welfare and development of the child or pose a risk to their safety.

A number of case reviews highlight that the child wasn't given the opportunity to be heard. Professionals must talk to the child and listen and respond to what they say.

Consider parental/carer history

Details of both parents/carers' backgrounds, current circumstances and medical and psychiatric history should be explored. This ensures a better assessment of risks in relation to parenting capacity and should be done regardless of whether the parents/carers live together or apart.

It shouldn't be assumed that parents/carers and children are registered with one family GP. When making professional enquiries both the parents/carers GPs should be identified. This will avoid missing potentially significant information.

Have the confidence to question and challenge

When professionals don't have a full understanding of each other's roles they may:

- lack confidence to challenge decisions
- make assumptions about areas of expertise.

All practitioners must have the confidence to challenge other agencies or professionals' decisions if there seems to be a lack of appropriate response or case drift.

Social workers should have the confidence to ask adult mental health professionals questions about diagnosis, the effects of medication, about the parent's behaviour and chances of recovery. Child practitioners can then use this information to make an assessment that takes full account of the risks posed by the parent's mental ill health.

Themes in common with other serious case reviews involving vulnerable parents

- **The need for curiosity about the families past history, relationships and current circumstances that moves beyond a reliance on self-reported information.**
- **The importance of thinking carefully about the role of the father in the family system.**
- **Parental mental ill health – the impact of the parent's mental health on the safety and wellbeing of the child**