

# A Practitioner's Quick Guide to Cumulative Harm

Cumulative harm, or the build-up and pattern of harm is the outcome of episodes of abuse, neglect and other harmful or difficult circumstances experienced by a child or young person over a short, medium or long time. This can include emotional, physical and psychological harm that is caused by a lack of care and or by the behaviour of parents, carers, other adults, and children / young people themselves. Accidental harm can also add to harm.

When considering harm to a child / young person over time, it is important that we pay equal attention to any evidence of safety in relation to the harm and the impact that this has had on the child / young person. Safety can include times when parents / carers or someone from the support network have stepped in to do something different so that that the harmful behaviour doesn't happen in the first place; times when the parents / network have stepped in to protect the child / young person when something harmful is about to happen; times when the child / young person has alerted someone from the network that they need help and the network has acted on this; the actions that young people take to keep themselves safe and how the network supports this.

## Identifying Cumulative Harm

- Read the child's / young person's file.
- Take time to understand the child / young person's history and develop a chronology.
- Be focused on the child / young person's whole childhood not just the presenting issues – understand their present lived experiences and how their past lived experiences impact on the present
- Work directly with the child/young person to understand their experiences from their perspective
- Identify patterns of abuse, impact and harm using the Harm Matrix. Formulate your best questions to explore any gaps in your knowledge from multiple perspectives (the child / young person, parents, family network, professionals who know the child / young person best)
- Start with first, worst, last incident, frequency and duration of the worrying / harmful behaviour and identify the likely impact of each incident on the child / young person.
- What is the impact of repeated incidents on the child / young person over time? When the abuse / harmful behaviour is repeated remember this can mean the impact of harm multiplies.
- Identify any experiences of loss and separation (including when a child / young person becomes looked after)
- Explore whether the child been subject to prejudice / abuse based on their ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, religion etc
- Include the impact of worries or complicating factors such as bullying, broken / lost friendships, isolation and poverty.

## The role of Strengths and Safety:

- Be curious about and explore all instances of strengths and safety in relation to the worries / harm from multiple perspectives (including the child / young person, parents, family network and professionals)
- Think about exceptions to the worries / harmful behaviour; times when things were less worrying and who or what contributed to this.
- How long are the gaps between worrying / harmful behaviour and what has been different about these times compared to the times where we have been worried?
- Be clear about who the people are who are important to the child / young person / parents / carers, who take the worries seriously and who have shown that they can step in to keep the child / young person safe in the face of danger.

## Impact

- What is the impact of the harm / worries on the child / young person over time and how do we know? This can include increased vulnerability and risk of other types of harm occurring, e.g. exploitation.
- What is it people are seeing in that child / young person's behaviour; what is the child / young person telling us about how what happened made them feel; what is it that has happened in the past that is still having an impact now, rather than making assumptions
- How do people respond when the child / young person tells someone about the harm they have / are suffering? Is the child / young person believed and 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, e.g. "it's my fault, this is all I deserve, it keeps happening so it must be me"
- Consider how we make sense of a child / young person's behaviour in light of their experiences: 'what has happened to them?' rather than 'there is something wrong with them'. This is a shift from viewing the young person as 'the problem or perpetrator' to someone who has suffered harm or abuse.
- 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 level of trauma is likely to increase and become more complex.
- Ongoing harm in the absence of safety can reinforce the impact of the different types of harm on the child/young person. Consider, are things getting better or worse for the child / young person over time and how do we know?
- Remember that lower levels of harm can become more significant if this happens repeatedly.
- Repeated harm leads to loss of trust and makes it harder for us to connect with the child / young person as time goes on.

### The role of Strengths and Safety

- Be clear about the impact of any strengths and safety on the child / young person, e.g. who are the people who provide good care to the child / young person and what is it that they do? Make sure that the child / young person is not just adapting to their circumstances or internalising worries.
- Who are the people who the child / young person feels safest around and what is it that they do to help? How do we know?
- Who are the people that the child / young person has good relationships with and who help them to feel valued and worthwhile?
- What is the balance of strengths / safety in relation to the worries / harm and what is the overall impact on the child / young person taking the whole picture into account?
- Remember that safety needs to be tested out over time to make sure that this is making a difference to the child / young person

### What can we do?

- Consider harm from the view of the child / young person – by 'standing in their shoes' as well as from what research and practice wisdom tells us
- Explore the harm / worries from the child / young person's perspective and from the perspective of the people who know them best
- Use the Harm Matrix
- Safety plan with children / young people, parents / carers and their network of important people
- Be trauma informed in your work with children and families
- Use plain language that is kind, respectful and not blaming
- Have a clear focus on repair and healing in your plans
- Consider how everyone around the child, parents / carers, family members, friends and professionals can learn and help to enrich the child's sense of worth and healing, as well as any specific therapies