

Durham Safeguarding Children Partnership

A Practitioners Quick Guide to Cumulative Harm



Keeping Children Safe

Cumulative harm, or the build-up and pattern of harm, results from episodes of abuse, neglect and other harmful or difficult circumstances experienced by a child or young person. This can take place over a short, medium or long time. It can include emotional, physical, sexual and psychological harm that is caused by a lack of care and or by the behaviour of parents, carers, other adults, and children or young people themselves. Accidental harm and other difficult circumstances, such as pandemics, natural disasters and living through warfare can also add to harm a child experiences.

When considering harm to a child or young person over time, it is important that we pay attention to any evidence of safety that reduces the harm or the impact on the child or 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 like; times when the parents or carers have stepped in to protect the child or young person when something harmful is about to happen; times when the child or young person has alerted someone from the network that they need help and the network has acted on this and how the network supports this.

Identifying Cumulative harm

- Read the child's or young person's file.
- Take time to understand the child or young person's history and develop a chronology of their good and worrying significant events.
- Be focused on the child or 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 or 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 or young person, parents/carers, family network, professionals who know the child or young person best).
- Start with first, worst, last incident, frequency and duration of the worrying or harmful behaviour and identify the likely and known impact of each incident on the child or young person.
- Think, what is the impact of repeated incidents on the child or young person over time? When the abuse or harmful behaviour is repeated remember this can mean the impact of harm multiplies.
- Identify any experiences of loss and separation (including when a child or young person becomes looked after)
- Explore whether the child/young person been subject to prejudice or abuse based on their ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, religion etc.
- Include the impact of worries or complicating factors such as bullying, broken or 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 and harm from multiple perspectives (including the child or young person, parents/carers, family network and professionals – use relationship questions).
- Think about exceptions to the worries or harmful behaviour; times when things were less worrying and who or what contributed to this.
- How long are the gaps between worrying and 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 and or 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 and worries on this child or 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 or young person's behaviour; what is the child or 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? Don't make assumptions. Remember, behaviour is communication.
- How do people respond when the child or young person tells someone about the harm they have 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 or 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"
- Consider how we make sense of a child or 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 impact and 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 or young person. Are things getting better or worse for the child or 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 or 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 or young person, for example who are the people who provide good care to the child or young person and what is it that they do? Make sure that the child or young person is not just adapting to their circumstances or internalising worries.
- Who are the people who the child or 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 or young person has good relationships with, who 'gets them' and who help them to feel valued and worthwhile?
- What is the balance of strengths and safety in relation to the worries and harm and what is the overall impact on the child or 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 or young person.

What can we do?

- Create and contribute to the child or young person's multi-agency chronology of their significant events that includes harmful and positive experiences, safety and the impact of these.
- Consider harm from the view of the child or young person by 'standing in their shoes' as well as from what research and practice wisdom tells us.
- Make sure that the right person or people are regularly working directly with children and young people so we know if things are getting better or not.
- Explore the harm and worries from the child or young person's perspective and from the perspective of the people who know them best
- Use the Harm Matrix. Use the knowledge you gain from the harm matrix to talk about the impact and cumulation of harm that the child or young person is or might be suffering and carrying with them.
- Increase your knowledge of the impact different types of harm has on boys and girls, children of differing genders, ages, abilities, resilience etc.
- Have conversations with the child and family about cumulative harm and what this is. Talk about this in family network and multi-agency meetings.
- Safety plan with children and young people, parents and 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. <https://proceduresonline.com/trixcms1/media/10743/165-language-that-cares.pdf>
- Have a clear focus on repair and healing in your planning and in the Child and Family Plan or the Child Protection Plan – we want to prevent, reduce, compensate for the impact on the child or young person.
- Consider how everyone around the child or young person – their parents and carers, family members, friends and professionals - can learn and help to enrich the child or young person's sense of worth and healing, as well as any specific therapies.