

Learning Together: Staff Briefing

Children at risk as a result of parental “Toxic Trio”

This briefing is aimed at anyone working with children and families in North Somerset. It summarises a recent learning review (Children C and D). National findings tell us about risk factors and learning for improved practice around understanding and responding to risks to children as a result of parental mental health, substance mis-use and domestic abuse (Toxic Trio). It provides key findings, recommendations and links to guidance.



SUMMARY: Two children subjected to physical abuse. With hindsight there were factors that may have been identified that they were at risk earlier. Maternal mental health and substance abuse issues; paternal learning needs and substance abuse issues were identified.

A number of domestic violence incidents were reported by neighbours and third parties to the police.

The children were presented to a number of professionals with injuries. Whilst there was some communication with these agencies there was not always a coordinated approach with those practitioners who had direct contact with the family, some on a regular basis. Each incident was taken in isolation and a full chronology was not pieced together. There was no triangulation of services to have an assessed view of risk, i.e. domestic abuse; drug misuse; mental health (Toxic Trio).

There was no understanding of the “lived” experience of the children i.e. taking what the mother said at face value, and all agencies were adult focused.

It appeared on the surface that the parents engaged with services but this was sporadic.

In the summer 2018, whilst the children were in the sole care of the father, he later disclosed to their mother that he had hit one of the children. When the mother was returned to the children, she did not take immediate action and there was a delay in presenting the children to health services. This presentation initiated a full multi-agency child protection investigation and a medical on both children which identified healing fractures, bruising and burns. At this point full child protection procedures and safety plans were put in place.

“The term ‘Toxic Trio’ has been used to describe the issues of:

- **domestic abuse,**
- **mental ill-health and**
- **substance misuse**

which have been identified as common features of families where harm to children and adults has occurred.”
Safelives.org.uk

Key Messages and areas for improvement:

In an analysis of 139 serious case reviews, between 2009-2011 (Brandon et al 2012), – investigations showed that in over three quarters incidents (86%) where children were seriously harmed or died one or more of a “toxic trio” played a significant part.

Substance misuse can increase violent behaviour. Violent or criminal behaviour incidents fuelled by substance use should be viewed as an increased risk.

The presence of parental mental health problems can significantly increase the risk for children, especially in addition to substance mis-use.

Seeing the bigger picture. Avoid seeing incidents in isolation. One-off incidents may not meet the threshold for child protection procedures. However, these incidents need to be seen within the context of what else is known about the family. This usually means ensuring that relevant and up-to-date information has been gathered from all agencies in contact with the family.

Historical information informing assessment of risk recognising ACE (adverse childhood experiences).

Maintaining a healthy scepticism. Practitioners need to retain their focus on the child and not be distracted by the needs and demands of the parents/carers.

Assessment of risk needs to take into account front-line staff perspective.

Hearing the voice of the child - the daily lived experience should be the focus of interaction with families.

Taking seriously concerns expressed by third parties.

What worked well:

UHB completed and commented their full assessment of the child which includes CP and the voice of the child.

Police contacts did result in a safeguarding referral.

Once Section 47 Enquiries were initiated there was good multi-agency working in terms of information sharing to inform assessment of risk.

Appropriate services were offered.

Learning Themes:

“Toxic Trio” are key indicators of increased risk of harm to children and young people. Early identification and response is needed.

Practitioners need to retain their focus on the child and not be distracted by the needs and demands of the parents/carers.

Agencies working together in an integrated and coordinated way.

Effective and challenging supervision that promotes professional curiosity.

Awareness raising around the Think Family approach.

Awareness raising of the non-mobile baby policy.

Next steps:

Multi-agency information sharing following domestic abuse incidents will now be risk assessed at One Front Door (1FD).

Raise awareness of DASH via comms and marketing.

Raise awareness of the Non-mobile baby policy via the Comms sub-group of the board.

Toxic Trio to form a core part of the multi-agency training provided by the NSSCB. The Learning and Development sub-group of the board to devise a programme.

Further reading and useful links:

Think Family Multi-agency Guidance

Multi-agency guidance for injuries in non-mobile babies and

Addendum for early years settings and child minders

Domestic Abuse Hub: information for professionals

SafeLives: Risk, Threat and Toxic Trio