

Cumulative Harm

The effects of chronic child maltreatment

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Overview

- Definitions
- The extent of the problem
- Impact of cumulative harm on children
- Implications for practice



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The child protection context

Research

- Largely treats CM as a single event
 - ◆ Aetiology - will 'it' occur
 - ◆ Consequences - impact of the event



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The child protection context

Practice

- Also focus on single incidents/events
- Case history used to establish pattern of behaviour to predict future risk
- Not cumulative impact



The child protection context

Legislation

- Incident/event focus:
 - ◆ Substantiate if an adult act of omission or commission has resulted in significant harm or risk of significant harm to the child and statutory intervention is required to prevent further harm



Definitions

- Isolated maltreatment: single incident or inter-related events in a single time period
- Chronic maltreatment: recurrent incidents of maltreatment over a prolonged period of time



What is cumulative harm?

- Cumulative harm may be caused by an accumulation of a single adverse circumstance or event, or by multiple different circumstances and events
- The unremitting daily impact of these experiences on the child can be profound and exponential, and diminish a child's sense of safety, stability and wellbeing



Patterns of entry into child protection

- Case files were reviewed for the 8-year period 1994 - 2002 for:
 - ◆ 100 families
 - ◆ with a child aged between 0 and 4 years
 - ◆ subject of a notification to child protection for the first time
 - ◆ between July 1 and December 31 1994
- Reviewed every case note for every notification from point of first contact to case closure



Patterns of entry into child protection

- For the 100 families, there were
 - ◆ 374 notifications recorded
 - ◆ 82 substantiations recorded
 - ◆ Min = 1 & Max = 22 notifications/family
 - ◆ Min = 0 & Max = 6 substantiations/family



Patterns of entry into child protection

- 65/100 families had > 1 recorded notification
- 24/100 families had > 1 recorded substantiation
- The average duration of family involvement with child protection was 3.3 years
- Families averaged three to four notifications with approximately 10-months between each notification



Patterns of entry into child protection

- The extent of the problem:
 - ◆ Most children experienced chronic maltreatment



Case Study

- This case study illustrates a pattern of chronic maltreatment and the cumulative effects if maltreatment persists
- Over 8-yrs: 22 not. & 4 sub.
- Underlying issue in majority of notifications
 - ◆ poor parenting capacity
 - ◆ psychological maltreatment by mother



Case Study

- Notifications fell into 5 groups of 2-3 notifications per group
- The notifications within each group were all essentially regrading the same set of concerns:
 - ◆ Physical abuse
 - ◆ Emotional abuse (esp. verbal abuse and rejection)
 - ◆ Exposure to family violence
 - ◆ Neglect
 - ◆ Also allegedly exposed to sex offender



Notification One

05-Oct-1994 to 06-Oct-1994

- Grandparent saw mother kick walker with 8mth old son, Jarrod sitting in it. Pulled Jarrod up off couch by one arm. Mother no diagnosed mental illness, but severe mood swings and previous psychiatric care. Mother receiving support from MCHN and FS
- Outcome: Insufficient info to warrant involvement, especially given involvement of local support agency.



Cumulative harm analysis

- No previous CP involvement for this or any other child in mother's care. Does not reach threshold for involvement



Notification Three

04-May-1995 to 05-May-1995

- Aunt alleging loud verbal arguments in front of 15mth old Jarrod, Father punches walls, Mother verbally abusive of Jarrod and is becoming increasingly aggressive towards him. Mother giving Jarrod stronger doses of prescribed medication to get him to sleep. Family Support Worker only sees parents in office.
- Outcome: Notification raising similar issues also received from Grandparents.



Cumulative harm analysis

- No previous CP involvement for this or any other child in mother's care. Does not reach threshold for involvement
- 3rd notification for same issues. 2 different notifiers. Increasing verbal and physical aggression towards child.



Notification Eleven

15-Oct-1997 to 15-Oct-1997

- Notification from worker at Family Welfare Agency. Mother came into service requesting a washing machine (note: parents now separated).
- While at the agency Mother continually yelled at 3 year old Jarrod for misbehaviour. In worker's opinion, child was not behaving inappropriately.
- Worker told Mother that yelling at child was not acceptable. Mother verbally abusive towards worker and left.
- Outcome: Assessed no protective concerns



Cumulative harm analysis

- No previous CP involvement for this or any other child in mother's care. Does not reach threshold for involvement
- 3rd notification for same issues. 2 different notifiers. Increasing verbal and physical aggression towards child.
- 11th not. for same issues from 7 different sources. 2 prior substantiations. Professional notifier. Behaviour observed in public – parental behaviour in private?



Cumulative harm analysis

- One month later: GP stated 3 year old Jarrod was severely traumatised following overnight access with mother and further contact with mother should not be permitted



Systemic barriers to recognising cumulative harm

- Each involvement treated as a discrete event
 - ◆ Information not accumulated from one report to the next
 - ◆ Information lost over time
 - ◆ Assumption that problems presented in previous involvements were resolved at case closure
 - ◆ Files were not scrutinised for pattern of cumulative harm



Indicators of cumulative harm in the case history

- Be alert if there are:
 - ◆ Multiple reports
 - ◆ Previous substantiations
 - ◆ Multiple sources alleging similar problems
 - ◆ Reports from professionals
 - ◆ Evidence of children not meeting developmental milestones
 - ◆ Allegations of inappropriate parenting in public



Implications for practice

- Unlikely to receive a report explicitly due to cumulative harm
- The **majority** of children who experience maltreatment experience:
 - ◆ multiple incidents; and
 - ◆ multiple types
- Need to be alert to possibility of cumulative harm in all reports



Identifying cumulative harm

- **Frequency** - Have there been previous allegations for similar issues?
- **Type** - Signs that child has experienced other types of CA/N in addition to those reported?
- **Severity** - Has caused or likely to cause significant harm if repeated over a prolonged period?
- **Source of harm** - Does current situation make child more vulnerable to other perpetrators?
- **Duration** - How long have problems that led to current involvement been present?



Parental and family indicators of cumulative harm

- Families who experience cumulative harm have:
 - ◆ Multiple inter-linked problems (i.e. risk factors) such as DV, A&D, and MH
 - ◆ An absence of protective factors
 - ◆ Social isolation/exclusion
 - ◆ Enduring parental problems impacting their capacity to provide adequate care (e.g. ID, A&D)



When parents can't or won't change

- Hard to witness parents' struggle to change
- If parent can't change, won't change, or it will take too long to change - need to prioritise child needs
- Short and long term effects matter, whether there is intent or not
- Desire to change does not equal change
- Need to review circumstances and the effectiveness of our interventions - have circumstances changed **for the child?**



Impact of cumulative harm on children

- Main theories to help understand cumulative harm are child development (incl. early brain development), trauma, and attachment
- Researchers use term 'toxic stress' to describe prolonged serious stress
- Stress is normal and releases chemicals in brain to help us respond
- Prolonged stress can damage the developing brain



Impact of cumulative harm on children

- Useful resource:

Child development and trauma guide

http://www.office-for-children.vic.gov.au/every-child-every-chance/library/publications/best_interests



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Assisting recovery in children

- Cumulative harm can overwhelm even the most resilient child
- Particular attention needs to be given to understanding the complexity of the child's experience
- Remember to consider what interventions or services might assist the child towards recovery



Final thoughts

- Inadequate to make assessments on the basis of individual reports - particularly in cases of neglect and emotional abuse
- Use pattern and history to establish harm to children
- Broaden thinking from immediate to long-term harm to children
- If cumulative harm is identified, next step is to determine what service is best placed to respond



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