

Briefing on Serious Case Reviews

CN10 (Devon, April 2014)¹

Background

In June 2013, Step Father was convicted and imprisoned for sexual offences against his two stepdaughters. He had admitted five counts of rape in respect of one child in the household, four counts of making an indecent photograph or pseudo image of a child, one count of taking an indecent photograph or pseudo image of a child in respect of one of the children and two counts of sexual activity with a female child (aged 13 – 17 years and offender aged 18 or over) in respect of the other child in the household.

Father had a previous conviction for a sexual offence against a 7-year-old-girl for which he had received a hospital treatment order (one year) and a probation order (three years). He had also been placed on the sex offender register from 2000 until 2005. An initial assessment was made when Step Father moved into family home in 2007. A series of further concerns were investigated over the following five years but the Step Father remained in the home throughout until his arrest in the latter part of 2012.

The youngest daughter took part in the serious case review and said it would have made a difference if she had felt that her mother would have listened to, and believed her, so that she could have confided in her. She also said she wished that social workers would have visited the home and so have seen what things were like rather than seeing her at school.

Key Learning Points

Social work and Multi Agency Assessments

- Social work assessment for the children did not adequately take into account known information regarding potential risk posed by Step Father. The multi-agency working was weak, because the social work team lacked information about potential risk, and this appeared to influence the approach taken by other agencies.
- In this case referrals and concerns were dealt with as separate issues. Key linkages, which could have given insight into the abuse being perpetrated, were not made between the various signs and symptoms being displayed behaviourally by the three children. Incidents were dealt with as individual situations and not seen in the context of the historical or familial whole.
- Little predictive assessment took place in relation to the potential of abusive behaviour on the part of Step Father. Conclusions drawn based on the lack of disclosures or allegations by the children, Step Father's longevity as a household member and his wife's alleged ability to protect the children.
- Services engaged with adults should develop practice tools that help to identify the risks that adults may pose to their children and assist in fulfilling their safeguarding responsibilities. Information needs to be shared appropriately, with referral made to appropriate child protection agencies.
- Information was held in disparate places with no single agency or collaboration of agencies understanding the full picture. A multi-agency model of chronologies should be developed and used to summarise key involvements and assessments.

¹ Please note this serious case review was not undertaken using the SCIE systems approach methodology.



Child's view and experience

- Voices of children were present at intervals but their thoughts and feelings are underrepresented through records. Referrals were made, and assessments followed, but they were limited to the immediate concern and not set in the wider context of the shared experience of what it was like to be a child growing up in this family.
- Implications of the daughter's behaviours as outlined by the Community Care Worker (where she related an incident when she had been visiting when the older daughter had got changed for something and stripped off in front of her), in the referral do not appear to have been considered in the context of the information about Step Father's conviction.
- The wish of the children to see their father was noted but there appears not to have been any social work contact with him.

Rule of optimism and tendency to 'start again'

- Optimism applied to the level of understanding demonstrated by Mother in relation to the potential risk posed by Step Father (her boyfriend and later husband) and in relation to her ability to safeguard her children. Optimism was exercised believing that a lack of direct allegation from the children meant that all was well, and in seeing Step Father's long-term involvement in the family as evidence that he posed limited risk.
- Referrals in respect of the children dealt with as a separate issue between 2007 and 2011.

Information sharing across the professional network

- Key information not sought or shared, for example; records held in relations to Step Father's treatment in hospital (which indicated potential future risk to children), letter sent to Probation but did not reveal any further information as the records had been deleted, School Nurse not informed about risk posed by Step Father moving into the family and Police not informed about the third initial assessment.
- Information known to agencies was not remembered correctly so that strategy meetings in 2009 and 2011 accepted that Mother was acting to protect the children.

Full picture of circumstances of the child and family

- Mother's health needs and level of dependency not factored into assessments.
- Step Father had pushed children on bed and held them down, raising concerns of possible domestic violence, inappropriate chastisement, this was not properly explored.
- Initial decisions were taken on the basis of there being no role for social care as there was no evidence of allegations, these decisions would have been made in the context of the County Council undergoing a Joint Area Review which raised concerns around consistency, thresholds and evidencing practice and performance.
- There was evidence that appropriate boundaries and adequate levels of support and guidance were not in place – Daughter 1 engaging in under-age sex, Son accessing pornography at school, Daughter 2 having to cook from a young age. Step Father was considered to have a low IQ, Son received specialist help for additional needs – all adding another dimension to the assessment of need and of neglect within the family.



Consideration of all adults in the household and beyond

- In 2009 the Peter Connelly Serious Case Review drew attention to the risk implicit of not considering the impact of an unrelated man joining the household and set this out starkly: *“One of the potentially dangerous scenarios in child protection is an unrelated man joining a vulnerable single parent family.”*
- The potential of increased risk of abuse for children living in households where one parent, usually the father figure, is unrelated to the children has also been researched, so whilst being part of a reconstituted family is not a risk indicator of itself, it should be considered as part of the comprehensive assessment.
- In this case Step Father was not seen, interviewed or challenged as part of the first initial assessment and the significance of him denying responsibility for his offence, and Mother believing his explanation, were not appropriately factored into the assessment of risk. In the subsequent assessments (2008 / 2009 / 2010) Step Father’s role in the household was considered mainly via the testimony of others.
- ‘Non resident’ parents (with parental responsibility) should be informed about child protection concerns for their children and consideration given to their potential contribution to the protection and care of children. In this instance, the Father was not informed of potential risks to his children or actively considered in assessments until 2012. The protection Father might have offered his children was not explored.

Other observations noted in the Serious Case Review

‘Respectful uncertainty’ & misplaced assumptions

- In 2003 Lord Laming in his report in to the death of Victoria Climbié coined the phrase ‘respectful uncertainty’ in describing the way in which social workers should view information passed to them by parents to ensure that an appropriate level of questioning occurred and information was not taken purely at face value. In this case, a decision was made within a week that their mother could provide adequate protection, seemingly based largely on her testimony. Social work assessments accepted Mother’s assurances that she was supervising Step Father’s contact and interactions with the children, and so protecting them from abuse. Given the nature of sexual abuse it is highly unlikely that even a very close level of supervision could have protected the children from Step Father.

Understanding and assessing the risks posed to children by sex offenders

- This case highlights the importance of front-line practitioners and their managers understanding and assessing the risks posed to children by sex offenders. Recidivism amongst sexual offenders appears to have been downplayed.
- Social workers and first line managers need to have a good understanding of sex offending, offender profiles, and risk implications for children. This knowledge and understanding should be routinely used to inform and guide assessments, information sharing and plans to protect children.

Safeguarding children from sexual abuse

- Indicators of abuse were not fully recognised. There are specialist assessment models available for assessing risk by a person with a historical conviction now having access to children, which could have been deployed to safeguard the children. Mother’s denial of guilt of her husband could have been better understood through such a model.



- The review recommendation the development and implementation of a system to ensure multi-agency training, practice initiatives, and quality assurance systems to improve assessment and front-line practice in relation to safeguarding children from sexual abuse

Disguised compliance

- Step Father's lack of engagement is a feature of the case, with evidence of non-engagement peppered throughout, for example not working with the community team on discharge from Hospital, through to remaining upstairs when workers visited the family household, and having no contact with professionals who were involved with the children.
- This factor linked with Mother's seeming ability to wittingly or otherwise convince successive professionals that she was able to protect her children, may be seen in the context of the term 'disguised compliance' coined by Brandon et al:

“Apparent or disguised cooperation from parents often prevented or delayed understanding of the severity of harm to the child and cases drifted. Where parents ...engineered the focus away from allegations of harm, children went unseen and unheard.”

