

Chapter 7

Assessing parents and good enough parenting

Assessments will be most effective when the parent, foster carer and assessor work in a way that promotes and values a climate of trust and openness. The focus of the assessment should be on enabling and supporting the adult to parent their child, recognising and building on strengths, as well as identifying and addressing any deficits. It should be a dynamic and robust process, and at best will be therapeutic and empowering.

ASSESSMENT MODELS

There are three basic models for undertaking parenting assessments in the context of parent and child arrangements.

Team-based assessor

In this model, there is a social work assessor within the parent and child team whose key role is to undertake assessments and present these in court. Commissioners will be purchasing or accessing a package that consists of both the parent and child fostering arrangement and a social work assessment. The strengths of this model will lie in the expertise of the team and the coherence of approach that will come from familiarity with particular ways of working, including agreed roles and responsibilities and established working relationships across the team. An assessment format will be used that is structured and tested, and the assessor will be well placed to service court requirements, being able to demonstrate clearly from the outset how an assessment will be progressed. Some local authorities additionally, where the resources are available, involve the parent in attending a parenting assessment programme at a family or children's centre.

Child's social worker as assessor

With this model, the fostering service offers a parent and child arrangement and supports that foster carer in the same way that they

would with any other mainstream placement. Here, the remit of the fostering service is distinctly in relation to the foster carer, and the supervising social worker has a limited remit in terms of assessing the parent by working closely with the foster carer to ensure that information and observations are passed on to the primary assessor. The assessment task will fall to the child's social worker in the same way that it would if the parent and child were living in their own accommodation, or if the child was in foster care and the parent in the community. This model has the advantage of allowing continuity in the relationship between social worker and parent, but in a court context may not be accepted as an impartial assessment. Furthermore, there is the risk that the assessment relies on observation and is reactive, rather than being based on an established and recognised structure.

Independent assessor

To achieve a level of impartiality, local authorities may choose to commission an independent social worker to undertake the parenting assessment. While there are advantages with that approach, it still will probably not achieve the other benefits associated with clarity of roles, processes and structure that can be achieved within an established team approach.

ASSESSMENT STRUCTURE AND CONTENT

Whichever model is used, it is necessary to have clarity about the structure of the assessment: what it will entail, who will be involved, how long it will take, what is expected of the parents, and what will be expected of all the professionals involved. Some fostering services have a very clearly defined 12-week assessment that includes one or two reviews and weekly progress meetings; others will set out arrangements on a more individual basis, depending on court dates and individual circumstances. Whatever is decided, it needs to be clearly set out in writing as an agreement or contract, and this will be the document to refer to in the event of disagreements or difficulties.

This practice guide cannot cover in any depth the issues involved in undertaking effective assessments of parents and their children, as this is a huge topic that is better covered elsewhere. However, it is important that where fostering services or others are making assessments, they do this from a position of competence and knowledge, using a structured approach, and making use of appropriate resources and tools. A number of fostering services use the Department of Health (2000) Assessment Framework with the associated tools. Other resources include the City of Salford Community and Social Services (2000) *Conducting Family Assessments: A practice guide* (further information is available on the

publisher's website at www.russellhouse.co.uk) and McGraw *et al* (1998) *Parent Assessment Manual Programme* (further information is available on the publisher website at www.pamsweb.co.uk/index.html).

A FAIR ASSESSMENT

In order to meet the ethical standards set by social work regulators, any assessment of parenting must be transparent, fair and evidence-based. It should give the parent a proper opportunity to demonstrate that they can care for their child, and should take into account the specific needs of that parent and their family. The parent should be provided with constructive guidance and teaching, and have the opportunity to observe good parenting as modelled by the foster carers. It should also consider what support might be needed by the parent in the immediate future and further down the line. A fair assessment does not set up the parent or parents to fail.

In order to give a parent the maximum chance of successfully continuing to parent their child, it is necessary to undertake a full and detailed assessment of their personal and individual circumstances prior to their living in the foster home. A good pre-arrangement assessment needs to set out the concerns about the parenting; be clear about the identified risks; and identify what behaviours need to be evidenced, or change, in order that professionals will be less concerned. There will also be a need to look at the specific vulnerabilities that a person brings, as well as considering their strengths.

This might include practical aspects such as substance misuse or inappropriate relationships, but could also include consideration of the parent's own childhood and how this might impact on their parenting. It might include consideration of a person's age and maturity, and how this will impact on developing an appropriate relationship with their child. Only by considering these various aspects on an individual basis will it be possible to ensure an entirely fair and objective assessment process.

It is also crucial that consideration is given to issues of equality and diversity, and that will mean taking account of issues including ethnicity, culture, class, and disability, amongst others. There are significant cultural differences in how different groups parent children, and it is essential that these are fully accounted for when judgements are reached about a person's parenting abilities.

There are also particular issues that need to be considered in relation to disability, including learning difficulty, and these need full and expert consideration at the outset. For example, there are likely to be significant benefits from undertaking a cognitive assessment of parents with learning difficulties, in order to think about how they learn best, and

so to be able to tailor an assessment or programme accordingly. Foster carers will need to be fully involved in this thinking.

The FA&ST team in Somerset County Council have considered this issue carefully (see Box 13).

BOX 13

FA&ST – WORKING WITH PARENTS WITH ADDITIONAL LEARNING NEEDS

Direct work with parents for all FA&ST assessments includes modelling, oral prompts, and clear explanations, all in the context of relationship-based practice and a strength-based approach. The FA&ST have various tools and strategies that can be used to support all parents, but that are particularly useful for parents with additional learning needs. These include:

- pictorial routine charts, that use pictures which are individualised to the parent and their child;
- pictorial instructions and reminders for tasks, such as making a bottle and washing hands;
- use of videos and worksheets that have pictures as opposed to words for parents with limited reading and writing skills;
- using clocks and false money to teach parents about time and budgeting;
- assessing an individual's learning style and tailoring the assessment accordingly;
- attempting to reduce anxiety, as this can act as a barrier to learning;
- providing material in a format accessible to the parents, such as larger font or using coloured paper;
- repeating information and offering opportunities to go over that information again;
- regular reviews so that parents are made aware of what is working well and what we continue to be worried about;
- providing information in advance of review meetings, with support to understand it before the actual meeting;
- offering regular breaks to parents during assessment visits and breaking down information into a manageable length.

Source: Personal communication with FA&ST team, Somerset County Council, 2020

Good practice will usually require the involvement of professionals from disciplines other than children's social work, and will likely include community paediatric, midwifery and health visiting services, but could also include psychology, disability and substance misuse services.

Pathway Care provides a good example of effective multi-disciplinary working (see Box 14).

BOX 14

PATHWAY CARE – A CASE STUDY IN MULTI-DISCIPLINARY WORKING

Emma was first introduced to Pathway Care just before she gave birth to her baby, George. Her significant learning disability, unstable mental health, childhood abuse, tendency to form relationships with violent men, social isolation and unreliable and fluctuating relationship with her mother had all combined to prevent her from looking after her oldest daughter, who had been placed within the extended family.

Prior to placement, George's social worker, Emma's occupational therapist and her speech and language therapist met with us, as the fostering provider, and with the foster carer. This enabled us to have a full understanding of Emma and the best ways of communicating with her, and we were also able to explain how we undertook an assessment, enabling Emma's team to reassure her before she moved in.

The assessment in relation to George proved to be exceptionally difficult, with the foster carer needing to be extremely vigilant to safeguard George while also coping with Emma's unpredictability.

It was only possible to manage this because of the good communication between the provider and referrer, and due to the ongoing contribution of the various adult services. As Emma's mental health deteriorated, an adult psychiatrist became involved, and fortunately he was willing to offer flexible support and consultation either by telephone or by home visit, and this was invaluable.

It was initially anticipated that Emma would be unable to manage more than a few weeks of being in placement, but due to the time and care put into introductions and planning, combined with sustained high quality communication between the various professionals and services, Emma stayed in the placement for seven months.

Families First Parenting Assessment Team, Pathway Care, 2011

GOOD ENOUGH PARENTING AND MANAGING RISK

It is generally recognised that "good enough" parenting is hard to define, but in broad terms the concept has been useful in distinguishing between the notion of perfect parenting and inevitable mistakes, errors of judgement and lapses that are a part of all parenting and being parented. Within this, there is still an enormous spectrum of parenting approaches, and establishing criteria that mark out those that fall within the definition of "significant harm" is challenging. There are helpful approaches to this (Hindley *et al*, 2006) but there is little doubt that it

requires considerable knowledge and experience of child development and parenting to understand this well.

With parent and child arrangements, these issues are particularly significant. The foster carer's experience and views about "good enough" parenting may clash with the parent's views, and by the very nature of the arrangement, it is likely that the parent's approach to or the circumstances of their parenting are at times not good enough. This is hugely significant, and brings an entirely different dimension to the practice of fostering. For some foster carers, who came into fostering because of their desire to provide very high quality care to vulnerable and disadvantaged children, this can create a situation that they are unable to accept. November and Sandall's research (2020, p 5) noted that 'stresses were associated with the tension inherent in the role, between nurturing a vulnerable mother and contributing to the assessment which decides whether she will leave with her child'. This study, and feedback from a number of practitioners, highlights the fact that placing social workers have very different expectations in relation to when they think foster carers should intervene to address poor quality parenting. This constitutes a significant challenge for parent and child foster carers.

Parent and child carers need to work with this lack of clarity, and learn to make judgements about what is good enough, and what is not. It is very hard to set clear guidelines about what this means in practice, as circumstances will vary in each case. However, it is clear that foster carers need to be trained and supported to know when to intervene because a child is at risk, and be fully aware of their responsibilities in relation to child protection matters. They must also be able to make judgements about when it is helpful to intervene in an effort to improve parenting capacity, and when to step back and allow parents some autonomy, even where their parenting style might create problems, or might clash with the carer's views about this. At times, it may be that the best way to intervene is through quietly role-modelling a different approach, and talking to the parent about this at a later, more appropriate time. All of these are difficult judgements, and need to be considered on an ongoing basis in the context of a reflective supervisory relationship.

In all parent and child arrangements, there will be a level of risk involved, and that risk needs to be considered on an ongoing basis. It is crucial that this is very clearly acknowledged, and that foster carers are empowered and supported to monitor and assess that risk, and to take action in circumstances when it becomes too great to accept. This support will include specific training about risk management, and discussions in the assessment phase about what this might entail, and whether the potential foster carer will feel able to undertake this aspect of the role. It will also involve regular face-to-face meetings with their supervising social worker, and good practice requires specific

consideration of risk on each occasion. Risk assessment must be an ongoing activity that is informed by close observation, reflection, and clear responsibility for action where necessary.

THE ROLE OF THE FOSTER CARER IN ASSESSMENT

There is a general consensus among most fostering services that while foster carers should be a significant contributor to assessments – they have been described as the “eyes and ears” for the assessing social worker – for the most part it is not desirable that they lead this process. There is the issue of skill base, and the skills required for a social work assessment are very different from those required for fostering. It can also be difficult for a person to be objective and avoid value judgements when they have formed a relationship with someone they are living with. This can potentially result in feelings of antagonism and anger, or conversely, affection and empathy, neither of which is helpful in completing a fair and impartial parenting assessment.

There will always be exceptions to this, but someone with social work assessment skills, who wants to foster, and who can maintain professional objectivity in the context of sharing a home with someone, will be a rare person. That said, foster carers can and must play a significant part within any good parent and child fostering assessment, and in some cases courts have been keen to clarify exactly what the foster carer’s role and responsibility will be prior to the arrangement being made.

None of this should be interpreted as suggesting that parent and child foster carers are not crucial to a good assessment, and it is their relationship with the parent that can make the difference between whether or not the child goes home with the parent or if they end up separated. It will be the foster carer who role-models good parenting, and who is central to teaching and guiding the parent when they need this. The foster carer’s records will be crucial within the whole experience (see Chapter 8), and it may be that the foster carer is expected to use the CoramBAAF parent and child foster carer progress checklist (see Appendix 5) with the parent to help them see what they are achieving, as well as what needs to change. In some fostering services, carers complete that with the parent on a weekly basis to measure progress, but the specific arrangements should be agreed as part of the placement plan.