



Completing social work chronologies: practice tool

Introduction

Chronologies are a vital tool for practitioners working with children and their families, supporting practice in a number of different ways. They are crucial to:

- > capture significant events in the child and family's life
- > consider the child's felt and lived experience
- > understand the source of actual and potential harm impacting on children and young people
- > identify protective factors and to decide next steps for intervention in a range of contexts.

Compiling and analysing chronologies serves as a foundation for relationship-based practice as they provide an overview of what has happened in families' lives, aid understanding of what their experience of services and professionals might be, what can be learnt from this, and how this can be worked with to effect change in the future.

Completing a chronology is a complex activity. Social workers need to decide what constitutes a 'significant event' and how much detail to include. This is compounded by the reality that they need to meet multiple purposes, from evidencing threshold decisions for court to sharing elements of a child's life story with foster carers. Guidance regarding their completion has sometimes been contradictory, from Lord Laming's (2003) recommendation following the death of Victoria Climbié that they should be 'comprehensive', to the updated guidance by Sir James Munby (2013) that they should provide a 'succinct summary'. The pressure of day-to-day practice means that they are completed in different circumstances, with some updated on a day-to-day basis, with others collated retrospectively from case notes going back months, or even years.

This guide aims to support social workers and their managers to navigate these complexities by providing an overview of the process that should be applicable to a range of contexts. It explores why chronologies are helpful, offers practical tips on completing them and includes tools to promote reflection and analysis of the information gathered. Overall, it will enable social workers and managers to understand and apply chronologies for assessment, planning and review with children and their families.

Chronologies: a tool for multiple purposes

Completing, analysing and utilising chronologies can play a significant role in supporting social work practice in a number of different ways.

A tool to support relationship-based practice

Information contained in chronologies will support workers to build relationships with families and explore the world from their perspective. Having an overview in the lives of children and their families should help workers empathise with their perspective and hypothesise what their likely felt experience in relation to these events might be. Events in parent's own lives, such as previous experiences of abuse and trauma, may provide helpful understanding to social workers regarding how they might manage their feelings, feel about themselves, their children and services.

Sharing and exploring chronologies can support people to understand what has happened in their lives, to appreciate and validate the family's position and what the family think might help. This can help explore how social work practice can be strengthened and which professional relationships should be prioritised to support effective engagement and interventions with the family. Co-producing chronologies with family members can also build their self-efficacy and promote their position as experts in their own lives.

A tool to aid child-centred practice

Chronologies are a powerful tool to aid child-centred practice and ensure that children's experiences are at the heart of decision-making. Chronologies should include children's voice, observations, what they have said about their lived experience and what they think may make a difference in their family. Appraising information should enable practitioners to notice the extent to which children's experiences and voice are evident in the chronology, and if it is absent, consider why this might be and how it can be addressed. Reviewing historical and current risks should prompt practitioners to be curious and reflect on what the child's likely felt and lived experience of these events may be.

A tool to analyse risk, harm and patterns over time

Chronologies are a key tool to help practitioners understand what risk factors are operating in the family and will provide a foundation for all stages of assessment. By listing incidents of risk including (but not limited to) mental health difficulties, alcohol and substance use, and domestic abuse will provide an indication of the extent and level of harm over time and the likely impact on children in the family.

Chronologies will be particularly helpful for families where there may not be individual incidents of concern, but long-standing neglect where children's basic physical and emotional needs have not been met and 'start again syndrome' has been a feature of social worker's practice (Brandon et al., 2008).

In the report 'Care Proceedings in England: The Case for Clear Blue Water' Isabelle Trowler stated that families subject to thin, red line decisions, where the decision to remove a child from his or her parents could go either way, should be diverted away from court. The report argues that there should be 'clear blue water' between children brought into care proceedings and other children at risk of significant harm (Trowler, 2018). Events in chronologies and impact on children over time can be an important way in which practitioners can identify whether they are more likely to secure an order from the court or not.

Structural inequalities and experiences of discrimination, racism, homophobia and physical difference that may be affecting children's physical and emotional well-being can also be identified. Regularly reviewing this history should help social workers distance themselves from immediate, isolated incidents and current impressions of the family to consider the historical context and their potential accumulative impact over time.

The information contained in chronologies can also aid a contextual lens for adolescence where risks from extra familial contexts may be the primary concern. Compiling information and noticing patterns in friendship groups, community locations, and knowledge of online activity may also help identify where and how to intervene to increase safety for young people.

A tool to identify strengths, resilience and protection

Updating and reviewing chronologies will support social workers to identify potential sources of support and resilience within the family. The history may include times when the family or young person were not known to Children's Services and recognising this should prompt curiosity regarding what was different in the life of the family then. The chronology may refer to key achievements and success that might be built upon to achieve change in other areas of the child's life. It may indicate a particular intervention that was successful in mitigating against current risks. Chronologies may also identify important people involved in children and young people's lives including fathers, grandparents, neighbours and kinship networks who may be able to play a role in the life of the child, promote safety and continuity of relationships now and in the longer-term.

A tool to explore and analyse capacity for change

Reviewing the history will provide information to social workers and their managers regarding the parent's capacity for change. A well-maintained chronology will include details of the support and intervention provided to the family, their response to this, and if this has brought meaningful, sustained change. Recognising periods of strained relationships with services or increased risk should enable social workers to be curious about what the reasons for a perceived lack of change might be, including shame, ambivalence, or struggle of confidence of parents and how this might be understood and worked with. Social workers may also review information to look for evidence of the factors known to indicate motivation and commitment to parental change.

A tool to support decision-making and next steps

Reviewing significant events in the history will be the basis on which to plan next steps of Children's Services' involvement with children and their families. This might include identifying gaps in information and the key questions that assessment of the family might need to answer now. It will help map potential interventions linked to current risks and needs and identify what would need to be seen to evidence change. Analysing the chronology should also help practitioners weigh up if the current intervention is appropriate to the level of risk and if there might need to be consideration of strengthening the statutory or legal response, or if there is evidence that the family can be effectively diverted from these processes.

A tool to support permanence, life story and identity for children in care

Chronologies often serve as a significant source of information for social workers, foster carers, other professionals and children and young people themselves in understanding their life story and the reasons why they may not be living with their birth family, a key factor which has been demonstrated to support resilience, self-esteem and placement stability for children in care (Staines and Selwyn, 2020). Chronologies will provide a vital piece of information for care experienced people who may request to see their files as adults and support their need to understand their history.

The overview of children's lives which chronologies provide, including knowledge of previous separation and losses, and the harm they have suffered, can support networks to understand the potential impact of developmental trauma and how the child may have needed to manage their feelings and behaviour in response to this. It should enable professionals and carers to empathise with the child's perspective and understand the impact these events are likely to have had on the child's current development and attachment relationships.

Maintaining up-to-date chronologies beyond care proceedings is crucial to serve as a record of achievements and key events in the child's birth or foster family to promote understanding, create life story and memories for now. It may support the child's identity by keeping an up-to-date record of key dates like new births, deaths, festivals and celebrations in the life of both their birth and foster families. They may also keep a record of placement changes which will be an important foundation for direct work to help them understand and explore what has happened in their life.

Chronologies may also help identify patterns in placement breakdowns and support exploration of why this might be and what the child or young person may be trying to communicate. For example, a child or young person who experiences a number of foster families in quick succession might be demonstrating that they may not be ready to join another family or may still be overwhelmed with feelings of loss or worry about their parents, which may lead to anxiety and difficulty in settling. Understanding patterns and potential contexts can support networks to think about what may be going on, how this might inform the proposed care plan and how foster carers can be supported to provide a secure base for children and young people at these times.

- > **Podcast: [Reflections on accessing care records \(2021\)](#) at 3 minutes 50 seconds, John-George discusses seeing his chronology when accessing his care file.**

A tool to underpin reflective supervision and practice

Chronologies are a key tool to support reflective practice within individual and group supervision and to explore the emotional impact of the work upon social workers, professionals and their managers. Complex histories of abuse, neglect, offending histories of adults, awareness of discrimination and structural oppression will inevitably impact on the feelings of practitioners working with them. Sadness, helplessness, fear, and avoidance need to be acknowledged as an integral part of the work, and reviewing the history within chronologies can be a helpful tool to give permission to name this and more consciously consider the potential impact as practitioners move forward in the work.

Completing chronologies in practice: the process

The central principle that provides a foundation for all social workers completing chronologies is that they are a **process** that should run alongside all involvement with children and their families. It will be helpful for practitioners to understand working with chronologies in three main stages:

- > opening and maintaining
- > reviewing and analysing
- > utilising and presenting information.

Stage 1: Opening and updating

From the point of referral, there should be an open chronology for all families open to a social worker which should be maintained on a day-to-day basis. Key events will be succinctly added to chronologies as they occur, providing a clear account of all the major changes and significant events in the lives of the child and family on an ongoing basis.

Stage 2: Reviewing and analysing

The list of events which will result from Stage 1 is not an end in itself but social workers, their managers and networks will regularly explore, review and analyse the information to aid their understanding of what is happening and decide next steps. This might take place in supervision; network meetings; child protection conferences or legal planning meetings.

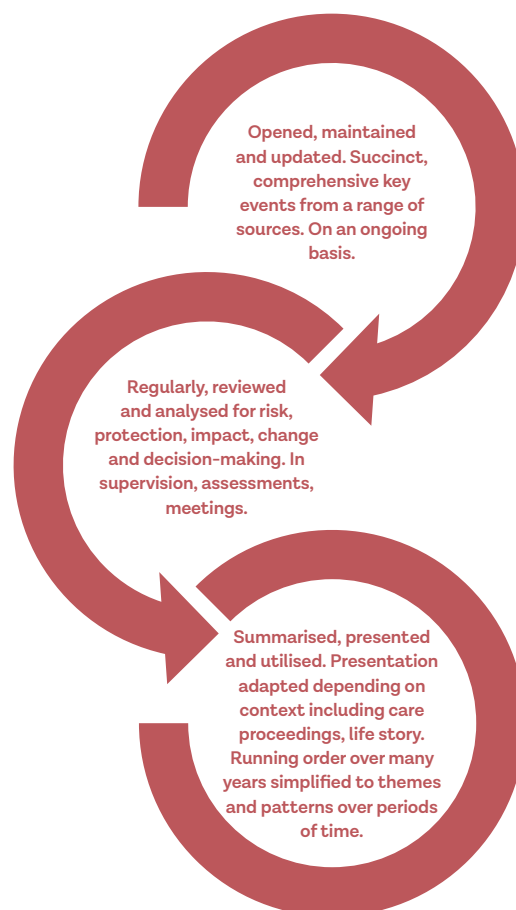
Stage 3: Utilising and presenting information

Finally, social workers will be required to prepare their ongoing running record of events to present and utilise this information, depending on the context and audience. An example might be summarising periods of time rather than listing every event in evidence for court or preparing a chronology for life story work which may highlight key events significant for the child's identity.

Key questions that social workers might need to consider at this point might include:

- > How will this information be used?
- > What sorts of information may need to be highlighted for this purpose?
- > How might a lengthy running record be effectively summarised?
- > Is there any confidential or particularly sensitive information that may need to be removed for this purpose?

Following the preparing of this information at a point in time, the social worker is likely to return to the previous stages as their work with the child and family continues.



How to compile a chronology

A chronology is a list of events that have occurred within a family in date order providing the date of the event, brief detail of what the event was and the source of the information where required, and the significant of this event. Overall, the chronology should provide a prompt, concise and visual outline of significant events based on the facts.

Where children are receiving support from more than one service, this running order of events should be multi-agency with each agency contributing, and the social worker taking the lead in pulling the information together and taking care to identify the source for each entry.

Date	Significant event	Impact on the child(ren)
The date or time period for each significant event should be recorded here.	A brief description of the significant concern, event or incident and the professional action or response. If no action taken, specify why not. Information should be clear, factual, accurate, and concise. Full case notes should not be copied over. The source of the information should be identified.	Potential and actual impact on the child. To include observation, child's expressed views and professional judgment.

Significant events should focus on the circumstances that had a positive or negative impact on the child.

They might include:

- > Key dates of birth, deaths, marriages, co-habitations, relationships.
- > Childhood history of parents.
- > Transitions and life changes, house moves, changes of carer, contact arrangements.
- > Social care intervention - Injuries, neglect of care, incidents of hospital admission, parental incidents including domestic abuse, substance use, violence, criminal history.
- > Incidents of racism and oppression.
- > Key professional interventions, what's been tried, missed appointments, engagement, other professionals involved.
- > The child's voice – when seen, observed behaviour, views sought.
- > When the child has been provided with explanations and what words were used.
- > Family and organisational responses to intervention.
- > Outcome of referrals and actions taken.
- > Child's health history, immunisations, injuries and hospital admissions.
- > Education, training and employment including achievements, qualifications, changes of school, periods of exclusion, absence.
- > Changes in the child's legal status and placement history of children in care.
- > Events of religious/cultural significance i.e. baptism, bar mitzvah.

The information recorded in chronologies should be succinct and to the point. Practitioners should avoid an indiscriminate transfer of case recording as too much information is likely to lessen the chronology's effectiveness and impact. Usually, two or three sentences detailing the incident or event and its significance will be sufficient and help social workers identify relevant patterns when it comes to analysing the information at a later point.

Social workers should remember that the chronology will be shared with the family and potentially the child when they are older, so it should be written in accessible language with jargon and acronyms avoided.

Each incident within the chronology should be colour coded to a 'RAG rating'. This means using different coloured fonts for chronology entries. The RAG Rating will comprise of:

Red: An event that indicates high risk.

Amber: An event that indicates medium risk.

Green: Used to indicate low risks or strengths and where the event is still significant to the child.

This should provide a visual aid for social workers to notice patterns of events and potential escalation in harm and the level of risk and times of greater protection for the child easier to identify. Practitioner analysis should also be used here to consider what the level of risk and impact of each incident is for that specific child.

Date	Incident or sequence of incidents relevant to the child/ren's welfare	Significance – Impact on child/ren
<p>01.05.21</p>	<p>Police Referral: Mr Johnson and Ms Smith had an argument whilst the children were at maternal grandmother's. The police were contacted by a neighbour. The police found Ms Smith with injuries amounting to ABH (Actual Bodily Harm). Mr Johnson said that he had bitten and punched Ms Smith, but said that she started the altercation.</p> <p>Initial home visit and agreement for support to be offered under a child in need plan. Family group conference to agree a safety plan arranged.</p>	<p>Further incident of domestic abuse which contributes to ongoing risk to the children, despite them not being present.</p>
<p>07.06.21</p>	<p>Mr Johnson called the social worker to inform that he and Ms Smith decided to separate to prevent further arguments in their relationship.</p>	<p>Potential increased safety for the children with Ms Smith and Mr Johnson understanding risks of violence between them and acting to protect them.</p>
<p>11.06.21</p>	<p>New police referral – Ms Smith was assaulted by Mr Johnson and this was witnessed by the children. Samantha was injured when she fell out of the pram during the dispute. A Section 47 was initiated, and found Samantha had a bruise and abrasion on her forehead. Tommy told the social worker that he was worried about his mother being hurt by his father.</p> <p>Child protection conference arranged.</p>	<p>Samantha physically injured and both children were scared and distressed. Children assessed to be at high risk of further emotional and physical harm due to safety plan not protecting the children.</p>

Analysing a chronology

It is crucial that social workers, their managers and the professional network take time to explore and analyse the information and consider what it means for the child and their family. Marion Brandon in her Biennial Review of Child Deaths and Serious Injuries wrote 'It is what is done with the information rather than its simple accumulation that leads to more analytic assessments and safer practice' (Brandon et al., p3, 2008).

Taking the time to explore the meaning of the information requires practitioners to step out of reactive, crisis-driven work where the only questions asked might be in relation to immediate, current involvement and risks, to a broader understanding based on the history and likely trajectory for the child and family.

Children's Services need to establish an organisational culture where chronologies are recognised as a core social work task with protected time to update and maintain them. The expectation needs to be established that they will be drawn upon as an integral part of key meetings including supervision, child protection, legal planning and children in care reviews.

Social workers and their managers may benefit from utilising reflective questions to explore hypotheses, effectively analyse and make meaning from the information gathered. The response to some of these questions can be utilised and integrated into comprehensive assessments.

Analysing a chronology – all children and families

- > What known risk factors are evident?
- > What external factors may impact on the parent's capacity to meet their children's needs?
- > What impact have these risks had on the child or young person? What are the likely felt experiences?
- > Is there any evidence of times when things have been different? How is this accounted for i.e. strengths, resilience and protective factors?
- > What has been tried in the past, with what success and for whom? Has it resulted in change for the child?
- > Are there any gaps in information or further questions that need to be asked?
- > Is there anyone in the chronology who is identified as important adults to the child and could play a role in increasing safety in the future?
- > What is your current hypothesis regarding level of risk?
- > What do these events indicate about prognosis and capacity to change?
- > What support could be offered to the child and the family that might increase safety, protection and ensure children's needs are met?
- > What will need to be seen to show that this is working?

Analysing a chronology – Public Law Outline and care proceedings

- > If we do nothing and the situation remains the same, what will be the immediate (today); short-term (six months); medium-term (a year) and long-term (five years) impact?
- > Is an application to the court necessary to safeguard the child and to ensure their permanence in the future?
- > Do you think the events listed indicate 'clear blue water' in making an application to the court i.e. is there more likelihood that an order will be secured than not? (Trowler, 2018)
- > What does this mean for what should happen next?
- > Are there any other actions that could be taken to divert the family from the court? What is the evidence for this?
- > If considering the child may need to be looked after by alternative carers, how is the child likely to respond to this? How might they experience being separated from their parents?
- > Based on the history, what further assessment and intervention should be undertaken during the Public Law Outline or proceedings to ensure that risks are reduced and decisions can be made regarding the long-term care plan for the child?

Analysing a chronology – Children in care

- > What are the key events in the child's family history? What impact did these have on the child?
- > What is the significance of these events for the child now and their emotional, social and psychological development?
- > What does the family history demonstrate with regard to the child's identity, racial, cultural and religious needs and kinship network, and how can this be supported now?
- > What has happened since the child or young person came into foster care? What is the impact of these events on the child or young person?
- > What might the child or young person be trying to communicate through their behaviour?
- > What is the child or young person's understanding of their history? What can be done to increase and strengthen this? How might their understanding need to change as they grow older? What do they need to support this?
- > How do these events impact on their sense of belonging, security and stability? What can be done to enhance this?
- > What are the child's strengths, and how can these be enhanced in the future?
- > How do these events inform the current care plan for the child?

Preparing and presenting chronologies for different contexts

An important process is to prepare and present this information depending on the context. A social worker's role in the life of the child and the child's changing circumstances over time means that the ongoing running order of events will need to be prepared and presented for different purposes. This might range from finalising a chronology for use in legal proceedings to one that might be used to support therapeutic life story work with the child. This stage in the process will rely on social workers and their managers considering the purpose of the chronology, who it will be shared with, and what information will need to be prioritised for this purpose. It will also be important to consider if there is any confidential or sensitive information that may need to be excluded in each context.

In respect to preparing a chronology for legal proceedings Sir James Munby, President of the Family Division at the time that the Public Law Outline was introduced, stated:

'We must get away from previous practice. All too often... local authorities are filing enormously voluminous materials which are not merely too long; too often they are narrative and historical, rather than analytical...local authority materials can be much shorter than hitherto, and they should be more focused on analysis than on history and narrative...We do not want social work chronologies extending over dozens of pages' (Munby, 2013, p.4).

Chronologies prepared as evidence in proceedings should be concise. The guidance suggests that significant events should only cover the previous two years, with events prior to this being grouped together and included as one entry in date order.

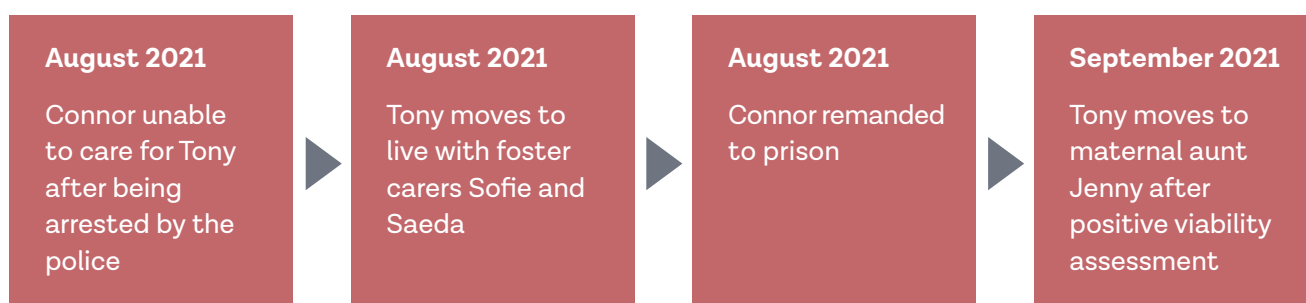
The example below shows how to achieve this:

Date	Significant event	Impact on the child(ren)
January 2015 – November 2016	Children on a child protection plan for neglect due to unclean home conditions, the children regularly missing school and health appointments.	The parents showed insight into the concerns and worked with social care and family support. Positive changes were made including the children attending school regularly and the child protection plan ended.

In the context of life story work chronologies may be adapted and prepared to emphasise events significant to the child's identity and life story. Sometimes social workers may use the chronology as a basis for writing a 'later life letter' or narrative for the child. Information in chronologies for this purpose might have less emphasis on individual incidents of concern, which may be more appropriately summarised. Instead, they may highlight information related to family history, celebrations, relationships, and key changes for the child that can be drawn upon in direct work and shared with their carers and network to support their understanding of their identity.

Rose (2012) describes how to methodically present key events in children's histories by breaking this down into 'bite-size chunks'. Rose presents key events in the form of 'movement boxes' to enable each piece of information to be considered separately and enable the practitioner to generate questions in relation to each event.

Example of 'movement boxes'



This process provides the foundation to prompt questions regarding what additional information the practitioner will need to undertake life story work and the questions the child may have. This can help the practitioner identify how they might access this information and support the child within the work. Presenting information in this way can help practitioners appreciate the number of changes in children's lives and likely impact on them over time.

Conclusion

Chronologies are a critical tool to support social work practice with children and their families. They provide a foundation for relationship-based practice and identify patterns of risk, harm and protective factors and how they have occurred over time. They also help plan next steps for assessment and intervention.

Chronologies need to be opened, maintained and updated on a regular basis; analysed and reviewed in supervision and relevant meetings; and presented in a range of contexts including child protection conferences and care proceedings. Information contained in the chronology needs to be succinct, recording key events and impact on the child.

This practice tool supports practitioners to understand how chronologies can be helpful and identifies the process of compiling, analysing and presenting chronologies within their work. Children's Services need to work to develop an organisational culture where chronologies are an expected, integral part of day-to-day work with children and their families and utilised in a range of contexts.

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