## Assessing parental history and its meaning for children[[1]](#footnote-1)

When assessing parenting, it is really important to understand what the parents have gone through themselves in life, especially when they were children, and the impact all of this has had on them. This is explained a little later in this tool in more detail.

First off, we need to recognise we are asking parents to tell us some really difficult and personal things – things we’d be uncomfortable talking about if we were in their shoes too. We need to be kind and gentle, but also recognise that this is a really important area to assess and one we have to look at to try and help bring about change for children. Often the roots of current problems lie in past experiences.

As with any social work assessment, it is also really important to acknowledge that we aren’t just setting out to identify problems and to present our conclusions to managers or courts. We need to use this tool collaboratively with parents, and to see not only what insight they may have into their problems and what services they may want to help them, but to try and help them make connections between their experiences in the past and the difficulties they face now, and then see what we can put in place to help them move on and change. This tool should be as much about collaborating with parents as it is identifying problems. If they have been brave enough to open up to us, we need to ensure we try and honour that courage and make it lead to something positive for them if at all possible.

The tool basically involves understanding what’s happened for a parent, and what they understand has been the impact of this on them.

Feel free to adapt these questions and add to them/replace them, bringing your own skills and experiences to your assessment too. Try and make this a conversation and then parents will likely cover some of these questions without needing to directly be asked them. The important thing is covering the areas below, not how you do it (although the questions in the first part of section 2 are really important).

If you are doing a shorter assessment, you may pick and choose the questions below (particularly section 2) to quickly check out any obvious issues.

This guide tells you how to gain the information, how to interpret and analyse it, why it matters, how to write it up, then gives some additional research notes about this area with a couple of worksheets at the end.

Assessing history/history of being parented

1) The first thing you need to do is try and get an understanding of what’s happened in their lives. Depending on the parent, there are a few ways you might go about this.

* Get a roll of wallpaper and use this as a long timeline and draw their life’s story together. They can start wherever they want. Use the chronology template tool (at the end of this document) to see what other questions/prompts you can use/which areas to cover (e.g. household composition, school experiences, relationships, employment, traumatic experiences etc.). This is likely the best way to do this with a parent who has a learning disability.
* Do a cultural genogram with them. As you do this you can explore relationships and experiences. When you’ve finished, you will have covered many of the areas on the chronology template. You then can plug the gaps with questions from the chronology tool.
* Write a chronology/history of their lives together. The chronology template (at the end of this document) tells you the kind of things to ask/include. You can ask them to tell you where they lived and with who when they were born and get them to tell you their story from then, asking “what happened next” and giving some prompts.

Alongside this you can use the traffic light cards to identify people, times, events or relationships as red, amber or green. You can also use figures or different colour pens to help this come alive.

No matter how you took their life story, explore the life story you’ve been told with them. What do they think and feel about these events? Which do they feel they dealt with, and which do they feel they haven’t? Notice how they appear when talking about them – are they angry, very upset/tearful, quiet, reluctant to talk, do they seem to drift away? Are there any gaps in their chronology/history where they can’t remember what happened?

2) Next, focus on their experience as a child.

Ask them for 3-5 words to describe each parent/carer (this may include grandparents or others who played a large caring role – ask). Then ask them for a real story or example from their childhood that illustrates that word. Notice how they come across when they are talking about this. Do the words they have picked or the stories they tell you indicate that they may have difficult childhood experiences? If appropriate, explore with them how they felt at the time when the stories happened, and how they feel about them now. Do they think what their parent/carer did was right or wrong? What do they think someone else would make of it? Do the stories they pick seem to match the words they gave you originally or not?

You might also ask:

* Did your parents have any particular difficulties when you were growing up (e.g. alcohol abuse, mental health issues etc.)
* How often did your parents argue? What happened (explore if they were violent)? How did you feel?
* What did their parents do when they were ill/upset/hurt?
* What happened on birthdays/at Christmas/Eid etc.?
* What words would you use to describe yourself as a child?
* Do you think you were a good child – how do you know?
* What happened when you were naughty as a child?
* What were the most important events that happened in your life – both positive and negative?
* What are their happiest and least happy memories from childhood? Since then?
* How did you feel about yourself and life as a child?
* Tell me about anything or anyone who made you feel afraid
* Looking back, is there anything you are particularly proud or happy about?
* Is there anything you regret or feel guilty about from your childhood? Since then?
* Did you get into trouble as a child or since, and if so, what kind?
* Are you the oldest or youngest – did this make a difference to how your parents were with you?
* Did you go on any holidays and what were they like?

Ask them to rate their own parents 0-10 in terms of how they raised them and ask them to explain their score.

You might also consider these questions:

* Describe your siblings/other children you lived with. What was the nicest and worst thing you ever did to them and the worst thing they ever did to you? How did you get on with them?
* Who were your family members, and did you get along with them?
* What were your teenage years like?
* Did you still have good relationships with the people around you during your teenage years?
* Who were your friends at primary school?
* What were your favourite thing at primary school?
* What did you not like at primary school?
* What was your favourite toy / game?
* Who did you play with as a child?
* Who were your friends at secondary school?
* What was secondary school like? What was your favourite subject? What did you find hard?
* Did you have a favourite teacher and why were they your favourite?

3) Ask what has been the impact of all of this on them? What has the impact of this been on the parenting they have given? What have they tried to do the same and differently (and why) from their parents? Try and explore this in a collaborative way. If they have insight into how their past has made things difficult for them now, explore what services may be able to help them. If they don’t have insight, can you help them to develop this and to make links between their past and their current struggles and challenges and then find the motivation and courage to try and address this?

Interpreting – guidance notes

*“It is important to note that history is not determining...[and] as with all assessments, the crucial point is less finding out what happened than exploring with the subject the meaning of these events and how they might impinge on parenting.”*

*“What does seem likely is that when parents are engaged in stressful interactions with their children frightening ghosts from their own childhood re-emerge …often at an unconscious level, leading the parent to act in self protective ways that can lead to child physical abuse or neglect.”*

*A Theoretical Model for the Comprehensive Assessment of Parenting (Steve Farnfield British Journal of Social Work (2008) 38, 1076–1099)*

Our histories don’t decide who we are or how we behave. Two people can have very similar experiences but turn out very differently.

The key things to work out are firstly, have they had difficult experiences, or experiences they would say were difficult?

If so, does it seem like they have dealt with them or not? Do these difficult experiences impact on their thoughts and feelings now or have an impact that makes them struggle to function now? Do these difficult experiences impact on their engagement with their children?

If they dismiss experiences, don’t see or deny the significance, can’t remember significant periods or events or seem very confused about them, can’t talk about them, become very upset indeed, seem very irrational or bizarre about these events, or seem fixated, enmeshed and pre-occupied with their past, or if they seem helpless, this might indicate they haven’t resolved or moved past what has happened to them. They are then likely to be experiencing difficult thoughts and feelings in the present that may be impacting on how they function now.

Also, if they are seriously struggling to understand why children behave as they do or blaming children for situations and not being able to understand a child’s thoughts or emotions (for example, blaming babies for poo-ing or crying or saying of a baby “they don’t like me” or “they hate me when clearly a baby isn’t capable of these thoughts), this would also be a cause for concern.

On other hand, if their account is clear without any gaps, if there is acceptance and reflection, if they can show complex feelings but that they aren’t overwhelmed by them, if they show understanding of the motives of their parents or others, and if they show they have a sense that they can control and shape their own life, you would be less concerned and they will likely find parenting easier.

Remember, the important thing is their current state of mind regarding their past experiences rather than necessarily what these experiences were. Someone may have had difficult childhood experiences, but healing and helpful relationships later on, and/or the chance to reflect on what happened meant they can move on from it. Different people can be impacted very differently by the same events.

In terms of parenting, some people experience poor parenting as children and then act the same way with their own children when they become parents. Other people experience poor parenting and are able to reflect on it, to understand what was good and what wasn’t, and decide to behave differently and then do behave differently. Some abused children make great parents as they are more determined that their children will have good childhoods. So, again, having experienced poor parenting doesn’t necessarily mean someone will give poor parenting to their children. We need to work out what the parenting they received was like, but also what they made of that. Again, if we can help them to develop insight and make links, we need to do this with parents.

In terms of understanding children, parents need to be able, at least to an extent, to understand why their children are behaving as they are, and what thoughts and beliefs and motives may be behind this. Parents may then meet their children’s needs. If they can’t recognise this, then they will struggle to meet that child’s needs.

Why this all matters

Research is clear that many parents who struggle to look after their children often do so because of their own experiences of being parented. So, in assessments, “in depth attention should be given to assessing the sense caregivers have made of their earlier attachment experiences” (Aldgate, J. and Jones, D. ‘The place of attachment in children’s development.’ p.95 in Aldgate, J. et al (eds) (2006) The Developing World of the Child, London: DfES.)

Parents may struggle with parenting because they are so preoccupied and wrapped up in the trauma and hurt they’ve experienced in the past that it disturbs and intrudes on their thinking and emotions day-to-day and makes it very hard for them to operate like they’d want to. Caregiving and having children may also awaken in them difficult past feelings or memories for them.

Or, it may be that they don’t see their children accurately, understand the meaning of their children's behaviour, or respond appropriately. If they have unresolved childhood issues, they may well find managing behaviour more difficult and less rewarding or more triggering.

Or, it may be that they don’t know what good caring looks like and they haven’t sifted out what was OK and what was not OK from their own childhood so they just repeat what they saw as a child.

In general, “Arranging for a parent to attend parenting classes or family centres or sending in a Family Support Worker without resolving their own problems stemming from their childhood is unlikely to be successful” (The missing side of the triangle: assessing the importance of family and environmental factors in the lives of children. Jack and Gill (2003) Barnardos p.132). So, addressing this area is key.

Writing up

**In a short assessment this could be written up like this:**

I spoke to Sarah about her own life and childhood. She was able to tell me about a fairly happy childhood, and to tell me stories and to give me examples that backed up what she said. Sadly, she also shared with me an experience of being raped when she was 15. She did not share any other significant traumatic experiences with me.

Although what Sarah went through was obviously a traumatic and awful experience for her, Sarah told me about how she was able to process and deal with her experience, and how it has made her more careful about her own children’s safety than she thinks should would otherwise have been. She did not present as this causing her any significant issues as she lives her life and cares for her children day-to-day.

**In a longer or court assessment and if you are more confident, it could be written up like this – the paragraphs in yellow are standard paragraphs you could put in all court assessments and you would edit the bits that aren’t highlighted.**

1. I have spent time exploring Sharon’s experience of being parented as research is clear that if someone is struggling to care for their own child, their struggles may well be rooted in their own experience of being parented and/or trauma that they have experienced since that time, either of which they may not have been able to deal with effectively.[[2]](#footnote-2)
2. Sharon Teresa Harris was born in Birmingham on 7th July 1995. She described to me an abusive and difficult childhood. Sharon told me she was scapegoated, neglected, and largely left to fend for herself. Her mother told her she had been mistake and she had wanted to abort her. She was called names, hit commonly (including with objects) and told she was hated and should go and live somewhere else.
3. Her parents (or at least her mother) appear to have struggled with alcohol abuse. Sharon told me that she was rarely shown warmth or affection so started causing trouble to get attention, which included getting in fights.
4. She was expelled from school at age 14 or 15. Sharon was known to the Child and Adolescent Mental Health Service as a child. Sharon also told me that she was raped at age 14. She has not shared with me any significant traumatic experiences since this time.
5. Sharon told me that she has not had counselling to help her deal with her experiences.
6. For children who did not receive good parenting, it is important to note that a parent’s own history of being parented does not automatically determine the caregiving a parent will provide themselves. We know that many abused children become outstanding care-givers themselves.
7. Instead, it is the *meaning* of someone’s history to them and how that history impacts on the parenting they now give, or are likely to give, that is important. For example, if parents have been able to reflect on the caregiving they received or the trauma they experienced, have been able to resolve their experiences, have been able to develop an awareness of the impact their history had on them and have determined to do things differently themselves, and have developed a sense they can control their world and behaviour, these are all positive signs that someone may well be able to provide good parenting despite their history.
8. At the same time, if a parent remains caught up in difficult feelings, cannot acknowledge complex emotions when considering their past, cannot provide a clear account of their childhood with no significant gaps, cannot show a level of nuanced reflection including on the motives of others, and have been unable to form a positive schema of what good enough parenting looks like and how the parenting they received was deficient, these are signs for concern and that there may be struggles in providing good parenting.[[3]](#footnote-3)
9. Sharon was able to tell me a clear account of her childhood. She clearly understood that the parenting she received had not been acceptable. She was also able to understand the impact her parenting had had on her. She told me that her childhood had made her how she is – “hard to get along with”, finding it “hard to show love and affection”, getting close to Daniel then pushing him away, being very scared of getting hurt, struggling to bond with Lucie initially, and reacting strongly when told what to do by authority figures. She said her rape had left her scared, anxious and angry.
10. During our conversation about her history, Sharon presented a range of emotions, ranging from frustration, hopelessness, sadness, and regret but she did not seem particularly caught up in these emotions.
11. Sharon also showed a degree of hopelessness, and a level of belief that she was unable to change. When we discussed counselling, she seemed conflicted about whether or not she would do this. The local authority files record she has previously told a Child Protection conference she was undergoing counselling, but this is not what she has told me more recently.
12. Sharon seemed caught up in her feelings about her childhood to some degree, particularly in her relationships with her family which was clearly a cause of stress and distraction for her, as explored later.
13. Overall, it is clear that Sharon suffered an extremely abusive childhood and a number of really awful and difficult experiences. This has very likely had a significant impact on her current behaviour. Whilst she has managed to reflect on her experiences to a degree, she does not seem to have the opportunity to move on, to develop a positive schema of parenting, or to have been able to deal with the problems her history has caused her. It is encouraging that she is considering counselling, but her thoughts around this are far from concrete.
14. It would therefore be reasonable to expect Sharon to struggle with many aspects of parenting and functioning and the impact her history has had on her and her history goes some way to explaining why she is struggling to give her children the parenting she would want to at the moment.

**Further research notes on parental history**

A child’s brain develops very rapidly in their early years, and a lack of helpful experiences (of both attentive caregivers and a stimulating and safe environment) can have a lasting effect on brain development and how the brain forms and how the neurons within it are structured. Early experiences also help us to make sense of the world. If a child does not grow up in a family where caregivers respond to them sensitively and meet their needs reliably they are unlikely to develop coherent working models of relationships. These children are more likely to struggle with forming healthy relationships and a positive concept of self, coping with anxiety, and coping with social relationships. Problems and patterns of behaviour developed in infancy may continue into adult life and play a significant role in parenting, particularly when parents have not resolved their feelings about their own relationships with their caregivers, for example blocking them out or remaining caught up in them. At the same time, positive later experiences and environments can provide more discontinuities than continuities with parents’ own past experiences (The missing side of the triangle: assessing the importance of family and environmental factors in the lives of children. Jack and Gill (2003) Barnardos p.126-7)

Whilst the experience by parents of abuse or neglect as a child does present an increased risk of them abusing or neglecting their own children, research does not support the thesis that the former causes or makes inevitable the latter. The abuse of a child is best seen as a complex interplay of several risk factors. For example socio-economic background presents a strong risk, in addition to parental background. On the other hand, it is clear from the research that childhood abuse can have severe effects on all aspects of a child’s health, growth, intellectual development and mental/emotional wellbeing which can be long-lasting and impair an individual’s functioning as an adult, which in turn may impact upon their ability and capacity to parent their own children. At the same time, a substantial minority of maltreated children do not experience significant problems during their adult years, although the more abuse they experience in their childhood, the less likely they will be resilient to its deleterious effects.

“The impact of abuse and neglect on the health and mental health of children and young people”, A. Lazenbutt (2010), NSPCC and “Key facts about child maltreatment”, K. Asmussen (2010), NSPCC.

Arranging for a parent to attend parenting classes/family centres without resolving their own problems stemming from their childhood is unlikely to be successful (The missing side of the triangle: assessing the importance of family and environmental factors in the lives of children. Jack and Gill (2003) Barnardos p.132).

Adults who have unresolved issues of childhood attachment may find managing the behaviour of a child more difficult and less rewarding. Aldgate, J. and Jones, D. ‘The place of attachment in children’s development.’ p.90 in Aldgate, J. et al (eds) (2006) The Developing World of the Child, London: DfES.

“If we look at individuals who suffered from deprivation in their childhoods and yet showed a capacity to reflect upon these experiences there was a strong likelihood that despite the adversity they would develop a secure parent-child attachment relationship with their own child. Steele, M. (2003), quoted in Aldgate, J. and Jones, D. ‘The place of attachment in children’s development.’ p.90 in Aldgate, J. et al (eds) (2006) The Developing World of the Child, London: DfES.

Whilst “caregivers’ own childhood experiences of attachment may influence their caregiving behaviour” it is also the case that “what individuals have made of experiences of attachment rather than the experiences themselves which are important”, as new experiences and relationships impact on internal working models throughout life. The current state of mind of the carer is the important factor in the caregiving they can give. Aldgate, J. and Jones, D. ‘The place of attachment in children’s development.’ p.94 in Aldgate, J. et al (eds) (2006) The Developing World of the Child, London: DfES.

In assessments, “in depth attention should be given to assessing the sense caregivers have made of their earlier attachment experiences”. Aldgate, J. and Jones, D. ‘The place of attachment in children’s development.’ p.95 in Aldgate, J. et al (eds) (2006) The Developing World of the Child, London: DfES.

Chronology template (parent)

Include all addresses lived at (or summarise if there were lots of moves), changes of people living in the house, schools attended (and qualifications gained), really good or bad experiences, jobs done (including volunteering), significant births/deaths (including of your children), significant partners, significant health or mental health problems, addiction struggles, financial problems (including bankruptcies) and anything else you would class as significant in your life or your child’s life.

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1. This model for assessing the impact of history on parenting is based on Farnfield, S. (2008) *A Theoretical Model for the Comprehensive Assessment of Parenting* in BJSW 38, 1076-99 (itself informed by attachment theory and the Adult Attachment Interview, evolutionary psychology and systemic theory) with additions from *The Parents’ Interview* by Patricia Crittenden and *A Practitioner’s Tool for Child Protection and the Assessment of Parents* by Jeff Fowler. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. See, for example, Lazenbutt, A. (2010) The impact of abuse and neglect on the health and mental health of children and young people, London: NSPCC. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. See also, Aldgate, J. and Jones, D. ‘The place of attachment in children’s development.’ p.94 in Aldgate, J. et al (eds) (2006) The Developing World of the Child, London: DfES [↑](#footnote-ref-3)