**Chronology Guidance**

# What is a Chronology?

* 1. A chronology is a tool that practitioners can use to help them understand what is happening in the life of a child or family. Simplistically it is a list in date order of all the major changes and significant events in a child’s or family’s life as well as detailing patterns of behaviour and periods where there have been specific challenges or when things have been stable and going well. A good chronology should also offer an analysis of the importance of these events and patterns, and their impact on the child.
  2. Chronologies are essential to a good quality assessment and decision-making. They provide a historical analysis of risks, themes and patterns, the previous involvement of services and professionals, and identify times when things have gone well. Chronologies should be completed at the start of an assessment to inform the entire process.
  3. Chronologies should be multi-agency document, and where appropriate, they should include information from a variety of sources.
  4. The chronology should not replace a child’s written record, which include more detailed information and analysis. There should be a clear distinction between the records and the chronology. A chronology does not replace the need for a case summary which should be recorded on each open child at minimum of 3 monthly intervals.

# The Purpose of a Chronology

* 1. The purpose of a chronology is to enable the reader to quickly gain a picture of formative events and patterns of behaviour and to analyse the impact (immediate and cumulative) of the overall history in order to improve their understanding of a child’s safety, wellbeing and life experiences.
  2. A chronology is one of the key documents by which a child’s journey is told.
  3. Chronologies completed for should be focused on the impact of events for the child.
  4. An up-to-date chronology helps to make sure assessment and decision-making considers past events and their relevance to the child or family’s current situation.
  5. Chronologies help to identify patterns and themes when understanding a family and assessing and managing risk. A chronology can be particularly helpful in situations where there may be no single incident (i.e. neglect), or when there is a pattern of behaviour that could be otherwise treated in isolation (i.e. persistent hostility to workers where there is no single ‘incident’ or where changes are made whilst services are involved but these cannot be sustained).
  6. Where appropriate they can be shared with family members to help them to make sense of their life, family experiences and professional concerns.
  7. Chronologies should be used to identify strengths and periods where there has been stability or when things have gone well. This will enable the features from that period to be considered in assessing how the child and family should be supported.
  8. A chronology is an important tool in avoiding ‘start-again syndrome’, where current circumstances are taken in isolation and professionals do not adequately assess risks to a child because these have not been considered in their historical context. This is often linked to supportive interventions being repeated even though these have not created change in the past and there is no evidence as to why these would now be effective. This has been a key risk factor identified in key Public Inquiries and Serious Case Reviews (Brandon et al., 2008).

# When is a Chronology Required?

* 1. Whenever an assessment of a child and family is being undertaken there should be consideration of the significant events in the family history and the impact on the child and family.
  2. All children that are open with to Children’s Social Care should have a chronology.

# What is Recorded in a Chronology?

* 1. The chronology should record all significant events in the life of a child and family and should include:
     + Key dates such as date of birth, life events and moves including changes in family composition, household members and carers.
     + A brief summary of the Children’s Social Care involvement, including assessments, Plans (dates and types), any periods in care, interventions undertaken and the outcome.
     + Brief summaries of key professional interventions e.g. referrals, assessments and interventions by other agencies such as a parenting program, input on health needs, substance misuse and the outcome.
     + Issues for the child such as developmental issues, significant illness, out of school/training episodes, bullying, change of school, incidents and disclosures of abuse, self-harm, placement breakdowns.
     + Family issues such as bereavement, separations, relevant criminal activity, domestic violence, substance misuse, illness and accidents, homelessness, financial problems, imprisonment, missed appointments.
     + Positive events and periods when things are settled or going well should, where possible, also be included.
  2. There will be variations as to what is included dependent on the child and family and the issues for them. The events included must be considered significant to the child or young person and what to include is a matter of professional judgement.

# Practice Guidance for Chronologies

* 1. A chronology should be completed or updated as part of an assessment, or at the start of a piece of work with a family so that it can inform assessment and decision-making. This also shows respect for a family so that a practitioner knows a bit about their history and circumstances.
  2. The chronology column for ‘incident or sequence of incidents relevant to the child’s welfare’ should report what happened in a clear factual way and should not contain opinion and speculation. A chronology should be based on up to date and accurate recording. If inaccuracies in the chronology are identified, then clarity should be sought, and the chronology should be amended as required.
  3. The column for ‘significance/impact on the child’ should be focused on the importance of the events or sequence of events outlined for the child. This requires the author to analyse the impact on the child and identify key patterns or themes, but again this column should not contain speculation or opinion.
  4. The chronology should reflect the best knowledge about a child’s history at a point in time. It will need to be amended and updated in light of new information received. Best practice will be to add information about significant events or changes as they occur or in the least every 3 months when a case summary is completed. Workers should review the chronology in supervision with their manager and at key decision making points.
  5. A chronology should be concise. There are no specific rules as to the length of a chronology and this is a matter for professional judgement, however most chronologies should not be more than 3-4 pages and ideally should be less and be in line with guidance for chronologies completed for court (see below). They should contain sufficient information about a significant event or sequence of events but should not be so detailed that they become difficult to read or that important issues or patterns are lost. They should also not be time consuming to maintain.
  6. Chronologies should be focused on providing a summary of key events and impact on a child leading up to where they are now. Where there is a lengthy history this can be summarised in a few paragraph entries at the start of a chronology without providing lengthy detail of all of the individual events. This helps to make a chronology more concise while still identifying key issues, themes and events with a focus on the relevance of these events to a child’s early life experiences. The more recent history should be covered in individual entries. As a chronology progresses it may be appropriate to revise information in earlier parts of the chronology to keep it concise.
  7. Chronologies are a part of recording and as such should be made available to the people that they are about. Involving the family in compiling the chronology provides an opportunity for them to contribute and ensures its accuracy. It also can promote and strengthen working together with children and families as it helps to obtain their perspectives on events and helps to develop an understanding of their impact. Sharing the chronology can support the family to reflect on the content and help to develop their understanding.

# Chronology for Court Proceedings

* 1. The intention of this guidance is to ensure that all chronologies produced when we are involved with a child and their family align with guidance for the Social Work Evidence Template (SWET).
  2. The guidance for completion of the chronology for the Social Work Evidence Template is as follows:

“The chronology lists those events or a sequence of events which are significant in terms of their impact on the child. The chronology should be confined to the last two years unless an event before that point in time has a current – and therefore lasting - significance. The chronology can be cut and pasted into a stand-alone document if required.”

* 1. Sir James Munby in “View from the Presidents Chambers (2)” 2013 advised that “Even if there has been local authority involvement with the family extending over many years, both the social work chronology and the summary of the background circumstances as set out in the social work statement can – and if they can then they must – be kept appropriately short, focusing on the key significant historical events and concerns and rigorously avoiding all unnecessary detail. We do not want social work chronologies extending over dozens of pages. Usually three or four pages at most will suffice. The background summary in the social work statement, particularly if it is cross- referenced to the chronology, avoids unnecessary repetition of what is already set out in the chronology.”
  2. In making an application to the court the chronology should contain the substantive evidence and refer to the specific incidents in relation to significant harm to the child. Wherever possible the information should be discussed with the family as whilst there may be dispute over the impact of the incidents the information about the incidents should be factual and not in dispute.

# References

Brandon M., Belderson P., Warren C., Howe D., Gardner R., Dodsworth J., Black J.(2008) ‘Analysing child deaths and serious injury through abuse and neglect: What can we learn? A biennial analysis of Serious Case Reviews 2003–2005,’ Nottingham, Department of Children, Schools and Families.