

Parental substance misuse - reflecting on the learning from local Serious Case Reviews

Four serious case reviews have been completed in Middlesbrough¹ where parental substance misuse was a significant issue (Emily, Alex, Billy and Daisy.) Three of the reviews involved babies or young children ingesting methadone. This briefing uses the key learning identified within the reviews, and asks a series of questions to be considered by professionals to enable them to reflect on the work they are undertaking with families where parental substance misuse is evident². The aim is to improve practice and effectively safeguard children in similar circumstances. There are currently over 200 adults on drug treatment programmes in Middlesbrough who have children living with them.

Am I aware of the extent of the parent's drug misuse?
Am I at risk of over-optimism because a parent is in drug treatment? Do I understand what the treatment involves and how often testing takes place?
Am I aware of and do I check the appropriate harm minimisation measures that should be taken? (e.g. is medication safely stored?)
Am I able to clearly assess and communicate the impact of the parents' drug use on the child and their ability to parent ? (e.g. diversion of finances, diversion of attention/ability to respond to children's individual needs, are there clear routines, safety plan for when parent/carer uses drugs?)
Can I recognise hard to engage and manipulative parents, and do I have the skills required to work with and challenge them?
Do I consult drug treatment professionals during assessments and involve them in core groups or other key meetings about children?
Do I ensure that my assessments robustly and continuously consider the capacity of the parents to maintain changes ?
Am I aware of the possibility that parents who misuse drugs or who are on a drug treatment programme may use drugs on their children? Do I engage with parents on the danger of giving drugs to children to pacify them?
Am I aware of the need for communication with all those involved and a plan for coordinated on-going support in cases where a parent is/was in drug treatment and there have been significant concerns in the past about their children? Do I consider this even if one parent is seen to be protective?
Do I clarify and avoid assumptions about what services provide, and about the ability of family members, including extended family, to support and protect the children?
Do I ensure that children's voices are always sought directly from them and clearly stated, and that the child's lived experience is considered and analysed by me and in multi-agency meetings?
Do I seek and then consider the family history in any new assessment?
Do I check information provided by parents with other professionals?
When I challenge parents about missed appointments (their own and their children's) do I clearly point out the impact on the child ?
Does my practice consider the impact on children of cumulative neglect when a new incident occurs? Do I explain this risk of neglect over time to the parents?
Are plans reviewed and updated in core group meetings? Is the plan then circulated to all involved, including parents and professionals unable to attend, such as the GPs for both adults and children?
Am I aware that any professional who is aware of a pregnancy where the parents misuse substances should make a referral to the Multi Agency Children's Hub? I don't assume someone else has made the referral.
Do I follow up concerns, escalate professional disagreements, and keep the child's welfare at the heart of all communications?
Am I aware of the potential impact on parenting of the misuse of prescription or over the counter drugs , particularly when a parent has a history of substance misuse?

¹ 2015, 2017 and 2018

² In supervision, core group meetings, team meetings etc

Useful links and references

Tees Procedures link [Home \(teescpp.org.uk\)](http://teescpp.org.uk)

South Tees Safeguarding Children Partnership website - [Homepage | South Tees Safeguarding Children Partnership \(STSCP\)](#)

Serious Case Review Daisy https://www.middlesbrough.gov.uk/sites/default/files/MSCB-SCR_Daisy.pdf

Serious Case Review Billy https://www.middlesbrough.gov.uk/sites/default/files/MSCB-SCR_Billy.pdf

Serious Case Review Emily https://www.middlesbrough.gov.uk/sites/default/files/MSCB-SCR_Jenny_Molly_Emily.pdf

Complexity and challenge: a triennial analysis of SCRs 2014-2017 [Analysis of serious case reviews: 2014 to 2017 - GOV.UK \(www.gov.uk\)](#)

Adfam (2014) Medications in Drug Treatment: Tackling the risks to children - http://www.adfam.org.uk/cms/docs/adfam_ost_exec_web.pdf

Hidden Harm - [AMCD inquiry: 'Hidden harm' report on children of drug users - GOV.UK \(www.gov.uk\)](#)

<https://adfam.org.uk/files/docs/OST-Good-Practice-Guide-September-18.pdf>

Claridge & Goodair (2015) 'Drug-related deaths in England, Northern Ireland, The Channel Island and the Isle of Man: January-December 2013,' National Programme on Substance Abuse Deaths; St George's, University of London

<https://adfam.org.uk/files/Impact-Report-2018.pdf>

https://adfam.org.uk/files/docs/hidden_harm.pdf

http://www.adfam.org.uk/cms/docs/adfam_ost_exec_web.pdf

Working Together to Safeguard Children 2018 - [Working Together to Safeguard Children \(workingtogetheronline.co.uk\)](#)

Marteau, McDonald and Patel (2015) 'The relative risk of fatal poisoning by methadone or buprenorphine within the wider population of England and Wales,' BMJ Open - [The relative risk of fatal poisoning by methadone or buprenorphine within the wider population of England and Wales | BMJ Open](#)

Office for National Statistics - Deaths related to drug poisoning in England and Wales [Deaths related to drug poisoning in England and Wales Statistical bulletins - Office for National Statistics \(ons.gov.uk\)](#)