Assessment framework for stakeholders
Content

1. Introduction 3
2. Purposes of assessment 4
3. The Assessment Process 6
4. Undertaking assessments 7
5. Case conceptualisation 10
6. Assessment of safety, harm, cumulative harm and risk of harm 11
   6.1 Domains of assessments of safety, harm, cumulative harm and risk of harm 12
7. Assessment of reunification viability 13
   7.1 Domains of assessment of reunification viability 14
8. Assessing the needs of children and young people in long term care 15
   8.1 The domains of assessments for children and young people in long term care 16
9. Documenting assessments 17
Appendix A: Definitions 18
1. Introduction

Assessment in child protection matters is a continuous process where practitioners build a picture of the life of the child, family, the community, culture and context in which they live.

Assessments will have a different focus depending upon the phase of intervention and the individual circumstances of the child or young person and family.

Practitioners must develop a sound understanding of the foundational theories and knowledge in the practice approach to ensure they can apply the framework in the most effective manner.

It is important to note that the framework is not intended to be used as a checklist but instead consists of themes to consider. Although not all themes will have equal weight in a child or young person’s situation, the Assessment Framework provides practitioner with guidance to ensure all domains of child and family life are considered. In addition, supervision, reflective practice and consultation are integral to effective child protection assessment.
## 2. Purposes of assessment

The purpose of assessment depends on the phase of work.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Phase</th>
<th>Purpose of assessment</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Intake</td>
<td>→ Establishing the most appropriate course of action in response to a current notification in the context of the child or young person’s vulnerability and the child protection history.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
| Investigation and assessment               | → Determining whether abuse or neglect has occurred, and the harm caused to the child or young person by any abuse and/or neglect  
→ Assessing the immediate and ongoing safety of the child or young person  
→ Establishing whether the child or young person is at risk of future psychological or physical harm  
→ Identifying sources of formal and informal support for the family and child or young person  
→ Determining the most appropriate course of action that ensures the ongoing safety of the child or young person and minimises the risk of future harm |
| Protective intervention (Family Preservation) | → Determining whether the child or young person is safe in the home  
→ Assessing the capacity of parents to provide safe care for the child or young person  
→ Identifying sources of formal and informal support for the family and child or young person  
→ Identifying the intervention/s required to ensure the child or young person’s ongoing safety and reduce the potential for future harm |
| Protective Intervention (Reunification)     | → Assessing parenting capacity and determining whether there is a reasonable likelihood of the safe reunification of the child or young person with their family  
→ Identifying sources of formal and informal support for both the family and the child or young person  
→ Identifying the intervention/s required to ensure the child or young person’s ongoing safety and reduce the potential for future harm  
→ If reunification is assessed as viable, identifying a plan for reunification that ensures safety, and reflects the needs and wishes of the child or young person and the capacity of the family  
→ Assessing whether the care environment is providing the supports necessary to meet the child or young person’s needs  
→ Assessing what contact arrangements are in the child or young person’s best interests, and reviewing these arrangements to ensure they continue to be aligned with changing developmental needs  
→ During and post the reunification process, ensuring the child or young person is safe and their needs are being met |
### Children and young people in care

- Identifying the child or young person’s current and future needs, including when transitioning from care
- Understanding the child or young person’s views and wishes
- Assessing whether the care environment is providing the supports necessary to meet the child or young person’s needs and continues to be in their best interests
- Assessing what contact arrangements are in the child or young person’s best interests, and reviewing these arrangements to ensure they continue to be aligned with changing developmental needs
- Determining what supports may be required for the carers and the child or young person to ensure the child or young person receives quality care and has the opportunity to reach their full potential
3. The Assessment Process

Assessment must be continuous throughout intervention. The way in which information is conceptualised must change as more is learnt about the child or young person, family and their context.

- Consider known information and identify gaps
- Gather detailed information
- Develop and document case conceptualisation
- Continue to gather new information
- Develop and document case reconceptualisation
4. Undertaking assessments

To understand what is happening for the child or young person and in the family, all assessments must consider multiple sources of information. To undertake a thorough assessment the following must be undertaken:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Assessment Process Step</th>
<th>What</th>
<th>How</th>
<th>Why</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Consider known information and identify gaps</td>
<td>Review history and records</td>
<td>Review all information known to the department about the child or young person, their siblings and the family, including extended family, kin and significant others. This includes past notifications, professional reports and assessments. Consider all information including notifications that have not been investigated (including NOCs and CNAs) and those that have not been substantiated. Consult and gather information from interagency partners as required (e.g., SAPOL). Gather information from interstate child protection agencies if there is information to suggest a parent and/or the child or young person or their siblings have resided interstate.</td>
<td>The Children and Young People (Safety) Act 2017 requires the department to consider the cumulative harm a child or young person may have experienced. Understanding the child or young person and family history is essential to assessing cumulative harm. Past notifications contain relevant information regarding the family's level of functioning. Particular attention should be paid to notifications made by professionals (e.g., SAPOL, SA Health and Department for Education) even if they have not been investigated or met the threshold for intervention. A level of credibility can be ascribed to notifications that have not been investigated by DCP when they have been made by professionals in the course of their work (e.g., SAPOL reporting domestic violence). Notifications that have not been investigated can demonstrate a pattern of cumulative harm. Risk factors present in the extended family (e.g., domestic and family violence) may have an impact on the child or young person or on their placement options if a placement in care is required.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gather and consider detailed information</td>
<td>Engage with the family</td>
<td>Partner with the family and discuss the notification, concerns, risks and protective factors with the family. Seek to understand what is happening for each child or young person and each family member.</td>
<td>Families must be considered experts in their lives and partnership with families is essential for gathering quality information. Engaging with the family is important to identifying whether the parents have an understanding of the needs of their child, the difficulties the family is facing and their willingness to work cooperatively with DCP.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Engage with the child or young person</td>
<td>Spend time with and talk with the child or young person to understand their unique perspective and needs. Consider their verbal and non-verbal (behaviour) communication. Speak to those who are in contact with them and who know them well. Compare and contrast views about the child or young person.</td>
<td>Hearing the voice and/or observing the non-verbal cues of children and young people is an essential element of child-centred practice and is empowering for the child or young person. Observing the child or young person’s behaviour is essential to assess if their expressed views are consistent with their behaviour and affect.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>---</td>
<td>---</td>
<td>---</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Observe</td>
<td>Observe the child or young person with their family. Ask others (professionals, extended family members) in contact with the child or young person and the family about their observations. Pay particular attention to how young children respond to greetings (reunions) and farewells (separations) from their parents. Consider whether or not the child or young person seeks connections and/or comfort from the parent to meet their needs (emotional and physical), attempts to have the parent join them in play, spontaneously seeks affection, and seems comfortable with the parent’s directions (versus avoiding the parent, not responding to parental direction, showing signs of fear of the parent, and acquiescing to requests for affection). Observe the child or young person in other contexts to see if they appear more comfortable and relaxed with others (e.g., their carers, their teachers, extended family).</td>
<td>Observation of the child or young person with their family and in multiple settings can offer rich information about quality of attachment relationships, relationships with siblings, parenting skills and deficits, and information regarding the developmental progress of the child or young person. In the context of information about the history of a child or young person’s relationships, observations often provide significant information about the quality of a child or young person’s attachments. (It is imperative that any cultural impacts on attachment are considered.)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gather information from other professionals and services</td>
<td>Request reports or gather verbal information from others involved with the child or young person and family (e.g., school, kindergarten, early intervention service providers, CaFHS, therapist).</td>
<td>Gathering information from other professionals strengthens the quality of assessment and assists in identifying gaps, consistencies or inconsistencies in information.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Develop and document case conceptualisation*</td>
<td>Consider information gaps and any inconsistencies</td>
<td>Consider the need to seek information from other sources, challenge the information or refer for professional assessments (e.g., psychological assessments, reports from services). Gaps in information lead to assessments that are incomplete and could lead to interventions that are ineffective or do not ensure safety. Children and young people can be placed at risk when decisions are made based on inadequate information.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conceptualise</td>
<td>Analyse what is known and what this information means for the safety of the child or young person now and into the future. Apply a cultural lens before finalising the case conceptualisation as needed. Consider the need to consult internally with Principal Aboriginal Consultants, Principal Social Workers and Psychologists.</td>
<td>Case conceptualisation is necessary to form a thorough understanding of the evidence and develop an appropriate plan. Without this, it may be difficult to accurately assess risk, identify the bottom lines and be transparent with the family.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Continue to gather new information and Develop and document re-conceptualisation as required</td>
<td>Continue to assess and re-conceptualise as required</td>
<td>Assessment must continue throughout involvement with a family. New information must be reflected in the case re-conceptualisation that must be documented. Information is constantly emerging during assessments, intervention and casework. Failure to adjust the case conceptualisation when new information emerges can impact the effectiveness of interventions and the safety of children and young people.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* See 5. Case conceptualisation below.
5. Case conceptualisation

When undertaking an assessment, conclusions must be drawn about what the information obtained means. Case conceptualisation is the process of reviewing, organising and interpreting information to develop hypotheses about what it means for children and young people, and families. Case conceptualisations help identify the rationale for the most appropriate next steps for a case.

The process of developing a case conceptualisation is dynamic and ongoing. As information is gathered and reflected upon it may change the way the situation is viewed and the plans for intervention. As new information emerges, the case conceptualisation must be updated. Whether a child protection concern diminishes, escalates or new concerns emerge, assessment relies upon the practitioner interpreting and giving meaning to the information.

Key reflective questions that support developing a case conceptualisation include:

- what does the information I have gathered mean in relation to the child or young person’s safety, wellbeing and development?
- what does the information gathered indicate about each parent’s strengths and their capacity to address the child protection concerns and keep the child or young person safe?
- where can I gather more evidence to help me clarify what’s happening for this family?
- what does the information tell us about the needs and strengths of the child or young person, family and/or carers?

This process requires the practitioner to reflect on relevant theories and knowledge and any consultations undertaken and to draw on their professional judgement to determine how the child protection concerns impact on the child or young person’s safety and wellbeing. Without this critical process, the information gathered will lack meaning in relation to the child or young person’s safety and wellbeing and the child or young person could be placed at further risk.

A key aspect of developing a case conceptualisation requires understanding of how risk factors impact on the capacity of the parent to meet the child or young person’s needs. Practitioners are required to make a judgement as to whether the risk factors are chronic and cumulative which can significantly impact on how to view concerns which were previously considered relatively minor. When weighing up the impact of the identified factors on the child or young person, it is essential to understand that factors will have varying impacts on the unique child or young person and must be weighted accordingly.
6. Assessment of safety, harm, cumulative harm and risk of harm

Assessment of safety, harm, cumulative harm and risk of harm* is required when:

- determining an appropriate response to a notification
- assessing a child or young person’s safety when conducting an investigation
- working with families to mitigate risks when the child or young person remains in the home
- assessing whether a child or young person requires placement into care
- considering a parent’s capacity to understand and address child protection concerns in a timely way
- considering whether a child or young person can be safely reunified with their parent(s) or other family member
- developing a case plan
- deciding whether it is safe to close a case.

* See Appendix A: Definitions for definitions of these terms.

These assessments are undertaken by DCP staff.
6.1 Domains of assessments of safety, harm, cumulative harm and risk of harm

Thorough consideration needs to be given to each domain of assessment to ensure that critical information is not overlooked.
7. Assessment of reunification viability

Assessing the viability of reunification must commence at the earliest opportunity, even prior to a child or young person’s placement into care for planned care and protection applications. It is essential to consider what would need to be different for the department to be satisfied that it would be safe for the child or young person to return home.

Like all assessments, assessing the viability of reunification is a continuous process that needs to consider new information as it emerges and to determine the impact of that information on the likelihood of a safe and successful reunification of the child or young person with their family.

Reunification is best supported by a comprehensive, individualised assessment of the strengths and needs of children and families that informs the development of a case plan that builds on identified strengths and addresses needs. In addition, a comprehensive risk assessment must be undertaken to minimise risk of future harm and re-entry to care.

The decision to reunify requires careful consideration as inappropriate or premature decisions to reunify children with their families can impact children’s safety and cause trauma to both children and their families. Where a child or young person has developed a healthy attachment relationship with their carer, removal from the carer may be traumatic for the child or young person, especially if they are transitioning to the care of someone whom is not supportive of an ongoing relationship with the previous carer.

Reunification should only be commenced once threats to a child or young person’s safety are resolved, risk of future harm sufficiently reduced, and family protective capacity and strengths are enhanced. Where there is an assessment that reunification is likely to be successful, a plan must be developed, without delay, that clearly identifies what needs to occur before reunification can commence and identifies a plan for increasing contact between a child or young person and parent that is appropriate to the child or young person’s developmental needs.

2Ibid
3Ibid
4Ibid
7.1 Domains of assessment of reunification viability

- Child protection history
- Child or young person’s needs, strength and views
- Child or young person’s relationship with parents and carers
- Parent’s ability to meet the child or young person’s needs
- Parent’s progress towards addressing the child protection concerns and reducing future risk
- Cultural context
- Family and environmental context

Holistic assessment of reunification viability
8. Assessing the needs of children and young people in long term care

Ongoing assessment must continue when children and young people are placed in long term care.

The purposes of assessment for children and young people in long term care includes:

- identifying the child or young person’s current and future needs (including post care)
- understanding their views and wishes
- assessing whether the care environment is providing the supports necessary to meet their needs and continues to be in their best interests
- determining what supports the child or young person (and carer) may need to ensure they receive quality care and have the opportunity to reach their full potential
- assessing what services and supports a young person may need when transitioning from care

Carers, including direct care staff in residential and commercial care, hold information integral to thorough assessments of children and young people’s needs and must be involved in assessment and decision making processes.

A crucial part of case management for children and young people in long term care is the development of the case plan. Effective case plans are underpinned by thorough assessment. As new information emerges and their developmental needs change, the assessment of the child or young person’s needs is re-conceptualised and the plan for their care adjusted accordingly.

Attention must be paid to developing strong relationships with carers to gain an understanding of their strengths and needs. This will assist in developing a case plan that ensures the carers are supported to continue to provide safe and responsive care to children and young people.
8.1 The domains of assessments for children and young people in long term care

- Child protection and placement history
- Carer/placement supports
- Child or young person’s views
- Carer/placement capacity to meet the child or young person’s needs now and into the future
- Child or young person’s life domains*

* The life domains as they appear in the Case Plan are:
  - Culture and identity
  - Family and community connections
  - Emotional functioning and behaviour
  - Developmental progress and disability
  - Physical health
  - Education and employment
  - Recreation and social activities
  - Self care/independent living skills
9. Documenting assessments

Clear documentation of case conceptualisations and rationales for decisions is an essential part of accountable, transparent practice.

Accurate, detailed records of decisions made are essential for:

- accountable practice
- enabling children, young people and families to access information regarding the rationale in the future
- responding to complaints or external reviews
- supporting future workers to understand the child or young person and family’s history.

A rationale for decision making will include facts and an analysis of the facts into a narrative that explains the logical basis for the decision.
## Appendix A: Definitions

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Term</th>
<th>Definition</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Safety</td>
<td>Refers to a child or young person’s physical, emotional and cultural safety.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Abuse and neglect</td>
<td>The act of harming a child or young person. Abuse may occur through an act (overt) or omission (covert i.e., failing to do something that ought to have been done) and could include physical, sexual, emotional, psychological abuse and/or neglect.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Harm</td>
<td>As per Section 17 of the Children and Young People (Safety) Act 2017, harm refers to physical harm or psychological harm (whether caused by an act or omission) and includes harm caused by sexual, physical, mental or emotional abuse or neglect. That is, harm is the negative physical and/or psychological impact of abuse.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cumulative harm</td>
<td>Cumulative harm refers to the effects of multiple adverse or harmful circumstances and events in a child’s life. Section 18 (3) of the Children and Young People (Safety) Act 2017 requires that the department consider the child and young person’s and family’s current circumstances, the history of their care and the likely cumulative effect of that history on the safety and wellbeing of the child or young person. In practice, this is referred to as cumulative harm.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Risk of harm</td>
<td>The likelihood of future harm occurring based on the presence of risk factors.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>At risk</td>
<td>Under s. 18 of the <em>Children and Young People (Safety) Act 2017</em> a child or young person will be taken to be <strong>at risk</strong> if: \n</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

---
