

# Cumulative Harm

The effects of chronic child maltreatment

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# Overview

- Definitions
- The extent of the problem
- Impact of cumulative harm and barriers to identification
- Cumulative harm in the Tasmanian context
- Making an assessment



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# Historical context of child protection

- Research largely treated CM as a single event
  - ◆ Aetiology - will 'it' occur
  - ◆ Consequences - impact of the event
- In practice, history used to establish pattern of behaviour to predict future risk - not cumulative impact
- In legislation, incident/event focus:
  - ◆ Substantiate if an adult act of omission or commission has resulted in significant harm or risk of significant harm to the child and statutory intervention is required to prevent further harm



# What is cumulative harm?

- Cumulative harm may be caused by an accumulation of a single adverse circumstance or event, or by multiple different circumstances and events
- The unremitting daily impact of these experiences on the child can be profound and exponential, and diminish a child's sense of safety, stability and wellbeing



# Patterns of entry into child protection

- Case files were reviewed for the 8-year period 1994 - 2002 for:
  - ◆ 100 families
  - ◆ with a child aged between 0 and 4 years
  - ◆ subject of a notification to child protection for the first time
  - ◆ between July 1 and December 31 1994
- Reviewed every case note for every notification from point of first contact to case closure



# Definitions

- Isolated maltreatment: single incident or inter-related events in a single time period
- Chronic maltreatment: recurrent incidents of maltreatment over a prolonged period of time



# Patterns of entry into child protection

- Most children experienced chronic maltreatment
  - ◆ 374 notifications and 82 substantiations recorded
  - ◆ Range = 0-22 notifications/family
  - ◆ Range = 0-6 substantiations/family
  - ◆ 65/100 families had > 1 recorded notification
  - ◆ 24/100 families had > 1 recorded substantiation
  - ◆ The average duration of family involvement with child protection was 3.3 years
  - ◆ Families averaged three to four notifications with approximately 10-months between each notification



# Case Study

- This case study illustrates a pattern of chronic maltreatment and the cumulative effects if maltreatment persists
- Over 8-yrs: 22 not. & 4 sub.
- Underlying issue in majority of notifications
  - ◆ poor parenting capacity
  - ◆ psychological maltreatment by mother



# Case Study

- Notifications fell into 5 groups of 2-3 notifications per group
- The notifications within each group were all essentially regrading the same set of concerns:
  - ◆ Physical abuse
  - ◆ Emotional abuse (esp. verbal abuse and rejection)
  - ◆ Exposure to family violence
  - ◆ Neglect
  - ◆ Also allegedly exposed to sex offender



# Notification One

05-Oct-1994 to 06-Oct-1994

- Grandparent saw mother kick walker with 8mth old son, Jarrod sitting in it. Pulled Jarrod up off couch by one arm. Mother no diagnosed mental illness, but severe mood swings and previous psychiatric care. Mother receiving support from MCHN and FS
- Outcome: Insufficient info to warrant involvement, especially given involvement of local support agency.



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Bromfield, Gillingham & Higgins (2007)

# Cumulative harm analysis

- No previous for this or any other child in mother's care. Does not reach threshold for involvement



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# Notification Three

## 04-May-1995 to 05-May-1995

- Aunt alleging loud verbal arguments in front of 15mth old Jarrod, Father punches walls, Mother verbally abusive of Jarrod and is becoming increasingly aggressive towards him. Mother giving Jarrod stronger doses of prescribed medication to get him to sleep. Family Support Worker only sees parents in office.
- Outcome: Notification raising similar issues also received from Grandparents.



# Cumulative harm analysis

- No previous for this or any other child in mother's care. Does not reach threshold for involvement
- 3rd notification for same issues. 2 different notifiers. Increasing verbal and physical aggression towards child.



# Notification Eleven

15-Oct-1997 to 15-Oct-1997

- Notification from worker at Family Welfare Agency. Mother came into service requesting a washing machine. While at the agency Mother continually yelled at Jarrod for misbehaviour. In workers opinion child was not behaving inappropriately. Worker told Mother that yelling at child was not acceptable. Mother verbally abusive towards worker and left.
- Outcome: Assessed no protective concerns



# Cumulative harm analysis

- No previous for this or any other child in mother's care. Does not reach threshold for involvement
- 3rd notification for same issues. 2 different notifiers. Increasing verbal and physical aggression towards child.
- 11th not. for same issues from 7 different sources. 2 prior substantiations. Professional notifier. Behaviour observed in public – parental behaviour in private?
- One month later: GP stated Jarrod was severely traumatised following overnight access with mother and further contact with mother should not be permitted



# Systemic barriers to recognising cumulative harm

- Each involvement treated as a discrete event
  - ◆ Information not accumulated from one report to the next
  - ◆ Information lost over time
  - ◆ Assumption that problems presented in previous involvements were resolved at case closure
  - ◆ Files were not scrutinised for pattern of cumulative harm
  - ◆ Departmental language used to describe events - reduces context and meaning
- Incident focus - practitioners disempowered to act



- *Cumulative Harm in the Tasmanian context*



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# Definition of a child at risk

- The Children, Young Persons and their Families Act 1997 S.4(a) states a child is at risk if he or she *has been, is being, or is likely to be, abused or neglected*
- Section 3(b) defines abuse and neglect establishing the threshold for statutory intervention
  - ◆ “physical or psychological harm detrimental to the person’s wellbeing”; or
  - ◆ where the person’s “physical or psychological development is in jeopardy”



# Cumulative Harm: Flavour of the month?

- New name, but not a new idea
- Based on good science and theory
- Raises consciousness of cumulative impacts of high frequency, low severity maltreatment



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# Indicators of cumulative harm in the case history

- Be alert if there are:
  - ◆ Multiple reports
  - ◆ Previous substantiations
  - ◆ Multiple sources alleging similar problems
  - ◆ Reports from professionals
  - ◆ Evidence of children not meeting developmental milestones
  - ◆ Allegations of inappropriate parenting in public



# Identifying cumulative harm

- **Frequency** - Have there been previous allegations for similar issues?
- **Type** - Signs that child has experienced other types of CA/N in addition to those reported?
- **Severity** - Has caused or likely to cause significant harm if repeated over a prolonged period?
- **Source of harm** - Does current situation make child more vulnerable to other perpetrators?
- **Duration** - How long have problems that lead to current involvement been present?



# Making your assessment

- Short and long term effects matter
- What has been the impact on the child to date?
  - ◆ Is the child meeting developmental milestones?
  - ◆ Are there any signs of trauma?
  - ◆ What is the quality of parent-child relationship?
- What are the likely outcomes for the child should their circumstance remain unchanged?



# Who is best placed to provide services?

- Practitioners need to make every effort to engage the families cooperatively to address issues of cumulative harm
- What interventions might assist the child and family, in the short and long-term?
- Can they be successfully engaged by non-government services?
- It is a last resort, however coercive forms of intervention will sometimes be necessary



# Assisting recovery in children

- Cumulative harm can overwhelm even the most resilient child and particular attention needs to be given to understanding the complexity of the child's experience
  - ◆ Remember to consider what interventions or services might assist the child towards recovery



# Preparing matters for court

- Not enough to say a child has experienced cumulative harm
- The court will need
  - ◆ Evidence that shows the circumstances and the effects of cumulative harm on children
  - ◆ Previous assistance that has been provided to the family
  - ◆ Outcomes of previous interventions
  - ◆ Demonstrate need for coercive intervention



# Conclusion

- Strengths of cumulative harm
  - ◆ Consciousness raising
  - ◆ Umbrella for sound science and theory
  - ◆ Prevent children from falling through gaps
- Caution
  - ◆ Must be evidence to demonstrate the effects of cumulative harm



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