



Government of **Western Australia**  
Department of **Communities**



# Parenting Capacity Assessments

**A Department of Communities Perspective**

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*“A child’s capacity to thrive depends a great deal on how well the adults in the child’s life make that thriving possible.”*



*Michael Ungar,  
Thinker in  
Residence,  
2014, CCYP*

# Our goal is to “make that thriving possible”



- In the context of this child’s reality, how do we support this child to thrive?

# Overview



- How the Department makes decisions about PCAs
  - Why
  - When
- How the Department conducts PCAs
  - What
  - Who
  - How
- Common issues
- Common risks

# Child Protection and Family Support mandate



## *Objects of the Children and Community Services Act 2004*

- (a) to promote the wellbeing of children, other individuals, families and communities
- (b) to acknowledge the primary role of parents, families and communities in safeguarding and promoting the wellbeing of children
- (c) to encourage and support parents, families and communities in carrying out that role
- (da) to support and reinforce the role and responsibility of parents in exercising appropriate control over the behaviour of their children
- (d) to provide for the protection and care of children in circumstances where their parents have not given, or are unlikely or unable to give, that protection and care
- (e) to protect children from exploitation in employment.

# Best interests of the child as the paramount consideration



- Protection from harm
- Needs met (physical, emotional, intellectual, spiritual, developmental, educational)
- Secure and safe relationships
- Continuity and stability in living arrangements
- Contact with significant others
- Cultural, ethnic, religious identity
- Free from violence

# Continual evolving assessment of parenting capacity



- Signs of Safety framework
  - Harm and danger; strengths and existing safety; safety goals and family goals
- Intervention strategies
  - Drug use, family and domestic violence, anger management, mental health, meeting a child's basic needs
- Ongoing review of current/ongoing risk and changes in parenting behaviours in the areas of concern

# Continual evolving assessment of parenting capacity



- Child Protection intake assessment
- Records of previous involvement with the Department
- Existing formal assessment data or records held by the Department or other agencies
- Consultation with Psychology Services and completion of specific assessments to inform working with the family
- Liaison and feedback from specialist service providers involved with the family
- Observations of and interactions with the family
- Observations of parent-child contact
- Compliance with intervention plans and observable/lack of observable changes in parent behaviours
- Assessment of the functioning of support systems
- Assessment of the child's needs



# The decision for a formal parenting capacity assessment



- Consultation process with the Psychology Service, Legal Service
- Why obtain a Parenting Capacity Assessment
  - Request of the court, legal services, legal representative for the parent, parent, case management team
  - A rigorous, scientific analysis of the mind and behaviour of the parent that informs our practice (a different focus or level of analysis – a psychological analysis) and/or increases our confidence in our decision making and/or provides an objective view
- What do we want to know that we don't already know?
  - Can this parent meet the needs of this child
  - How best to support parents, address limitations
  - Likelihood of change
  - Ongoing levels of risk of harm

# Timing of completing a parenting capacity assessment



- When is the right time?
  - During the early phase of a TL protection order?
    - Pros/Cons
    - Parenting needs assessment
  - During the late phase of a TL protection order?

# General assessment areas



- Whether the child's needs are being met
- What is working well and what is not working well
- The impact of identified parenting vulnerabilities on the child's functioning and development now and into the future
- The nature and likely origins of the adult's difficulties in fulfilling their parental role
- Whether change is possible

# Assessment issues



Typically, some of the following as they relate to this person's capacity to parent this child

- Intellectual capacity and adaptive functioning
- Mental health and personality
- Interpersonal functioning and relationships
- Systemic/environmental factors
- Risk/protectiveness
- Parent-child relationships
- Child factors
- Parenting knowledge and skills
- Motivation and capacity for change
- Cultural or religious belief systems, practices

# Assessment issues



- Relate to
  - Child protection concerns
  - Best interests of the child
  - Can this parent provide “good enough” care for this child to thrive now and in the long term?

# Child protection concerns present in PCAs commissioned this year



- Family and Domestic Violence (Emotional Abuse) 70%
- Physical Abuse 60%
- Neglect 50%
- Sexual Abuse 20%

Comorbidity is high

# Core assessment issues as they relate to parenting



- Mental health
- Personality
- Cognitive functioning, adaptive functioning, executive functioning
- Drug and alcohol addiction
- Interpersonal functioning and the nature of relationships

# Change; Risk; Capacity



- Change and/or Management: mental health, personality, drug use, self regulation (anger/aggression)
- Risk: perpetrating harm (sexual harm, physical abuse, family violence); recognise harm and protect the child from it (family violence, sexual abuse, drug use); prioritise child's needs
- Capacity: parenting knowledge/skills; understand and meet child's universal, unique and changing needs; relationship with child (safe and secure)



# Other common questions



- Insight – Department involvement, impacts on child
- Likelihood of engaging with Department
- Recommended treatments and supports, likelihood of engaging/accepting support, and likely duration/impacts
  - The baby can't wait

# Assessors



- Psychiatrists
- Approved clinical, counselling and forensic psychologists on a Department register
- Department psychologists
  - Training requirements
  - Experience
  - Supervision

# Multiple methods of data gathering



- Clinical interview with parents
- Clinical interview with child, where appropriate
- Psychometric testing
- Observations – parent with child
- Consultation with collateral sources
- Review of Department records
- Review of relevant psychological literature

# Example Psychometric measures



- Personality Assessment Interview (PAI)
- Millon Clinical Multiaxial Inventory (MCMI)
- Substance Abuse Subtle Screening Inventory (SASSI)
- Parenting Stress Index (PSI)
- Paulhus Deception Scale (PDS)

# Issues – Family and Domestic Violence



- Intentional and systematic use of violence and abuse to create fear and to control the victim's behaviours
- Multiple forms of abuse that result in physical and sexual, or psychological damage, forced social isolation, economic deprivation, or cause the victim to live in fear.
- Power as the critical dynamic (as opposed to situational couple violence)
- Goal: minimise risk to children and adult victims, support their wellbeing and long term recovery

# FDV: effects on parenting



- Parents who use family and domestic violence:
  - Use coercive and manipulative tactics in parenting
  - Use harsh discipline and controlling, authoritarian parenting
  - Use a child to undermine the mother's parenting and self-worth
  - Harm or control the mother through behaviours towards the child
  - Interfere with a child's relationship with their mother
  - Use child as a weapon against the mother
  - Model and normalise violence in relationships
  - Create family division and conflict

# FDV: Effects on parenting



- Parents who experience family and domestic violence may find it difficult to
  - Be consistently physically and mentally present
  - Attend to child's needs
  - Support child's emotional expression
  - Feel confident in parenting
  - Maintain a loving connection

# Principles for responding to children who are exposed to family violence



- Safety of the child and adult victims is paramount
- Increasing safety of non-abusive parent and their safety networks enhances child safety
- Perpetrators must be held accountable for their actions and actively supported to cease violent behaviour
- Safety is best achieved through collaboration and coordination with other agencies and services



# FDV – Department response



- Safety plan for non abusive parent; specialised FDV counselling or services
- Safety plan for child
- Perpetrator accountability (risk management)
  - Avoid endorsing Violence Supporting Narratives (collusion)
  - Not appropriate: anger management, mediation, couples counselling, family therapy, individual counselling that does not focus on the violence, focusing on parenting whilst violence is a concern
  - Appropriate: monitor behaviour; support engagement for behaviour change – Men’s Behaviour Change Programs; systemic responses to hold perpetrator accountable (criminal charges, VROS, supervised access)

# FDV – PCAs



- Abusive parent – rare to assess
- Specialised area for assessment and treatment



- Non abusive parent
  - Impact FDV on her parenting (maternal alienation)
  - Impact of FDV on her relationship with her children
  - Likelihood of continuing to engage in FDV relationships into the future

# Issues: Cognitive Disability



- Combined with other challenges - often histories of deprivation, neglect, sexual abuse in childhood; comorbid issues – poverty, social isolation, mental health problems, vulnerability to predatory behaviours of others leading to risk of abuse to self and/or children, relationship conflicts, accepting support
- Growing in understanding of the social model of disability
- Getting better at recognising disabling barriers for parents with cognitive limitations in a) engaging with us and b) parenting
- Assessment of support needs
  - Adaptations that may be required in our way of working
    - Communication accessibility
    - Accessible safety goal setting
      - Plain English/Easy English; visual information
  - Enduring support network – the right to ongoing support
- Do we focus on performance rather than knowledge

# General issues and risks



- Necessary and warranted
- Delay
- Informed consent
- Bias
- Fishing expeditions
- Good enough rather than optimal
- Setting people up for failure
- Cultural fairness

# Thank you

