Case Conferences

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CHAPTER 21

Case Conferences

Case conferences are central to assessment, interagency cooperation, and decision making in child protection. Social services departments (and sometimes the NSPCC) convene them when an initial investigation has confirmed, or suspected, abuse or neglect. Their decisions must take account of all the available information, including a detailed individual and family history with relevant events and an evidence-based, knowledge-informed appraisal of the family’s ability to protect the child and willingness to cooperate with professionals.

Except for registration and the appointment of a key worker, case conferences make recommendations to participant agencies, which should follow locally agreed procedures for confirming their intention to implement them. Key workers and local authority or NSPCC social workers may not be those most in contact with the family but will ensure that child protection plans are developed and implemented. They are central to interagency work: coordinating agency contributions to assessment, intervention, and review; engaging the child and parents in the child protection plan; and facilitating communication between agencies (Boxes 21.1–21.7).

Confidentiality

Effective intervention and case management depend on consideration of all available information. Child protection inquiries commonly pinpoint the failure to disclose or ask for information as crucial in distorting assessment and decision making. Consequently, the Children Act 2004 created provision for shared databases to support information exchange between agencies about children in need and children experiencing or likely to experience severe harm. All those involved with children’s wellbeing must ensure that they take account of the need to safeguard and promote the welfare of children – for example, by early sharing of information.

The Data Protection Act 1998 allows disclosure of information without an individual’s consent to prevent or assist with the detection of crime. Case law recognises that children will be safeguarded only if professionals exchange information. The right to privacy (Article 8, European Convention of Human Rights) is qualified and gives way to the higher order principle of safeguarding and promoting the child’s welfare.

Box 21.1 Tasks of case conferences

- To share and coordinate information and concerns about the child and family, to assess the severity of abuse and neglect, to assess the likelihood of severe harm in the future, to evaluate the degree of risk, and to decide what action is necessary to safeguard and promote the child’s welfare
- To fulfil statutory obligations for the protection of children
- To formulate an agreed, recommended plan of management and intervention that addresses the abuse or neglect, risks, and needs with the child’s welfare and safety the paramount aim. This must include consideration of what legal action is necessary to protect the abused or neglected child and other children in the family and what services should be provided on the basis of assessed needs
- To analyse information about the child’s developmental needs and the capacity of the parents
- To decide whether to place the child’s name on the child protection register and to nominate a key worker
- To agree if and when a child protection review is required – no more than six months from the case conference at which the child’s name was placed on the register
- To make judgements based on evidence

The legislation, procedures, and terminology in this chapter reflect practice in England and Wales. Readers who work elsewhere will recognise the importance, philosophy, and principles of working together with other agencies when they are concerned about child abuse. They should be familiar with equivalent legislation procedures and terminology used in their country of practice.
Adequate recording of discussion, facts, decisions, recommendations has positive results.

Careful timing of meetings to facilitate attendance.

Absence of jargon and professional mystique, recognition of professionals and families.

Chairperson who focuses the meeting on the task and, when appropriate, enables the meeting to consider issues of group dynamics.

Abarance of jargon and professional mystique, recognition of anxiety and stress in child protection work, explicit discussion of degrees of risk when appropriate, and willingness to reappraise professional status (power) and sex stereotypes.

Careful timing of meetings to facilitate attendance.

Adequate recording of discussion, facts, decisions, recommendations, tasks, and interagency plans.

Adequate preparation, consistent membership or attendance, and assessment after interviews with the child, parents, or other people concerned. Serious assault or abuse or neglect should be reported so that officers can investigate and consider prosecution.

General practitioner – Whether or not concerned directly in the initial investigation, the general practitioner may have important knowledge of the child and family.

Paediatricians, working in a hospital or the community, are sometimes the first to suspect or identify abuse or neglect. They will advise on diagnosis and on whether the signs and symptoms are attributable to the parents or carers.

Health visitors, school nurses, hospital nurses, and nurse managers contribute knowledge of the child and family. They may contribute to the child protection plan, especially when this entails monitoring a child’s health and development.

Probation officers may work with family members or can provide information about previous or possible involvement with the family (for example, work with offenders or marital work).

Voluntary organisations may be involved when they provide or could offer services to children and families.

Armed services may also be involved.

The circumstances of the case may indicate the involvement of current or former foster parents or residential social workers, and other agencies or professionals: the local authority housing department, especially in cases of rent arrears, overcrowding, or questions of homelessness; the Department of Social Security, where financial difficulties are relevant; and psychiatrists and practitioners working with learning disabled people.

Specialist advice must be available to case conferences, such as lawyers from the local authority’s legal section and interpreters and specialists working with disabled people and people from minority ethnic groups. Their role is to contribute to informed decision making – for example, about legal options and the cultural components of a case. Once a court has granted an emergency protection or interim care order and appointed a child’s guardian, this officer of the court, who advises the court on issues of case management,

![Figure 21.1 Teachers may be the first to whom a child discloses abuse. With permission from Martin Riedl/Science Photo Library. Posed by models.](image)
represent the interests of the child, and provides courts with an independent social work perspective, may attend as an observer.

**Parental attendance**

Parents and children must be invited to attend case conferences unless the chairperson decides that their exclusion is justified – for children because of their age and understanding, for parents when attendance would preclude proper consideration of the child’s interests. This includes the likelihood of the conference being disrupted, violence towards professionals or the child, or undue influence being exerted by parents on a child. It does not include the possibility of prosecution. The reasons for exclusion should be recorded in the child’s file.

When the interests of parents and children conflict, the child’s interests have priority. If parents and children are not present the conference must receive or ask for a report of their views (a written report, statement, or audio tape) and ensure that they receive details of discussions and recommendations.

Local child protection procedures, agreed by local safeguarding childrens boards, will detail how parental and child attendance, ideally for the entire conference (though separate attendance may be necessary) should be facilitated. Including parents and children exemplifies the Children Act’s commitment to partnership and requires professionals to address envisaged problems, such as sharing confidential information, through training and procedural preparations. The following can encourage meaningful family participation:

- Partnership underpinning all work with the family – openness, consultation, and consideration of wishes and views expressed
- Leaflets on the purpose of case conferences
- Training for professionals
- Preparation work with children and parents on their contribution to case conferences
- Assistance to facilitate attendance – for example, timing, venue, fares, and creche facilities
- Enabling parents and children to bring an advocate to support and advise them
- Written reports from professionals that distinguish facts and observations from opinions
- Actively chairing – introducing the participants, clarifying purposes, and ensuring language is “client friendly”
- Open discussion about the nature and degree of risks and the resources required, including those from the family, to implement the recommended plan
- Provision of minutes and written notification of decisions and recommendations, with follow-up to clarify any outstanding issues
- Minutes should contain details of the unresolved issues of child protection, the interagency work necessary to deal with those, and how the child protection plan is related to the identified needs and risks.

**Core group meetings and child protection reviews**

Initial case conferences agree outline child protection plans. Core group meetings, which must initially start within 10 working days of the case conference, develop, finalise, and implement the child protection plan based on the comprehensive assessment. Core group meetings will change the plan when necessary, by considering current risks and needs in the family and whether the plan continues to protect the child. The frequency of meetings will be determined by the complexity of the case. Membership will comprise those with essential contributions to the child’s welfare.

Child protection reviews evaluate interagency cooperation and consider if registration should be continued or terminated. The

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**Box 21.4 Working with children in need and children requiring protection should be characterised by**

- Assessment, planning, intervention, and reviewing
- Engaging with parents as early as possible to prevent problems
- Listening to and consulting with children and young people, ascertaining their wishes and feelings
- Competent professional judgements based on sound assessment of need
- Working co-operatively with parents where possible
- Sharing information
- Recording clearly concerns, discussions, agreements, and decisions to ensure that children are protected; and meeting obligations under Human Rights Act 1998, especially relating to privacy and family life and to the right to a fair hearing

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**Box 21.5 Conference outcomes**

- Decision on whether a child is at continuing risk of considerable harm
- Where a child is at risk of considerable harm, agreement on an interagency child protection plan and on whether the child’s name should be placed on the register (physical, sexual, emotional abuse, and/or neglect)
- Recommendations concerning how agencies and family members work to safeguard a child from harm – clear expectations
- Appointment of a key worker
- Identification of membership of a core group of professionals and family members, and others in direct contact with the child, to develop and implement the child protection plan
- Agreement on how the child, parents, and family members will be involved in implementation of the plan
- Agreement on the timetable for core group meetings
- Agreement on what further assessments and outcomes are required to safeguard the child

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**Box 21.6 “Looked after” children**

- The term covers all children in local authority care. It includes those in foster or residential homes, and those still with their own parents but subject to a care order
- Most “looked after” children return to their parents within six months
- Abuse and neglect are the reasons for nearly two thirds of “looked after” children. Family dysfunction, stress, disability, and illness are other reasons
reviews months after the case conference. The same requirements concern-
committees may be described as follows:

**Children Act 2004** and building on the work of area child protection

**Local safeguarding childrens boards**

The role of local safeguarding childrens boards, outlined by the

**Government policy guidance requires that work in child protection is:**

- Child centred
- Rooted in child development
- Focused on outcomes for the child
- Evidence based
- Based on assessment as a continuous process not an event
- Focused on, and able to build upon, the child’s and the family’s strengths
- Multi-agency

usual interval between these reviews will be six months, but any-

one may request a review at any time. The first review will be three

months after the case conference. The same requirements concern-

ing parental and child attendance apply.

**Statutory reviews**

When children are being looked after by the local authority statutory

reviews are required after the first four weeks, three months, and
every six months thereafter. They may be combined with child pro-
tection reviews. Parents and children are invited to attend, separately
when this is indicated, with an officer of the social services depart-
ment (not the social worker or team leader) responsible for coor-
dinating the review and reports, including annual health reports.
The local authority is required to consult and consider the views of
the child, parents, and other people relevant to the case, including
healthcare professionals. The child’s views about the attendance of
professionals at these reviews must be considered. Each review must
reappraise the plan for the child, including case objectives, any vari-
ations to the child’s placement, legal status, contact with family, and
education and health needs. A formal record is made and the results
sent to those concerned in the case.

**Local safeguarding childrens boards**

The role of local safeguarding childrens boards, outlined by the

**Children Act 2004** and building on the work of area child protection

committees may be described as follows:

**Box 21.7** Government policy guidance requires that work in child protection is:

- Child centred
- Rooted in child development
- Focused on outcomes for the child
- Evidence based
- Based on assessment as a continuous process not an event
- Focused on, and able to build upon, the child’s and the family’s strengths
- Multi-agency

**Box 21.8** Children and Family Court Advisory and Support Service (CAFCASS)

- CAFCASS provides independent representation for children in specific proceedings relating to:
  - Children Act 1989
  - Adoption and Children Act 2002
  - Human Fertilisation and Embryology Act 1990
  - Crime and Disorder Act 1998
- CAFCASS works only in the family courts, and commonly represents the child, as “children’s guardian” in supervision or care order proceedings.

- To determine and evaluate arrangements for working together – developing clear policies on roles and responsibilities in prevention, assessment, investigation, and treatment of child abuse and neglect; and publishing these procedures, including the principle of including parents and children at all conferences
- To agree objectives and performance indicators for child protection
- To develop and review joint training – covering assessment, investiga-
tion, and treatment; issues of race and sex; children with dis-
abilities; how feelings about abuse affect practice; and professional stereotypes
- To encourage and review interagency cooperation, including the development of protocols on child protection investigations, on resolving disagreements between agencies, and child and parental attendance at conferences and decision making meetings
- To evaluate working together in the light of local and national evidence of best practice
- To develop and review arrangements for expert advice
- To review and when necessary inquire into cases when a child has died or been seriously harmed
- To monitor case conferences and the implementation of legal pro-
cedures
- To publish an annual report and to raise community awareness of the need to safeguard children.

The core membership comprises senior officers or professionals, with delegated decision making powers, from the social services and education departments, NSPCC, police, probation service, health services, and representatives from armed services (when appropri-
ated); and CAFCASS (Box 21.8), drug and alcohol services and youth offending teams. Other agencies that may be involved include vol-
untary organisations, housing departments, the Department of So-
cial Security, and those with particular skill, for instance in religious, ethnic, and cultural matters.

**CAFCASS** – the Children and Family Court Advisory and Support Service (www.cafcass.gov.uk)

**NSPCC** – the National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children (www.nspcc.org.uk)

The representatives pass reports and recommendations to their own agencies and inform the local safeguarding childrens board of their agency’s work in child protection.

**Further reading**


HM Government. **Working together to safeguard children. A guide to inter-
agency working to safeguard and promote the welfare of children**, 2006:

- www.everychildmatters.gov.uk/resources-and-practice/IG00060/
- Laming H. Inquiry into the death of Victoria Climbié. London: Stationery Of-


Reder P, Duncan S, Gray M. **Beyond Blame – child abuse tragedies revisited. Lon-
den: Routledge, 1993.**

Reder P, Duncan S. **Lost Innocents. A follow-up study of fatal child abuse. Lon-
den: Routledge, 1999.**