

# ADOPTING A FAMILY APPROACH

## Practical Tips

# Identifying and engaging unidentified adults in a child or adult at risk's life

## Introduction

The term 'unidentified adults' refers to an adult who agencies are not aware of, or not engaging with. They could be living within a household where children/adults at risk live or with someone who has regular contact with them. This can be in any capacity, such as parent, partner, grandparents, non-family member etc.

The risk of not engaging effectively with adults who have regular contact with children, or live within the family home, includes understanding:

- What the child's main caregiver and other family members might be saying about the unidentified adults' role within the family.
- The positive contribution which they might make to the needs and welfare of the child.
- What support they may offer to the family, including caring for children.
- Any risks which they might present.

Similarly, it is helpful for professionals working with adults at risk to have a good understanding of the role of other adults in that person's life – for example so that people with caring responsibilities can be supported, that any support they may be able to offer the adult at risk is maximised, whether they are an appropriate person to advocate for the adult at risk, and that any potential risks can be identified (such as coercive control, financial abuse or cuckooing).

## The Approach

Remember to be, and indeed remain, professionally curious when engaging with families. It is important to:

# ADOPTING A FAMILY APPROACH

## Practical Tips

### Look

- Is there anything about what you see when you meet with this child/adult/family which prompts questions or makes you feel uneasy?
- Are you observing any behaviour which might indicate abuse or neglect?
- Does what you see support or contradict what you are being told?

**Listen and check out any information you are provided. Reflect on the information you have received and ask yourself – ‘does this add up?’**

- Are you being told anything which needs further clarification?
- Are you concerned about what you hear family members say to each other?
- Is someone in this family trying to tell you something but is finding it difficult to express themselves? If so, how can you help them to do so?

### Ask direct questions

What could you ask when you meet this child/adult/family which will provide more information about the vulnerability of individual family members?

Below are some examples:

- a. How do you spend a typical day? - How did you get that injury?
  - b. Who do you live with? - Who is this with you?
  - c. When were you last happy? - When do you feel safe?
  - d. What do you look forward to? - Why are you not at school?
- Never make assumptions and try to obtain information from different sources to gain a better understanding of the individuals within the family as well as family functioning.
  - Gain an understanding of each individual's past history and how that fits together with others within the family and what this might mean for the future.
  - Always obtain multiple sources of information and avoid accepting a single set of details you are provided at face value.

# ADOPTING A FAMILY APPROACH

## Practical Tips

- Consider your own personal bias and how that might affect how you see each of those within the family.

### Check out

- Are other professionals involved?
- Have other professionals seen the same as you?
- Are professionals being told the same or different things?
- Are others concerned? If so, what action has been taken so far and is there anything else?
- What should or could be done by you or anyone else?

### Identifying:

- The main carer references to another person in a child's life in conversations.
- The main carer answers questions that are directed at the child/adult with care and support needs.
- Children refer to another unknown adult in conversation or through play/imitation.
- Presence of another person on visits/contacts.
- Presence of another person at appointments and locations, for example, at school gate.
- Instinct or 'tacit knowledge' plays an important part. For example, someone else new in the house who appears to be 'at home' or taking on a caring role for the children/adult with care and support needs.
- Physical evidence of another person which contradicts what you were expecting, for example, personal possessions evident around the household, spare bedrooms in use, spare bedding visible.
- When someone is introduced as a family member which does not 'fit' with existing knowledge of the family situation.
- Other adult in the household who 'removes' themselves when the professional arrives.
- Information provided to a professional by a third party.
- Change in a child/adult at risk's behaviour or primary carer's behaviour.
- New adults answering questions being directed at the main carer or child/adult at risk.

# ADOPTING A FAMILY APPROACH

## Practical Tips

- Falling into rent arrears.
- Changes to the condition of the property.
- New vehicles parking at the property.
- Change in children/adult with care and support needs appearance or demeanour.
- Not keeping pre-arranged appointments or declining/refusing on behalf of the child/adult with care and support needs.
- Constant presence of someone not known at the property/answering the door etc.

Information may need to be flagged/checked/verified with another professional, not necessarily challenged by the worker at that time. Professionals need to consider asking partner agencies what information they hold about the child/adult at risk and family.

### Engaging:

- Introducing yourself or asking to be introduced to another person.
- Asking them to introduce themselves.
- Enquiring respectfully about other adults who may be in a child/adult at risk's life who can offer support or who may need support. This information could be gained by aiming questions to the adult rather than the child – particularly if they are a single parent / working parent. For example – is there anyone who you can / do ask to help with things around the house or the children?
- All written communication should be inclusive of all key people in a person's or child's life.
- Being aware of person's concerns about sharing information due to loss of benefits, implications for housing provisions, previous experience of services etc.
- Offering the next contact at a time when the other adult can be present and noting the response to this. For example, happily accepted or avoided.
- Asking a direct question as to why they are at the property.
- Asking where they normally reside.

### Further information

[Understanding Unidentified Adults Toolkit](#) – developed by Hampshire and Isle of Wight Local Safeguarding Children Partnerships, this toolkit provides additional resources that are

# ADOPTING A FAMILY APPROACH

## Practical Tips

helpful for practice when working with children and families where there are concerns about unidentified adults.