

## Case Summary Two Sisters

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The two children in this review were aged 10 and 7 at the time of the review. The oldest child had been under a Child Protection plan in Hertfordshire under the category of neglect prior to 2013. The family moved to Suffolk where the youngest child was born. The children have not been subject to CP plans in Suffolk. Prior to the discovery of abuse in April 2020, there had been no involvement other than a statutory assessment in November 2015. The case was closed in January 2016.

Referrals had been received in Suffolk during 2013, 2014, 2015 and 2016. These were for concerns regarding mother's dependency on the father and worries around emotional and physical neglect. Referral information refers to the parents being swingers and the presence of a frequent male visitor to the house. School noted that one of the children had disclosed that mum pushes her, and the nursery said that the youngest child had disclosed that 'Daddy and me had a fight this morning'.

Following a referral from the school, a CAF was open to the team in October 2019. It was closed to the team in November 2019. Concerns were identified as mother's low mood, her poor mental health, that she spends all day in her bedroom having locked herself in and concerns for the impact of this on the emotional well-being of the two children. Low level concern about neglect was also noted. The children weren't seen at school or at home. The school did some wishes, and feelings work but nothing of concern emerged from this.

The abuse of the two children only emerged when the wife of the abuser found explicit images of the girls on his phone in April 2020 and phoned the police. These and other videos indicated that her husband was conducting an affair with the mother of the two girls, abusing the older girl and preparing to do the same with the youngest child. The abuse was found to have taken place over a period of approximately two years. The police made arrests and reported that the family home conditions were 'awful'.

The case is in proceedings and both children are currently subject to Interim Care Orders and are placed in long term and potentially permanent foster care. Specialist input has been provided to help support the foster carers and the children. Both mother and her partner have pleaded guilty as has another male defendant.

There doesn't seem to have been any significant multi agency working in this case. There were several instances of single agency involvement with sporadic attempts to engage the family and or partner agencies. The school have said that they had a niggling feeling that something wasn't right. Over thirty concerns were recorded over a three-year period. Concerns are indicative of neglect and family dysfunction, but no referrals were submitted. Concerns seem to have shifted to the mother's mental health, her presentation and potential domestic abuse rather than the presentation of the children. CYP had no indication from the school or Health of any concerns and the children didn't feel able to disclose to anyone whilst they were being abused.

## Summary of Learning

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- Schools should give consideration as to how they monitor and review the concerns logged on their CPOMs system. An automatic review should take place when a certain number of concerns are logged within a specific period.
- Development of a learning event which addresses the need for professionals to:
  - Talk with the child.
  - Exercise professional curiosity
  - Understand the experience of the child and not simply from the adults' point of view.
  - Beware of the parent who habitually visits school, clinic or office as a possible strategy to discourage professionals visiting the home.
  - Access or develop a comprehensive chronology and learn from what is known. This is an important counter to professional optimism and also the 'start again' syndrome when a family moves to another area or service.
  - Assess if in any doubt – do not assume it is simply how this family lives
  - Deep dive into reasons for variable/disguised compliance.
  - Clarify all routes for expressing concerns – not simply MASH – contacting the relevant service manager and safeguarding manager.
  - Avoid assuming that another agency or professional will have an overview of risk.
  - Challenge decisions by agencies that do not follow on from the evidence-base in a referral.
  - Understand the implications of professional uncertainty for how cases are managed and workers supported.
  - Embed authoritative practice which can effectively challenge parents when needed.
  - Understand the dangers of silo thinking.
- Safeguarding leads within schools should ensure that any referral to another agency is always followed up and that the nature of the response is recorded at the time. Any perceived failure in responsiveness should be escalated within the school and the Headteacher can then contact a senior manager within the receiving agency.
- Health need to ensure that all transfers in of families where children are at risk are accompanied by appropriate documentation, management review and a visit.
- When a concern is raised with Health by another agency, consideration should be given to a visit being undertaken by a health visitor rather than relying on what was seen at a visit some weeks or months earlier
- CYP should ensure that at the point of referral, any extensive history is carefully considered within the MASH as part of effective decision making on what action to take.
- CYP should set any retracted compliance regarding a CAF within the context of the family history and consider stepping up for a social work assessment rather than simply accepting that nothing can be done as parental co-operation is withdrawn.

## **Update on the Children**

The children are now placed together. They are both struggling in a range of ways. The foster carer describes a 'turbulent period' in the months since they arrived. Specialist support is available to both the children and the foster carers whose insights are invaluable in helping the children to process what has happened. The children have said that they would like to remain where they are with the foster carer.