

Child Safeguarding Practice Review Cameron – Learning Brief

FOR THE FULL REPORT VISIT <https://dscp.org.uk/professionals/child-safeguarding-practice-reviews>

1 Background

Doncaster Safeguarding Children Partnership decided to conduct a local child safeguarding practice review (CSPR) following the death of a baby in 2020. The baby died after being attacked in the family home by a dog owned by the baby's father. The baby will be referred to by the pseudonym 'Cameron' in this report..

The purpose of a CSPR is to identify improvements to be made to safeguard and promote the welfare of children. It is expected that CSPRs will be published in order to widely disseminate learning from the review. Doncaster Safeguarding Children Partnership commissioned an independent reviewer for this child safeguarding practice review.

2 Key Findings

Parental Neglect

Concerns about parental neglect of Cameron's older siblings led to the family being supported by child protection planning and subsequently through a child in need plan¹. Whilst there was a strong professional focus on supporting the parents in managing to maintain 'good enough' home conditions as a key success/failure indicator, this was a narrower approach than envisaged by Doncaster's Neglect toolkit which encourages professionals to take a broader, strength-based approach to the quality of care children are receiving including physical care, safety, emotional care and developmental care.

3 Key Findings

GP practice response to earlier dog bite

The subsequent police investigation found that one of Cameron's siblings had previously been bitten by the dog which subsequently attacked the baby. The sibling was seen by the family GP at the time of the earlier dog bite, but the family falsely informed the GP that a stray dog was responsible. Whilst the GP practice did not feel that they should have informed children's social care about this earlier dog bite, the GP practice had not recorded the family's involvement with children's social at that time sufficiently precisely.

4 Key Findings

Analysing Risk

Signs of Safety guidance asks professionals to try and limit themselves to just three 'Danger Statements' – statements which relate to each issue where professionals are worried about what could happen if nothing changes. The CSPR observed that this could lead to risks not included in the three 'Danger Statements' receiving insufficient attention. In this case, concern about Cameron's father's dog was one of four issues which professionals were worried about. Of these four issues, the concern about father's dog was the only one which was not translated into a 'Danger Statement'.

Assessing the risks which dogs may present to children

Professionals primarily perceived the family dogs to be a risk to the health and hygiene of the family. Although the child and family pre-birth assessment conducted in respect of the unborn Cameron noted that the dog which subsequently attacked the child was 'large, boisterous and not house trained' and would need to be 'kept away from the baby at all times', the concern about the dog was not included in subsequent meetings or planning.

Doncaster Safeguarding Children Partnership has comprehensive 'Dangerous Dogs Practice Guidance' which includes a risk assessment template for assessing dogs which may pose a risk to children which should be used to assist assessment of potential risk of any dog that may come into contact with a child. This risk assessment was not completed in this case and professional awareness of the guidance appeared to be insufficient. Had the risk assessment been completed, it would have provided greater insight into canine safety issues and have drawn attention to the welfare of the family dogs who were not being well cared for.

7 Key Findings

GP practice involvement in child protection planning

Cameron's family's GP practice did not attend key multi-agency meetings to discuss the family. The family were well known to their GP practice, which could have made a valuable contribution to multi-agency discussions.

6 Key Findings

The impact of Covid-19 restrictions

The first Covid-19 lockdown was introduced during the mother's pregnancy with Cameron. This affected contact with the family for a time, largely restricting such contact to letters, telephone calls and home visits where conversations took place on the door step or through the window. However, the family's social worker managed to complete visits during which she accessed the family home.

Good practice

The CSPR found much good practice including the positive relationship the school attended by Cameron's elder siblings developed with their mother despite needing to challenge her care of the children on occasions. Additionally, the family's social worker supported the mother and father to achieve improvements in their care of the children and in home conditions. There was also much effective partnership working and information sharing between the family's social worker, health visitor and the children's school.

5 Key Findings

Parental mental health

Professional concerns about Cameron's family were at a lower level than for many of the families practitioners were working with at that time. Whilst mother's low mood was recognised as an issue it had begun to be perceived as 'historic' and there appeared to be little attention paid to father's mental health.

Responding to indications of domestic abuse

There was a missed opportunity for a DASH risk assessment to be completed following of an incident of domestic abuse by the father and the opportunity to explore a subsequent incident of domestic abuse was overlooked. Possible indications of controlling behaviour by the father did not receive sufficient attention.

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Recommendations

- 1. That Doncaster Safeguarding Children Partnership uses the learning from this CSPR to inform their monitoring of progress against the strategic priority of Neglect and the associated workstreams.*
- 2. That Doncaster Safeguarding Children Partnership seeks assurance that the 'Signs of Safety' approach ensures that all risks to a child receive appropriate attention and that the cumulative impact of multiple risks is not obscured by a requirement to focus only on a small number of risks.*
- 3. When the learning from this CSPR is disseminated, that Doncaster Safeguarding Children Partnership highlights the importance of fully considering both maternal and paternal mental health and their potential impact on parenting capacity when conducting assessments.*
- 4. That Doncaster Safeguarding Children Partnership shares this CSPR with the Safer Stronger Doncaster Partnership so that the latter Partnership can consider how to make use of the learning from the case to inform Doncaster's domestic abuse training programme.*
- 5. That Doncaster Safeguarding Children Partnership shares the concerns about the system for combining reports of the same domestic violence incident reported to different agencies by the victim and perpetrator with the Safer Doncaster Partnership so that the latter Partnership can consider what action to take.*
- 6. That Doncaster Safeguarding Children Partnership promotes professional awareness of the Partnership's 'Dangerous Dogs Practice Guidance'. The learning from this case, though very distressing, should be widely disseminated to reinforce awareness of the 'Dangerous Dogs Practice Guidance'.*
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- 8. That Doncaster Safeguarding Children Partnership introduces the mandatory use of the Partnership's 'Assessing dogs who may pose a risk to children' alongside all pre-birth assessments completed by children's social care where there is a dog or dogs in the family home.*
- 9. That Doncaster Safeguarding Children Partnership seeks assurance from the Doncaster Place Team of South Yorkshire Integrated Care Board that all GP practices accurately code any involvement that children's social care has with every child who is a patient in the practice.*

KEY MESSAGES FOR STAFF

- Professionals should use a holistic and broad approach when working with families, taking into account all elements of a child's development needs (health, education, emotional and behaviour development, identity, family and social relationships, social presentation and self-care skills) and not solely focus on the reason for referral.
- Professionals should fully consider both maternal and paternal mental health and substance misuse issues and their potential impact on parenting capacity (basic care, ensuring safety, emotional warmth, stimulation, guidance, boundaries and stability) when conducting assessments.
- Professionals should consider that families can have multiple risks that give them cause for concern (e.g. family history and functioning, wider family, housing, employment, income, family's social integration, community resources) professionals should ensure these risks are well communicated and understood by all involved.
- Professionals should seek to understand the father's life, experience and role as a carer and ensure that they involve men in children's lives with direct work and support.
- Professionals should have easy and immediate access to the Dangerous Dogs Practice Guidance [Dangerous Dogs Practice Guidance \(proceduresonline.com\)](https://proceduresonline.com/dangerous-dogs-practice-guidance)
- Professionals should promote the use of the Dangerous Dogs Practice Guidance to all other agencies involved with families and ensure the guidance is utilised when there is a dog in the family home.

The recommendations from this review will be implemented and overseen by the Case Review Group and accountable to the Doncaster Safeguarding Children Partnership.

The DSCP Dangerous Dogs Practice guidance, the DSCP 'Assessing Dogs which may pose a risk to children' (Risk Assessment Tool), was revised and relaunched in April 2022 and can be found at [Dangerous Dogs Practice Guidance \(proceduresonline.com\)](https://proceduresonline.com/dangerous-dogs-practice-guidance)