

# Carrying out better assessments: evidence snapshot

**Top-line messages from research on conducting effective assessments**

**June 2024**

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## Introduction

This snapshot provides a top-level summary of findings from research published between 2010 and 2022 about assessment practice in children's social work. It draws on articles, reports and guidance held in the NSPCC Library and identified through searches of Google Scholar, Social Care Online, the King's Fund database and Ingenta Connect.

It outlines the key enablers and barriers to effective assessments identified in the research. Combined with learning from case reviews, this snapshot underpins our practice points for effective assessments.

### + Relevant resources

- **See the full list of research which informed this evidence snapshot**

<<https://library.nspcc.org.uk/Shibboleth.sso/Login?target=http://library.nspcc.org.uk/HeritageScripts/Hapi.dll/retrieve2?SetID=8BA01150-FE3F-4DFB-8837-4B1AFB957728&DataSetName=LIVEDATA>>

- **Read our learning from case reviews about assessments**

<<https://learning.nspcc.org.uk/research-resources/learning-from-case-reviews/assessments>>

- **Read our assessments practice points**

<<https://learning.nspcc.org.uk/research-resources/practice-points/assessments>>

## What makes a good assessment?

Effective assessments are centred on the child's needs, recognise the wider family and social context, gather and analyse appropriate information from all relevant sources and avoid being overly defensive or risk-averse (Cook and Gregory, 2020; Crichley, 2020; Hood et al, 2022; Rees et al, 2021; Whittaker, 2018).

## What are the challenges to conducting effective assessments?

- Increased demand for services and budget cuts have led to issues with: resources available to support families, recruitment and retention of staff, workloads and the timeliness of responses (Webb and Bywaters, 2018, Hood et al, 2022, Flood and Wilkinson, 2022).

- Initial assessments are often based on practitioner intuition. First impressions can sometimes overly influence future judgements (Kirkman and Melrose, 2014; Saltiel, 2016; Saltiel and Lakey, 2019; Whittaker, 2018).
- Practitioners can sometimes focus on the specific incidents which led to the assessment, rather than the wider context and case history (Ofsted, 2015; Rees et al, 2021).
- The views of parents and carers aren't always represented in assessments (Hood et al, 2022). Fear, stigma, shame, embarrassment, or previous negative experiences can all impact practitioners' ability to effectively engage with families (Hood et al, 2022; Forrester, Westlake and Glynn, 2012; Turney, 2012; Smithson and Gibson, 2017).
- The child's voice is also sometimes missing from assessments (Brandon et al, 2012; Ofsted, 2015; Saltiel and Lakey, 2019). Issues include: not recognising the meaning behind children's behaviour, not seeing children separately and relying on parents' or carers' accounts rather than speaking to children directly (Flood and Wilkinson, 2022).
- Lack of communication, poor co-operation and tensions between agencies can get in the way of effective inter-agency working on assessments (Mason, Robertson and Broadhurst, 2019; Ofsted, 2015; Hood et al, 2022).

## What are the enablers of effective assessments?

- Effective assessments depend on intuitive judgements strengthened by experience and analytical thinking (Whittaker, 2018; Hackett and Taylor, 2014).
- Critical but supportive supervision provides opportunities for practitioners to analyse their initial judgements (Hood et al, 2022; Cook and Gregory, 2020; Hackett and Taylor, 2014).
- Research can help inform assessments, if it is made accessible in ways that are compatible with practitioners' workloads and timescales (Hood et al, 2022;

Barlow and Schrader-McMillan, 2017; Ofsted, 2014; Ward, Brown and Hyde-Dryden, 2014).

- If used correctly, evidence-based assessment tools can support practitioners to think analytically (Hood et al, 2021; Hackett and Taylor, 2014; Hood, 2014).
- Effective inter-agency working is essential to assessments. It requires accurate recording and sharing of information and respect for diverse professional perspectives (Dickens et al, 2022; Ward, Brown and Hyde-Dryden, 2014; Rees et al, 2021).
- Standardised frameworks can help ensure information is thoroughly gathered and recorded. There is less evidence that they improve outcomes for children and families (Vis, Lauritzen and Fossum, 2021).
- Assessments rely on practitioners building good working relationships with families and engaging with children in ways that are appropriate to their age and needs (Casey and Hackett, 2021; Rees et al, 2021; Godar and Holmes, 2017; O'Reilly and Dolan, 2016; Ward, Brown and Hyde-Dryden, 2014).

## Conclusion

The short timeframes, incomplete information and complex contexts involved in assessments are best navigated by practitioners who are supported in ways that develop, rather than constrain, their expertise.

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