

Assessing Potential Non-Accidental Injury

What do you need to know about assessing potential non-accidental injury?

- There are a limited number of causes for a child sustaining an injury and it is essential to consider all possible options and eliminate them. Practitioners must maintain professional curiosity and not immediately accept the explanation given by a parent or carer.

Reasons for a child having an injury include

- Accidental - need to consider whether the accident happened due to lack of supervision
- Abuse
- Self-harm – need to consider underpinning factors linked to this and how best to offer the right support

What can prevent practitioners from effectively assessing potential non-accidental injury?

- Practitioners can too readily accept the explanation given by the parent or carer.
- Challenging topic - the reality is that it is difficult for practitioners to ask parents about whether they have injured their child
- Practitioners can be diverted from considering abuse by parents/carers who justify their behaviour by describing this as legitimate punishment. Terms such as physical chastisement and harsh punishment can contribute to this confusion.
- Challenges of sharing information about a child with other practitioners

As practitioners, how can we effectively assess potential non-accidental injury?

- Identifying the point at which physical abuse is, or may be, present will require focus on the child's lived experience and reflect on how the punishment impacts on them. This will include consideration of the following factors
 - The persistence of such treatment
 - The severity of the treatment

- The NICE Guidelines make it clear that in order to establish whether injuries to children are non-accidental that a number of issues must be considered. These include:
 - the nature of the injury;
 - the explanations provided by the child;
 - the explanations provided by the parent and any other person involved;
 - any contradictions or discrepancies in the story;
 - family history and known risk factors;
 - history of other injuries.
- In assessing potential non-accidental injury it is important to consider the attitudes and behaviours of the adults caring for the child. Adult behaviour can be attributed either to
 - contextual factors and circumstances, external issues which are outside of an individual's control
 - internal or innate psychological traits or personal characteristics.
- Understanding whether the adult's behaviour is situational (responding to the situation they are in) or dispositional (innate part of their character) will help to decide what the best response should be.
- Be wary of putting more emphasis on a child retracting a disclosure, than on the disclosure itself
- Be mindful that describing a child as having 'lied' about something is very damaging – future disclosures are less likely to be believed

Further Reading...

- NICE have produced guidance which is relevant to this issue which can be accessed here - <https://www.nice.org.uk/guidance/CG89/chapter/1-Guidance>

Suggested activity

In your team, think about non-accidental injuries in terms of consequence and repair. What are the consequences for the parent or carer where non-accidental injuries have been determined to be from their actions, and what the repair is for the child?