

CUMULATIVE HARM

What is cumulative harm?

A child that has experienced 'cumulative harm' is one that has been harmed (or at risk of harm) as a result of:

- An ongoing adverse event or circumstances in their life (e.g. ongoing neglect) and/ or;
- An accumulation of adverse circumstances (e.g. experiences of neglect, inconsistent and harsh discipline, exposure to physical harm)

These adverse events/circumstances contribute to chronic maltreatment, which causes the child cumulative harm. In the context of child protection, "cumulative harm involves a series of events and circumstances which individually may not constitute grounds for child protection intervention but contribute to chronic child maltreatment causing cumulative harm".

Sheehan, R. (2019). Cumulative harm in the child protection system: The Australian Context. Child and Family Social Work, 1-9.

The impact of cumulative harm

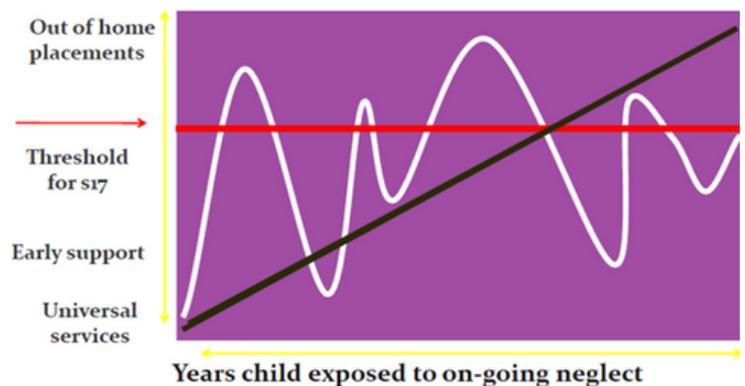
When children's basic needs (e.g., physiological, safety, love, and belonging) are unmet, it can harm their brain development, preventing healthy cognitive, emotional, and social growth. Cumulative harm, resulting from repeated maltreatment over time, has long-lasting negative effects on child development and mental health. This impact may not be immediately visible but can manifest as children grow. Even "minor" harm over time can be as damaging as a single major event. Children who are on the receiving end of multiple acts of commission (abuse) or omission (neglect) from those whose role it is to care, protect and nurture them, suffer complex trauma; cumulative harm is traumatic. While some people who have experience of abuse and neglect will never perpetrate this on their children, where the cumulative impact is left unrecognised and responded to, there may be links to intergenerational abuse.

Barriers to recognising and responding to cumulative harm in practice

Although cumulative harm is becoming more recognised in child protection guidance and legislation. In practice, child protection responses are often crisis-driven, focused on a single critical incident. The diagram by Horwath (right) illustrates the child's experience of neglect (white line) versus the cumulative impact of fluctuating abuse and neglect over time (black line).

Unfortunately, many service systems fail to recognise when a child is being exposed to patterns of multiple episodes of harm and neglect:

- Each involvement with a single agency may be considered in isolation and not linked to prior history.
- Information may not be accumulated from one report to the next.
- Lesser incidents of harm are often overlooked or seen as low-level, rather than part of cumulative harm.
- Assumptions are made that past issues are resolved or unrelated to current concerns.
- Records are not scrutinised to determine if patterns of cumulative harm are present.
- When a history/record exploration is undertaken this is usually done in order to determine future risk rather than present cumulative impact.
- Child protection practice seems to focus on single incidents, not the cumulative picture.
- Lack of information sharing between different agencies and workers working with different aspects of the overall abuse picture, or with differing family members.



Recognising and responding to cumulative harm

Give attention to the impact of risk of significant harm from cumulative maltreatment and its influence on long-term developmental outcome. Effective chronologies enable us to see the ways in which an individual child or a family have functioned over time and to examine how families have managed their own circumstances, as well as how professionals have managed the case over time. A multi-agency chronology should commence as soon as concerns are identified, and partners come together to discuss them and the impact on the child.

