

Rough Guide to Assessment

For professionals in children's services

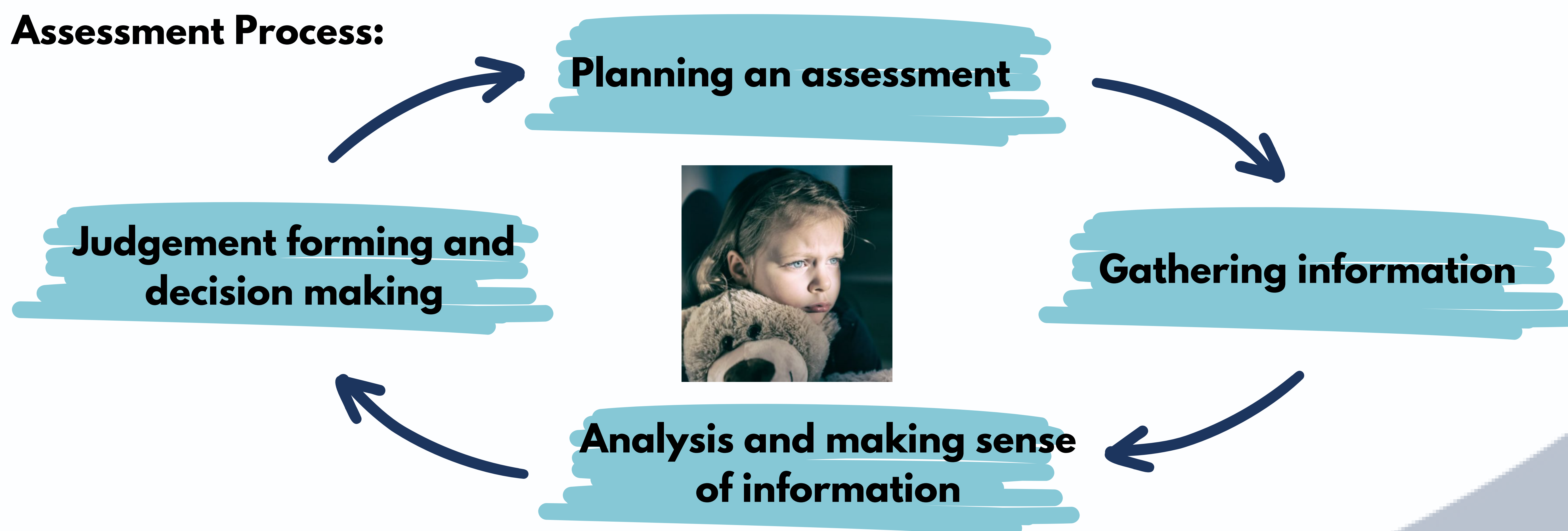
what

Assessment is the continuous process for understanding what is happening to a child and their family, which then informs decisions about action to be taken or services to be provided.

why

Assessments underpin the planning process. Without good assessment, subsequent decisions, plans and interventions will be flawed, which could lead to catastrophic consequences for the child and family.

Assessment Process:



Planning an assessment:

Determine **what you need** to know and **how you intend to obtain** the information.

Key questions and considerations:

- **What** are you assessing?
- **Who** will be involved?
Families, agencies, community?
- **How** will you engage the child, family and significant others?
- **How** will you involve other practitioners?
- **How** will you gather and record the information you need?
- **Which** strategies will you use to support involvement?
- **Which** order will you involve services and significant people?
- **When** will information be gathered and analysed?

Gathering information:

The gathering of information in the assessment process is vital. As a practitioner you need to know where to collect, what to collect, how to filter, and how to verify information. Case files and agency records are primary sources, demanding careful scrutiny. Additional sources include the child, family, friends, neighbours, and professionals. It's crucial to verify, clarify, and gather comprehensive information.

Remember:

- Keep it relevant
- Know the difference between fact and opinion
- Be unambiguous
- Be thorough
- Be neutral

Analysis and making sense of information:

Assessment goes beyond collecting disputed 'facts'; it involves analysing information and using this to guide practitioners in decision-making and referrals. Analysis turns information into knowledge of a child's life. It allows us to question, identify biases, note similarities, verify, check conflicts, establish relationships, and identify themes. Colour-coding chronologies can aid in assessing and revealing patterns in a family's service history. This analytical process turns information into understanding, facilitating informed decisions in children's welfare.

Judgement forming and decision making:

Gathered, evaluated, and analysed information leads to judgments and decisions in the assessment process, affecting children and families significantly. Quick judgments may be necessary in urgent situations, but they should be considered tentative and subject to revision as more information emerges. Good practice involves recording, communicating, and establishing clear links between information, analysis, judgments, and decisions. Ensuring clarity and understanding in the rationale for judgments and decisions is essential.

What does good quality assessment practice look like?

- ✓ It ensures the child remains central.
- ✓ It uses full, relevant and accurate information.
- ✓ It examines the interaction between historical facts and the present situation.
- ✓ It recognises the importance of a chronology and a good understanding of the family's history.
- ✓ It makes good use of information from a range of sources.
- ✓ It identifies needs, risks and protective factors.
- ✓ It includes effective analysis.
- ✓ It is transparent.
- ✓ It avoids jumping to conclusions.
- ✓ It is timely.
- ✓ It is based on a clear picture of what life is like for a particular child.
- ✓ It critically reviews the evidence for judgements made.

Getting More Analysis Into Assessment

Given the significance of child assessments, practitioners must engage in critical reflection throughout the process. Critical and reflective thinking is a skill that involves being able to:

- Understand the logical connections between pieces of information
- Detect inconsistencies and inaccuracies
- Identify the relevance and importance of pieces of information
- Reflect on the rationale for one's own beliefs

You can achieve this in your assessment practice by adopting a high level of questioning in your approach.

Some questions to focus on are:

- Why do you think what you think?
- What evidence supports your views?
- Are there any other professional views to consider?
- What are the other possible explanations?
- Are you assuming anything that you shouldn't?
- Are you remaining professionally curious?
- Have you considered the presenting issue in the context of the family's history?
- Do you know of all the significant adults in the child's life and what are their potential risks?
- Could you be or might you have been deceived, misled, manipulated, intimidated or threatened by the parents or other member of the household?

Assessing Risk

The key questions for assessing risk are:

- What has been happening?
- What is happening now?
- What could happen in the future?
- How likely is it?
- How serious would it be if it did happen?

Good risk assessments:

- Are based on sound evidence and analysis
- Are focused – on risk to/from whom, risk of/from what
- Use risk assessments to inform rather than replace professional judgement
- Construct a coherent story about the child's situation
- Appreciate there will be ambiguity and uncertainty
- Are constructed through the testing of hypotheses and curiosity that sees people in their contexts
- Are not just focussed on future harm, but also consider cumulative harm

Assessment pitfalls:

- Believing there is a 'best' tool that guarantees certainty
- Having an overly optimistic or pessimistic view
- Focusing only on new referrals and not the family history
- Clinging to the initial hypothesis
- Making decisions on incomplete/inaccurate information
- Being adult-focussed
- Superficial engagement from parents