

Good Practice Guide – Unidentified Adults

With thanks to Hampshire Safeguarding Children Partnership



Introduction

The term 'Unidentified Adults' refers to an adult who agencies are not aware of, or not engaging with. They may be living within or staying in a household where children live or with someone who has regular contact with children¹. This can be in any capacity (such as parent, partner, grandparents, non-family member etc.)

There is a plethora of information both locally and nationally which highlights the need to understand who is living within the household with a child. Many reviews highlight the issue of professionals not identifying and/or assessing key adults, such as fathers, mothers/fathers' partners, extended family and friends involved in the care of children who died or suffered harm.

The risk of not engaging effectively with adults who have regular contact with children or live within the family home includes understanding:

- What the child, child's main caregiver and other family members might be saying about the 'Unidentified Adults' role within the family
- The positive contribution which they might make to the needs and welfare of the child
- What support they may offer to the family, including caring for children
- Any risks which they might present.

Focus on Engagement

There is a tendency for practitioners to focus on mothers and to take at face value what mothers are telling them about the dynamics which exist, or have existed, within the family and about the impact of those dynamics, positive or negative, on children and young people. Other adults play an important role in children's lives and have a great influence on the children they care for. Male care givers may not feel as included or involved by professionals, who sometimes focus almost exclusively on the quality of care children receive from their mothers and female carers.

Professionals sometimes rely too much on mothers to tell them about other adults involved in their children's lives. There are a variety of reasons why a mother may not be open about

¹ Please remember the term unidentified adults can include someone who may not live in the home and may exert significant influence or provide regular support to the family. This could be through virtual contact

the presence of other adults involved in their children's lives such as due to concerns about housing, benefits or potential risk (known to the police for example). If a mother puts their own needs first, they may not be honest about the risk the hidden adult poses to their children.

Robust assessments, however, require that information is triangulated and tested out. Identifying and engaging Unidentified Adults in a positive way is critical to ensuring that assessments are balanced and rigorous, especially when important decisions need to be made about children.

From the NSPCC's (2015) analysis of case reviews, two categories of 'Unidentified Adults' emerged:

- Those, for example estranged fathers, who were capable of protecting and nurturing the child but were overlooked by professionals.
- Those who posed a risk to the child which resulted in them suffering harm.

Sharing Information

Professionals involved with adults who are in regular contact or living with children, such as substance misuse workers, housing officers and probation officers, do not always share information about potential risks with other professionals supporting the children. This may be because they are unaware the adult has contact with children. Consequently, practitioners depend entirely on parents to share this information, which they may or may not do. Professionals must ensure that information is sought from all agencies that could be involved with the family.

Professionals do not always talk enough or ask probing questions of other people involved in a child's life, such as the main care giver's estranged partner(s), siblings, extended family and friends. This can result in them missing crucial information and failing to spot inconsistencies in the main care giver's account. Children will also have information about their daily routine which may indicate that there is another adult present in their life, such as who collects them from school, makes dinner or puts them to bed, or for older children who is spending time around them in their home. Children should always be spoken to and concerns which they raise acted upon.

Professionals can be reluctant to enquire about the decisions parents make about their personal and sexual relationships. However, this is to ignore the risks that might be posed to children by adults who are in relationships defined as short or long term, significant or casual or as friends.

Professionals need to consider that not all those that pose a risk to children need to be in a sexual relationship with the main care givers. It could be as simple as what appears to be a new family friend who has appeared on the scene. It is recognised that some adults are known to befriend parents/carers to seemingly provide help but are actually grooming both the child and parent to gaining legitimate access to children.

Failing to identify and/or engage with adults who have regular contact with children ignores their fundamental importance in a child's emotional and psychological development. When a vulnerable child's needs are not being met by their main care giver, an estranged parent for example may be able to provide the protection and stability that the child needs.

General Principles in Identifying Unidentified Adults

In all assessments, always put the child's needs before those of an adult.

During pregnancy and after birth, make active enquiries about the child's father, the mother's relationships and any adults in contact with the child.

Identify any new adults who have regular contact with children. Always clarify who the members of a household are each time you visit a family, be aware that some individuals may have several aliases or alternative spellings.

It can be difficult to get parent/carers to open up and discuss their partners' involvement in their children's lives. Supervisors should support practitioners to find ways to engage with parent/carer and build trust.

Supervisors also need to offer guidance and training on working with Unidentified Adults, monitor engagement with services and evaluate how effective direct work with them is.

REMEMBER

Routinely ask about who lives in the child's home, who regularly cares for or has contact with the child, gain name and date of birth, document this within the child's records. If this information is declined then consider this in relation to what you know about the family, and again document. Be Curious, if you have concerns or things don't feel right ask more questions, discuss at supervision or with safeguarding colleagues.

Engaging

From the very beginning, always emphasise to parents the crucial role that adults have on a child's health and emotional wellbeing.

Talk to the child about their daily routine, who is in their home or visits their home.

Encourage the child's care givers to attend appointments and engage in services. Make appointments for times convenient to them, such as evenings and in places that they will be able to access. E.g. close to public transport hubs.

Consider how fathers and other adults could contribute to an assessment of the child's needs.

Ask them directly about potential risky behaviours such as drug and alcohol use and offer them services based on their needs and consider mental health and other issues such as Domestic Abuse².

Consider those with parental responsibility who appear not to be directly involved in a child's life are aware of safeguarding concerns relating to their child unless there are significant reasons not to.

Ensure services involved with the adult's in a child's life are invited to attend key meetings and share information.

Consult about plans and invite to child protection conferences and core group meetings.

² It's important to make sure that the service user you are in contact with is alone and safe before speaking with them about abuse. This is particularly the case when supporting them over the phone or online. Ask 'closed' questions to establish this, allowing them to give 'yes' or 'no' answers. E.g.

- Are you alone?'
- 'Is it safe to ask you some questions about your relationship with ___?'
- If it isn't a safe time, then ask for a suggested safe time to call back. Be aware that situations change quickly, and that risk is dynamic.
- Ask if the service user is alone to ensure that the perpetrator isn't in the same room. Be aware that the perpetrator of the abuse may be in the house or enter the house and ask the service user to terminate the call if the perpetrator of the abuse comes into the room.
- Ask if the service user feels safe and if there is any immediate danger. Always advise calling 999 if there is any immediate danger. If the service user is unable to do this, offer to do this for them.