

ConnectED Briefing #6



Risk assessment with people with multiple or complex needs

The Issue

Social care practitioners are working with people whose complex needs necessitate an assessment of risk.

What we wanted to find out

What approaches to risk assessment are most effective when working with adults with complex needs?

What we did

We searched for relevant studies and guidelines published since 2015. We also searched publications on risk published by Research in Practice. We defined adults with complex needs as those with multiple needs who need a high level of support with aspects of daily life^a

What we found

We found a guideline produced by the National Institute for Clinical Excellence (NICE) on social work with adults experiencing complex needs¹ that included a section on risk assessment; an evidence review on working with complexity², and a strategic briefing on promoting positive approaches to risk.³

The NICE guideline authors found no studies on the effectiveness of different approaches to assessing risk, so based their recommendations on information from four qualitative studies and the views of a committee of practitioners, academics and people with lived experience.

What the evidence suggests

1 Citizenship and human rights

People are entitled to take risks, and practitioners should approach assessment from a human rights perspective. Balancing the duty to prevent harm with a person's right to take risks can be difficult, but practitioners should consider how they can enable activities or decisions that involve risk, based on what is important to the person.

2 Planning a risk assessment

The NICE guideline recommends that, unless there are safety concerns that necessitate immediate assessment, practitioners should complete an assessment over several contacts to provide the opportunity to establish rapport with the person. They should ask (and record) who the person would like to be included in discussions, including family members.

Practitioners should reflect on their own values and assumptions and how they may influence discussions.

3 Completing a risk assessment

The NICE guideline recommends that risk assessments should be tailored to the person concerned. Practitioners should seek to understand the person's perspective of risk, using plain language that is easily

^a This briefing does not address practice with a person who lacks mental capacity and should therefore be considered alongside legislation and guidance on mental capacity and safeguarding.

understood. Words such as 'worries', 'safety' or 'being careful' can be used instead of 'risk' and 'self-neglect'.

Risk checklists

The NICE guideline recommends using one of the few validated risk checklists available as the starting point for a wider discussion, rather than as a tool to assess the extent (high or low) or likelihood (prediction) of risk. This is because there is evidence that the seriousness of a risk can be different for different people.

Assessing risk

Risk assessments should be tailored to the person's strengths and needs and focus on how to respond to the circumstances contributing to the potential risk of harm identified. The evidence suggests the following aspects should be included in a risk assessment.

- Consider the severity and likelihood of
 - The risk of harm to self, whether from accidents, self-neglect or self-harm;
 - The risk of harm from others, including physical and sexual violence, psychological harm, neglect or exploitation;
 - The risk of harm to others
 - The risk of loss of independence or breakdown of support.
- Identify the potential benefits of the activities people are concerned about.
- Explore the consequences of the potential risks and potential benefits.
- If a person is making a decision that is likely to cause them harm, assess their person's capacity to understand, retain and weigh up the relevant information about safety, taking into account previous choices and perspectives of carers, involved family members and professionals working with the person.
- Find out what things have worked before to reduce risks. Work together to find ways to maximise the benefits and manage and/or reduce the risks of harm to the person or others.

Making decisions

If the person has capacity, respect their right to make a decision that you may consider unwise. Do not refuse support because you consider their decision to be unwise. If a person declines support that could reduce a risk, continue to work with the person to find other ways of reducing a risk of harm.

The person should be given a copy of their risk assessment and have the opportunity to identify any inaccuracies or differences of opinion before it is finalised.

4 When serious risk of harm is identified (see also evidence briefing: Interagency working with people with complex needs)

When a risk of serious harm is identified the NICE guideline recommends holding a case conference with all relevant organisations. The person and other people they wish to be present should be included in the conference unless this would increase risk to anyone involved. Information should be shared in line with UK GDPR and the Data Protection Act 2018 and people from all organisations involved with the person should develop a coordinated risk management plan.

5 Support for practitioners

The strategic briefing from Research in Practice highlighted evidence that practitioners are more likely to 'play it safe' and be risk averse when they are not confident that senior managers will support them in the event of a negative outcome. Supervision is identified as a means of support for practitioners to discuss decisions about risk. The NICE guideline recommends that organisations should provide training for staff

on legal literacy and assessment of risk. Peer-support, opportunities to debrief and counselling should be available following serious incidents.

Conclusions

We know little about the effectiveness of different approaches to risk assessment. Current best evidence rests on expert opinion, including that of experts by experience. Practitioners are advised to take a person-centred approach to risk assessment, and to be aware of the importance that establishing good rapport plays in gathering all relevant information and reaching a decision that best reflects the wishes of service users or their carers.

Research is needed that focusses on how best to train staff in conducting risk assessments with people with complex needs. Such training should include the experience of service users and carers that is less represented in the current evidence.

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References

¹National Institute for Health and Care Excellence (2022) NICE guideline: Social work with adults experiencing complex needs [online] Accessed 19.1.23 <https://www.nice.org.uk/guidance/ng216>

²Duffy, S. and Sutton, J. (2018) Chapter Three: Working with risk IN Ford, D (ed) *Working with complexity*. Totnes: Research in Practice.

³Guthrie, L. (2021) Promoting positive approaches to risk across organisations Totnes: Research in Practice.