

PRACTICE GUIDE

Parenting capacity assessments

This practice guide supports practitioners to determine when an independent parenting capacity assessment by an external professional assessor may be appropriate, and how the assessment should be used.

Parenting capacity is a parent's willingness, intent and practical ability to provide safe care to their child. It includes a parent's ability to empathically understand and prioritise their child's physical, developmental and emotional needs and sustain protective caregiving over time. Parenting capacity is dynamic and may change over time or in response to a range of individual, relational and environmental factors¹.

During any intervention with a family, child protection practitioners continually assess parenting capacity to determine a parent's willingness and ability to protect a child from harm. An independent parenting capacity assessment is an evaluation conducted by an external, professional assessor of a parent's functional ability to meet the basic physical, emotional, developmental and safety needs of their child.

The most robust assessments of parenting capacity take place over time and involve multiple observations of a parent and child. Professional parenting capacity assessments most often provide a single, point in time assessment and therefore should not be used in place of a practitioner's professional judgement or other assessment actions.

When to consider a parenting capacity assessment

Parenting capacity assessments are most useful as an early intervention tool to guide how to best support families to address child protection concerns. The findings of a parenting capacity assessment may be used to:

- inform case planning
- assist in reunification and
- ensure family time is meaningful for both parents and children.

Parenting capacity assessments should not be used solely to strengthen court applications or as a tool to substantiate concerns.

Before seeking a parenting capacity assessment, consider the following questions²:

- Do we need more information that we don't already have?
- Can this parent meet the needs of this child?

- What are the parent's strengths and limitations in their functional ability to meet the child's needs?
- How can we best support the parent to mitigate risk to the child?
- What support does the parent need to make the necessary changes to meet the child's needs?
- What is the likelihood the parent has the willingness and capacity to change?

If these questions cannot be answered, a professional parenting capacity assessment may be useful.

How is parenting capacity assessed?

There is no single agreed, evidence-based practice standard or guideline on how to assess parenting capacity³. Therefore, assessment scope and report quality can vary significantly between assessors. Assessments should adopt a practical and contextual approach that is child-centred, family-focussed, culturally appropriate and strengths-based.

When preparing a terms of reference for a parenting capacity assessment, consider the following⁴:

- Focus the assessment on parenting characteristics and the parent-child relationship rather than general cognitive or personality functioning.
- Use a functional approach, emphasising behaviour and skills in everyday performance (e.g. what the parent understands, believes, knows, does, and is able to do with regard to parenting their child).
- Explore the parent's current strengths in relation to the parent-child relationship and their ability to meet the child's needs, rather than focusing on weaknesses.
- Identify contextual conditions (environmental, social, cultural or historical factors) likely to positively or negatively influence parenting capability.
- Seek opinion on a parent's capacity for change and recommendations on interventions that could support the parent to make this change.

A professional assessor will use a range of information to inform their assessment, including:

- departmental documentation and records
- interviews with parents, children, relevant family members and professionals involved with the family
- observation of parent-child interactions
- results of psychometric testing.

As these types of assessments are often constrained by time and funding, seek to involve other professionals who have experience working with the parent and family over time to provide their knowledge and assessment of the parent's capacity. This may include culturally appropriate professionals, where relevant.

Who can conduct a parenting capacity assessment?

There is no formal accreditation required to conduct a parenting capacity assessment, however particular qualifications and accreditations are required by assessors to administer certain

psychometric tools. Appropriate assessors are often psychiatrists, psychologists or social workers with relevant knowledge, skills and experience. Assessors should have a demonstrated understanding of the child protection context and experience with any other factors particular to the assessment, such as disability or complex mental health.

Caveats for use of parenting capacity assessments

Parenting capacity assessments often risk confirmation bias, particularly when a referring practitioner has already formed an assessment and is seeking to strengthen evidence associated with a court application. Parenting capacity assessments should seek to fill gaps not already known by practitioners and provide guidance for appropriate supports. To be truly strengths-based, assessments should not seek to highlight deficits in families in order to substantiate concerns. Assessors can only answer the questions outlined in the terms of reference provided to them; ensure referrals are balanced, relevant and meaningful for a child and family's goals.

Disability

Parental disability should not be conflated with an increased risk to a child⁵. As such, the use of parenting capacity assessments with parents with disability must remain relevant to the principles outlined in this guide.

Parenting capacity assessments cannot predict future behaviour with certainty and do not remove the requirement for ongoing review and assessment of a parent's capacity over time.

The use of psychometric tools and testing with parents with disability should be interpreted with caution. Cognitive functioning or IQ tests are not measures of parenting capacity and should not be used to infer parenting incapacity or risk³. For parents that do live with disability, consider the following when facilitating their participation in a parenting capacity assessment:

- Seek to engage an assessor with demonstrated knowledge and expertise in disability.
- Work with the assessor, the parent and their supports to determine how the parent can be best engaged during the assessment e.g. use of plain language, visual supports, modelling and repetition.
- Allow sufficient time for the assessment to occur i.e. taking regular breaks, if required utilise a preferred communication mechanism or an accredited interpreter.
- Provide opportunity for the parent to have a disability advocate and/or support person present for interviews and/or observation to allow them to demonstrate their skills and capacity with appropriate scaffolding.
- Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families may require support to recognise disability or related behaviours and may not be accessing formal disability services or diagnosis.

Further Reading

[Toward access and equity: disability-informed practice in child protection — a guide to assessing parenting capacity with parents with intellectual disability.](#)

[Royal Commission into Violence, Abuse, Neglect and Exploitation of People with Disability Final Report - Volume 9, First Nations people with disability](#)

Complex mental health

Mental health diagnosis does not determine parenting capacity. An assessment should examine how symptoms of a parent's mental illness or mental health concern influence supervision, responsiveness, emotional availability and consistency of care¹ and how these symptoms can best be managed. When commissioning a parenting capacity assessment for a parent with complex mental health, consider:

- the parent may require additional preparation prior to the assessment – offer choices where possible and avoid sudden changes or surprises in the assessment plan
- the nature of the parent's symptoms and how interviews and observations can be scheduled to best facilitate their engagement e.g. time of day.

Substance use

For parents with identified concerns in relation to substance use, it may be beneficial to facilitate interviews, with parental consent, with their Alcohol and Other Drugs (AODS) support service, and ensure the following are provided to the assessor as relevant collateral information:

- How substance use impacts upon the parent's ability to meet the child's care and protection needs.
- Patterns of use, recovery and treatment engagement.
- Support availability and utilisation.

Child sexual abuse

When child sexual abuse concerns have been raised in a family, a parenting capacity assessment may assist in formulating a holistic assessment of risk, evaluating protective factors, developing case plan goals and establishing intervention targets. They can also support informed decisions about contact and reunification in some instances. Such an assessment would ideally be completed by a psychologist with experience and expertise in sexual offending behaviours and sexual risk assessments.

Due to the dynamics of sexual abuse including grooming behaviours, secrecy, manipulation and denial of harm, ensure the following when seeking a parenting capacity assessment:

- It is crucial that an assessor is provided robust collateral information to inform their evaluation.
- The assessment must consider the experiences, dynamics and characteristics within the family system which may contribute to both strengths and vulnerability.
- Any formulation should be based on an understanding of the parents' capacity for change, motivation for engagement in interventions and their ability to prioritise the child/ren's safety and wellbeing.

Information about contextual risk factors such as domestic violence, parental mental health, disability, substance misuse, and childhood adversity must be considered specifically in relation to their intersection with child sexual abuse risk factors, including how any presenting vulnerabilities in the family system may impact the non-offending parent's capacity to supervise and protect the child/ren from future risk over time.

Domestic and family violence

A parent's capacity to meet their child's care and protection needs can be significantly impacted by the perpetration of domestic and family violence, both directly or via the targeting of existing vulnerabilities such as mental health concerns, substance use and social isolation. Consider the appropriateness of a parenting capacity assessment for a victim-survivor of domestic and family violence who may be prevented from meeting their child's care and protection needs due to the violence, coercive control or trauma they are experiencing.

When determining whether a parenting capacity assessment is appropriate, consider:

- Whether the victim-survivor's presentation, decision-making, emotional availability or ability to meet their child's needs may be temporarily affected by fear, trauma, intimidation or efforts to manage safety.
- Whether perceived limitations in capacity arise from the behaviour of the person using violence who may be undermining, sabotaging or restricting their parenting.
- The timing of the assessment. An assessment conducted during a period of active violence, crisis, homelessness, court proceedings or recent separation is unlikely to accurately reflect a victim-survivor's parenting capacity in a different context.

Culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) families

Many parenting capacity assessments are based on Western concepts of parenting and do not consider the strengths and nuances of parenting in other cultures. Where assessors lack cultural competence, there is a risk that differences in parenting approaches may be labelled as deficits if these are not adequately recognised and understood. Consider the following when seeking a parenting capacity assessment with a CALD family:

- Secure an assessor that shares the family's cultural background or experiences. If this is not possible, the assessor must be able to demonstrate strong cultural competence and experience working with people of that culture.
- Provide opportunity for the parent to have a support person present for the assessment.
- Avoid using departmental jargon and acronyms.
- Be aware of any language barriers and use an accredited interpreter when required.
- Consider the appropriateness of psychometric tools and other measures that are unlikely to have been validated with CALD populations.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families

When considering seeking a parenting capacity assessment for an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander family:

- Consult with a cultural practice advisor or the region's Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander practice leader as to the appropriateness and necessity of conducting a parenting capacity assessment.
- Provide opportunity for the parent and child to have an independent person present for the assessment.
- Avoid using departmental jargon and acronyms.
- Consider the appropriateness of psychometric tools and other measures that are unlikely to have been validated with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander populations.
- Undertake assessments in culturally safe locations, noting that, particularly for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and families, the CSSC may not be appropriate.

Requesting a parenting capacity assessment

When you have determined a parenting capacity assessment is appropriate, complete the following:

- Consult with a senior team leader to gain their endorsement and seek relevant financial approval from the CSSC manager.
- Gain informed consent from the parent/s. Provide them the opportunity to include a support person, legal representative or disability advocate, where relevant, in discussions regarding the assessment to ensure they understand their rights, what is involved and how the results and final assessment report may be used.
- Inform parents of their right to have an advocate or support person present during the assessment itself and ensure this can be facilitated.
- Prepare a terms of reference as part of the referral and, based on the family's particular background and needs, consider an appropriate professional to undertake the assessment.
- Allow sufficient time for the assessment to occur. Consider the time required for the assessor to review departmental documentation and records, conduct interviews and observations, administer psychometric testing (if relevant) and complete the assessment report. For parents with disabilities, complex mental health or communication difficulties, ensure they are allowed adequate time for processing, interpreting and fatigue management.
- Provide the assessor with all relevant documentation and contact details for relevant stakeholders connected to the family. This could include support workers, service providers or family members with knowledge of the parent's functioning and history.

Parenting capacity assessments can be daunting and stressful for parents. Their participation in parent-child observation or interviews should not take the place of family contact and should be undertaken in the home or naturalistic environments where appropriate and practicable.

Distributing a parenting capacity assessment

When a parenting capacity assessment has been undertaken, ensure the parents do not first receive the final report via an affidavit. Discuss with the assessor their willingness to talk through the report with the parents including providing feedback and clarity to the parents as to their findings, how they reached these conclusions, and subsequent recommendations.

Parenting capacity assessments aim to provide ways to better engage with families, increasing their capacity and connecting them with appropriate supports. Work collaboratively with parents to implement the results and recommendations of the assessment.

References

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Version history

First published:	September 2026
Most recent update published:	
Owner:	Office of the Chief Practitioner