

Learning from Case Review for (Birmingham/Solihull case) - Alcohol and substance misuse: be curious, seek evidence

The BSCP briefing can be read [here](#)

What happened?

This Birmingham case focuses on the death of a two-month-old baby who sustained multiple rib fractures which led to the baby's death. The baby was subject of a Child Protection Plan for neglect from birth due to concerns about mother's parenting capacity, alcohol and substance misuse and previous abusive relationships. Throughout the baby's short life, health and social work professionals in Birmingham and Solihull worked closely with the family, undertaking regular visits. The mother consistently told professionals that she was no longer drinking or taking drugs.

Alcohol use

The effects of alcohol can include:

- Reduced feelings of anxiety and inhibitions which can help you feel more sociable
- An exaggeration of whatever mood you're in when you start drinking
- A wide range of physical health problems, either as a result of binge drinking or from more regular drinking. The problems caused by alcohol can include high blood pressure, stroke, liver disease, cancers and falls and other accidents.

Key Learning

- In this case the mother provided assurance that she was not taking drugs, but did not attend all drug testing appointments, which went unchallenged. Further evidence should have been sought and a programme of drug testing should have continued.
- There was a lack of recognition that risk is dynamic, and therefore assessment and management of risk needed to be flexible to respond to periods of increased risk. For this mother, it was the festive period.
- Lack of attendance by key professionals at the Initial Child Protection Conference undermined the effectiveness of information sharing.
- There was a reduction in the continuity of care and support provided to the mother during the move to new accommodation in a different local authority.

Mixing cocaine and alcohol

This combination can produce a poisonous substance in the body called coca-ethylene that may affect your heart and stays in your system longer than cocaine alone. Mixing cocaine, a stimulant, with a depressant like alcohol can hide some of the other effects of the cocaine. This makes it easier to overdose as you take more to achieve the same high.

Improving Practice

- When working with parents with addictions be mindful of 'disguised compliance'. You should not rely solely on assurances of abstinence but need to seek evidence of positive change. A failure to attend a substance misuse appointment should be considered as a potential positive test.
- When working with a family you need to establish trust, remain curious, even sceptical, but always focus on the needs of the child, particularly when they are pre-mobile and pre-verbal.
- When convening an Initial Child Protection Conference and Core Group, it is essential that all of the key agencies working with the family attend or share relevant information if unable to attend.
- Where there are cross-border implications there is a need to ensure that you are familiar with your agency's inter-agency transfer protocol and are able to apply it to your practice, especially where there are safeguarding concerns. The Case Transfer Protocol between Birmingham Children's Trust and Solihull Children's Services can be read [here](#).

