

The Ecological Approach to the Assessment of Asylum Seeking and Refugee Children

The social worker's guide to looking at the child in context

Introduction

When assessing children in need, including separated children, the blueprint for what to cover and the approach to take emanates from the *Framework for the Assessment of Children in Need and their Families* (2000). This has, in turn, been incorporated into the Integrated Children's System (ICS). One of the **key principles** of the assessment framework is that assessments are to be *ecological in their approach* (Department of Health 2000 p10).

What does *ecological* mean?

Jack (2001), citing the work of Brooks-Gunn et al (1993), states that:

ecological approaches to assessment are based on the premise that the development and behaviour of individuals can be fully understood in the context of the environments in which they live

The assessment framework explains further, by seeing the child's environment as:

the child's family (parent or wider family) and the community and culture in which he or she is growing up

(Department of Health 2000 p11)

The assessment of the child needs to include reference to the context of their environment. However, to look solely at a separated child's needs within the context of living in the UK would provide only part of the picture. It would not take into consideration their experiences prior to coming to the UK.

Rutter (2005) concurred in her recommendations for practice that:

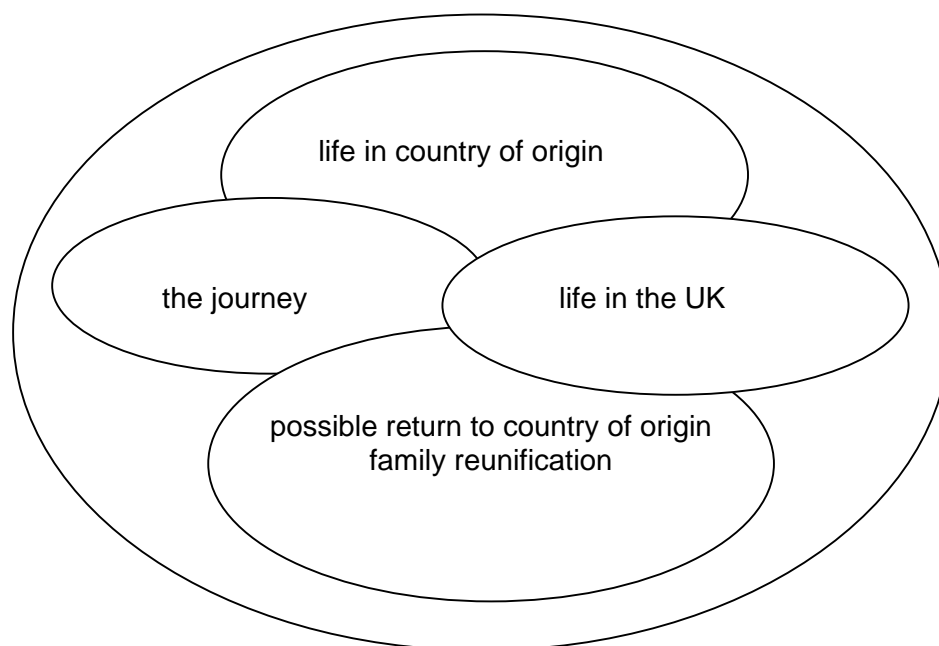
we need to look at pre-migration experiences of refugee children and look at the migration and their experiences in exile as well

I would also argue that, however much professionals are focused on planning for a child remaining in the UK, consideration has to be given to the possibility that a child might not be able to remain indefinitely in the UK. If a child's family is located in, or by virtue of their immigration status has to return to their country of origin, then consideration of the possible consequences of that return will add a further dimension to assessment and planning for the child.

There are four distinct but interrelated layers that provide the overall context when looking at a separated child's holistic needs. These are:

- life in the country of origin
- the journey (sometimes referred to as the transit)
- life in the UK
- a possible return to the country of origin.

Figure 1: The basic context of the separated child



So what are we looking at when we consider the context of the child in these four areas?

Life in the country of origin

This would explore the child's life experiences, including their environment, in their country of origin; how this impacted on their life and developmental needs in the past; and how it relates to their present needs, while living in the UK. The following highlights some of the areas that you might consider when looking at the child's life in the context of their country of origin.

Child's life experiences

This area covers their history; family background; significant adults; friendships and attachments; education or work; health history; culture, practices and customs; child and family's expectations and aspirations; and what happened to the child (and their family) to lead to the child fleeing their country of origin.

The environment

The environment comprises the country, district or province; the immediate environment; climate; politics; religion; culture, customs and practices; laws; education and health provision; housing; local resources in the community; events taking place within the country or immediate environment; war, conflict, violence; restrictions, codes of behaviour or practices; or external factors that could be affecting a country or region as a result of economic sanctions or foreign interventions.

Case study 1 illustrates how learning about the context of the child's country of origin can assist in assessment and planning for the child's needs in the UK.

Case study 1

Miklovan is 17 years old. He was keen to learn English but when a place is found on a local ESOL course he fails to attend.

Miklovan was unable to say what the problem was. However, during a discussion about his experiences of education in his country of origin, it comes to light that he hasn't been in any form of education for many years. He had been working on the land with his father and uncles. There was no expectation to go to school but he was expected to help out his family and do the work that his family had been doing for generations.

Commentary

As Miklovan has not been attending any form of structured education in his country of origin, it is not surprising that he would have found it difficult to go to college in the UK.

Although Miklovan recognises the importance of being able to speak the language of the country he now finds himself in, most language courses would assume that a person has literacy skills in their first language. In Miklovan's case he may not have literacy skills in his own language, which would make it difficult to learn a second language using conventional English language teaching methods.

By just looking at Miklovan's needs in the context of living in the UK, one would assume that learning English would be a priority. To meet that need by finding a place on a local English language course would seem to be the appropriate course of action.

By looking at Miklovan's needs in the context of his country of origin and cross-referencing these to his needs now, one would identify the same priority of learning English. However, the means of addressing this might be different.

The issue of Miklovan's literacy skills and his induction into structured education would need to be considered carefully. One would ideally consider work experience or a more practical course for Miklovan to attend, in addition to English and literacy classes, so as to build on the skills he has already

learnt back in his country of origin. This would have a twofold effect: that of developing confidence and skills that would be useful here in the UK; and, should he have to return to his country of origin, skills he can apply back home.

The journey or 'transit'

The child may have needs as a result of their experiences in transit, during the journey from their country of origin to the country of exile. These journeys are often fraught with danger and risk (Richman 1998).

Those fleeing persecution may have to do so in secret, without official travel documents and often by illegal, sometimes unconventional.

Sometimes these children do not know where they are going to end up. As Richman (1998 p10) points out, the process of fleeing is *often the most frightening of all their experiences*.

There may be all sorts of health implications – physical, emotional and mental – resulting from their journey, which have to be considered when looking at the needs of these children. These may not be apparent if the children's lives are viewed solely in terms of their country of origin.

The journey may signify the start of life as a separated child. In addition to any concerns and needs resulting from their journey, there may be strengths that can be identified, developed and built upon as part of a child's inner resources.

Life in the UK

There will be obvious needs that are a direct result of being a separated child, alone in a new and strange foreign country. These are food, shelter, warmth, care, support and protection. But looking at the child's life experiences and environmental factors, both in the country of origin and during the journey into exile, may highlight additional needs that have to be considered.

In this new environment one also has to consider needs in the context of helping a child to settle and integrate after a period of great instability. At the same time, one must recognise the effects arising from uncertainty over the child's immigration status, the possibility of locating the family and of the child returning to the country of origin.

Possible return to the country of origin

The uncertainty over the long-term future and the potential consequences of this will have an impact on the child's world. For some children the journey may not be over. At some point (whether as children or when they become adults) a return to the country of origin may be a reality. For some this will be voluntary; for others, involuntary. These are important factors that have to be considered in assessment and planning.

Finding out about a child's country of origin not only helps to provide context for the child in the here and now but also provides the context for future plans. It helps when addressing the possibility of a child having to return to their country of origin, if they do not receive permanent status in the UK; and in addressing the issue of family reunification, if this is a possibility.

Further reasons for finding out about the child's context

As well as providing context for the assessment and planning process, another pertinent reason for finding out about the child's context is to assist practitioners to engage more effectively with children.

Keeping child-focused

It will help the practitioner to see the world through the child's eyes and gain insight into how they relate to the changing environment, their fears, hopes, wishes and understanding of what's going on around them and how their environment affects them.

Communication

Having knowledge of the child's context will help the practitioner to interpret what children are communicating, understand why children may choose to be silent about their lives and experiences (Kohli 2002), and how to handle this more effectively.

It will also help practitioners to establish more effective ways of communicating with children that facilitate participation and inclusion. It will also help to highlight any differences that might lead to misunderstandings and misinterpretation.

Building rapport

Having some basic knowledge and showing genuine interest and empathy about the lives and experiences of children is essential to building the relationship between the social worker and child. Some children may not be able or willing to talk about personal details for a long time for a variety of reasons – but continuing to show an interest could help to break the ice and facilitate even basic discussions that will help the worker make an assessment to meet the basic needs of these children. This is illustrated in Case study 2.

Case study 2

A social worker learnt a few basic phrases in the languages of the children they worked with and used them regularly. The social worker found it useful on many levels. With some children, it provided humour especially with the often intentionally mispronounced words; for others it provided a 'way in' for discussion about their countries of origin and different aspects of lives. Most importantly, it demonstrated to the children that the social worker was

genuinely interested – the children appreciated that the social worker had taken the time to learn the different phrases.

Although many children find it difficult to talk directly about personal details concerning their life experiences, talking about areas that might be less threatening or less personal might be an easier starting point. For example, one could talk about general information about their country of origin or the differences between the UK and their country of origin. Having some basic knowledge would help to enhance the quality of your interaction, show that you have a genuine interest and also make you aware of any issues that might be sensitive.

Life story work and identity

Gaining background knowledge can also help in longer term work with the child and in supporting them to piece together their life story. Documenting their heritage helps to preserve parts of their identity and culture which they may lose over the passage of time, especially if they remain long term in the UK and adapt to a different life.

Most children within a UK context do not see the value of documenting their own history – either to refer back to in later life or as a record for future generations – until they are older or have children themselves. They can refer to photographs, family members and friends to provide memories long forgotten.

For separated children, there may not be any other source of memory to rely on. To help them record their life story you may need to carefully document what a child says and possibly find out information about the child's country of origin. See the Practice example for further suggestions.

Practice example 1

Personal memory box

The aim of the personal memory box is to store items that a child can look at when they are homesick or feeling uncertain about who they are and where they have come from. This box can contain everything a child would like to keep as reminders of home, so creativity may be needed to find items that represent home, family and so on.

Case study – Ahmed

Ahmed had been feeling very homesick and concerned that he was forgetting about his home and family. Together, Ahmed and his social worker gathered items for a personal memory box for him, collecting things to put in the box that helped him during times when he felt homesick. The whole process was helpful to Ahmed in making sense of his life and exploring loss. It also gave the social worker an insight and understanding into Ahmed's life.

What are the sources of information?

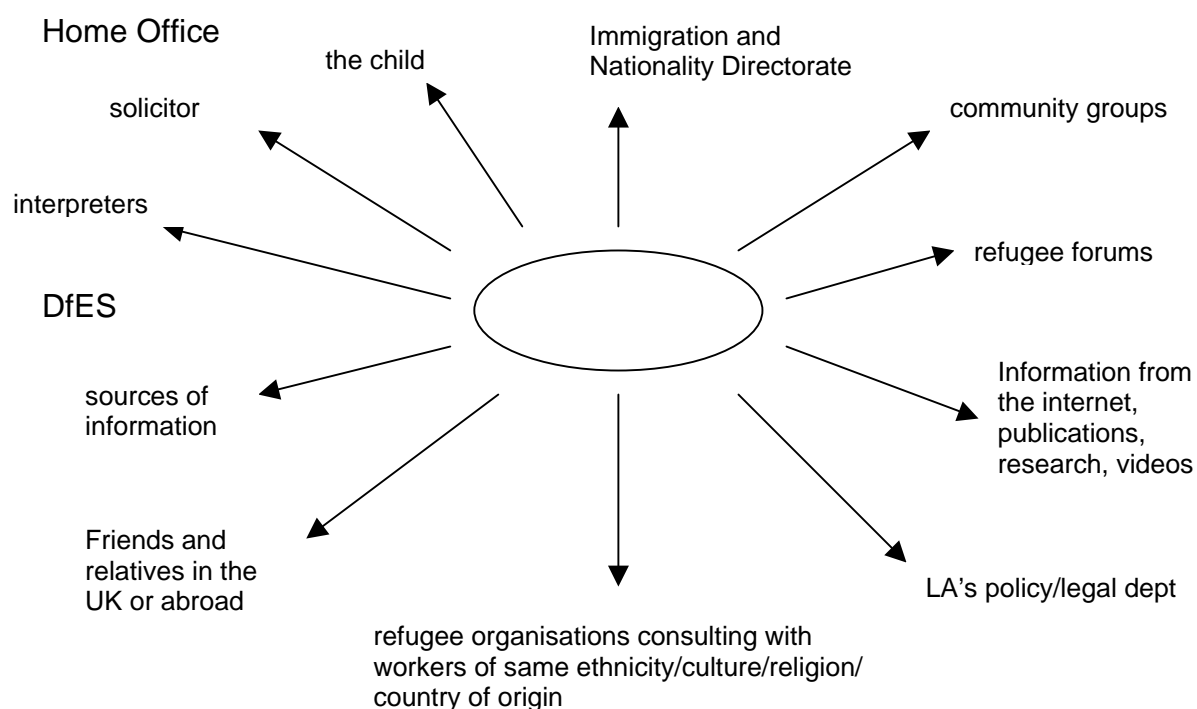
Assessments of children in need would ordinarily have a range of sources to draw from including:

- the child
- the family and possibly extended family
- care givers, if different to the family
- members of the community, such as religious leaders and organisations, community leaders and organisations, friends, and significant adults in the child or family's life
- education or early years professionals, such as teachers, education welfare personnel and nursery nurses
- health professionals, such as GPs, health visitors, school nurses
- other professionals and agencies involved with the child or family, such as probation, housing, disabilities services, and mental health services
- documentary records, for example health, education, children's services records and civil records
- the worker or manager's knowledge of the locality, community and environment in which the child lives.

Information gathered and the analysis made can be checked, cross-referenced and verified across a range of different sources. In the case of a separated child, the child appears to be the main source of information (Dennis 2005). However, there are other sources that can complement the information that a child is able to give.

Figure 2 shows some other sources that can help provide information for assessments and planning.

Figure 1: Sources of information for assessing a separated child



Closing thoughts

In order to make an effective holistic assessment of need, you have to understand the environment, the context in which the child has grown up and their current circumstances.

For separated children, this assessment means looking at the needs of the child resulting from their experiences and lives in their country of origin, the journey that has brought them to the UK, their experiences and circumstances as a separated child in the UK, and the possibility of reuniting them with their family. If a child's status is not permanent in the UK, the uncertainty and consequences of immigration controls will be an important factor when looking at the child's needs in the context of living in the UK.

Although no one can become an expert on every aspect of a child's life, one could argue that by using a variety of sources of information it is possible to build a fuller and richer picture of a child's needs than could be provided by one individual, namely the child.

In order to address the needs of separated children effectively, continuing to gain knowledge and understanding of the child's world has to be a priority.

Sheree Kane
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