An introduction to assessment, to support the CAF training:

A handbook to support practitioners

Content

Purpose of the handbook

This short handbook is aimed at and should be used by practitioners with **little or no prior assessment experience or knowledge**. It contains supporting text and references, focusing on general assessment knowledge and skills (it is not specifically about the CAF). It aims to ensure that all participants have a baseline level of understanding with regard to assessment, prior to undertaking CAF training.

In addition, this handbook contains three exercises that can be worked through to help embed learning into practice. These exercises are optional and will not be specifically referred to in the CAF training. However, they will support personal learning and development.

Although designed for practitioners with less experience of assessment, **experienced practitioners may choose to use this handbook** to refresh and review their general assessment knowledge.

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Part 1: An introduction to assessment

What is assessment?

All children and young people are different and have different needs. Similarly, a family's ability to respond to and meet all their needs may also differ. In some circumstances, professional assessment may be required to identify strengths and needs, to ensure that all children, young people and their families receive appropriate support.

Assessment can be defined as a systematic process of gathering a range of information relating to a child, to help identify their strengths and needs, in order to decide on appropriate further action (or to confirm that no additional help is required). Assessment can provide a baseline of information against which a child or young person's future development can be measured. The information may be gathered from a wide range of sources.

An assessment process

A general outline of an assessment process is shown below.

Preparation
Gather a range of information
Analyse the information
Identify strengths and needs
Plan further action
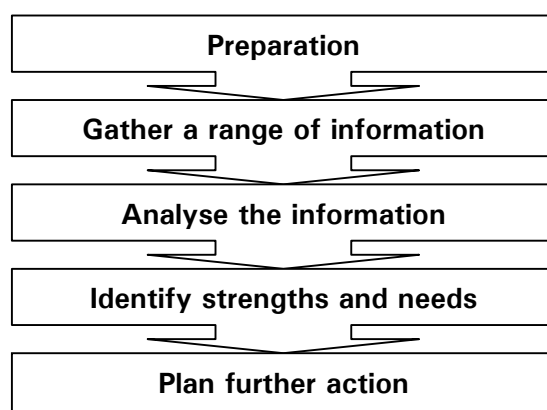
Assessment as part of a cycle

Assessment must be part of a cycle. The assessment must inform planning, the plan must then be implemented, the implementation must then be reviewed, which may lead to further assessment. Assessment on its own – for its own sake – will not achieve effective change and support for children, young people and their families. To achieve the aims of Every Child Matters: Change for Children, assessment must be a part of an effective cycle. This cycle is illustrated below, though in practice, the cycle is unlikely to be so neat.

Assessment → Planning → Implementation → Review → Assessment

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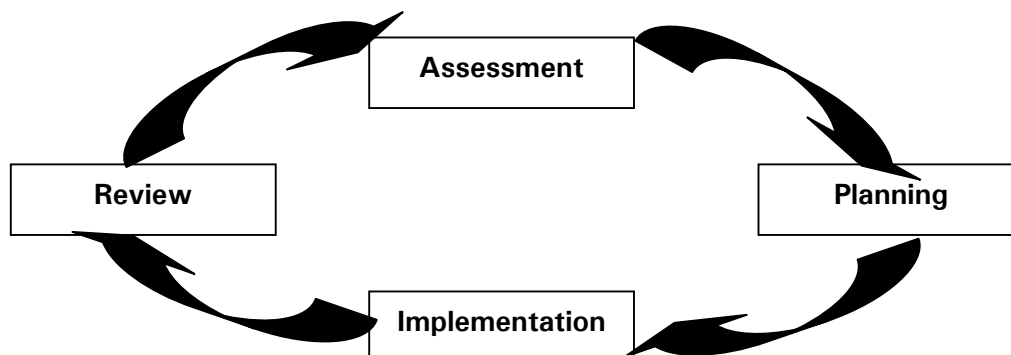
Part 2: An overview of assessment

The purpose of assessment

Assessment may take place in a wide range of situations and for a variety of purposes, for example:

- A teacher's assessment of a child's educational attainment at key stages of the national curriculum, to determine future learning plans.
- A paediatric assessment to ensure that a child has reached the appropriate developmental milestones and to monitor progress.
- A Connexions personal adviser's assessment of a young person's strengths and barriers to participation in learning to provide feedback and motivation.
- An educational psychologist's assessment of a child or young person's special educational needs to identify their educational strengths and needs.
- A social worker's assessment of a child's home situation, to determine if they are at risk of harm.

Each of these types of assessment has a clearly defined purpose and it is important to note that the role and function of assessment may vary according to the context.

There are a range of existing specialist assessments that are used in particular agencies, by particular professionals and have a fairly specific focus. They tend to focus more and go into some depth on the key issues covered by the agency (for example the Yot assessment – ASSET – focuses on the likelihood of re offending). Specialist assessments are often used to help decision-making about whether or not a child/young person meets threshold criteria to trigger delivery of a service.

In contrast to specialist assessments, the CAF aims to consider a full range of issues, in a holistic but less in-depth way, and where appropriate may lead on to a specialist assessment. Some of the key existing assessments are outlined in section 4.

What is an assessment framework?

What differentiates an assessment framework from being mere guidance is the inclusion of an explicit theoretical or conceptual underpinning. An assessment framework has the potential to provide guidance that is grounded in an evidence base and to facilitate consistency among assessors. Crisp et al (2005) argue that in the absence of a formalised assessment framework, assessors may develop their own subjective assessment criteria and fail to include core information. Furthermore, it may indicate a lack of consensus as to the expectations of the assessment process. An assessment framework does not necessarily provide the data collection tools to collect information.

Common assessment should lead to a common approach to strengths and needs assessment. It should:

- Reduce the number of assessments that a child undergoes
- Break down professional boundaries
- Improve information sharing

Specialist assessments would build on this initial, common assessment. Linking information sharing and assessment will encourage a wider culture change across the children's workforce.

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Basic principles of effective assessment

The purpose of effective assessment is:
- To gather information
- To identify strengths
- To identify needs
- To inform action

Assessment should follow the 'non-deficit' model or strengths/needs model, where focus is placed on a child or young person's strengths and needs, rather than their weaknesses, as this has been shown to lead to more positive outcomes. However, issues and problems also need to be considered. The assessment process should be a positive experience and the practitioners should work **with** a child or young person, their parents/carers and other agencies, to gather information to establish the issues that need to be addressed and assess the most suitable response. Assessments should be grounded in knowledge, i.e. theory, research findings and practice experience in which confidence can be placed to assist in the gathering of information, its analysis and the choice of intervention in formulating a plan.

Assessment should be:

Child/young person-centred – the views of the child or young person should be included and they should be kept at the centre of assessment to ensure their needs are met.

Transparent – work with families should be honest and open. The purpose should be clear to all. Children, young people and their parents/carers should have the opportunity to gain access to information held about them.

Not discriminatory – based on equality of opportunity and taking into account disability, communication, gender, sexuality, cultural and racial needs. Personal information should always be dealt with in a sensitive and non-discriminatory

Consensual – the informed consent of the child/young person and /or parents/ carers should be obtained where possible, unless to do so places the child/ young person at risk of significant harm; in which case the decision should be recorded.

Collaborative – one person should co-ordinate a mulit-agency approach for information gathering and the provision of services. There should be provision for active collaborative reflection by all parties.

Current – information should be valid and reliable. Assessments should work to timescales and be solution and action-focused. Appropriate services should be provided during the course of the assessment.

Continuous – an ongoing process rather than a one-off event – i.e. an evolving picture growing with the child rather than a snapshot fixed in one point in time.

Sufficient and formative – to provide sufficient information to inform and support future planning.

Progressive – to build on existing information, from as many valid sources as possible. Assessments should build on strengths as well as identify needs.

Sound – grounded in evidence based knowledge, current research and an understanding of human growth and development.

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Exercise 1: Principles of effective assessment

Choose three of the principles listed on the previous page that you consider to be the most important when planning for effective assessment with children, young people and their parents/carers.

Detail how you would ensure that these principles would be implemented and adhered to, in your practice.

1. Principle:...

2. Principle...

3. Principle...

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Methods of assessment

There are a range of methods that can be used for assessment. Methods will vary in a number of ways:

- Some are oral, others are written
- Some use words, others are non verbal
- Some may be measuring skills directly, others may be an indicator of potential abilities
- Some may be objective and quantifiable, whilst others may be subjective and qualitative.

Objective	Subjective
An objective test/assessment is one for which the scoring procedure is completely specified enabling agreement among different scorers. E.g. a multiple choice, set-answer test.	A subjective test/assessment is one in which the impression or opinion of the assessor determines the score or evaluation of performance. E.g. a job interview.
Quantifiable/Quantitative	**Qualitative**
These are results that can, usually, be expressed in numbers. E.g. 75 correct out of a possible 90.	These are results that can, usually, not be expressed directly in numbers. E.g. An improvement in the effort made in lessons.

The quality of the results produced may vary according to the method used and there are pros and cons to each approach. The following list gives some of the approaches currently in use.

One-to-one interactions

Structured and purposeful discussions with children, young people and their families are the most common approach in gathering information. They can be very effective but this depends a great deal on the skill of the practitioner. In addition, discussions are inherently subjective so are prone to bias. However, some form of interaction with children, young people and their families is essential for any effective assessment.

Gathering information from other sources

This involves getting information from other people and organisations that have been involved with the child/young person and/or their parent/carer in the past. It is important to gain as much information as possible from other sources.

This data can help confirm data gathered by your own assessments and should prevent duplication of assessment. The information may contradict that gathered from your own assessments, and as such can act as a useful checking mechanism and a prompt to ask more questions and seek further information. However, it is important not to rely purely on information from other sources, as it may be out of date, or written from a perspective that may be misleading or out of context.

Self-assessment questionnaires

These allow children, young people and their families to rate/assess themselves against a set of criteria related to a need being measured. Examples can include learning styles, self esteem and coping strategies.

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These can form a vital part of the assessment process and facilitate structured input from the person being assessed. However, children, young people and their families may not always be objective about themselves. In addition, low levels of literacy can sometimes prevent the completion of self-assessments, so additional support may be needed or other types of assessment used.

Task/work samples
This allows information to be provided on the standard achieved in a set piece of work. Other factors like a person's interest levels, strategies or techniques adopted and understanding of various concepts can be analysed. This can be carried out as a formal process or through informal discussions. The maximum benefit can be gained from these by using a task which is as close to a real life situation as possible.

Formalised assessment tests
These include psychometric tests and can provide important information about how children, young people and their families compare with others. These are usually paper and pencil based but increasingly interactive computer testing is coming into play.

Observation
This can provide important information for future discussion and goal setting. Assessment of social skills is one characteristic that can be looked at. The use of video is sometimes applied to the process.

Group Discussion
This can provide useful information on areas of interaction with others and personal effectiveness.

Dynamic Assessment
This is a quickly developing area of assessment. Learners are presented with increasingly explicit cues and prompts for performing a task. Support is limited by giving learners hints about the general approach to a particular problem or task. This could also involve providing a specific blueprint for solving the task. The number of hints given by the assessor for the learner to solve the problem serves as a measure of learning efficiency. The more 'clues' given the lower a young person's 'learning efficiency'. The dynamic assessment of learning efficiency focuses on how much help is needed for a learner to reach their learning potential in a given domain, rather than a 'static' measure of what has already been acquired.

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Part 3: Engagement to enable effective assessment

The key to effective assessment is the practitioner's engagement with the child or young person and their parents/carers. Consequently, practitioners who undertake assessment need to be skilled and trained professionals who know how to engage and work with children, young people and their families. Practitioners will need to have or be working towards the skills and knowledge covered by the *Common Core of Skills and Knowledge for the Children's Workforce.*

They key engagement skills needed to undertake effective assessments with children, young people and their families include:
* Working ethically and with consideration for consent and confidentiality
* Understanding behaviour
* Interviewing
* Questioning
* Observation
* Listening
* Summarising
* Accurate empathy and reflective listening
* Giving constructive feedback
* Challenging
* Working for change with children, young people and their families

Some basic elements to consider are outlined below.

Assessment - When, where, why and how?

➢ The decision on when, where and how to engage creates the conditions for the development of the practitioner's relationship with the child or young person and their parents/carers.
➢ The decision on who should be involved in the assessment will depend on the situation. Assessors will need to consider who, in addition to the child/young person, should be involved in the assessment. They will also need to consider if it is necessary, on some occasions, to assess a child/young person on their own.
➢ It is vital that the child or young person and their parents/carers understand why the assessment is taking place. They should also understand what happens next and who will have access to the information that is collected.
➢ How an assessment is undertaken will impact significantly on its outcomes. It is important to engage and motivate the child or young person and their parents/carers throughout the assessment process. The use of open questions, an awareness of non-verbal communication and an ability to listen to what the child or young person is saying are all important. Professional judgement should be used to decide when to raise potentially sensitive issues. Practitioners should not jump to conclusions during assessment but should consider all available information. Additional specialist assessment may also be required to gather further information. Assessments should be completed as thoroughly as necessary and give details of any decision-making made during the assessment.

If effective engagement is not achieved, then the assessment or identification of needs will be flawed.

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Underpinning principles

The following are some of the key principles that underpin engagement to enable effective assessment:

All children, young people and their families:
- Are individuals and should be treated as such
- Have a potential that can be developed
- Can be helped in some way to identify their strengths and meet their needs
- Have the right to appropriate levels of confidentiality
- Have the right to impartiality and to be treated non-judgementally.

The initial engagement should:
- Have a clear purpose and focus
- Be a two way process which actively engages the child/young person and their family
- Be based on trust, honesty and objectivity
- Agree the assessment strategy.

The following should be addressed:
- Ensure that the child/young person and their family is comfortable and at ease
- Establish an appropriate level of communication (including ensuring that the assessor is able to communicate with the child or young person and their family using means appropriate for any additional communication needs)
- Check there is understanding of the purpose of the engagement
- Check that there is understanding of the role of the practitioner
- Check that there is understanding of and agreement on the purpose of the engagement
- Identify what the child/young person and /or their parent/carer wants from the interaction
- Discuss issues of and limits to confidentiality
- Establish acceptable working rules
- Do not ask too many probing/challenging questions too early on.

Exercise 2: To explore the skills needed for effective assessment.

For effective assessment to take place with a child or young person and their parents/carers, practitioners will need to:
- Gather information from a range of sources, including the child or young person, their parents/carers and other professionals
- Build a profile of the child or young person, including the identification of strengths and needs.
- Gain and maintain the consent of the child or young person and their parents/carers, to be involved in the assessment process

What skills do you think you would need to ensure that an effective assessment takes place? Try to be as specific and detailed as possible.

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With children and young people (e.g. be able to use appropriate questioning techniques to gain relevant information from a child or young person during an interview).

With parents/carers

With other professionals

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Exercise 3: Developing engagement skills for effective assessment

1. In the first column, list the engagement skills for assessment you already feel confident in using (refer to the list at the start of this section, as well as your responses to exercise 2)
2. In the second column, list the skills that you do not feel confident about at present, and which you feel you need to develop for your practice in the future?
3. In the right hand column, detail how you would develop these skills, including practical strategies.

|	**Already have**	**Need to develop**	**Strategies to help development**
With children			
With young people			
With parents/ carers			
With a range of other professionals			

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Part 4: Outline of some existing assessments

This section gives a brief overview of some of the existing assessment frameworks. The CAF will, where appropriate feed into these other assessments, so it is important for practitioners to be aware of them. Consultation is ongoing as to how the CAF will link most effectively with existing assessments.

Framework for the Assessment of Children in Need & their Families (2000)

The Framework for the Assessment of Children in Need and their Families (DoH) covers the areas shown in the diagram below and is the model some other assessment tools follow or build on. The framework is based on three domains:-
* Child's developmental needs,
* Parenting capacity,
* Family and environmental factors.
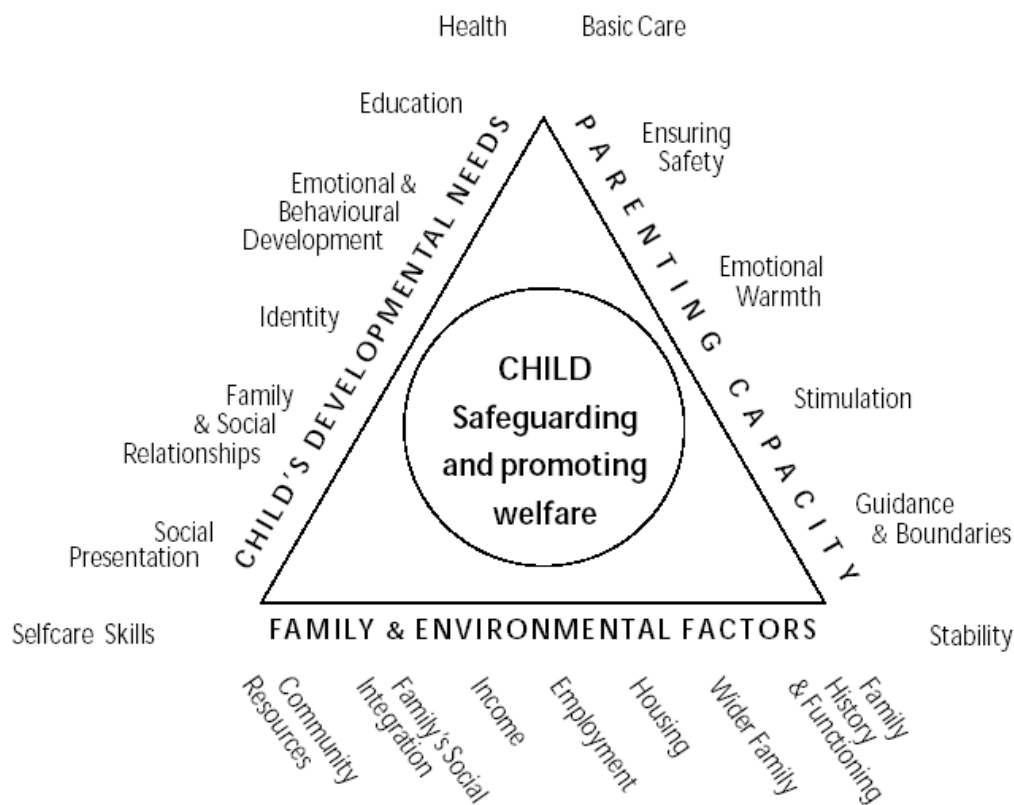
The framework is intended to provide "a systematic way of analysing, understanding and recording what is happening to children and young people within their families and the wider context of the community in which they live" (page viii)

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A training pack consisting of a training video, guide and reader (NSPCC and University of Sheffield, 2000) was developed to accompany the Guidance and to assist the introduction and implementation of the new framework. It is called A Child's World: Assessing Children in Need.

The framework sets out the principles of effective inter-agency, inter-disciplinary work with children in need.

Principles underpinning the Assessment Framework
Assessments:
* Are child centred
* Are rooted in child development
* Are ecological in their approach
* Ensure equality of opportunity
* Involve working with children and families
* Build on strengths as well as identify difficulties
* Are inter-agency in their approach to assessment and the provision of services
* Are a continuing process, not a single event
* Are carried out in parallel with other action and providing services
* Are grounded in evidence based knowledge.

The DoH Framework states that to assess the needs of a young person effectively requires a thorough understanding of:
* The developmental needs of children
* The capacities of parents or caregivers to respond appropriately to those needs
* The impact of wider family and environmental factors on parenting capacity and children.

SEN Code of Practice (2001)

The Code of Practice became effective on 1 January 2002. From that date, local authorities, schools, early education settings and those who help them – including health and social services – must have regard to it. That means that whenever settings, schools and local authorities decide how to exercise their functions relating to children with special educational needs, they must consider what the Code says.

Most children with SEN will have their needs met by their school, sometimes with help from external specialists. The key test of the need for intervention is evidence that the child's current rates of progress are inadequate. The Code of Practice provides for schools to identify and assess pupils' needs and for increasing specialist expertise to be deployed within the school through Early Years Action and Early Years Action Plus and School Action and School Action Plus of the SEN Code of Practice to help meet the difficulties pupils may be experiencing. The trigger for each level of intervention is if a child fails to make adequate progress – based on teachers' professional judgement.

In deciding whether to make a statutory assessment of a child's SEN the local authority will seek to satisfy themselves that there is convincing evidence that despite the school or setting, with the help of external specialists, taking relevant and purposeful action (through Action and Action Plus) to meet the child's learning difficulties, those difficulties remain, have not been remedied sufficiently for the child to make adequate progress and may require the Authority to determine what special educational provision should be made for them.

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In reaching a decision about whether to carry out an assessment, the local authority will seek evidence:

- That the school has responded appropriately to the requirements of the National Curriculum, especially in relation to meeting the pupil's individual needs, setting suitable learning challenges, and overcoming potential barriers to learning and assessment
- Produced by the child's school, parents and other professionals as to the nature, extent and cause of the child's learning difficulties
- Of action already taken to meet and overcome the child's learning difficulties
- Of the rate and style of the child's progress, and where some progress has been made, that it has only been as a result of much additional effort and instruction at a sustained level not usually commensurate with provision at Action Plus

Evidence should relate to the child's attainment but it should also relate to other factors that could impact on their learning outcomes such as:

- Evidence of clumsiness, significant difficulties of sequencing or visual perception, deficiencies in working memory or significant delays in language functioning
- Any evidence of impaired social interaction or communication of a significantly restricted repertoire of activities, interests and imaginative development
- Evidence of significant emotional or behavioural difficulties as indicated by withdrawn or disruptive behaviour, marked and persistent inability to concentrate, frustration or distress in relation to their learning difficulties, difficulties in establishing and maintaining balanced relationships with peers or adults, and any other significant delay in the development of life and social skills

Some factors, including significant problems in the child's home or family circumstances or their school attendance record can also contribute towards under attainment but may not always be indicators of special educational needs. Local authorities should seek any evidence of such identifiable factors that could impact on learning outcomes, including:

- Any evidence that the child's performance is different in different environments
- Evidence of contributory medical problems
- Evidence from assessments or interventions by child health or social services

Statutory assessment itself will not always lead to a statement. Sometimes the assessment will highlight ways in which the school may be able to meet the child's needs without the need for any special educational provision to be determined by the local authority.

The Code notes that when a child under two is referred to a local authority it is likely that parents/carers, Sure Start or Health services will have originated the referral.

If a local authority decides to proceed with a statutory assessment they must seek written:
A. Parental advice
B. Educational advice
C. Medical advice
D. Psychological advice
E. Social services advice
F. Any other advice (such as the ascertainable wishes of the child) which the local authority or any other body from whom advice is sought, consider desirable. In particular, advice from Service Children's Education (SCE) must be sought where the child's parent is a serving member of the armed forces.

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Youth justice ASSET assessment

ASSET was introduced in April 2000 with the aim of bringing a common, structured assessment profile across the youth justice system in England and Wales. Part of its purpose was to bring consistency of practice in the multi-disciplinary youth offending teams. The design of ASSET was shaped by a review of the research literature on the risk factors that contribute to offending by young people and by discussion with a wide range of individuals and organisations working in the field of youth justice.

Asset must be completed for all young people subject to:
- Bail supervision and support
- A request for a court report (pre-sentence report and specific sentence report);
- Community disposals during the assessment, quarterly review and closure stages
- Custodial sentences at the assessment, transfer to the community and closure stages
- Final warnings.

To make a full assessment it is necessary to engage in interviews with a young person and his/her family, obtain information from a range of other sources and make a series of judgements about the factors that affect his/her offending behaviour. The guidance notes that establishing relationships with the young person is central to the assessment process.

The issues covered in ASSET are:
- Offending behaviour
- Living arrangements
- Family and personal relationships
- Education, training and employment
- Neighbourhood
- Lifestyle
- Substance use
- Physical health
- Emotional and mental health
- Perception of self and others
- Thinking and behaviour
- Attitudes to offending
- Motivation to change
- Positive factors
- Indicators of vulnerability
- Indicators of serious harm to others.

ASSET also has a What do YOU think? form, which is completed by young people.

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Connexions APIR Framework

The Connexions Service National Unit (CSNU) developed the Connexions Assessment, Planning, Implementation and Review (APIR) Framework to provide both guidance and a structure to underpin the work of personal advisers. It provides a methodology and supporting materials through which a young person supported by their personal adviser can develop and implement a personal action plan for realising their goals based on a holistic assessment of their needs. By setting out a common approach it aims to bring together a degree of consistency to service delivery across Connexions Partnerships and facilitate information sharing between agencies working to support young people.

The Framework consists of the
• APIR process (including identification of 18 factors, given below)
• Profiling kit
• Profile (wheel or linear format)

The Connexions Framework describes a process of assessment, planning, implementation and review (APIR). It provides a structure to assist personal advisers in their one-to-one work with young people. This process of identifying needs, planning effectively and taking action to address those needs is a key element of a personal adviser's role working one-to-one with a young person.

The Framework has identified 18 factors, within 4 main areas, which have the potential to impact on a young person's participation and progression in learning in both positive and negative ways. Personal advisers need to be aware of all 18 factors to ensure they take a holistic view of a young person.

The Connexions APIR factors

Education and employment:	**Social and behavioural development:**
Participation	Identity and self-image
Achievements	Attitudes and motivation
Basic skills	Relationships within family and society
Key skills	Risk of (re-) offending
Life skills	
Aspirations	
Family and environmental factors:	**Personal health factors:**
Capacity of parents/carers	Physical health
Family history and functioning	Emotional well-being
Social and community factors	Substance use issues
Housing	
Income	

The CAF will eventually replace the assessment elements of the APIR framework.

Part 5: Further information and references on assessment

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