1 What’s a chronology?
A chronology draws together and records factual information about circumstances and events in the life of the child and their family judged by the author to be relevant to an understanding of the child’s circumstances and to any difficulties the child is facing.
The information is recorded in date order so that it tells the story of how the child and family have come to need help.
Whether the child and family are seeking help early in the development of any difficulties or whether decisions need to be made in the context of court proceedings, constructing a chronology is often the first step in undertaking an assessment in order to make decisions about what needs to happen next to address difficulties and improve outcomes for the child and their family.
While the process will be the same the nature and extent of the information included in any particular chronology will vary according to individual circumstances and the nature of the decisions being made. The key is to include information that is relevant to the specific context and nature of the decisions being made.
Making a decision about what is relevant involves judgement. It follows that constructing a chronology, either as a continuously updated record of significant events, as a full social work chronology or in the context of a specific assessment, is not about mechanically reiterating a list of contacts or reproducing detailed file recordings. It is about deciding, in as logical a way as possible, which information is relevant, why it’s relevant and then connecting the relevant circumstances, facts and events to create a coherent narrative in the context of current circumstances.

2 What’s a chronology for?
An up-to-date, accurate, precise and succinctly recorded chronology is one hallmark of good social work practice.
The roots of the difficulties facing a child and family almost always lie in their background history as well as their current circumstances. A chronology summarises this history and provides the basis for the analysis and identification of the child’s needs so that focused and effective responses to address those needs can be formulated.
More specifically, by organising and recording information about what is happening in a particular situation a chronology can:
- Begin to explain the roots of the difficulties facing a child and family
  For example - by highlighting how domestic violence at the time of the child’s birth may have made it difficult for this mother to form a close bond with this child
- Predict what might happen in future
  For example - by describing a positive and lasting reaction to a particular intervention or by highlighting past behaviour as the best indicator of future behaviour
- Indicate what we don’t yet know but need to find out
For example we may be clear about the reasons a mother will struggle to parent her children well enough and so need information about father’s history of being parented so a judgement can be made about whether he is likely to be able to compensate for any difficulties in parenting his partner has.

- Describe an accumulation, over time, of individually insignificant incidents which seen together constitute significant harm.

For example in neglect cases where repeated observations of little individual importance indicate the serious impact living in a situation of low warmth and high criticism is having on the child, or in cases where repeated presentations to health services indicate the possibility of induced illness.

- Address the question – what’s this case about?

For example when a case transfers to another worker and the new worker needs to understand as quickly as possible the key issues for the child. Or in supervision when a step back from day to day processes needs to be taken with a view to focusing on the key issues to ensure key needs have been identified and are being responded to in the most effective way.

### 3 Why a chronology is important for a child in care?

A chronology is important for looked after children because it will:

- make it easier for the child to develop sense of permanence
- increase the ability of the care plan to address the breadth of the child’s needs.

All children need a sense of permanence – permanence means ‘security, stability, love and a strong sense of identity and belonging’. Nurturing a sense of permanence for children living away from home is particularly important because placement moves and changes of carer mean looked after children often lack a clear and continuous understanding of their own history and knowledge about significant events and people in their lives – issues that can usually be taken for granted by children living with their birth families. Permanence also means having an understanding of how and why decisions have been made, knowing what will happen in the future and feeling involved in the plans being made for and with you. A chronology has an essential role to play in ensuring this information is available and can be shared with the child.

While chronologies provide the practitioner with a useful basis for ‘life story work’ such work is not a one off event and neither is it a short cut to helping children to understand their story on an on-going basis. Ordinary, day to day conversations with children about their lives can be supported by involving them in updating their own chronology – formally and informally – so that they and those caring for them are clear about what has happened in the past, what is happening now, what is planned for the future and why.

Chronologies have the same function for looked after children as they do for all children – to act as the basis for an analysis about what needs to happen to address the child’s needs. Too often care plans for looked after children focus solely on the placement and the stability of the placement, leaving the needs that led to separation from birth family unaddressed with serious consequences for the child as they move into adulthood. Similarly, the most common reason for adoption breakdown in the UK is a lack of knowledge about a child’s background leading to needs arising from background history being unknown and unaddressed and subsequent difficulties causing placement breakdown and further rejection for the child. And so it is imperative that care plans are based on a clear, complete, succinct and up to date chronology. Chronologies for looked after children should build on the details outlined in section 5 below but go on to detail dates of care episodes, changes of legal status, names carers and placement
changes including respite and the reasons for changes, schools, periods of missing from placement.

4 Are different types of chronology needed in different contexts?

Different information is needed in different contexts and so chronologies are not ‘one size fits all’ documents. Some examples of the different contexts in which chronologies are compiled might include:

- A chronology as a running record for every child receiving help

Every open file needs a chronology. This will be a running record of significant events as they happen. If the case has been open for a short time only the chronology will be short, perhaps a few lines only: if the case has a long history of involvement it may spread over several pages. A chronology is as important in cases that do not have a lengthy history as they are in cases that have been receiving services for a long time.

For example, a referral made about a 13 year old where there are concerns about gang involvement and where an earlier chronology indicates the child was excluded from school aged 5 is likely to be viewed as more serious and as needing a more intense response than a case where a child has no previous history and up to this time has thrived in a home with no apparent problems.

- A chronology as part of a single assessment for early help

A chronology provides a skeleton of key incidents and events that inform the assessment of children and their families. If an assessment is being undertaken as part of a request for early help a chronology may only comprise a few lines and take little time to complete. In future it could well be vital in providing a clear, easily accessible overview of key significant events that might not be obvious from laboriously trawling through referrals and contact sheets.

- A full social work chronology

A full social work chronology is required in complex families where difficulties have persisted down the generations.

For example:
- families with histories of children being removed from home over several generations
- families where intergenerational sexual abuse has been a feature, or
- families where state intervention has been required in both paternal and maternal branches of a family.

These are worth their weight in gold because of the depth of understanding they bring to issues of risk and capacity to change. They provide a deep picture of the whole family that would not be evident from an individual child’s electronic record.

With a focus on events stretching back over perhaps four generations these chronologies will be based on a summary of available social care and legal records - both paper and manual – possibly dating back as far as the inception of local authority social services departments in 1974.

Such detailed work, often extending to 100 or more pages, is extremely labour intensive but once completed avoids the need for future social workers involved with a child in the family network having to repeat the work. Many high profile serious care reviews point to the ways in which the availability of such chronologies might have helped protect children more effectively.
Note. These chronologies will include third party information (relating to grandparents, parents and siblings, for example) and so need to be stored in limited access.

- **A legal chronology**

A legal chronology is required when a decision has been made to hold a legal planning meeting. If a subsequent decision is made to issue an application for a care or supervision order the legal chronology will be made available to all parties. As the basis on which the court will begin to make judgements about whether or not state intervention in family life is justified the information included must be ‘relevant, central and key’. It needs to tell the story of how and why the case has come to court and include the evidence about why an order is needed. The legal chronology will rely on the running record chronology, editing it so that only those events and circumstances that are key to understanding why the local authority has bought the case to court are included and presenting the information in a way that tells the story of how the situation has come to this point in as succinct a way as possible.

5  **What information should be included in each type of chronology?**

A running record chronology will include all circumstances and events deemed to be significant while chronologies associated with more specific assessments will comprise edited versions of the running record chronology.

Individual children and families react very differently to different events and circumstances. However events and information that could be seen as significant and worth including in a running record chronology might include:

- Changes in **family circumstances** — births, deaths, moving home/addresses, new partner moving into the household, change in employment, significant losses and traumatic events

- **Health** — birth trauma, accidents, injuries, serious illnesses, periods of mental ill health, hospitalisation, developmental delay

- **Education** — performance, attainment, achievement, behaviour, name/change of nursery/school, additional support needs and plans, long or frequent absence or exclusion from school

- **Offending behaviours** — arrests, cautions or convictions for offending behaviour, periods of custody, police logs with details of pertinent information including, domestic violence, child neglect and substance misuse

- **Agency interventions** — referrals, assessments, section 47 enquiries, child protection, planning legal planning, care proceedings

- **Services offered** — who the service was for, who provided it, the frequency and intensity and the outcome was being sought. For example, social worker visited mother weekly, over a period of three months to help her understand how her own childhood has made it difficult for to parent is more helpful to include than – 19 home visits to support parenting.

This list is not exhaustive and aims to provide examples of the kinds of information that might helpfully be included.

N.B. Remember – you need to decide what is relevant and why. It will not do to record every visit and it is not helpful or relevant to include lists of administrative tasks, messages and phone calls.
When constructing a chronology as part of a specific assessment relevance is key. In deciding what is relevant or not it may be helpful to ask:

- Is this event relevant in the context of the reason for constructing this particular chronology for this particular child at this particular time?
- Has this event had an impact on the child or on family members who are important to the child? If so what might the impact be and what evidence of impact do I have?
- Is there a link between this event and the current difficulties? If so what is the link?

6 How should a chronology be recorded?
Record in three columns with the date, event and source of information. If it is impossible to be precise about the date put the 1st of the month with an asterisk, indicating to the reader this is approximate. Your source might include manual archive records (before 2007) or the electronic social care record (since 2007). If your source is a professional report you should include both author and date.

References
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Celia Parker
Principal Social Worker
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